



Raphael Soyer

American, born Russia, 1899 - 1987

A Railroad Station Waiting Room

c. 1940

oil on canvas

overall: 87 × 114.94 cm (34 1/4 × 45 1/4 in.)

framed: 111.13 × 139.07 × 9.84 cm (43 3/4 × 54 3/4 × 3 7/8 in.)

Inscription: lower left: Raphael / Soyer

Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund) 2015.19.69

ENTRY


Raphael Soyer's *A Railroad Station Waiting Room* treats a common theme in the artist's work: people waiting. [1] He depicted the subject in different contexts throughout his career, from the benign ennui of *Bus Passengers* (1938, location unknown) to the nervous anticipation of *Waiting for the Audition* [fig. 1]. *A Railroad Station Waiting Room* indexes the moods of a diverse group of travelers in the Harlem 125th Street Station as they wait for trains to take them to the Bronx, New Haven, or other destinations. [2] A man in a brown suit staves off boredom by engrossing himself in his newspaper, while a woman seated in the foreground in a brilliant red crocheted hat leans on a paper that has been unfolded and refolded several times over, as if she has exhausted her reading material and now resigns herself to an unrelieved wait. Between these poles of resistance and resignation, other travelers smoke, yawn, or lose themselves in thought. Soyer also conveys the monotony of the wait through various formal means. He repeats the alternation of mint green, brown, and white that makes up the station walls and ticket windows with marked uniformity. The smaller facets of paneling and the lines of the planks composing the walls similarly repeat, echoing the four figures on the bench, whose

backs slump one after the next in a series of parallel curving lines.

A Railroad Station Waiting Room was exhibited in the Corcoran Gallery of Art's Eighteenth Biennial Exhibition, where it won the Third William A. Clark Prize and a Bronze Medal. Soyer received his awards in person from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt [fig. 2], who praised his work, saying, "I felt as though I were passing through that waiting room, which I have done so many times, and looking at the people myself." [3] Such comments must have pleased Soyer, not only because Roosevelt complimented his skills as a representational painter, but also because his work prompted her empathetic response. The artist is typically classified as a social realist: an urban, socially aware painter who crafted figures in a representational style. Indeed, Soyer was the very definition of urban, spending most of his life in New York City after immigrating there from Russia at the age of 12. He also spent a great deal of time advocating for the rights of oppressed groups. [4] Unlike many of his peers, however, Soyer professed a determination not to allow specific political views to enter into his art. [5] Rather, he sought to present a more universal, humanist view of city life, one with which people from all walks of life, privileged or poor, homeless man or First Lady, could relate. [6] Eleanor Roosevelt's ability, then, to empathize with the boredom of the people in the waiting room she herself had visited proved the success of Soyer's painting.

Because Soyer sought a universal perspective in his art, he downplayed other more personal influences, particularly his own observant Judaism. The Soyer scholar Samantha Baskind has argued, however, that contrary to his claims, his art expressed a Jewish worldview that was shaped by the concept of social justice known as *tikkun olam*, or "repair the world." "Tikkun olam," Baskind writes, "means in the most universal sense, that Jews are not only responsible for the ethical and material welfare of other Jews but also for the ethical and material welfare of society as a whole." [7] Thus Soyer did not see it as his duty, as he said, to "paint so-called class-conscious pictures" that might prompt specific political action, [8] but to paint works that were inspired by and that in turn inspire a sense of shared humanity and social consciousness. [9]

In *A Railroad Station Waiting Room*, boredom is the great leveler. It evokes a sense of alienation that, ironically, unites us all. But Baskind also understands this sense of alienation, particularly as Soyer expresses it in the context of transience, to be another biographical aspect of his art. A sense of ephemerality indeed pervades the Corcoran's canvas. Soyer has not only portrayed people in transit, but the very instant he has captured is fleeting: a woman yawns, a baby looks

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curiously over her mother's shoulder, a man holds a cigarette in his mouth.

Soyer and his twin brother, Moses, who was also an artist, were born in Russia, where their father worked as a Hebrew teacher. Their home became a meeting place for students and other Jewish intellectuals, and, as a consequence, their residence permit was revoked in 1912. In a matter of months the family moved to Philadelphia, where the intellectually precocious teenagers were placed in a kindergarten class because they could not yet speak English. [10] This personal experience of being uprooted, as well as the more general immigrant experience as part of the Jewish diaspora, led Soyer to focus on painting themes of alienation, homelessness, and travel. [11] He regarded these experiences as part of the human condition and thus central to artistic enterprise: "In my opinion if the art of painting is to survive, it must describe and express people, their lives and times. It must communicate. . . . I consider myself a modern artist, or rather an artist of today . . . because I am influenced by the thoughts, the life and the aesthetics of our time." [12]

Lisa Strong

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Raphael Soyer, *Waiting for the Audition*, c. 1950, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund), 2015.19.75



fig. 2 "Five Thousand Attend Preview of Corcoran's 18th Biennial Exhibition," *Washington Star*, Mar. 21, 1943

NOTES

- [1] Lloyd Goodrich, *Raphael Soyer* (New York, 1967), 16.
- [2] The 1896 building designed by Morgan O'Brien, the New York Central and Hudson River Railroad architect, still stands.
- [3] Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day," *New York World-Telegram*, Mar. 22, 1943, sec. 2, 17; The Poe Sisters, "Corcoran Art Preview Here Draws Crowd," *Washington Times-Herald*, Mar. 21, 1943, sec. B, 1, 2; "Five Thousand Attend Preview of Corcoran's 18th Biennial Exhibition," *Washington Star*, Mar. 21, 1943, sec. A, 3.
- [4] Milly Heyd, *Mutual Reflections: Jews and Blacks in American Art* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1999), 73.

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- [5] Raphael Soyer, “An Artist’s Experiences in the 1930s,” in Patricia Hills, *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Paintings of the 1930s* (Boston, 1983), 27.
- [6] Soyer, as quoted in Lloyd Goodrich, *Raphael Soyer* (New York, 1967), 21.
- [7] Samantha Baskind, *Raphael Soyer and the Search for Modern Jewish Art* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 1–16, 92–93.
- [8] Raphael Soyer, *Self-Revelment: A Memoir* (New York, 1967), 72.
- [9] Soyer, in Patricia Hills, *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Paintings of the 1930s* (Boston, 1983), 27; and Lloyd Goodrich, *Raphael Soyer* (New York, 1967), 12.
- [10] Lloyd Goodrich, *Raphael Soyer* (New York, 1967), 6.
- [11] Samantha Baskind, *Raphael Soyer and the Search for Modern Jewish Art* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 110–179, 181.
- [12] Soyer, unpublished lecture, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Maine, 1960, Raphael Soyer Papers, Series III: Articles, Essays and Lectures, Box 2, Folder 13, p. 20, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; and Samantha Baskind, *Raphael Soyer and the Search for Modern Jewish Art* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 125.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave canvas that was commercially prepared with a warm off-white ground thin enough that it does not obliterate the texture of the canvas weave. The canvas is stretched onto a six-member stretcher with one crossbar running in each direction. There are Shattuck mechanisms at each of the stretching points. It appears that the artist transferred the work to this stretcher from a smaller one early in the painting process, expanding the dimension along the right side by 2 cm and along the left side by 0.5 cm. Along both sides there is a ridge in the paint where the canvas had previously turned over the edge of a smaller stretcher. There are tack holes within the area of this ridge and the side of the stretcher along the right side. One possible explanation for the restretching is that the artist reused a canvas, but there is no evidence for this in the x-radiograph, which also shows no artist’s changes. In the infrared examination it is clear that Soyer began the painting process by laying out the primary elements of the painting with a dark liquid wash and a small brush. [1] He built up his paint in fairly thick layers, blending the paint wet into wet with low impasto. Under ultraviolet light the thick varnish layer has the

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characteristic greenish fluorescence of a natural resin. The condition of the painting is excellent with only a few tiny retouches evident in the ultraviolet examination. The varnish is discolored and somewhat overly thick and glossy.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

(Frank K.M. Rehn Gallery, New York): purchased March 1943 by the Corcoran Gallery of Art; acquired 2015 by the National Gallery of Art.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1940 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 27 November - 8 January 1941, no. 149.

1941 Fifty-Second Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture, Art Institute of Chicago, 30 October 1941 - 4 January 1942, no. 192, as Railroad Waiting Room.

1941 Raphael Soyer, Associated American Artists Galleries, New York, 18 March - 7 April 1941, no. 49, as Railroad Waiting Room.

1943 138th Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1943, no. 126, as The Waiting Room.

1943 Eighteenth Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 March - 2 May 1943, no. 84, as Waiting Room.

1949 Juliana Force and American Art, a Memorial Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 24 September - 30 October 1949, no. 116, as Waiting Room.

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1958 The Iron Horse in Art, Fort Worth Art Center, 1958, no. 101, as Waiting Room.

1959 American National Exhibition, Moscow, 1959, no. 24, as Waiting Room.

1959 Paintings and Sculpture from the American National Exhibition in Moscow, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1959, no. 11.

1967 Raphael Soyer, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; William Hayes Ackland Memorial Art Center, University of North Carolina; High Museum of Art, Atlanta; California Palace of the Legion of Honor, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts [Ohio]; Minneapolis Institute of Arts; Des Moines Art Center, 1967, no. 40, as Waiting Room.

1978 The William A. Clark Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 26 April - 16 July 1978, unnumbered catalogue.

1980 Guy Pène du Bois: Artist About Town, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha; Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, 1980-1981, no. 105, as Waiting Room.

1981 Of Time and Place: American Figurative Art from the Corcoran Gallery, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Cincinnati Art Museum; San Diego Museum of Art; University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington; Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga; Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Des Moines Art Center; Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1981-1983, no. 55, as Waiting Room.

1984 Raphael Soyer's New York: People and Places, The Cooper Union, Arthur A. Houghton Jr. Gallery, New York; Boston University Art Gallery, 1984, checklist no. 20.

1998 The Forty-Fifth Biennial: The Corcoran Collects, 1907–1998, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 17 July - 29 September 1998, unnumbered catalogue.

2004 Figuratively Speaking: The Human Form in American Art, 1770-1950, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 2004-2005, unpublished checklist.

2005 Encouraging American Genius: Master Paintings from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, 2005-2007, checklist no. 94.

2008 *The American Evolution: A History through Art*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 2008, unpublished checklist.

2013 *American Journeys: Visions of Place*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013 - 28 September 2014, unpublished checklist.

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