FORUM GALLERY

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Robert Fishko, *Director*

RAPHAEL SOYER
(1899-1987)



Late Afternoon, c.1931
oil on canvas
16 x 12 inches
signed lower right "*RAPHAEL SOYER*"

Provenance

The Artist
Private Collection, NM
Private Collection, NY
Private Collection, CT
Private Collection, NY

Note

Raphael Soyer was born in the city of Borisoglebsk between Moscow and the Black Sea in the Southern Russian province of Voronezh Oblast. Their father, Abraham, was a Hebrew writer, scholar, and teacher who fostered the humanities both at his school and at home. As children, Raphael read the great Russian writers as well as Dickens and Mark Twain (in translation), discovered the seminal painters of Western art, and began to draw. Due to the ongoing oppression of Jews in Czarist Russia, in 1912 the Soyer family emigrated to the United States, settling on the Lower East Side. In 1914, Raphael and his twin brother, Moses, enrolled at the free evening classes offered at Cooper Union, where their formal art training began and where they remained until 1918. Raphael continued his studies at the National Academy of Design where, for four years, he learned traditional painting technique by working from life models in the realist tradition.

While at the Academy, however, and after leaving it, Raphael also took courses at the Arts Students League. There, he came under the guidance and professorship of painter Guy Pène du Bois (whose own teacher had been famed Ashcan School leader Robert Henri), who encouraged Soyer to paint his own real-life surroundings, and to do so instinctively.

Art dealer Charles Daniel gave Raphael Soyer his first solo exhibition in April 1929. Within four months of Soyer's show at the Daniel Gallery, the stock market crashed, drastically reshaping America. Shantytowns, or Hoovervilles, named after President Herbert Hoover and built by and for the homeless, sprang up about the nation. In New York City, they were

found on the Great Lawn in Central Park ("Hoover Valley") and at Riverside Park along the Hudson ("Camp Thomas Paine"). Near where Soyer commonly painted and not far from the Bowery Mission where New York City's homeless converged for food and shelter, were the Hoovervilles known as "Packing Box City" on Houston Street and "Hardlucksville" on the East River, which by August of 1932 sheltered about 450 men living in sixty shacks occupying two blocks on East 9th and 10th Streets.

In November of 1932, a new President was elected, Franklin Roosevelt, who pushed through Congress his overarching New Deal program within his first hundred days in office. But recovery would prove to be a long, slow road. For Soyer, poverty, privation, and abandonment were not abstract concepts to which he had to adjust. They filled the pages of the Russian authors he had read as a youth. Moreover, as an Eastern European Jew, fear of itinerancy had always been an unfortunate part of his ethnic past. In New York, Soyer adapted to the new hardships by painting content deriving almost solely from his sensitive and sympathetic awareness of the grim social issues of the times. His painting style evolved into a new, modern "Urban Realism" wherein Soyer painted the beggars, bums, homeless workers as he saw them on the streets of New York's Union Square, the Village, Fourteenth Street and the Lower East Side.

Late Afternoon, c. 1931 is emblematic of Soyer's paintings peopled with the inhabitants of Lower Manhattan going about their lives. Such depictions made him a key figure of the Fourteenth Street artists known for their observations of Depression era life around Union Square. For the exhibition catalogue published on the occasion of the traveling Raphael Soyer retrospective organized by The Whitney Museum of American Art in 1967, Lloyd Goodrich wrote:

"Soyer did not need the Depression to make him aware of the facts of life in most of New York; he had lived with them since childhood. As boy and youth he had roamed the streets, drawing the people of the East Side. About 1933 he embarked on a series of paintings and prints of life on the Bowery and Fourteenth Street, focusing on the derelicts – men existing without hope, begging, sleeping in parks and under bridges, dependent on missions for food and shelter…Soyer's Bowery paintings, direct out of reality, owed little to other art. Each man was specifically characterized, from his face to the patches on his clothes…The somber tonality of these canvases was appropriate to their subjects."

Showing an interviewer in 1934 a picture of men sleeping under the arches of the Williamsburg Bridge, Soyer remarked, "they did not mind when I sketched them. I knew most of them."

Raphael Soyer's *Late Afternoon* is related to his painting, *The Unemployed*, 1931, in the Collection of the Columbus Museum of Art, OH.



Raphael Soyer, *The Unemployed*, 1931
oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches
Collection of the Columbus Museum of Art, OH