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Entering the Studio

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In Raphael Soyer’s painting *Entering the Studio* (c. 1935) (Fig. 1), Soyer depicts his wife Rebecca Letz¹, who was both well-educated and, like Soyer, Jewish. The biographical facts of Soyer’s life and the development of both his artistic style and subject matter, allow for an explanation of the painting, predominantly through the use of Feminist and Social Marxist methods. Soyer and his family experienced persecution at the hands of the anti-semitic Czarist

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¹ *Entering the Studio, C. 1935*. Wall Label, Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC.
Russian government and Soyer’s status as an immigrant to the United States limited his financial, educational, and personal opportunities. These factors forced the young artist to financially support his parents at the expense of his education and influenced both his artistic style and subject matter. Soyer became an adamant Realist, reflecting his opinion that art is meant to “describe and express people, their lives and times,” and he dedicated himself to painting intimate scenes of women. These paintings followed the end of the “New Woman” movement, which “represented a generation of women who came of age between 1890 and 1920 and challenged gender norms and structures by asserting a new public presence through work, education, entertainment, and politics, while also denoting a distinctly modern appearance that contrasted with Victorian ideals. The New Woman became associated with the rise of feminism and the campaign for women’s suffrage, as well as with the rise of consumerism, mass culture, and freer expressions of sexuality that defined the first decades of the 20th century.”

Despite the progress made by the “New Woman” movement, the movement also inspired unflattering depictions of women as consumerists and a rejection of intellectual or artistic women. In *Entering the Studio* (c.1935) Soyer uses Letz to represent the marginalization of women following the “New Woman” movement, and the generational differences in Jewish families.

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Raphael Soyer and his twin brother, Moses, were born on December 25, 1899, in Borisoglebsk, Tambov, Russia to Avroham and Bella Schoar (who later changed their name to Goodrich, Lloyd. *Raphael Soyer*. New York: Published for the Whitney Museum of American Art by F.A. Praeger, 1968. 5.

Soyer upon their immigration to the United States in 1912).\(^4\) Avroham, a scholar of Hebrew literature and history, taught Hebrew to the children of the few Jewish aristocratic families in Borisoglebsk.\(^5\) The Schoar home was bursting with support for the humanities. Avroham owned a library containing the works of classic Russian, English, and American authors (with English texts being translated to Russian). Avroham would decorate the walls of the Schoar home with postcards of Russian paintings and his own drawings of flowers and animals, and Bella would then embroider linens in bright colors based on Avroham’s drawings. Besides their own artistic and literary pursuits, the Schoar parents encouraged their children to draw. Their children began copying the work of their father, and the Schoar parents would put their children’s work on the walls alongside the postcards and make suggestions for the improvement of their work. Interestingly enough, all three Soyer brothers (Raphael, Moses, and Isaac) would go on to become artists. Indeed, the enthusiasm of the Schoar brothers in the visual arts is noted when Raphael says,

“Everyone in the family aspired to be something. The brothers were obsessed by childish dreams of becoming Rembrandts and Raphaels, whose works were as yet entirely unknown to them.”

The Schoar home also served as the gathering place for Avroham’s pupils and other young people. Avroham’s pupils instructed the children in French and German\(^6\), and their presence had an important impact on Raphael’s later work, evidenced when Soyer writes,

“One evening, a young man named Ivan Ivanovich Pozdniakov, came to our house and
did a drawing of our father from life. That one could draw a living person was a sudden
revelation to me. I stopped drawing for several days, then asked my father to pose for me as he
had for Ivan Ivanovich. When the drawing was praised, my elation was boundless. From then on
I became a confirmed realist. I drew only from nature rather than from imagination, like other
children. In retrospect, I believe that this limited my art, but perhaps my love for painting people
stems from that incident.”

Despite having the support of the Jewish community of Borisoglebsk, the Schoar family
did not have the support of the Czarist Russian government. Czar Nicholas II held anti-semitic
views, and this was reflected in the local government. In addition to antisemitism, the Russian
government did not welcome the spread of liberal ideas. Thus the gatherings in the Schoar
home, inherently liberal and Jewish in nature, roused the ire of the provincial government. In
1912, the governor of Tambov refused to renew Avroham Schoar’s residence permit, essentially
exiling the Schoar family from Russia and forcing them to immigrate to the United States.

Upon their entry into the United States, the Schoar family changed their name from
Schoar to Soyer, a practice common among immigrants at this time. The Soyer family landed in
Philadelphia, where they stayed with one of Bella’s relatives while Avroham sought employment
in New York. After Avroham secured jobs as a professor at Yeshiva College and a writer for
Yiddish publications, the rest of the Soyer family moved to the Bronx. Despite Avroham

securing an academic post, life was not easy for the immigrant family. The family was poor and lived in a small apartment composed of three generations.¹⁰ Both Avroham and Rebecca found it difficult to adjust to life in the United States. Ellen Wiley Todd describes their difficulties when she writes,

“Raphael recalled his father being at times ‘childishly uncompromising, unable to cope with the inconsistencies of his world’ and ‘the turbulent inner life of our bewildered mother.’ She was frustrated by the ‘void in her own intellectual growth, the realization of which made her alternately angry and melancholy.”

Raphael and Moses experienced similar frustrations. Highly educated for their age, and students of the “gymnasium” in Borisoglebsk, the twins were initially placed in kindergarten in the United States due to their lack of English. To make matters worse, the twins stubbornly clung to their Russian. Nevertheless, Raphael and Moses completed grammar school in two years and entered high school at the age of fifteen. In 1916, when Avroham could no longer support the family, Raphael and Moses dropped out of Morris High School and went to work. For the next ten years, Raphael worked various jobs.

Through their frustrating school years and their years spent working, the boys continued to paint and draw, noted when Moses states,

“We were happy only in the badly lighted and ill ventilated back room in our apartment which our mother had allocated to us. Here we did our lessons, posed for one another, and painted and drew.”

Besides their back room drawings, Raphael and Moses took free evening drawing classes at Cooper Union from 1914 to 1918. While attending Cooper Union, Raphael had a job selling newspapers from five in the morning until three in the afternoon. Following their studies at Cooper Union, Raphael and Moses entered the free school of the National Academy of Design in 1918. While attending the Academy, Raphael worked nights as a soda jerk. Soon after entering the Academy, the twins decided to study in different art schools. Raphael stayed in the National Academy of Design, while Moses began studying at the Educational Alliance Art School (founded for the children of immigrants).\(^\text{11}\) Raphael explains the decision, stating,

\textit{“\.\.\. our special problem of being twins, of having the same interests and attitudes, which tended to make our work look alike.”}\(^\text{12}\)

At the Academy, Raphael studied under George Maynard and Charles Curran, artists who taught the style of Sargent and Whistler. During his time at the Academy, Raphael also studied intermittently at the Art Students League under Guy Pène du Bois, whose work and teaching methods Soyer appreciated. Soyer was afforded the opportunity to attend the Art Students League, which cost fourteen dollars a month (beyond the means of Soyer), by an uncle who took interest in his work.\(^\text{13}\) Soyer, like many of his peers, despised the boring and conservative painting formulas taught at the Academy. So, in 1922 when he left the Academy, Soyer sought to forget everything he had learned there, stating,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{11}{Todd, Ellen Wiley. \textit{The "New Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street.} Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. 64.}
\footnote{13}{Todd, Ellen Wiley. \textit{The "New Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street.} Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. 65-66.}
\end{footnotes}
“As soon as I left the Academy, I made a conscious effort to forget everything I had learned there. . . I started from the beginning again and painted in a frank and almost naive manner subjects of ordinary interest that were part of my immediate life.”

Thus Soyer entered his primitivist stage, characterized by flat patterns, little concern for naturalistic light, and a pale color palette. The subject of his primitivist works were Bronx and Lower East Side street scenes featuring family and friends, places and people that made him feel comfortable. Soyer’s primitivist stage was welcomed by a number of his friends and critics, due to the fashionable nature of primitivism during the mid to late 1920’s. The typifying example of Soyer’s primitivist work is the watercolor Williamsburg Bridge (1927) (fig. 2). In this painting, Soyer depicts the portal of Williamsburg Bridge in New York City. Soyer’s painting appears flat, curvilinear figures lack identity, the color palette is pale, and the forms are nuanced. Soyer commented on the painting’s primitivist style and his comfort with the subject when he wrote,

“I love that bridge. I did many watercolors of it and also a painting that Mr. Hirshhorn bought and gave to the Museum. People used to walk and children used to play on the bridge. There was little traffic, especially on Saturdays and Sundays. When you saw the bridge from the end of Canal Street, looking east, it was beautiful, the way it rose up. It always reminded me of a Henri Rousseau painting.”

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Stylistically, *Dancing Lesson* (1926) (Fig. 3) incorporates the same flatness, nuanced forms, and pale color palette as *Williamsburg Bridge* (1927). Soyer depicts his sister Rebecca and brother Moses dancing to the tune of his younger brother Isaac’s harmonica. To the left and right of the children sit Avroham and Bella Soyer, who take a moment to watch their children dance. On the wall is a framed photograph of Soyer’s grandparents, emphasizing the generational differences between the Americanized children and their Russian elders.\(^ {17} \)

Soyer felt especially uncomfortable in the presence of strangers and had what can be inferred to be social anxiety. Soyer admits that in the period from the late teens to mid-1920’s he was the “shyest, the most inward, non-communicative character, almost to the point of being retarded”\textsuperscript{18}, thus we can infer that Soyer was closer and more comfortable with his family than anyone else. Besides Soyer’s depiction of his comfort with his family, scholars have argued that \textit{Dancing Lesson} (1926) is indisputably “Jewish”. Although Soyer rejected the affiliation his art with Judaism,\textsuperscript{19} art historian Avram Kampf has argued that \textit{Dancing Lesson} (1926) exemplifies Soyer’s Jewishness on the basis that the decor of Soyer’s home is typical of Jewish immigrants.

\textsuperscript{18} Todd, Ellen Wiley. \textit{The "New Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street}. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. 66.

Kampf has also recognized that *Williamsburg Bridge* (1927) and *East Side Street* (1928) (Fig. 4) depict the landmarks of a typically Jewish neighborhood, the Lower East Side. Art historian Samantha Baskind builds on Kampf’s argument, asserting that the photograph of Soyer’s grandparents is an icon due to its size relative to the figures in the painting. Photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century would never have been so oversized, and its size would make it cumbersome to transport from Russia to the United States. Thus, Baskind argues that Soyer exaggerates the size of the photograph to indicate the significance of the signs and symbols from the homeland to himself and Jews in general. Baskind asserts that Soyer followed in the footsteps of other Jewish-born artists of New York City by painting life on the Lower East Side, a recurring subject of Jewish artists.

In *East Side Street* (1928), Soyer again depicts the Williamsburg Bridge in a primitivist manner, this time from the side. Soyer reiterates his love for the area around Williamsburg Bridge, evident when he comments on the lithograph stating,

“I am not now sure, but this is probably the Williamsburg Bridge from a different angle. In those days I always had a studio near the waterfront, on the East Side. I would sometimes stand in the middle of the street painting, drawing, or making watercolors. I love that section of New York.”

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In 1926, painting in the height of interest in primitivism, Soyer’s work, appearing in a group exhibition by the Salons of America, caught the attention of Alexander Brook, assistant director of the Whitney Studio Club. Soyer was welcomed as a member of the Club and introduced to Juliana Force, the Club’s director, who began to purchase his work (a total of five paintings).22 The Whitney Studio Club closed in 1928, and in 1931 was replaced by the Whitney Museum23, which retained the five Soyer paintings purchased by Force. In 1932, the Museum purchased a sixth Soyer painting, becoming the first museum to purchase one of Soyer’s works. Following his success at the Whitney Studio Club, Soyer received his first one-man show at the Daniel Gallery, months before the Great Crash of 1929. The show was well received and Soyer

sold several paintings, affording him the opportunity to pursue a career as an artist, and allowing him to give up the various jobs which he worked.\textsuperscript{24}

Despite his success as a primitivist, Soyer by choice continued to develop his art, made evident when he states,

\begin{quote}
“My eagerness to learn my craft and widen the content of my paintings prevented me from acquiring the confining mannerisms of primitive art.”
\end{quote}

Soyer’s decision to develop his art occurred both stylistically and in his choice of subject matter. Soyer’s works evolved from the flatness, nuanced forms, disregard of naturalistic light, and pale color palette, characteristic of primitivism, to the illusions of depth and strong forms created by a sophisticated depiction of natural light and a heavy color palette. In regard to subject matter, Soyer turned his attention to intimate depictions of women. The start of the 1930’s ushered in the development of Soyer’s art, in reference to both style and subject.

Soyer’s shift from a primitivist style to a more literal style and his growing interest in intimate depictions of women are the products of his admiration of the works of Edgar Degas (1834-1917). Soyer was first introduced to the work of Degas in the Academy’s library,\textsuperscript{25} and revealed the influence of Degas on his own work when he stated,

\begin{quote}
“But personally I was very soon taken with people like Degas. I loved his work—somehow. And I attribute it to the element of, not so much of the quality of painting in
\end{quote}

Degas—or even drawing in Degas, which is so great—but somehow I fell for this element of understanding of the human psyche, you know, that I see in Degas. I see it to this day.”

Thus, Soyer aimed to paint the character of women. However, in contrast to Degas’ paintings of women bathing, Soyer’s paintings do not contain any element of exposé. Instead, Soyer depicts women with warm intimacy and comfort. A comparison of Soyer Entering the Studio (c. 1935) (Fig. 1) and Degas’ Woman Combing Her Hair (c. 1888-90) (Fig. 5) exemplifies the difference between the two painters’ depiction of women. Both paintings are intimate and of women in interior spaces. In Entering the Studio (c. 1935), Rebecca Letz is clothed and faces the viewer (however she does not make eye contact). Emphasis is placed on Letz’s face, and the viewer is left wondering “What is she thinking?”. In Woman Combing Her Hair (c. 1888-90), the woman is naked and has her back to the viewer. Emphasis is placed on her hair and shapely figure. Instead of inquiring about the woman’s thoughts, the viewer instead spectates her body. Degas’ influence on Soyer was restricted to the representation of women in an intimate manner, however, Soyer broke from Degas’ objectification of women by depicting women as introspective beings.

In addition to the comparison between Soyer’s *Entering the Studio* (c. 1935) and Degas’ *Woman Combing Her Hair* (c. 1888-90), the same comparison can be made between Soyer’s *Intimate Interior* (c. 1933) (Fig. 6) and Degas’ *Woman Having Her Hair Combed* (c. 1886-88) (Fig. 7). In *Intimate Interior* (c. 1933), Soyer depicts a woman and a man sitting on a bed. The lack of contact between the couple dismisses any suggestion of coition. The woman makes eye contact with the viewer, and in concordance, the viewer’s eyes are drawn to the woman’s eyes. The woman’s cleavage is exposed, however, Soyer does not place emphasis on it. Thus, instead of focusing on the woman’s sensual qualities, the viewer instead focuses on the woman’s mentality.

In *Woman Having Her Hair Combed* (c. 1886-88) Degas presents the woman in an intimate way, but again he objectifies her, fully revealing her chest and shapeliness.
(Fig. 6) *Intimate Interior* – Raphael Soyer (c.1933)

(Fig. 7) *Woman Having Her Hair Combed* – Degas (c.1886-88)
In addition to the association between Soyer and Degas, Soyer was also associated with the Fourteenth Street School, a group of painters including Isabel Bishop and Reginald Marsh. The subject of the Fourteenth Street School was the “new woman” and life on the streets of New York City. However, Soyer’s depiction of the “new woman” is strikingly different from other painters of the Fourteenth Street School. Soyer depicts the women in his paintings as intellectual and not overly materialistic. In contrast, Bishop and Marsh depict women as consumerist and temporal. The non-glamorous, uncongested, and realistic accuracy of Soyer’s works combats the sense of overwhelming consumerism and spurious nature of the women seen in the works of other members of the Fourteenth Street School. In Soyer’s *Window Shoppers* (1938) (Fig. 8) we see three plainly dressed women window shopping. The placid nature of the window shoppers, combined with the two women in the background, who are not preoccupied with consumerism, sets the mood of the painting as introspective and the opposite of the raucous scenes of works such as Bishop’s *Tidying Up* (c.1938) (Fig. 9) and Marsh’s *In Fourteenth Street* (1934) (Fig. 11).

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(Fig. 8) *Window Shoppers*—Raphael Soyer (1938)

(Fig. 9) *Tidying Up*—Bishop (c. 1938)
Coinciding with his shift from primitivism to a more literal style and his choice to paint intimate scenes of women, Soyer was in the process of leaving home. In 1931, Soyer married Rebecca Letz, a friend of his sister Fanny.\textsuperscript{30} Letz was a highly educated woman graduating from the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1922, receiving a bachelor's degree in English from Hunter College and 1924, and a masters degree in Early Childhood Education from Teachers College, Columbia University. Following her education, Letz worked as a kindergarten teacher and a teacher at various Jewish primary schools.\textsuperscript{31} Letz’s steady income from teaching combined with Soyer’s income as an artist allowed the couple to achieve financial stability during the Great Depression. The Depression had little effect financially on the couple,


but it affected them politically. In 1929, Letz and Soyer joined the communist John Reed Club, which encouraged the development of literature, art, and culture sympathetic to communism. Despite the leftist agenda of the John Reed Club, “women were largely excluded” and “feminism played a diminished role”. The Club often made women feel uncomfortable and never discussed a feminist agenda in their meetings. The sexism towards women, even in the more liberal spheres of society, during the late 1920’s and early 1930’s signals the failures of the New Woman movement. Educated women, such as Rebecca Letz, continued to be marginalized by men in an artistic and intellectual setting.

In *Entering the Studio* (c.1935), Soyer depicts Letz peering around a corner into what we can infer, based on the painting’s title, to be the artist’s studio. Letz is depicted as apprehensive, yet engrossed in what lays before her. Light shining from the artist’s studio hits her face while darkness shrouds her back. Soyer’s contrast of light and darkness acts as an allusion to the common metaphor of light representing knowledge and darkness representing ignorance. Soyer empathized with the marginalization Letz experienced. Soyer experienced marginalization as a result of being Jewish, poor, and an immigrant. Letz experienced marginalization as a result of being a woman with intellectual and/or artistic interests. Thus, Soyer’s choice to depict Letz entering the studio serves as a recognition not only of the marginalization of Letz but of all the women whom the “New Woman” movement failed.

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An additional interpretation of the painting uses the same metaphor of light and dark, but this time to represent the generational changes within Jewish families. Soyer and his family were forced to emigrate from Russia due to the anti-semitic Czarist Russian government. In the United States, and particularly New York City where twenty percent of the population in 1920 was Jewish, Jews experienced relative peace compared to the old-world. Thus, Soyer uses Letz, a Jew, to represent the generation of Jews whose parents experienced the anti-semitism of the old-world (darkness) and who may have experienced it themselves as children. However, this generation of Jews also experienced the relative peace of the United States in comparison to the old world (light).

Soyer and Letz both struggled with marginalization but made a success of themselves in their respective careers. Both Soyer and Letz represent a new generation of Jews who enjoy the peace of the United States in contrast to the anti-semitism of the old world. In *Entering the Studio* (c.1935), Soyer acknowledges the discrimination against Letz and himself, and the opportunities in the United States.

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Bibliography of Works Consulted


