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A CULTURAL APPROACH: JUDAISM AND ITS EFFECTS ON MOSES SOYER'S
PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

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Bachelor of Arts in Art History

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ABSTRACT

In July of 1966, Harold Rosenberg published his often-cited article, “Is There a Jewish Art?.” Rosenberg’s inquiry continues to spark debate on the existence and merit of labeling art as Jewish. Rather than attempting to provide an answer for the question posed by his article, this thesis instead contemplates the ways in which Judaism might shape an artist’s body of work, in particular, that of Social Realist Painter Moses Soyer. Considering that many of the most notable American Social Realist painters of the twentieth-century share a common Jewish ancestry, it is important to analyze the possible significance of their shared heritage. Therefore, this thesis examines the work of Moses Soyer in conjunction with the American Jewish experience. The first chapter focuses on Soyer’s early years, which I argue are instrumental to his later works of art. The second chapter concentrates on Soyer’s political activism, that is, his involvement in leftist politics, which relates to several important Jewish values. The final chapter analyzes the artist’s numerous portraits of dancers, which also align with the Jewish experience in America during the 1930s and 1940s.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to his monograph on Moses Soyer, art historian Alfred Werner declared that Jewish subject matter was “conspicuously absent” from Soyer’s work “as it is markedly present in that of older artists such as Abraham Walkowitz or Max Weber.”¹ He further asserts, “The fact that Moses Soyer was one of several Jews among the era’s Social Realist painters should not be misinterpreted within the ranks of the protesters, no distinction was made between gentile and Jew, black and white, native American and immigrant. They formed a fraternity of people filled with the same desire to give plastic expression to the genuine dissatisfaction rampant in a period of mass unemployment, strikes, and riots.”² Werner’s observations fail to account for the influence of Judaism on both Soyer’s work and life. I would that by not making distinctions between the various sitters in his paintings the artist is conforming to long standing Jewish ideals. Additionally, while Werner correctly asserts that the large majority of Soyer’s work lacks overtly religious imagery, he ignores an important facet of the Jewish experience: notably

¹ Alfred Werner, *Moses Soyer* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1970), 18.

² *Ibid.*

that Judaism encompasses much more than just religion. Judaism also comprises a cultural heritage, which proved much more influential to Soyer's oeuvre. Furthermore, by overlooking the cultural elements of Judaism vis-à-vis Soyer's work, Werner also disregards the changes in American Jewry that took place during Soyer's lifetime, many of which directly impacted the artist and thus informed some of his paintings and drawings. Accordingly, this thesis will examine some of the most pivotal social, political, religious, and cultural developments of American Jewry that took place during the decades of the 1920s and 30s, noting their importance on the artist's creative process.

CHAPTER II

THE EARLY YEARS

Born in Russia on December 25, 1899, Moses Soyer lived a rather atypical life in comparison to that of other Eastern European Jews.³ Soyer grew up in Borisoglebsk, a rare city outside the Pale of Settlement in which Jews could reside. In fact, due to their unique living situation during this time, the Soyers were required to obtain a special “right to live” permit issued by the Russian government.⁴ Within this provincial town lived about fifty other Jewish families among a population of roughly 50,000 inhabitants, a relatively small number when compared to other Jewish-only settlements.⁵ Life in Russia, and especially in the Pale, proved difficult for Eastern European Jews, who lacked basic freedoms and economic opportunities. For the majority of Russian Jews the government became the enemy once it began restricting residential rights, economic enterprises, and viewing Russian Jews as the “Hebrew Leprosy,” as stated by Uri Herscher, of the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles.”⁶ Living outside the

³ From this point on, I will refer to Moses Soyer as Soyer, and the rest of his family will be referred to by first names in order to avoid confusion.

⁴ Raphael Soyer, Interviewed by Milton W. Brown. Oral History Interview. Archives of American Art (May 13-June 1, 1981).

⁵ Moses Soyer, “Three Brothers,” Box 2, Folder 4, Archives of America Art (1940).

⁶ Uri D. Herscher, *The Eastern European Jewish Experience in America* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1983), 12.

Pale meant that Soyers did not have the same experience as many other Russian Jewish immigrants in the United States. The *shtetl* life, which Alfred Werner and other historians believe has informed the psyche of Eastern European immigrants, did not influence Soyser during his childhood.⁷

In his article, “Ghetto Graduates,” Werner notes that the culture of the *shtetl*, in conjunction with Russian law, severely limited the creative potential of Jewish American artists who emigrated from Russia. The art world remained closed to Russian Jews unless, as stated by Werner, they elected to defy Jewish tradition and were somehow able to overcome the increasingly anti-Semitic policies set forth by the government.⁸ The confines of the Pale, which excluded culturally rich cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg, lacked art museums and other cultural institutions that could provide an artistic education for Jews. Because Russians excluded Jews from the most profitable industries, such as agriculture and the industrial industry, the Jewish population commonly faced extreme poverty.⁹ Day-to-life consisted of grueling work and left little, if any, time for leisure and “frivolous” activities, like painting and drawing. Additionally, in the *shtetl*, “iconoclastic Judaism,” which strictly enforced the second commandment, saw a much greater prevalence than in other areas, especially the New World.¹⁰

Similar to Werner’s argument, Matthew Baigell also noted the limited potential for creative endeavors in the lives of Eastern European Jews. He cites the second

⁷ Alfred Werner, “Ghetto Graduates,” *American Art Journal* 5, no. 2 (November 1973): 72.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ray Scheindlin, *A Short History of the Jewish People: From Legendary Times to Modern Statehood* (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 181.

¹⁰ Werner, “Ghetto Graduates,” 73.

commandment, extreme poverty, cultural insularity of the Jews, and limited opportunities for studying art as reasons for an anti-artistic sentiment that many Jews from Eastern Europe had adopted.¹¹ Instead, Jewish parents urged their children to focus on religious education or skilled labor, which was much better suited to providing a stable income. However, the Soyers, unlike their peers, actively encouraged their children to pursue art and introduced them to the works of the Old Masters. Soyer's father took him and his brothers to visit the Tretyakov Gallery on a trip to Moscow where they saw paintings by Rembrandt, Titian, and El Greco, among others. Soyer claimed that their trip to Moscow reinforced his decision to become an artist.¹²

It is important to note that while the Soyers enjoyed many freedoms denied the majority of Russian Jews, they still experienced forms of anti-Semitism and alienation due to their Jewish heritage. As a child, Soyer drew a picture of the Russian prince, Alexei. Upon seeing the sketch his drawing teacher declared, "You may draw whomever you wish, even God almighty himself, but never, never, never dare to draw again a member of the imperial family."¹³ As pointed out by Charlotte Willard in the introduction to her book on Moses Soyer, many considered paintings and drawings of the royal family by Jewish artists sacrilegious and offensive.¹⁴ Thus, the young artist learned early on that his Jewish heritage marked him as different from those around him. Soyer's twin brother, Raphael, shares an anecdote in his memoir in which their father, Abraham, arrives home

¹¹ Matthew Baigell, "From Hester Street to Fifty-Seventh Street; Jewish American Artists in New York," in Norman Kleeblatt and Susan Chevlowe, *Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in New York, 1900-1945*, exh. cat. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 31.

¹² Moses Soyer, "Three Brothers," 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Charlotte Willard and Philip Evergood, *Moses Soyer* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1962), 32.

one day out of breath and flustered because two drunk peasants recognized him as a Jew. They planned to assault him but he was able to escape by “making very big strides.”¹⁵ Additionally, Soyer’s father, although a respected member of their Russian community, became the target of persecution for his “radicalism,” which eventually led to the revocation of the family’s residence permit in 1912 and forced the family to immigrate to the United States.

THE ARTIST’S FATHER

Throughout his life, Abraham remained one of Soyer’s major influences. In his autobiographical essay, “Three Brothers” or “This is our Story,” Soyer notes that his story really begins with his father, who was a “truly remarkable man.”¹⁶ The elder Soyer, a Hebrew literature scholar, “enthusiastic” Zionist, and novice artist himself, was viewed as an intellectual leader within their Russian community.¹⁷ He was, as Soyer stated, a steadfast believer who “never deviated from the ideals he set for himself in his youth.”¹⁸ Werner writes that the Soyers raised their children in a strict Jewish home and Abraham once told his son to remember always that he was a Jewish child, a statement that surely stuck with him throughout his life.¹⁹ Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, his father

¹⁵ Raphael Soyer, *Self-Revelment: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1967), 12.

¹⁶ Soyer, “Three Brothers,” 5.

¹⁷ Soyer, *Self-Revelment*, 24. Raphael remembered his father as a “naïve romantic” and an “enthusiastic Zionist” who often took his children to Zionist meetings that he attended.

¹⁸ Soyer, “Three Brothers,” 5-6.

¹⁹ Werner, *Moses Soyer*, 21-22. Werner’s use of the word “strict” is interesting here considering Soyer never mentions a strict upbringing. Regardless, Judaism did play a part in his upbringing and his close relationship with his father would have made his father’s statement all the more influential.

encouraged him and his brothers to pursue art and gave them every opportunity for success. This differs remarkably from many other Jewish families who actively discouraged their children from pursuing art due to a strict adherence to the Second Commandment or a desire for their children to learn trades or gain other useful employment.²⁰ The encouragement received by Soyer and his brothers to pursue art is another way in which they were set apart from other Jewish artists and immigrants at this time.

The Artist's Father (fig.1), completed in 1938, gives viewers a sense of the reverence Soyer felt for his father. Abraham Soyer, seated in the foreground of the canvas, stares out past the viewer in quiet contemplation. He wears a suit and tie, imbuing him with an air of authority. Undoubtedly, this style of this painting recalls an earlier work, *The Unemployment Agency* (1933) (fig. 2), in which a tired, dejected looking man crosses the threshold of a door; he is either leaving or entering an employment agency with his shoulders stooped and his eyes filled with worry. The pressure to provide for himself and quite possibly his family ostensibly weighs on the sitter, a burden the elder Soyer felt throughout his life as his family was never able to escape the confines of poverty.²¹ In the portrait, the artist uses his father's old age to convey wisdom and intelligence, while his sad eyes, wrinkled hands, and tired face suggest a life of hard

²⁰ Werner, "Ghetto Graduates," 72-74.

²¹ Soyer, "Three Brothers," 7. Soyer notes that in Russia, many opportunities for employment were closed to his father due to his Jewish heritage. The family was poor and often did not have money for clothes and shoes. Even in America, the family struggled financially, and Moses and his brothers left school to help aid their family.

work. Soyer crops the painting in such a way that viewers feel as if they are sitting in front of him awaiting a conversation in which he will impart his worldly knowledge.

Soyer continued to utilize the idea of the Jewish sage/scholar/intellectual throughout his career. In 1922, while studying at the Educational Alliance, a settlement house located in Manhattan, he painted *Old Man in a Skull Cap* (fig. 3), about which Philip Evergood, a fellow student, friend, and colleague, stated, “Moses had done *Old Man with Skull Cap* which was rightly hailed as one of the outstanding contributions made by a student to the development of the school.”²² This painting proved so influential to Evergood that he used it as a model for his first dry-point etching, *Head of a Jew*. In fact, Soyer influenced the lives and art of many eminent artists, after he began a teaching career at the Educational Alliance. Peter Blume claimed that Soyer was the most advanced student at the school and that the influence of the Soyer brothers was so strong that Blume’s work, among others, began to share similar qualities.²³

Old Man in a Skull Cap harkens back to an old master, Rembrandt, and his *Portrait of an Old Jew* from 1654 (fig. 4). Soyer, in fact, often cites Rembrandt as one of his greatest influences. In Soyer’s book, *Painting the Human Figure* he writes, “Rembrandt’s line is intangible and spiritual. His drawings seem to be dictated by his spirit rather than drawn by his hand. They are deep, penetrating, and full of color.”²⁴ Both paintings, separated by centuries, show an older man with a covered head who stares out of the canvas disengaged from the viewer. A dark, plain background devoid of objects

²²Willard, *Moses Soyer*, 16.

²³ Peter Blume, “Interview with Peter Blume,” *Archives of American* 32, no. 3 (1992): 3.

²⁴ Moses Soyer, *Painting the Human Figure* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1964), 45.

surrounds the figure, emphasizing his importance. By removing superfluous details within the composition, the viewer's eyes rest solely on the sitter, thereby creating a relationship between the two. Likewise, both artists adorn the men in their compositions with long robe-like garments. The artists' emphasis however remains on the hands and faces of the men depicted, thereby highlighting their old age. The same is true for another painting by Soyer from the same year: *Old Man with Cane* (fig. 5).

A final composition in this vein, painted a decade later and titled *The Lover of Books* (1934) (fig. 6), portrays another older, albeit more modernized scholar. This portrait deviates from its predecessors in that the background is not barren, but rather cluttered with unidentifiable books and paintings, emphasizing culture and knowledge rather than age. Nevertheless, the scholar, who prominently stands in the foreground of the painting, remains the central focus. The model for this work, while still clothed in amorphous attire, stares straight ahead, engaging the viewer with a book in hand. Historian Barbara Mann suggests this tome might be a volume of the Talmud, a central text of Rabbinic Judaism.²⁵ She also notes the affinity this composition shares with many of Rembrandt's paintings, observing, "There is, in this archetypal European Jew, more than a hint of Rembrandt's depictions of Dutch Jews and Biblical scenes."²⁶ Soyer's *Lover of Books*, like *Old Man with a Skull Cap*, resonated with the Jewish community. The Congregation Beth Torah in

²⁵ Barbara Mann, "Visions of Jewish Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 4 (2006): 676.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Orange County, New York featured this painting as one of their “Paintings of the Month” for the month of *Kislev*.²⁷

REMBRANDT VAN RIJN: THE PAINTER OF JEWS

Interestingly, historians often associate Rembrandt with Jews and Jewish art due to what they perceive as his sympathetic portraits of Jews.²⁸ Rembrandt, living in the Jewish quarter known as *Jodenbreestraat*, found himself surrounded by Jewish neighbors, most of whom were Sephardic, although later many Ashkenazi Jews moved into the area.²⁹ Compared to the rest of Europe, Amsterdam, which contained the second largest concentration of Sephardic Jews in Europe, proved to be a place where Jews could obtain a certain measure of freedom and security.³⁰ They were, for the most part, able to amass significant wealth and status during this time due to the city’s economic prosperity.³¹ Their improved social standing, among other things, led to patronage of the arts, resulting in a demand for paintings depicting narratives from the Hebrew Bible.³² Furthermore, Jews and their culture fascinated the Dutch population, which was highly interested in Jewish

²⁷ Soyer papers, printed material: undated clippings, box 2, folder 32. *Kislev*, on the Hebrew calendar, is the third month of the civil year or ninth month of the ecclesiastical year, generally occurring between November and December.

²⁸ See Franz Landsberger, *Rembrandt, The Jews and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946); Michael Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Berkeley: University of Carolina Press, 2002); and Shelley Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith: Church and Temple in the Dutch Golden Age* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

²⁹ Steven Nadler, *Rembrandt’s Jews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 15.

³⁰ For more on the formation of Dutch Jewry see Zell, *Reframing Rembrandt*, 8-12.

³¹ *Ibid*, 10.

³² Nadler, *Rembrandt’s Jews*, 79.

scholarship.³³ Universities even offered Judaic languages and literature studies believing the language of the Old Testament key to understanding the Bible and essential to facilitating the conversion of Jews to Christianity.³⁴ Nevertheless, attitudes toward the Jewish population overall remained positive and the Netherlands became a modern Israel for the Jews, causing a demand for biblical subject matter in art by Dutch patrons.³⁵

Jewish culture, and especially Hebrew scripture, similarly appealed to Rembrandt and he sometimes incorporated both in his etchings and in paintings. While many historians call into question Rembrandt's motives for painting Jewish subject matter and object to the notion of his compassion toward Jews, historian A. Hyatt Mayor claims, "Rembrandt's persistence in painting, drawing, and etching certain events of the Bible is one of the most individual obstinacies of his headstrong genius."³⁶ Moreover, philosopher Steven Nadler stated that there has not been any other non-Jewish painter in history to include more Hebrew into his or her art than Rembrandt.³⁷ Regardless of Rembrandt's thoughts and motives for creating works centered on the Hebrew Bible, there remains a certain universal quality and quiet regard for the sitter imbued in each work. His dignified portrayal of Jews, showing no distinction between them and other Dutch citizens, certainly would have resonated with Soyer.

³³ For further reading see Simon M. Schama, "A Different Jerusalem: The Jews in Rembrandt's Amsterdam" in Susan W. Morgenstein and Ruth Levine, *The Jews in the Age of Rembrandt*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Judaic Museum of the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington, 1982).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁵ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 587. See also 587-596 for an in-depth reading of Dutch attitudes toward Jews.

³⁶ A. Hyatt Mayor, "Rembrandt and the Bible," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 36, no. 3 (Winter 1978-1979): 5.

³⁷ Nadler, *Rembrandt's Jews*, 128.

Rembrandt, whose work Soyer studied extensively, was perhaps the only Old Master that Soyer had encountered who depicted Jews in a positive manner. For instance, Rembrandt's *Portrait of a Young Jewish Man* (1648) (fig. 7) is similar to Soyer's *Portrait of an Old Jew* in that, again, the sole focus is on the sitter. Rembrandt does not idealize the young man nor does he caricaturize the sitter's features or call attention to his Jewishness in a negative way. In fact, other than the *kepah* on his head, which almost completely blends into the background, the title offers the only indicator of the young man's heritage. Comparatively, Albrecht Durer's *Christ among the Doctors*, painted in 1506 (fig. 8), depicts Jews in a much harsher light. Art historian Jan Bialostocki first pointed out that Durer utilized various kinds of ugliness as indicators of evil, a prevalent theme throughout the history of art.³⁸ This painting depicts a story from the Christian Bible about Jesus meeting with Jewish doctors or rabbis. Here, six Jewish doctors in various states of "ugliness" surround Jesus, whose youth and beauty contrast sharply against their physical deformities. The most gruesome of the figures stands to the right of Jesus, and clutches his robe. The rabbi's hideous facial features contrast sharply with the youthful, angelic face of the "savior," indicating his inferior status.

Another common thread throughout history is the blood libel, or the false accusation that Jews kidnap, murder, and drain the blood of Christian children to drink for religious ceremonies and holidays. Catholic priests preached that Jews had spilled the blood of Jesus and thus enforced the idea that they would continue to spill the blood of Christians for their own perverse rituals. A seventeenth century fresco (fig. 9) painted by

³⁸ Jan Bialostocki, "'Pous Quinque Dierum:' Durer's 'Christ among the Doctors' and Its Sources," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 22, no. 1 (Jan-June 1959): 23.

the Franciscan monk Adam Swach portrays the blood libel. In the top right corner of the painting a group of Jewish men torture a small, innocent child. Swach painted the men with darker skin in comparison to the creamy, white skin of the child. Additionally, a spot light placed on the infant further highlights his innocence and combined with the makeshift bed the child lays upon, recalls nativity scenes common of the era.

Continuing with his theme of the “evil” Jew, Swach preyed on another common fear, that of Jews buying Christian children, which is evident in the bottom right of the canvas. In the middle of the composition, the artist painted a third infant lying in a pool of blood. At the center, three Jews pour the blood of another child into a cup. Scenes like these were commonplace, and Soyer would have been familiar with the idea of blood libel not just from history but from contemporary times as well. In 1911, just before the Soyers emigrated, police accused a Russian Jew by the name of Mendel Beilis of murdering a young Christian boy in Kiev for ritual purposes. It stands to reason that a young Soyer would find himself drawn to Rembrandt, one of the few artists who not only painted Jewish subject matter somewhat regularly, but who also chose not to differentiate Jews from other human beings.

FROM RUSSIA TO AMERICA

The fast approaching decline of Czarist Russia continued to exacerbate anti-Semitic attitudes, and Jews became aware of precarious position in society. Similar to other Eastern European Jews hoping for a better quality of life, Soyer’s father noted a lack of opportunities for Jewish scholars in his homeland. He felt an almost urgent desire

to reach the “Golden land” of America. As observed by Matthew Baigell, Jews tended to glorify the United States as a place where they could achieve their goals for the first time in collective memory.³⁹ This is certainly true for Abraham Soyer, who instilled in his children a love for the United States. Soyer notes that his favorite childhood books included *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, while some of his heroes were Abraham Lincoln and George Washington.⁴⁰ He also recalls a tablecloth that depicted scenes of New York City, which he and his brothers spent many hours looking at, contemplating the unfamiliar country.⁴¹ His father would often talk to his children about the merits of living in the United States, stressing its vastness and democratic form of government, which later became important to the artist and his brothers. Soyer remembered his father’s words so forcefully that he recalled them in an autobiographical essay: “Who knows, perhaps you too might one day be citizens of this great Republic and contribute your strength and talents to its growth.”⁴² This hope came to fruition in 1912, after the government forced the Soyers to flee Russia. The Soyers first arrived in Philadelphia where they briefly stayed with family before moving to New York, settling in the Bronx.

In both cities, Soyer and his brothers struggled to adjust to American life. They fiercely clung to their native language, and at thirteen, Moses and Raphael’s teachers placed them in class with six year olds, much to their chagrin. During this period, as Soyer emphasized, they made no friends, did poorly in school, and “were happy only in

³⁹ Matthew Baigell, *Social Concern and Left Politics in Jewish American Art* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 18.

⁴⁰ Soyer, “Three Brothers,” 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*

the badly-lighted, ill-ventilated back room” in which they painted and drew incessantly.⁴³ In an article about Soyer, Alfred Valente stated, “His early youth was a haunch, paunch and jowl experience in the teeming life of New York. This background is what made Moses Soyer essentially a social artist, mirroring a strong human sympathy for the people he paints.”⁴⁴ It is noteworthy that both Philadelphia and the Bronx were neighborhoods with a very strong Jewish presence. For the first time in his life, Soyer and his family settled in communities primarily consisting of other Jews. This tight-knit community proved influential to Soyer as he began his career as an artist.

Disgruntled and frustrated with their education, the twins eventually dropped out of high school, much to the dismay of their parents who, like many other Jewish immigrants of this time, had a deep respect for formal instruction.⁴⁵ The brothers began working odd jobs in order to contribute to their family’s finances. Soyer worked part-time in factories and at newsstands, and even taught Hebrew classes to young boys and girls while enrolled in art classes. At night, using whatever little extra money they could manage, Moses, Raphael, and their younger brother Isaac, started taking art lessons. Early on the twins studied together at the National Academy of Design but quickly lost interest in the school’s purely academic focus. Moses went on to take Sunday classes at the Ferrer Art School, also known as the Ferrer Center, which was an anarchist-sponsored organization focusing on radicalism and cultural revolution.⁴⁶

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁴ Alfred Valente, “Moses Soyer,” (undated) found in Soyer papers (printed materials: undated clippings), box 2, folder 32.

⁴⁵ Soyer, “Three Brothers,” 13.

⁴⁶ Ann Uhry Abrams, “The Ferrer Center: New York’s Unique Meeting of Anarchism and the Arts,” *New York History* 59. No. 3 (July 1978): 307.

Modeled after Francisco Ferrer Guardia's Escuela Moderna in Spain, the Center offered free classes and activities, both of which emphasized secularism and class-consciousness.⁴⁷ The Center employed two American Realist painters, George Bellows and Robert Henri, who taught many notable Jewish American artists such as Soyer, William Gropper, and Man Ray. Henri and Bellows' socially conscious approach to art proved extremely influential to Soyer's oeuvre. He would later become a premier Social Realist painter, never deviating from realism, and intent on providing commentary about the world around him. Henri especially pushed the younger artist to express himself in his paintings. He introduced Soyer to the work of Honorè Daumier, whose satirical caricatures of political figures and commentary on Parisian life in the 1800s became a lifelong model for him.

Undoubtedly influenced by Daumier, Soyer accepted a job working as a political cartoonist, and several Yiddish publications featured his cartoons and illustrations. A number of these contributions allude to some aspect of Judaism or the Jewish experience. Two cartoons (figs. 10-11) draw attention to the Jewish community in New York, although they might also bring to mind any other immigrant community at this time. In these compositions, Soyer highlights everyday life in New York City for American Jews. These illustrations make subtle references to Jewishness by including the theme of the Jewish intellectual, which Soyer continued to utilize throughout his career. They also include various signs and sentences in Yiddish.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 309.

A second pair of illustrations (figs. 12-13) provides a possible commentary on the immigrant experience in America or perhaps the life left behind prior to emigrating. Both images depicts a young boy and girl burdened by the stress of their lives. They are not, as one might expect, happy and carefree children. One image shows the two young children entering their small, cramped living space. Their mother and father, both slumped over, look dejected and worried. The sparse room only has space for a table and chairs. On top of this small table sits a single cup and plate, both empty. The gaunt features of the adults and the empty dishes accentuate the sacrifices the parents have made for their children.

In another image, Soyer again depicts a sparsely furnished room, but this time devoid of adults. Two children, similar to the mother and father in the previous illustration, hunch over and display no signs of youthful innocence. In front of them sits a meager loaf of bread and a cup of tea. Dressed in tattered clothing, the young girl sleeps at the table dreaming of a better life while her brother despondently stares off into the distance. The caption reads, “Very sweet dream” at the top, and on the bottom, “The life of the poor children is bitter, the poverty makes people feel squeezed, their meal is a piece of bread with some tea. They dream their sweet dreams about a vacation where the nature is rich, the trees are green, and the air is cool.”⁴⁸ These four cartoons resemble two notable works by George Bellows, *Cliff Dwellers* (1913) (fig.14) and *Why Don't They Go to the Country for Vacation?* (1913) (fig.15), the latter of which was a study for *Cliff Dwellers*. *Cliff Dwellers* appeared in the socially conscious magazine *New Masses*, a communist affiliated publication that Soyer eventually worked for as well. In Bellows'

⁴⁸ Special thanks to Rachel Kagarlitsky and family who provided translations for all the Yiddish captions.

compositions, he comments on the position of the lower class as seen by elite members of society. The dream about a luxurious vacation directly correlates to Bellow's portrayal of the snobbish nature of the aristocracy, who cannot fathom that poorer citizens are not able to leave the city during the summer.

Three other drawings directly reference religious subject matter (figs. 16-18). They appear as illustrations for an article in an unknown magazine, highlighting a particular story in Exodus: the Israelites worshipping idols as Moses carries down the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai. One image displays a young girl, Karmi, observing a group Israelites dancing around the golden calf, which Soyer drew separately on the next page. The third illustration in this set depicts a darker scene in which the stone tablets appear in the upper left hand corner while the group of Israelites cower in fear and shame at the bottom left. Two women hold tightly to their children, fearful of their unknown fate while the rest of the crowd exhibits varying signs of distress.

The final cartoon analyzed in this paper (fig. 19) does not utilize religious imagery. However, this illustration, which appeared in the widely-circulated Yiddish newspaper, *The Day*, offers criticisms on Nazi Germany and the crimes committed against European Jews. In the top panel, Soyer depicts two men in a physical altercation, one of whom resembles Adolf Hitler with a small mustache, similar hairstyle, and caricatured angry facial expression. "Cartoon Hitler" aggressively overpowers his opponent by holding him down with his left leg while violently suffocating the helpless man. Behind the pair, a pile of Yiddish papers flutters around, forgotten about in the scuffle, foreshadowing the destruction of this language at the hands of the Nazis.

Meanwhile, in the bottom panel, a group of armed soldiers, possibly the Gestapo or members of the SS, attacks another group of men carrying a coffin adorned with the Star of David. The soldiers beat the passive, unarmed men with a club and a swastika. Both weapons extend out of the panel box and overlap with the scene overhead. By conjoining these two images, Soyer depicts the lack of respect for both the living and the deceased. The coffin itself also becomes a metaphor for Judaism in general. Hitler and his men will not rest until they have wiped out all remaining Jews and remnants of Jewish culture. Poignantly, the caption for this work reads, “They don’t let you live, they don’t let you die.” A common thread shared by this group of cartoons, then, is a concern for the fate of the Jews and Judaism.

Soyer continued to find work as an illustrator throughout his career. Drawing always remained an important aspect of his artistic practice because he felt that drawing and painting were inseparable, and the most intimate and revealing part of an artist’s oeuvre.⁴⁹ *Palestine Dances!* (fig. 20), an illustrated book on the folk dances of Palestine, and *Vovik* (fig. 21), a Yiddish children’s book, were two projects that Soyer completed in the late 1940s. *Palestine Dances* focuses on two common types of dances practiced by Jews living in pre-state Israel. The land of Israel held a special place in Soyer’s heart both as a Jew and as another connection to his father, who as a Zionist, believed in the establishment of a Jewish state in Israel. Moses himself visited Eretz Israel and stated, “It is a strange and fascinating country...It fairly took my breath away. I could not paint there for I did not wish, like many others, to walk the country and paint all the places of historical and sentimental interest. I felt that they would not have been the work of a

⁴⁹ Soyer, *Painting the Human Figure*, 29-31.

native deeply rooted and sincere, but rather impressions of a tourist.”⁵⁰ Nevertheless, he found a way to use his artistic voice as a means to connect with the sacred land of the Jews.

The significance of Soyer’s early years cannot be stated enough. From the artist’s atypical childhood in Russia and close relationship with his father, to his personal studies of the Old Masters and instruction under Henri and Bellows, this time span imparted a socially conscious mindset on the painter. Soyer’s experience as a Jewish boy in Imperial Russia, and later as a Jewish immigrant in America, affirmed his status as an outsider in mainstream society. However, despite these differences, Soyer felt a deep connection to mankind, stating that his message was “people, the plain, common people” that he lived and worked with, preferring to paint life as he observed it while commenting on the conditions of his time.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Moses Soyer, “Art and Artists,” (undated) found in Soyer papers. (Printed Materials: Scrapbook of newspaper clippings), box 2, folder 34.

⁵¹ Soyer, “Three Brothers,” 26-27.

CHAPTER III

THE DEPRESSION ERA AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

ART AS A VEHICLE FOR CHANGE

Soyer opted to utilize painting as a means to connect with struggling Americans, both Jews and non-Jews, during the Depression era. The 1930s was a time rife with anti-Semitism, mass unemployment, and social injustices.⁵² Nearly two million Jews, or roughly forty percent of the Jewish American population, resided in New York. They quickly became the largest ethnic group in the city, and the majority consisted of Eastern European immigrants.⁵³ Like most other Americans, Jews felt pressured by economic uncertainties while simultaneously becoming scapegoats for the crisis. Anti-Semitism peaked during this era. The economic success enjoyed by American Jews during the 1920s fueled anti-Semitic attitudes in the thirties; some American citizens believed that because Jews fared 'better' financially during the Depression, they were somehow to

⁵² For more on how the Great Depression affected American Jews, especially those living in New York City, see Beth S. Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression: Uncertain Promise* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

blame for the country's problems.⁵⁴ As Beth Wenger noted in her influential study, "Jewish status and citizenship never rested on the condition that they alter the fundamental nature of their beliefs or behaviors...still they felt their minority status on many occasions."⁵⁵ It was during the Great Depression that Americans consistently pushed this minority status on to American Jews, many of whom believed total assimilation into American culture would provide them with safety and success.

Soyer endeavored to reflect the changes of this era in his art with a keen sense of awareness of the people and circumstances of his time. Having been born a poor Russian Jew and later living as a poor immigrant in America, he empathetically identified with his sitters and their positions. Scholar David P. Peeler observed that Soyer believed Social Realist artists were responsible for expressing the misery and hopes of their generation.⁵⁶ Even more, Wenger points out that the Lower East Side, where Soyer lived and worked as an adult, bore the brunt of the Great Depression, housing the poorest of all Jewish neighborhoods, although for many the Depression meant very little.⁵⁷ Raphael, in an essay titled "An Artists Experience in the 1930s," mentioned that he felt unaffected by the 1929 crash and subsequent Depression because he and everyone he knew were already so poor that they had nothing else to lose.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, lack of employment in conjunction with poor working conditions became a prevalent theme in the art of this era.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁵ Beth S. Wenger, *History Lessons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 27-28.

⁵⁶ David P. Peeler, *Hope Among us Yet: Social Criticism and Social Solace in Depression America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 236.

⁵⁷ Wenger, *New York Jews and the Great Depression*, 84.

⁵⁸ Raphael Soyer, "An Artist's Experience in the 1930s" in Patricia Hills, *Social Concern and Urban Realism: American Paintings of the 1930s*, exh. cat. (Boston: Boston University Art Gallery, 1983), 27.

Soyer's painting, *Old Worker* (1928) (fig. 22), follows the style of Soyer's earlier portraits. An old, tired man leans forward with his head resting on his hands. He stares out past the viewer, wrestling with his own thoughts. Dangerous work conditions in America at this time called for long, grueling hours and very little pay in unhealthy environments, especially for minorities. Here Soyer remains empathetic to the old man's plight and gives him a quiet moment of rest while still calling attention to the injustices of his time. *Employment Agency*, as previously discussed, also sympathetically comments on the lack of employment opportunities for many Americans, especially Jews who were excluded from a plethora of occupations, most notably the banking industry and medical fields. Jews also faced strict university quotas, which prevented them from studying at many universities, causing an even greater handicap when searching for jobs. Lastly, countless employment agencies during this time adopted a gentile-only policy, leaving American Jews to fend for themselves.⁵⁹ Subsequently, Jewish women entered the workforce and young Jewish girls elected not to pursue education but rather take jobs to contribute to their family's welfare. They often helped in family stores or took on extra work such cleaning and sewing, which they could complete in the comfort of their own homes. Soyer reflects this change in the many compositions he creates of seamstresses and tailors. For example, *Girl at a Sewing Machine* (1937) (fig. 23) depicts a young, college-aged woman working tirelessly at her sewing machine in the hopes of generating extra income for her family.

Other Social Realist artists also turned to the theme of the modern American woman, highlighting her role in the workforce. Like Soyer, both Philip Evergood and

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

William Gropper created works of seamstresses. Raphael and Isaac Soyer consistently painted images of shop girls while Reginald Marsh's compositions reflected working class women as consumers. Art historian Ellen Wiley Todd notes that prior to this era, images of shoppers and working women rarely, if ever, appeared in American art but with the increase in mass production of the interwar period, a growing consciousness of consumerism arose.⁶⁰ With this newfound awareness and the expansion of women's role in society, artists began to respond to the "New Woman," an idea that began in the twenties and carried into the thirties. William Gropper's *Terkile* (1939) (fig. 24) depicts two young women working in a textile factory. At first glance, his painting appears to be a simple comment on changing gender roles and the further entrance of women into the working class. However, *Terkile* may also serve as a reminder of an important historical event, one that would still be relevant in the 1930s.

On March 25, 1911, a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirt Waist Company in Greenwich Village. The textile company, which occupied the top three floors of the ten-story Asch Building, mainly employed young, immigrant women. These women worked long hours for extremely low pay in hazardous conditions. In order to discourage breaks, employers kept all the doors locked, which meant that when the fire broke out they had little hope for escape. The incident claimed the lives of 146 workers, including Gropper's aunt. Given no choice, workers jumped to their deaths or perished in the fire, finally bringing national attention to the working conditions for immigrants and women.⁶¹

⁶⁰ For more on the "New Woman" in America, see Ellen Wiley Todd, *The "New Woman" Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), xxv.

⁶¹ For more on the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire see Jo Ann Argersinger, *The Triangle Fire: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).

Victims of the fire ranged from sixteen to twenty-three years of age, with the large majority of them being of Jewish heritage. Historian Arthur McEvoy described the fire as denoting the hopelessness of industrial worker's situation, especially in the face of danger.⁶²

By the 1930s, working conditions had yet to improve for men or women, and unemployment rates escalated after a brief period of economic prosperity in the United States. American artists, especially Jews, continued to lobby for change, in part by bringing attention to the lack of employment opportunities. Isaac Soyer, Abraham Harriton, and Ben Shahn, to name a few, all created works confronting the economic situation of the thirties. Isaac's *Employment Agency* (1937) (fig. 25) shows three men and a woman dejectedly waiting for work. The man furthest to the left scours a newspaper in hopes of finding a job while the others stare out, lost in their thoughts. Harriton also depicts the rampant unemployment in his painting, *6th Avenue, Unemployment Agency* (1937) (fig. 26). Men and women of various races and ethnicities congregate outside of the agency checking for available postings for that day. To the left of the composition, one man takes advantage of the crowd by setting up a shoe shining station in the hopes of earning some wages. Shahn's *Unemployment* (1938) (fig. 27) likewise portrays a mixed-race group of unemployed men crowded together. However, rather than depicting them as morose or dismayed, Shahn's sitters stare out at the viewer in defiance, illuminating the anger and disillusionment of the decade.

⁶² Arthur F. McEvoy, "The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911: Social Change, Industrial Accidents, and the Evolution of Common-Sense Causality," *Law & Social Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 622.

Hooverville and *Out of Work* (fig. 28), both from 1930, express many of the same sentiments. Soyer portrayed the harshness of American life as he continued to identify and sympathize with its plight. His canvas *Men at Waterfront III* (1938) (fig. 29) demonstrates the influence of Honore Daumier, both in style and content. This painting portrays a group of five men standing closely together and pushed up to the front of the canvas, almost spilling out into the viewer's space. Soyer invites his audience to interact with these tired, haggard men. His limited, dark palette and thick brushstrokes add a layer of grime and grittiness to the canvas. The man in the far right corner protrudes furthest into the viewer's space, and his cocky, sarcastic smile seems almost menacing. The fourth man also resembles a homeless man named Walter Broe, who was often confused for a Soyer in a number of Raphael's works, such as *Transients* (1936) and *In the City Park* (1934). Indeed, on more than one occasion critics incorrectly identified Broe as Raphael. Art historian Samantha Baskind argues that Raphael, impacted by Broe's plight and that of other homeless men at the time, identified with him and often saw bits of himself reflected in Broe.⁶³

When comparing *Out of Work* to Daumier's *The Third Class Carriage* (1862-64) (fig. 30) we notice the same color palette, same cramped position of the people in the carriage, and a similar hint of amusement on the woman's face in the middle. Daumier sought to capture the effects of industrialization on Parisian society. He especially focused on the conditions of the working class by painting many scenes of the third-class on public transportation. He highlights their less than ideal travel situations, which tend

⁶³ Samantha Baskind, *Raphael Soyer and the Search for Modern Jewish Art* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 80.

to reflect the conditions of their lives in general. Like Daumier, Soyer also aimed to highlight unsavory aspects of American life for the lower classes.

Not only did American Jews face an economic depression during the 1930s, but they were in the midst of what Wenger terms a “spiritual depression” as well. Synagogue attendance rapidly dwindled as a result of the daily struggle to survive, which often took precedence over religious matters.⁶⁴ As the competition for jobs steadily increased, Jews elected to take positions that required them to work during the Sabbath, further diminishing participation in many religious Jewish traditions. Again, the rise of anti-Semitism also saw many American Jews abandoning their beliefs and concentrating their efforts on total assimilation. Some American Jews viewed assimilation favorably, believing this to be the only way to gain acceptance by Americans. The tension caused by assimilation efforts of the 1920s and 1930s combined with a desire to maintain a connection with traditional Jewish values is one that most immigrant Jews felt in America, especially during the 1920s-1930s. It led many American Jews to turn to leftist politics and embrace a more secularized form of Judaism.

AMERICAN JUDAISM AND LEFTIST POLITICS

Historian Moses Rischin stated that many Jews involved in leftist politics viewed Socialism as a secularized form of Judaism.”⁶⁵ Like other leftist orientations such as Communism and Marxism, Socialism provided American Jews with a safe place to

⁶⁴ Wenger, *New York Jews*, 173.

⁶⁵ Baigell, *Social Concern and Left Politics*, 1.

balance their religious and social concerns. Baigell cites two main reasons for the Jewish appeal to leftist politics: the influence of their religious and cultural heritage as well as the acceleration of anti-Semitism, which reached an apex during the thirties and resulted in a push for assimilation and integration into American society. However, neither assimilation nor rejection of their Jewish heritage offered Jews protection from the increasingly hostile views of Americans. Thus, as we will see in the remainder of this chapter, Soyer, like many other American Jews, turned to leftist politics as a means to reconcile his Jewish heritage with his American identity.

During the 1920s, Soyer studied art at the Educational Alliance, where he met and developed close relationships with many other left-minded Jewish artists. The relationships he developed there, as well as the school itself, proved highly influential. The Educational Alliance, founded by American Jews with the intention of Americanizing immigrant Jews, opened in 1889 and quickly became a “vital nexus of community life” for all immigrants but especially for Eastern European Jewish immigrants.⁶⁶ It was at the Alliance that Soyer met and worked with other American artists with whom he shared a Jewish heritage, including Chaim Gross, Peter Blume, Philip Evergood, and Adolph Gottlieb. He also befriended Louis Lozowick, another Russian Jewish immigrant, who likewise taught at the school and shared in the Alliance’s goals of teaching social consciousness to students.⁶⁷ In fact, Ernest Rubenstein, president

⁶⁶ Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 136. The Art School itself did not open until 1895. It closed briefly in 1905 and reopened again in 1907 under the radical Russian immigrant, Abbo Ostrowsky. For more on the Alliance see Irving Howe, “Americanizing’ the Greenhorns,” in Kleeblatt and Chevlowe, *Painting a Place in America*: 14-22.

⁶⁷ Baigell, *Social Concern and Left Politics*, 81. See also Baigell, “Social Concern and Tikkun Olam in Jewish American Art,” *Ars Judaica* (2012): 55-80.

of the Educational Alliance in 1991, commented on the early aims of the school: “The Alliance has been and is today concerned with everyday needs for physical survival-but also with human dignity and with the human spirit. When we speak of ‘human dignity’ and the ‘human spirit’ at the Educational Alliance, we inevitably think about our art school.”⁶⁸ Accordingly, the goals and ideals of the art school aligned with the artist’s own agenda.⁶⁹

One of the main tenets of Jewish faith emphasized and practiced by American Jews, and arguably by many students of the Educational Alliance, is *tikkun olam*, which roughly means, “repair of the world” and largely equates to social justice and activism.⁷⁰ Although the phrase *tikkun olam* did not become common until the 1970s, Samantha Baskind maintains that social justice is a fundamental Jewish value with origins in the Bible.⁷¹ Baigell points out that many of the 613 commandments apply directly to the notion of social concern.⁷² He also states that modern theologians, whose writings greatly affected community values, considered the moral aspects of social concern as an indicator of the importance of community responsibility.⁷³ Baskind, in *Raphael Soyer and the Search for Modern Jewish Art*, likewise goes into detail about the concept of

⁶⁸ Kleeblatt and Chevlowe, *Painting a Place in America*, 6.

⁶⁹ Soyer began studying at the Educational Alliance in 1918 and taught there in 1924. After a brief trip to Europe, he returned to teaching from 1928-34.

⁷⁰ Matthew Baigell, *Jewish Art in America: An Introduction* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 16-18. Baigell notes the connection between those that studied at the Educational Alliance under Ostrowsky and a multicultural approach in art. He also highlights their imperative to assist those in need. He further connects this to the idea of *tikkun olam* in *Social Concern and Left Politics*. The artists who studied at the Alliance during this time include Leonard Baskin, Peter Blume, Jo Davidson, Jacob Epstein, Philip Evergood, Adolph Gottlieb, Chaim Gross, Lena Gurr, Louis Lozowick, Elie Nadelman, Louise Nevelson, Barnett Newman, Jules Olitski, Ben Shahn, Isaac Soyer, Moses Soyer, Abraham Walkowitz, and William Zorach.

⁷¹ Samantha Baskind, “Weegee’s Jewishness,” *History of Photography* 34, no. 1 (2010): 75.

⁷² Baigell, *Social Concern and Left Politics*, 6.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

tikkun olam and how it relates to Raphael Soyer's work. Accordingly, this chapter will not delve into the intricacies of *tikkun olam*, but aims to highlight that this important Jewish value was prevalent in the Jewish community thereby influencing many Jewish artists, especially those, like Soyer, who committed themselves to social justice.

Tzedakah, another important Jewish value that historians have yet to explore in conjunction with Jewish American art, was perhaps a greater influence on Soyer. The concept of *tzedakah* derives from the Hebrew word for justice, *tzedek*, and means "righteousness" and "charity."⁷⁴ Current interpretations of *tzedakah* correlate strongly with the notion of charity and providing physical goods and monetary aid to people in need. However, Jews believe that many levels of *tzedakah* exist, with the highest level maintaining that one must help those in need find opportunities for employment, thereby creating conditions for self-help and independence.⁷⁵ This may account for Jewish support of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal during the 1930s, which allowed for American Jews, especially artists, to continue to work and make money while still receiving federal aid.⁷⁶ Jewish Studies scholar Jacob Neusner argues that for many, even Jews who do not associate themselves with the religion, *tzedakah* is a way of being Jewish.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Jacob Neusner, *Tzedakah: Can Jewish Philanthropy Buy Jewish Survival* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1990), 1.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁶ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 105-109. Diner also notes that Jews often refused federal aid preferring to establish their own charity organizations however, during the Depression era, the acceptance of federal aid became more prevalent. Wenger, *New York Jews*, 45-47.

⁷⁷ Neusner, *Tzedakah*, 2.

Providing one with the opportunity to work is evident in the way the Soyers brothers aided one of their models, the aforementioned Walter Broe. An unemployed, homeless man, Broe posed for the Soyers, which created a relationship in which they would provide him money and food in exchange for his services, thus placing Broe in a situation in which he could earn a living rather than just receiving financial support.⁷⁸ As Hasia Diner stated, “Communal service came to be the common denominator of American Jewry. Though Jews could not always-or indeed ever- agree on matters religious, they could, in literally thousands of community organizations, agree on their common obligation to provide assistance to Jews in need.”⁷⁹

Tzedakah also involves another critical element, perhaps the most relevant in Soyers’ case, which is empathy and the listening and sharing in the pain of a person in need.⁸⁰ When considering Soyers’ economic status during this time we may note his inability to contribute monetarily to those in need, but more important is his empathy and concern for humankind and the human condition. As Emery Grossman aptly observed, “during the years of the Great Depression Soyers created paintings that convey the grinding tragedy of his subjects’ lives with an almost painful empathy.”⁸¹ As a struggling artist, Soyers’ financial situation combined with his Jewish upbringing resulted in awareness and empathy for those suffering around him.

⁷⁸ For more information on their relationship with Walter Broe, see Samantha Baskind’s chapter “Soyers or Walter Broe?” in *Raphael Soyers and the Search for Modern Jewish Art*, 79-110.

⁷⁹ Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 135.

⁸⁰ Gregg Gardner, *The Origins of Organized Charity in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 33.

⁸¹ Emery Grossman, *Art and Tradition* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1967), 164.

Additionally, American Jews, no strangers to discrimination themselves, actively participated in the Civil Rights Movement. Diner noted, “American Jewish thinking about the trauma of the recent past and the political climate of the postwar nation came together in the Jewish participation in and support of the Civil Rights movement.”⁸² Rabbi Joachim Prinz, a speaker at the 1963 civil rights march in Washington, believed that lessening the discrimination against some diminished discrimination against all, which would thus benefit society as a whole.⁸³ American Jews began to work with civil rights organizations in an effort to change and better American society. Prior to World War II, Jews campaigned for the rights of African Americans, but only after the war did they come together as a cohesive unit to participate in the crusade for freedom and equality.⁸⁴ They recognized that the plight of Jews echoed that of other minorities and that social injustice prevented a true integration into American society. Accordingly, Jews, along with other minority groups, would continue to live on the fringes of American society rather than being fully accepted. Therefore, the Jewish population in the United States chose to raise awareness of important issues, like the continued persecution and discrimination against African Americans. Raising awareness of inequality and discrimination is another form of *tzedakah* in that it gives agency to a marginalized group of people and in doing so puts them in a position to help themselves and receive help from others. Fighting for African Americans allowed the disenfranchised group to achieve rights not only for the betterment of the African American community but for all of society as well. Additionally, *tzedakah* requires

⁸² Diner, *The Jews of the United States*, 265.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

consideration for the humanity of the person in need, who remains no different from those who give their aid.⁸⁵

Soyer personally lobbied on behalf of African American artists and their right to exhibit work alongside other American artists at a time when racial tensions had once again escalated in America.⁸⁶ As a critic for *The Masses* and *Art Front*, he repeatedly published reviews of works by African American artists.⁸⁷ Additionally, Soyer was a member of the Artist's Union, which assisted African American artists with joining the WPA. In 1962, along with his brothers, Jack Levine, Chaim Gross, and Jacob Lawrence, he petitioned the president of the Educational Alliance, Abbo Ostrowsky, to hold an exhibition for the work of the African American artist Edward Strickland.⁸⁸ Soyer shows the same sympathy and concern in his own compositions. For example, in *Gwen and Jacob Lawrence* (fig. 31), Soyer paints a quiet, tender portrait of the couple leaning into one another and staring out past the viewer. Jacob Lawrence, a close friend of Soyer's, was a struggling African American artist most known for his *Migration Series* (1940-1941), which portrays the events of the Great Migration from 1910-1930. Furthermore, Lawrence's work shares an affinity with Soyer's as he often chose to comment on the history of African Americans in the United States, as well as other minorities, paying close attention to the bigotry and oppression of their past.

⁸⁵ Neusner, *Tzedakah*, 13.

⁸⁶ Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 128-167. Langa goes into detail of the ways that New York artists protested racial inequality via printmaking.

⁸⁷ Milly Heyd, *Mutual Reflections: Jews and Blacks in American Art* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 79.

⁸⁸ Milly Heyd and Ezra Mendelsohn, "'Jewish' Art?: The Case of the Soyer Brothers," *Jewish Art* 19/20 (1993): 203.

Contrary to the bulk of Soyer's other group portraits, Jacob and his wife Gwen actively engage with one another, creating a connection between them and the audience. As Milly Heyd and Ezra Mendelsohn observed, "Unlike the expressions of 'white superiority' to be found in the paintings of black people by Winslow Homer, for example, the Negress represented by Moses Soyer has dignity and self-assurance. She is treated as an equal."⁸⁹ Although Heyd and Mendelsohn reference a later portrait of a famous actress and singer, Eartha Kitt, completed in 1964 (fig. 32), the same still holds true for the Lawrences. When juxtaposed against another portrait of a couple, *David and June* (fig. 33), one notices that Soyer made no distinction between the two canvases. He elects not to favor one race above the other in an effort demonstrate equality amongst all human beings, a common thread throughout his career. In a short catalog essay about Soyer, Bernard Smith observed that his "number of negro portraits are remarkable for their objectivity, lack of color consciousness, and their interest in people as inhabitants of our community, not as pictorial drama."⁹⁰

In addition to his genuinely empathetic portraits, Soyer also participated in many other causes for the benefit of society. He donated works to at least two art shows organized as charity events. The "Little Red School House," a progressive school in Greenwich Village, faced closure due to hardships caused by the Depression. Moses Soyer, along with Ben Shahn, Jack Levine, Milton Avery, and Adolph Gottlieb contributed works of art to raise money for the failing school.⁹¹ He also supplied a

⁸⁹ Ibid., 205.

⁹⁰ Bernard Smith, *Moses Soyer*, exh. cat. (New York: ACA Galleries, 1944), 13.

⁹¹ Soyer papers, (Printed Materials: Clippings), folder 27. Interestingly, of the four contributors, three share a common Jewish ancestry, a testament to the importance of *tzedakah* to the Jewish community.

painting for another show in which the proceeds benefited the Fannie Soyer Mendelsohn Children's Fund, a charity named after his younger sister.⁹² As previously mentioned, he was a member and confounder of the Artist's Union, which became a meeting place for culturally and socially minded artists at the time. The goal of the union was to improve working conditions for its 2,000 members.⁹³

In 1935, Soyer also aided in establishing the American Artists' Congress, a left-wing political organization that devoted its time and energy to the fight against war and fascism, battling for those who could not fend for themselves.⁹⁴ In 1939, at its peak, the congress had roughly 900 hundred members dedicated to combating European tyranny. Ever empathetic, Soyer painted a portrait of Lieutenant Robert Raven (1939) (fig. 34), a member of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. Raven was an American Jew born in Philadelphia in 1913, who, along with many others, joined forces and volunteered their time in an effort to fight Fascism in Spain. Wounds sustained during the war caused the lieutenant to lose his eyesight, although Soyer elected to focus on Raven's heroic deeds rather than his disability. Soyer depicts Raven dressed in full military uniform decorated with medals. Hunched over ever so slightly, he sits with his hands folded in his lap, somewhat reminiscent of Rembrandt's *Portrait of an Old Jew* and the earlier portrait of Soyer's father. Recall that Abraham Soyer was very politically minded and a strong Zionist. As Fascism remained prevalent in Europe, Zionism provided hope to European Jews, who faced rapid declines in population due to policies

⁹² Ibid. It is unclear whether the charity was run by Soyer's sister, Fannie, or if it was dedicated in her name.

⁹³ Werner, *Moses Soyer*, 31.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 42.

enforced by Hitler and Mussolini. Notably, while Soyer was an avid supporter of the fight against Fascism, the portrait of Raven, along with his earlier cartoon depicting Hitler, are the only two instances when the artist makes a direct reference to Fascism in his art. His artistic silence on the matter stands out considering a number of his close friends and peers, such as Peter Blume and Philip Evergood, frequently commented on the war in their art.⁹⁵

POST WAR ANXIETIES

Although the American Artists' Congress dissolved in 1942, Soyer, still concerned with battling injustices, persisted in painting scenes that commented on war in America. In 1943, he painted *The Kiss* (fig. 35), which portrays a naval sailor embracing a young woman. The horrors to come overshadow this tender moment as the viewer remains uncertain of whether the young couple will ever reunite. In the same year, he also completed *Soldiers World War II* (fig. 36). Here, three soldiers and two civilian females huddle together near a doorway. One soldier stands on threshold of the door, locked in a tight embrace with a woman, whose arms wrap tightly around him in a desperate attempt to keep her partner close. The two remaining soldiers stand side-by-side with one's arm wrapped around the other in a gesture of camaraderie or solace while possibly saying their goodbyes to the other woman. As with *The Kiss*, the viewer remains unsure of the fate of the men preparing to leave for war. In both images, the artist painted

⁹⁵ For more on anti-fascism in art see Cecile Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). See also Helen Langa, *Radical Art: Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 167-203.

young men on the cusp of adulthood. If old age for Soyer typically signifies wisdom, youth then becomes a marker for innocence, which war will soon take away from these soldiers.

Even with the end of World War II, humanity still faced many problems, which Soyer continued to reflect upon on canvas. Two especially prominent works stand out from the rest of Soyer's oeuvre in both content and style. The first painting, *Apprehension* (1962) (fig. 37) was Soyer's "deepest, most ambitious work," as Philip Evergood claimed.⁹⁶ Soyer once again utilizes painting as form of commentary on society. In 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, tensions continued to mount in America as the country's relationship with Russia deteriorated even further and the threat of nuclear war became a very real possibility. Here, Soyer uses dark colors and a thick painterly brushstroke to elicit an emotional response from his viewers. Surrounded by his wife, grandchild, and close friends, Soyer huddles in the bottom right corner. The artist's earlier cartoon of Moses descending with the Tablets of Law serves as a precursor for this work, which showed the Israelites cowering in fear, similar to the group in this portrait. In both images, he comments on the sinners of society, who have broken commandments set forth by God, while the rest of society must now anxiously await the consequences of their actions.

In the upper left hand corner of the canvas, Soyer replaces the biblical Moses carrying the Tablets of the Law with a dark ominous shape, quite possibly the mushroom cloud of a nuclear explosion. His friends and family look on with varying degrees of fear,

⁹⁶ Willard, *Moses Soyer*, 16.

shock, and horror. Only he and his grandson, Daniel, look out toward the viewer. While Daniel seems confused, as if he does not yet understand what is happening, the artist's expression is that of resignation. With the United States on the brink of war once more, history again repeats itself, and Soyer cannot possibly hope to come out of another horrific conflict unscathed. Evergood observed, "Here the turmoil, the fears, the strife of humanity are exposed in a very moving degree: people face extinction, but retain their dignity...they relate to each other in the dire moment of facing death."⁹⁷ Beyond the group lays a decimated landscape devoid of people and places. Vibrant reds, yellows, and oranges clash together to complete the post-apocalyptic landscape in which humanity cannot hope to thrive again.

Soyer's use of color and thick, erratic lines vastly differ from his other paintings, and instead recall works by early twentieth-century Expressionists, in particular the deeply psychological art of Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele, both of whom he admired and whose works hung in his studio.⁹⁸ Kokoschka, an Austrian painter deemed 'degenerate' by the Nazis, was likewise dedicated to social justice, providing yet another model for Soyer. Kokoschka's allegorical portrait, *The Tempest (Bride of the Wind)* (1914) (fig. 38) employed a similar, somber color palette mirroring the melancholic mood of Soyer's *Apprehension*. Likewise, both artists pushed their figures to the front of their canvases surrounded by desolate wastelands. Kokoschka created *The Tempest* after the end of a tumultuous love affair with his mistress, Alma. The termination of their relationship profoundly affected the artist, and his anxiety for the future is evident in the

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Werner, *Moses Soyer*, 47.

body postures and facial expressions of his sitters. *Apprehension* also brings to mind a work by the German artist George Grosz. His painting *Ghosts*, from 1934 (fig. 39), portrays a group of men and women huddled around a table while death looms overhead. Their blank stares, hollowed eyes, and uneasy expressions contribute to the anxious feeling of the overall canvas. Like Soyer, Grosz was preoccupied with the fate of humanity. Having lived through and fought in the First World War, he was not optimistic about the outcome World War II.

Additionally, *Apprehension* resembles a series of lithographs created by William Gropper during the 1950s. Gropper and Soyer share similar backgrounds and Russian Jewish heritage although, unlike Soyer, Gropper was born in New York. Both artists studied under Henri and Bellows at the Ferrar Art School and were strongly interested in social justice. Having affiliated themselves with leftist political organizations, the government targeted both Gropper and Soyer as Communists.⁹⁹ In 1953, the U.S. Senate put Gropper on trial regarding his involvement with Communism and his relationship with Soviet Russia. Under protection of the Fifth Amendment, Gropper refused to answer questions, destroying his reputation and nearly ending his career.¹⁰⁰ In response, the artist created a series of *Capriccios* inspired by Francisco Goya, as well as several paintings with the same theme. *Politicos* (1953-57) (fig. 40) and *Two Senators* (1950) (fig. 41), completed before his trial, highlight the artist's disdain for the government and capitalism. Similarly, Gropper adopts a much more painterly style in *Capriccios* and *Politicos* than in some of his previous works. Notably, Soyer mirrors Gropper's use of

⁹⁹ Special thanks to Daniel Soyer for providing FBI files on Moses, Raphael, and Rebecca Soyer.

¹⁰⁰ For more information on the trial see Norma S. Steinberg, "William Gropper's 'Capriccios,'" *Print Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (March 1994): 29-36.

hollowed eyes, sickly pallor, and gaunt facial features for the figures in *Apprehension*, communicating the same distrust of the government while fearing the onset of yet another disastrous war.¹⁰¹

Soyer painted another canvas in a very similar fashion, although he left this one undated. In *Foreboding* (fig. 42), which we can surmise he also completed in the sixties due to a similar palette, painterly style, placement of figures, and overall tone of the composition, Soyer paints himself among a group of four women who look out past the viewer with sadness and unease. Two other faceless individuals, one clearly a man while the other is a highly abstracted yet still human form, walk towards the group. Vibrant reds, browns, and oranges surround the two menacing figures, emphasizing their destructive natures and intentions. Here, too, the artist obscures the background, rendering another ominous landscape. Who these people are, and what threat they present remains unclear to the viewer. However, it is critical to remember that in Soyer's lifetime he witnessed two world wars, the rise of Nazism, the near destruction of European Jewry, the threat of nuclear war, hate, corruption, and death all by the hands of his fellow man. Werner notes, "With all his poise as a person, with all his self-assurance as an artist based on a career of nearly fifty years, Soyer admits that he faces each new canvas with uneasiness, if not outright fear."¹⁰² Quite possibly his fear stems, in part, from his uncertainty of the fate of humanity. In 1949, Oliver Larkin's influential study of American art and culture, *Art and Life in America*, asserted that men such as Soyer, William Gropper, and Peter Blume, among others, were willing to exchange their idle

¹⁰¹ It is unclear if Soyer knew of Gropper's series prior to the creation of *Apprehension* but viewers should note the similarities in both content and style of the two artists.

¹⁰² Ibid.

freedoms for the ability to demonstrate injustices and to create a united front against the powers of darkness in America and abroad.¹⁰³ Certainly, the “darkness” to which Larkin references consistently concerned Soyer, who continued to worry about not only the fate of Jews, broader humanity as well.

¹⁰³ Oliver W. Larkin, *Art and Life in America* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1949), 430.

CHAPTER IV
PORTRAITS OF DANCERS
A CULTURAL AFFAIR

Apprehension and *Foreboding* contrast sharply with Soyer's best-known works, portraits of dancers, which Bernard Smith referred to as displays of "wistful tender sympathy for those charming and appealing creatures who live precariously on the fringes of the art and dance worlds."¹⁰⁴ However, these seemingly straightforward paintings also contribute to our understanding of Soyer's world and continue to shed light on the Jewish American experience. First, consider that the Bible, Torah, and Mishnah (Oral Torah) all refer to dancing as important expressions of joy. On May 14, 1948, when David Ben-Gurion announced the creation of the State of Israel, Jews worldwide celebrated by dancing a common Jewish dance, the Hora, in the streets.¹⁰⁵ Additionally, as noted by LeeEllen Friedland, "The cultural values of the Old World Jewish dance tradition were various. Jews not only considered dancing an integral part of celebrating rites of passage, it was also a central and very inspiring part of a wide range of social

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *Moses Soyer*, 13.

¹⁰⁵ Nina S. Spiegel, *Embodying Hebrew Culture: Aesthetics, Athletics, and Dance in the Jewish Community of Mandate Palestine* (Detroit: Wayne Street University Press, 2013), 1.

occasions.”¹⁰⁶ Jews danced as a means of self-expression capable of bringing enjoyment and gratification to both the participator and spectator.¹⁰⁷ Dancing therefore took place during a number of celebrations, most notably weddings and *bar mitzvahs*. This type of social dancing was available to all members of the community. Soyer’s brother, Raphael, depicts the social aspects of dancing in his painting *Dancing Lesson* (1926) (fig. 43), which critics and historians alike champion as a visual representation of his Jewishness and the Jewish immigrant experience in America. As a result, Raphael’s painting may be read as clashing between the old and the new worlds and in which the old world traditions prevail, even if momentarily.¹⁰⁸

In *Dancing Lesson*, Raphael depicts his younger sister Rebecca teaching Moses some popular dance steps. Moses viewed dancing as a skill, one that he lacked, and reached out to his sister for instruction.¹⁰⁹ Dancing was once an integral part of *shtetl* life and therefore played an important role in the lives of Eastern European Jews. Again we note that the Soyers did not have the same experience as other Eastern European Jews, where dancing took precedence in social activities, and as a result, Soyer once again finds himself separated from his peers. *Dancing Lesson* shows a tender moment between the two siblings, who occupy the foreground focused solely on their movements. The mother sets down her newspaper, giving Moses and Rebecca her undivided attention while the rest of the family looks on. Hints of Jewish culture permeate the canvas such as the

¹⁰⁶ LeeEllen Friedland, “‘Tantsn Is Lebn:’ Dancing in Eastern European Jewish Culture,” *Dance Research Journal* 17/18, no.1 (Autumn 1985- Spring 1986): 77.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Samantha Baskind provides an in depth historiography of *Dancing Lesson* in chapter two of *Raphael Soyer and the Search for Modern Jewish Art*, 53-79.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 55.

Yiddish newspaper, an ancestral portrait, and, in Irving Howe's estimation, an overall "tonality of Jewishness."¹¹⁰ The fact that Raphael Soyer's dancers appear to be straddling the line of two different identities might have appealed to both Raphael and Moses Soyer because, like other American Jews of the time, they too grappled with dual identities and struggled with how to reconcile their American and Jewish identities.

William Gropper also viewed dancing as a connection to his Jewish ancestry. During the course of his career, Gropper completed a number of works referencing the cultural aspects of dance. His painting *Hasidic Dance* (date unknown) (fig. 44) comments on a type of dance commonly practiced among Ashkenazi Jews in the *shtetl*. Gropper portrays a group of six men huddled together in motion with their hands raised in ecstasy. He strips away the background forcing the viewer to focus only on the dancers, who the artist has surrounded by white, cloud-like forms emphasizing the spiritual nature of dancing. The men, however, ignore the viewer's presence as their dance has become all-consuming. This is not a performance but rather an exercise of self-expression and joy. Another similar image, *Ascetic Dance* (ca. 1962) (fig. 45), highlights the importance of dancing and the elation that it is meant to elicit.

In 1970, Gropper created a series of twenty-seven lithographs, which he bound together and titled *The Shtetl* (figs. 46-48). A number of these illustrations depict Jewish men and women dancing, usually within a group. On the front page Gropper wrote, "These lithographs are personal, for that matter all art is personal. I am still looking for

¹¹⁰ Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the Eastern European Jews to America and the Life they Found and Made* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1976), 583. Again, see also Baskind, *Raphael Soyer*, especially pages 55-68 for an analysis of *Dancing Lesson* and her critique of Irving's assertion of a Jewish tone.

my roots. I think most artists look for a home, a wall, a place in a society of people.”¹¹¹

Like Soyer and other American Jews, Gropper’s dual identity caused him to question his place in American society. In order to come to understand and reconcile his American and Jewish identities, Gropper looked to the history of Eastern European Jews.

Comparable to the Soyers, his family immigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe and made their home in New York, although on the Lower East Side. Neither artist ever lived in a *shtetl*, yet they still felt drawn to its cultural importance and experienced a connection to their ancestors through its various elements, especially dancing.

HELEN TAMIRIS

Traditional and folk dancing remained part of the Jewish culture however, during the 1930s, American ballet came into its own as Russian dominance started to wane. Modern Dance also emerged as a rejection and reaction to classical forms of dance. New York became the nation’s dance center and a number of American Jews flocked to this art form.¹¹² A large majority of the most preeminent dancers and choreographers of this era shared a common Jewish ancestry.¹¹³ Perhaps the most notable figure at this time was Jewish American dancer and choreographer, Helen Tamiris. Born Helen Becker to Russian Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side, she began studying dance at the

¹¹¹ William Gropper, *The Shtetl*, found in the archives of the Syracuse University Library.

¹¹² Gayle Kassing, *History of Dance: An Interactive Arts Approach* (Champaign: Human Kinetics, 2007), 199.

¹¹³ Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) xiv.

Henry Street Settlement, where she developed an interest in social justice. Tamiris adopted her stage name at the beginning of her career, paying homage to the Persian queen Tomyris. Her brother, Maurice Becker, known for his radical illustrations in publications such as *New Masses*, *Revolt*, and *Toiler*, was involved with leftist politics and, along with Soyer, was a founding member of the American Artists' Congress.

For Tamiris, and many other dancers during this era, modern dance became an instrumental tool for commenting on social and political injustices during the thirties. Employed by the W.P.A, she utilized dance as means to critique the rampant hunger, poverty, racism, unemployment, and evils of war that marked this time in American history.¹¹⁴ Her *Negro Spirituals*, created between 1928 and 1948, developed from common tropes such as the comic, dandy, and the exotic primitive that were entrenched in African American theater.¹¹⁵ Likewise, the dancers appropriated slave songs as a means of protesting prejudices against African Americans. For example, "Pickin' off de Cotton," commented on the labor-intensive process of picking cotton. It showed dancers rapidly moving across the stage and eventually collapsing on stage succumbing to exhaustion.¹¹⁶ Another dance, "Upon de Mountain," begins with Tamiris on top of a box above three starving children who beg for food, and one child in the midst of hunger contractions. She reaches out to protect the children while the remaining dancers raise their arms in protest demanding food for them.¹¹⁷ In her memoir, Tamiris recalled, "In

¹¹⁴ Elizabeth Cooper, "Tamiris and the Federal Dance Theater: Socially Relevant Dance amidst the Policies and Politics of the New Deal Era," *Dance Research Journal* 29, no. 2 (Autumn 1997): 24.

¹¹⁵ Pauline Tish, "Remembering Helen Tamiris," *Dance Chronicle* (1994): 334.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 347.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

these dances, I wanted to express the spirit of the people-in the first, his sense of oppression-in the second, his fight and struggle and remembrance.”¹¹⁸ Dance historian Susan Manning claims that Tamiris’ desire to call attention to the inadequacies and strife of African Americans during the thirties stem from her cultural politics as a Jewish leftist and that leftist dance allowed Tamiris to express her Jewishness.¹¹⁹ Here we may recall Soyer’s earlier portraits of Jacob Lawrence and Eartha Kitt, among many others, which served a very similar function for the painter.

Tamiris also choreographed several other dances devoted to social justice: *Memoir* (1959), a reflection of her Jewish heritage, and *Women’s Song* (1960), which analyzed the role of women in American society as well as commenting on the destruction wrought by the Holocaust. *Women’s Song*, she claimed, was a celebration of the essence of womanhood and served as commentary on the strength and bravery of women despite the difficulties of age, personality, and experience.¹²⁰ She composed *Adelante!* as a means to criticize the Spanish Civil War in which thirty percent of American volunteers fighting with the Spanish army identified as Jewish.¹²¹ Naum Rosen, a Jewish writer for *Dance Observer*, argued that the lead character, Jose, serves as metaphor for the Jewish American fight against fascism.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Helen Tamiris, *Tamiris in Her Own Voice: Draft of an Autobiography* (Oak Creek: Society of Dance History Scholars, 1989). 40-41. The two dances she refers to are part of the *Negro Spirituals* and titled, “No Body Knows de Trouble I See” and “Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho.”

¹¹⁹ Manning, *Modern Dance*, 2.

¹²⁰ Muriel Topaz, *Readings in Modern Dance Vol. 1* (New York: Dance Notation Bureau, 1975), 55.

¹²¹ Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, *Theatre History Studies: Theatres of War*, vol. 33 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2014), 45.

¹²² *Ibid.*

Soyer's wife, Ida, who he met at the Educational Alliance, was a member of Tamiris' dance company and likely provided the introduction between Soyer and Tamiris. His painting, aptly titled *Tamiris*, (fig. 49) differs from his other renditions of dancers such as *Five Dancers* (fig. 50), *Seven Dancers* (fig. 51), and *Dancers Reposed* (fig. 52) in a variety of ways. First, consider how Soyer titles his composition. He chooses to use her stage name, Tamiris, rather than a descriptive label indicating her occupation or bodily position. In using her name, the artist demonstrates her importance and gives the painting a more personal touch. Additionally, Soyer, capturing her likeness, renders Tamiris' figure more realistically than his other portraits of dancers for which he often uses interchangeable, generic features. Her facial expression also deviates from that of Soyer's typical dance paintings. With her hands held above her head, which she cocks to the side, Tamiris appears in wistful thought. She has closed her eyes, remaining oblivious to the world around her, committed only to her dance and the message she wishes to communicate. Gone is the sad, dejected nature of Soyer's other dancers. Clearly, Tamiris and her ideals resonated highly with Soyer, who captures her essence on canvas. While the style of dancing practiced by American Jews may have shifted and evolved during the thirties, what remains clear is that a portion of the Jewish community continued to turn to dancing as a means of self-expression and, possibly, as a way to reconcile their dual identities.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Finally, a few minor connections to Soyer's Jewishness remain, which separately may not mean very much, but in conjunction with the material presented thus far, demonstrate the concern Soyer had for the continuation of Judaism as well as the place of Jews in society. Recall that Soyer married a fellow Russian Jewish immigrant, Ida Chassner. They married at a time when more and more Jews chose to intermarry, causing concern for the continuation Judaism.¹²³ Additionally, the Soyers chose to name their only son David. While initially the name may seem meaningless, one must consider the importance of the biblical figure David who stood as a symbol of hope for the Jews and their ability to persevere in the face of hardship. Soyer's son, David, metaphorically provides hope and perseverance for Jews in the modern age. Additionally, Raphael, who was more vocal about rejecting his Jewish upbringing, and his wife named their only daughter Mary, a name typically associated with Christianity. Lastly, Soyer enjoyed a close relationship with his grandchildren, Daniel and Nancy. In one letter (fig. 53), he

¹²³ For more on the changes in American Jewish marriage patterns see Beth Wenger, "Mordecai M. Kaplan Founder of Reconstructionist Judaism," in *The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America* (New York: Doubleday, 2007): 221-228.

asks Daniel whether he had a good Christmas and a nice Chanukah.¹²⁴ He then goes on to explain the process of lighting the candles for Chanukah and surrounds his text with Star of David, a Menorah, and a large Santa Claus. Here we can make two observations. One, that like most other Jewish children of the time, Daniel's parents did not raise him in strictly a religious Jewish home, as Soyer felt compelled to both verbalize and illustrate the importance of this well-known Jewish holiday. Second, the artist felt a connection to his heritage and wished to impart, at least in some small measure, the traditions of his religion and heritage with his grandchildren, demonstrating his hope for the continuation of Judaism.

When asked by Russell Newton Roman, in an article on the Soyer brothers for the *Jewish Mirror*, whether being Jewish contributed to his art, Soyer answered, "That is hard to say. It may have been the reason I was drawn toward painting Jews, but then Rembrandt painted unsurpassed masterpieces of the ghetto and its habitants and wasn't Jewish at all!"¹²⁵ Roman then goes on to reword his question, "Do you believe, as Ernest Bloch believes in music, that an artist must try to express his racial heritage?" To which Soyer replied, "No...an artist, whether he is a painter, musician, or a writer, must look around him and find those things that interest him most and express them in his own terms."¹²⁶ Soyer, as indicated by Heyd and Mendelsohn, did not reject or try to conceal his Jewishness.¹²⁷ In fact, Judaism directly permeates his body of work and some of the core tenets of the faith interested the artist. To say that Moses Soyer is only a Jewish

¹²⁴ Soyer papers, Correspondence with grandchildren (Daniel and Nancy Soyer), box 1, folder 17.

¹²⁵ Russell Newton Roman, "The Soyer Brothers," *Jewish Mirror* (October 1941), clipping in Soyer papers (printed materials: clippings) box 2, folder 27-31.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Heyd and Mendelsohn, "Jewish Art?" 211.

artist is to ignore the other facets that make him an important artist. However, ignoring his Jewish influence minimizes the significance of his art as well. What we can glean from Soyer's oeuvre is that he was concerned with the fate of humanity, injustices in society, and the human condition. In Soyer's words, man was the noblest creation, and depicting people in their surroundings as authentically as possible transcended other concerns, including race, class, and religion.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Soyer, *Painting the Human Figure*, 156.

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Appendix

Images

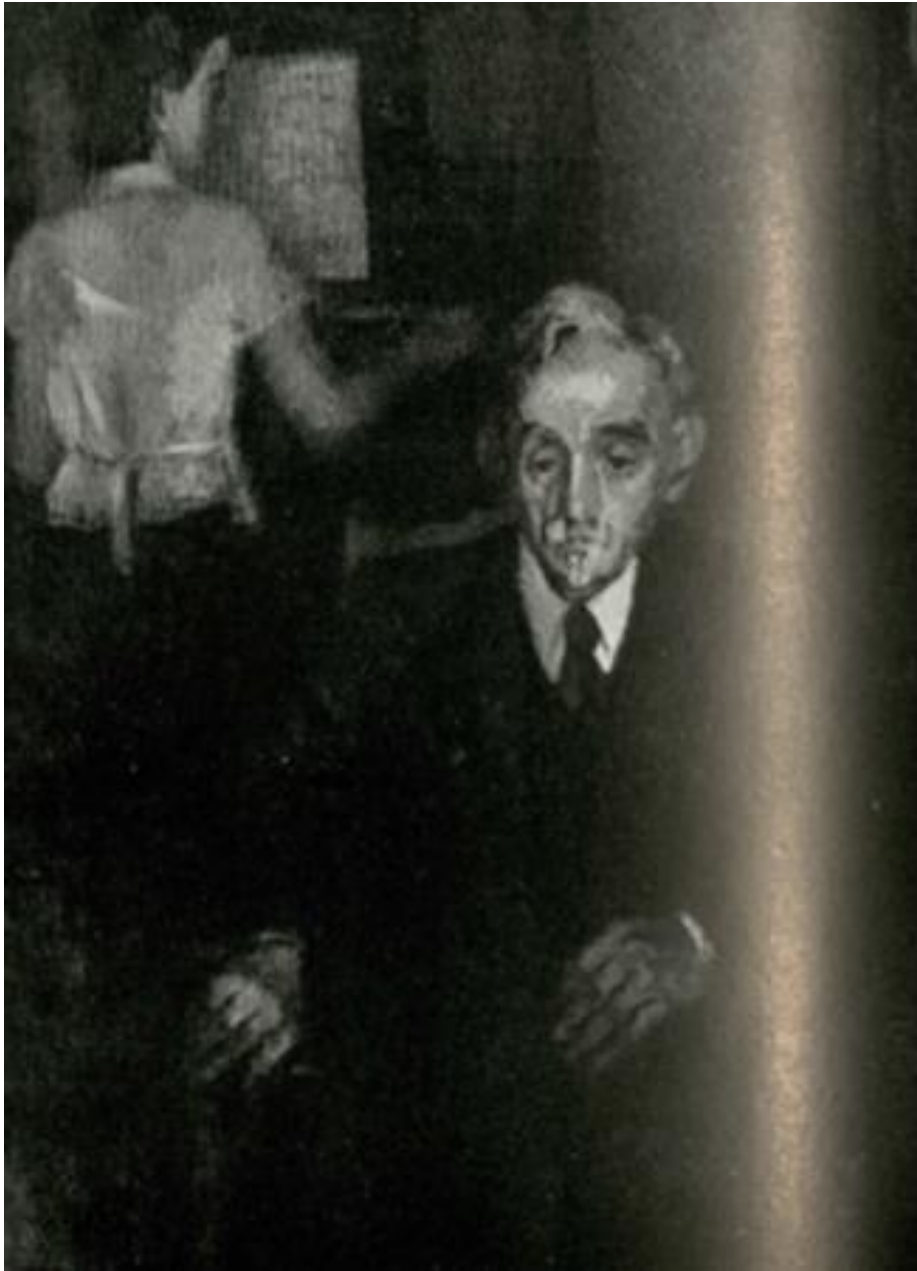


Fig. 1 Moses Soyer, *The Artist's Father and Sister*, 1937. Private collection.



Fig. 2 Moses Soyer, *Employment Agency*, 1933. Private collection.



Fig. 3 Moses Soyer, *Old Man in Skull Cap*, 1922. Jewish Museum, New York.



Fig. 4 Rembrandt, *Portrait of an Old Jew*, 1654. State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



Fig. 5 Moses Soyer, *Old Man with Cane*, 1922. Collection unknown.



Fig. 6 Moses Soyer, *The Lover of Books*, 1934. Jewish Museum, New York.



Fig. 7 Rembrandt, *Portrait of a Young Jewish Man*, 1648. Staatliche Museum, Berlin.



Fig. 8 Albrecht Durer, *Christ among the Doctors*, 1506. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.



Fig. 9 Adam Swach, Panel 3 of the *St. Paul's Fresco*, 17th century. St. Paul's Church Sandomierz.

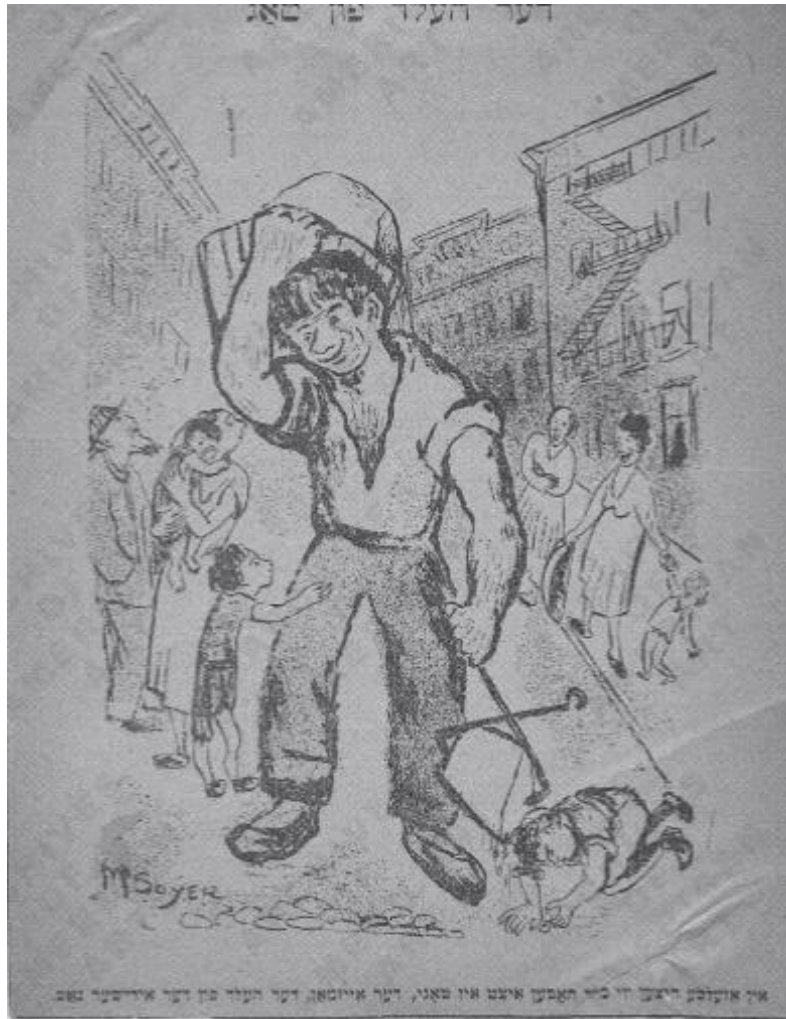


Fig. 10 Illustration by Moses Soyer, ca.1920. Found in the Archives of American Art.



Fig. 11 Illustration by Moses Soyer, ca. 1920. Found in the Archives of American Art.

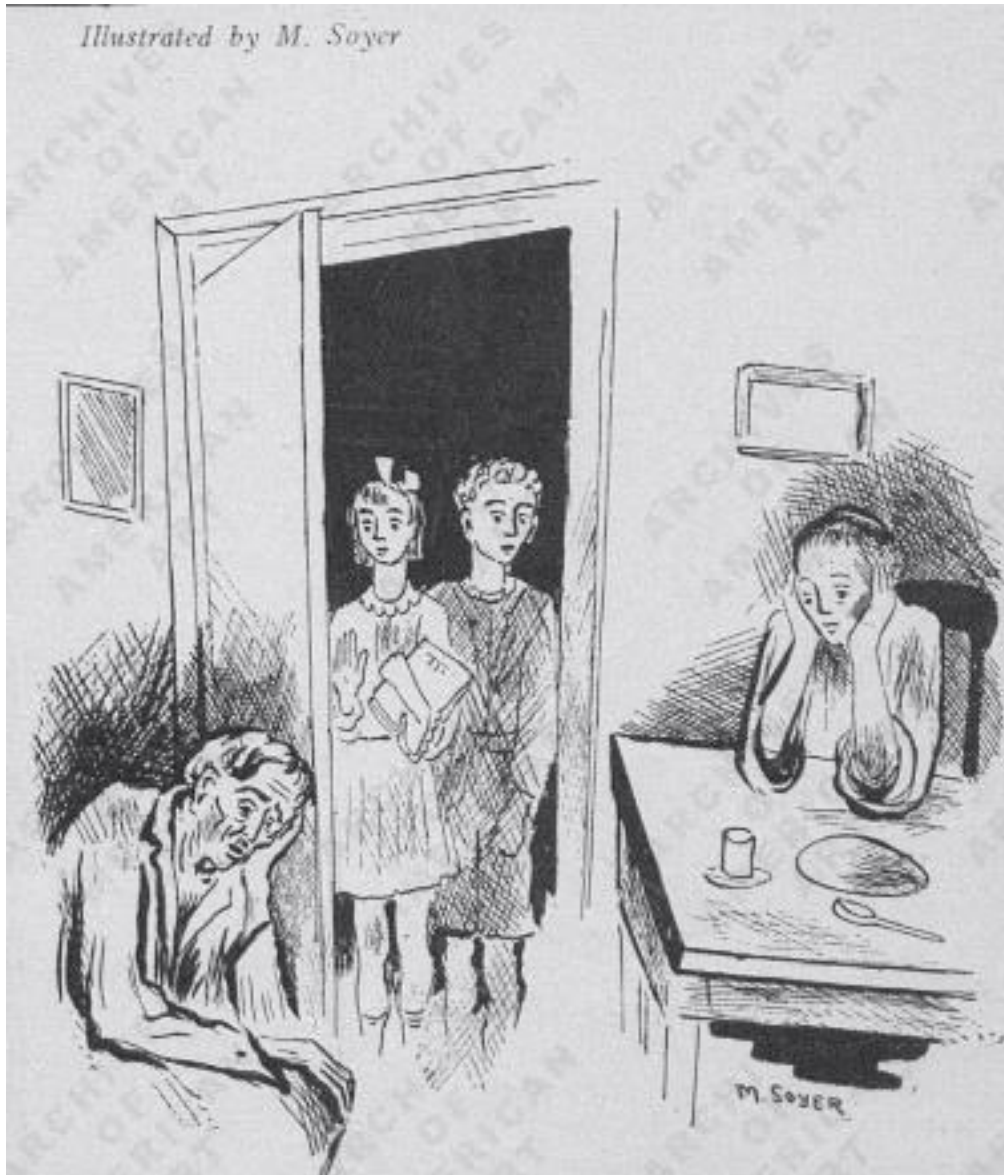


Fig. 12 Illustration by Moses Soyer, ca. 1920. Found in the Archives of American Art.

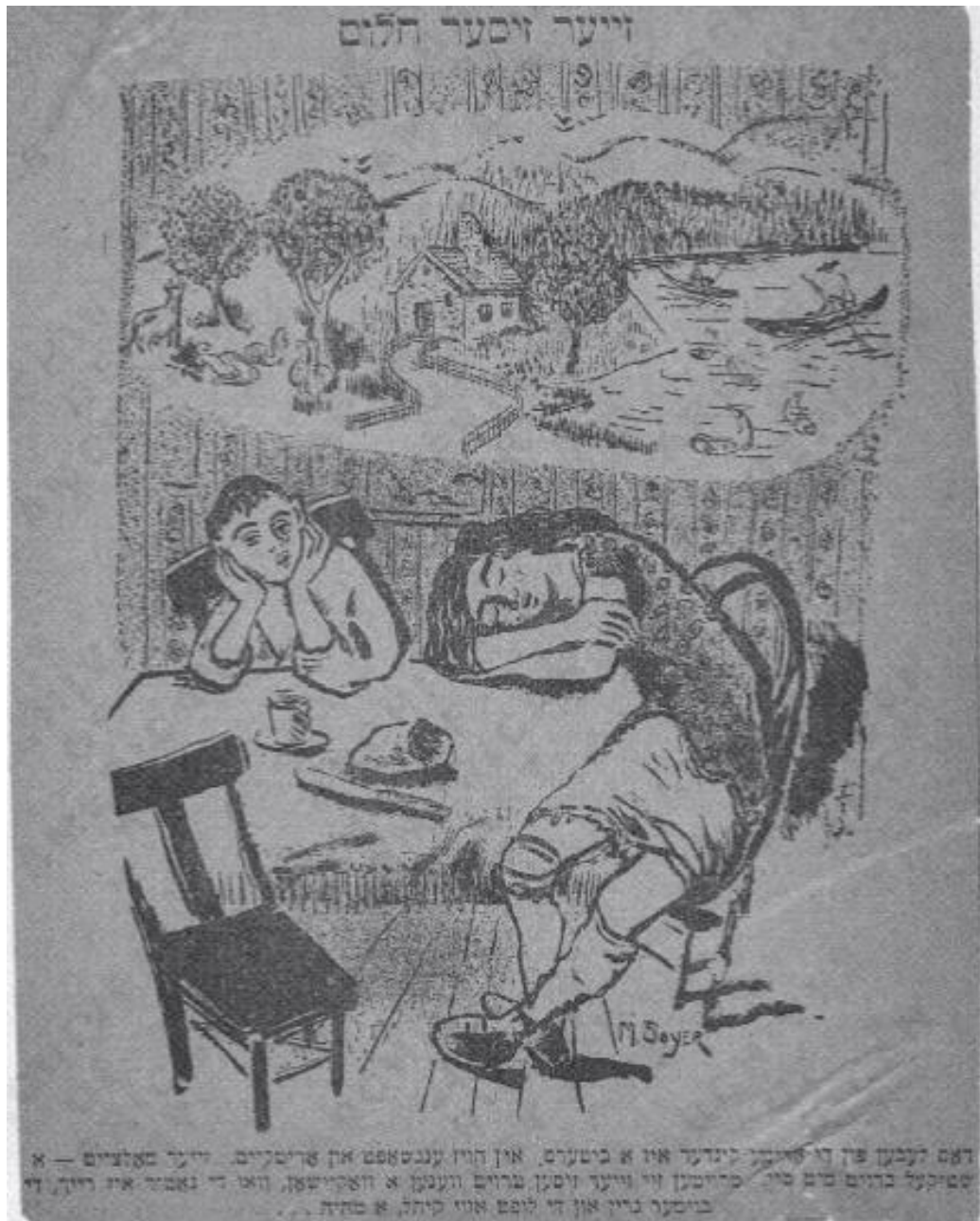


Fig. 13 Illustration by Moses Soyer, ca. 1920. Found in the Archives of American Art.



Fig. 14 George Bellows, *The Cliff Dwellers*, 1913. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.



Fig. 15 George Bellows, *Why Don't They Just Go on Vacation*, 1913. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.

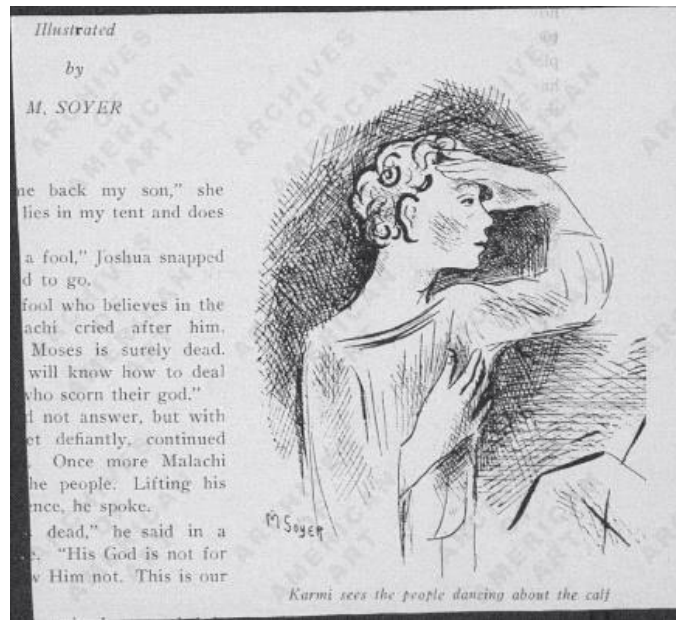


Fig. 16 Illustration by Moses Soyer, ca. 1920. Found in the Archives of American Art.

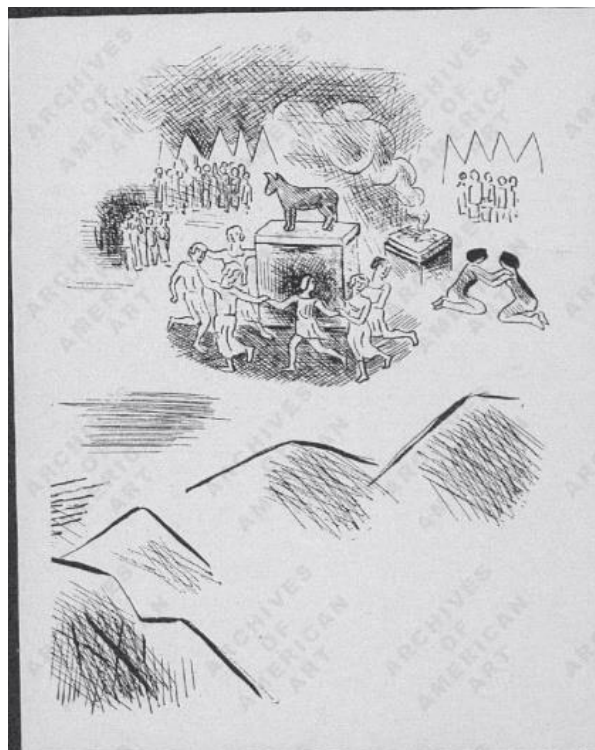


Fig. 17 Illustration by Moses Soyer, ca. 1920. Found in the Archives of American Art.



Fig. 18 Illustration by Moses Soyer, ca. 1920. Found in the Archives of American Art.



Fig. 19 Political cartoon by Moses Soyer, ca. 1930. Found in the Archives of American Art.



Fig. 20 Image from children's book, *Vovik*, 1947. Illustrated by Moses Soyer.



Fig. 21 Image from *Palestine Dances!*, 1946. Illustrated by Moses Soyer.

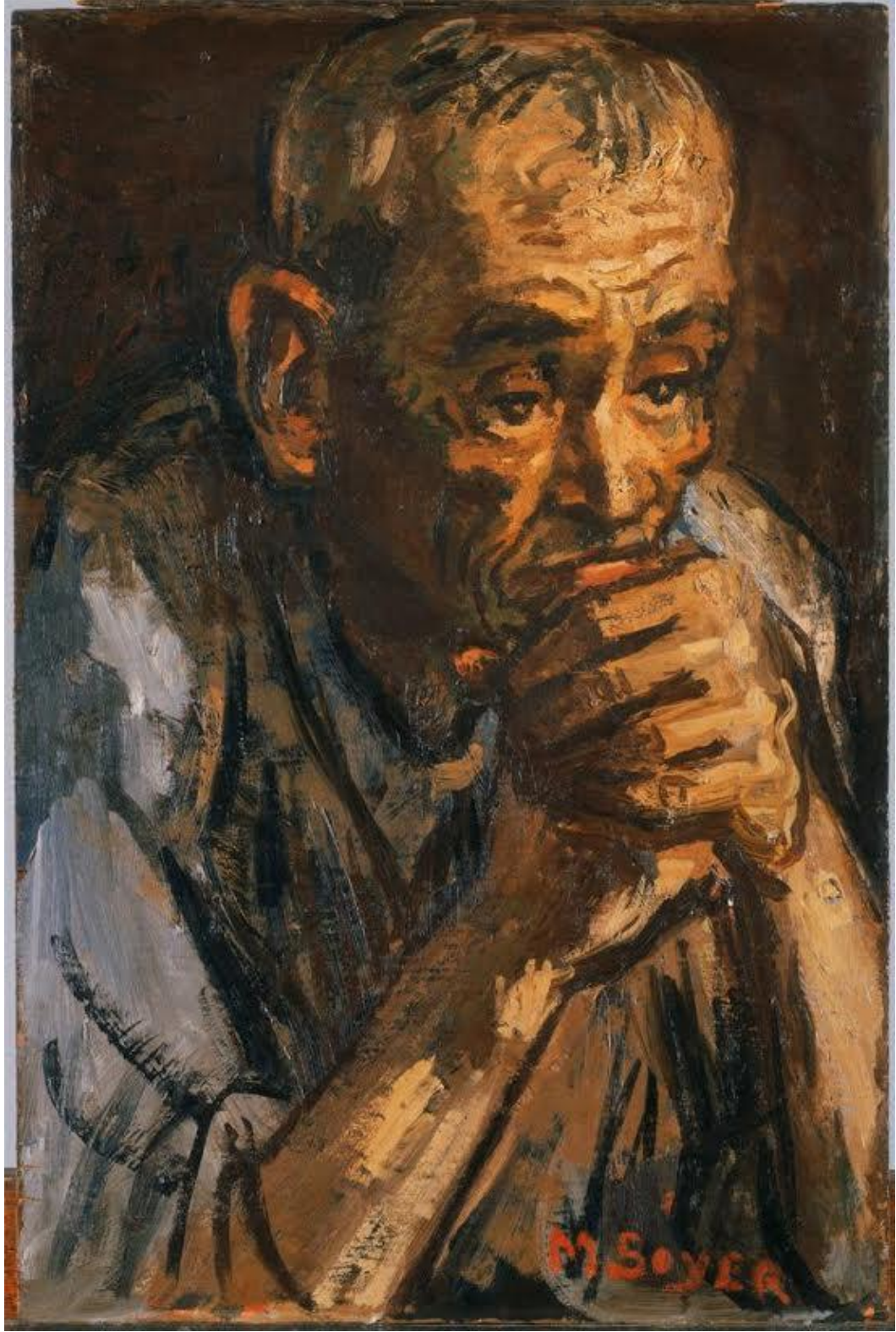


Fig. 22 Moses Soyer, *Old Worker (Old Man)*, 1928. Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 23 Moses Soyer, *Girl at Sewing Machine*, 1937. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 24 William Gropper, *Terkile*, 1939. Collection unknown.



Fig. 25 Isaac Soyer, *Employment Agency*, 1937. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



Fig. 26 Abraham Harriton, *6th Avenue, Unemployment Agency*, 1937. Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens, Jacksonville.



Fig. 27 Ben Shahn, *Unemployment*, 1938. Collection unknown.



Fig. 28 Moses Soyer, *Out of Work*, ca. 1930s. Collection unknown.



Fig. 29 Moses Soyer, *Men at Waterfront III*, 1938. Collection unknown.



Fig. 30 Honore Daumier, *The Third Class Carriage*, 1862-1864. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 31 Moses Soyer, *Gwen and Jacob Lawrence*, 1962. Collection unknown.



Fig. 32 Moses Soyer, *Eartha Kitt*, 1964. Collection unknown.



Fig. 33 Moses Soyer, *David and June*, undated. Courtesy: ACA Galleries, New York and The Estate of Moses Soyer



Fig. 34 Moses Soyer, *Robert Raven*, 1939. Collection unknown.



Fig. 35 Moses Soyer, *The Kiss*, 1943. Collection unknown.



Fig. 36 Moses Soyer, *Soldiers World War II*, undated. Courtesy: ACA Galleries, New York and The Estate of Moses Soyer



Fig. 37 Moses Soyer, *Apprehension II*, 1962. Syracuse University Art Collection, Syracuse.



Figure 38 Oskar Kokoschka, *The Tempest (Bride of the Wind)*, 1914. Kunstmuseum, Basel.



Figure 39 George Grosz, *Ghosts*, 1934. Collection unknown.



Fig. 40 William Gropper, *Politicos* from *Capriccios*, 1953-1957. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 41 William Gropper, *Two Senators*, 1950. Jewish Museum, New York.



Fig. 42 Moses Soyer, *Foreboding*, undated. Collection unknown.



Fig. 43 Raphael Soyer, *Dancing Lesson*, 1926. Jewish Museum, New York.



Fig. 44 William Gropper, *Hasidic Dance (Hasidic Dancing)*, undated. Collection unknown.



Fig. 45 William Gropper, *Ascetic Dance*, ca. 1962. Collection unknown.



Fig. 46 William Gropper, *Shtetl Series*, 1970. Syracuse University Library.



Fig. 47 William Gropper, *Shtetl Series*, 1970. Syracuse University Library.

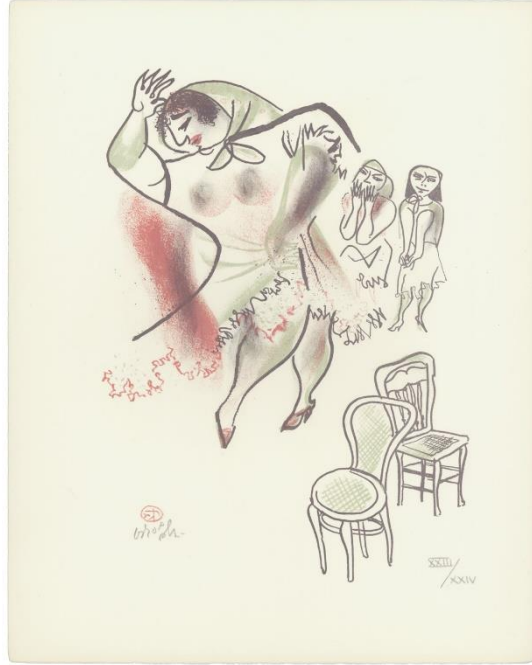


Fig. 48 William Gropper, *Shtetl Series*, 1970. Syracuse University Library.



Fig. 49 Moses Soyer, *Tamiris*, ca. 1930-40. Collection unknown.



Fig. 50 Moses Soyer, *Five Dancers*, 1974. Collection unknown.



Fig. 51 Moses Soyer, *Seven Dancers*, undated. Courtesy: ACA Galleries, New York and The Estate of Moses Soyer

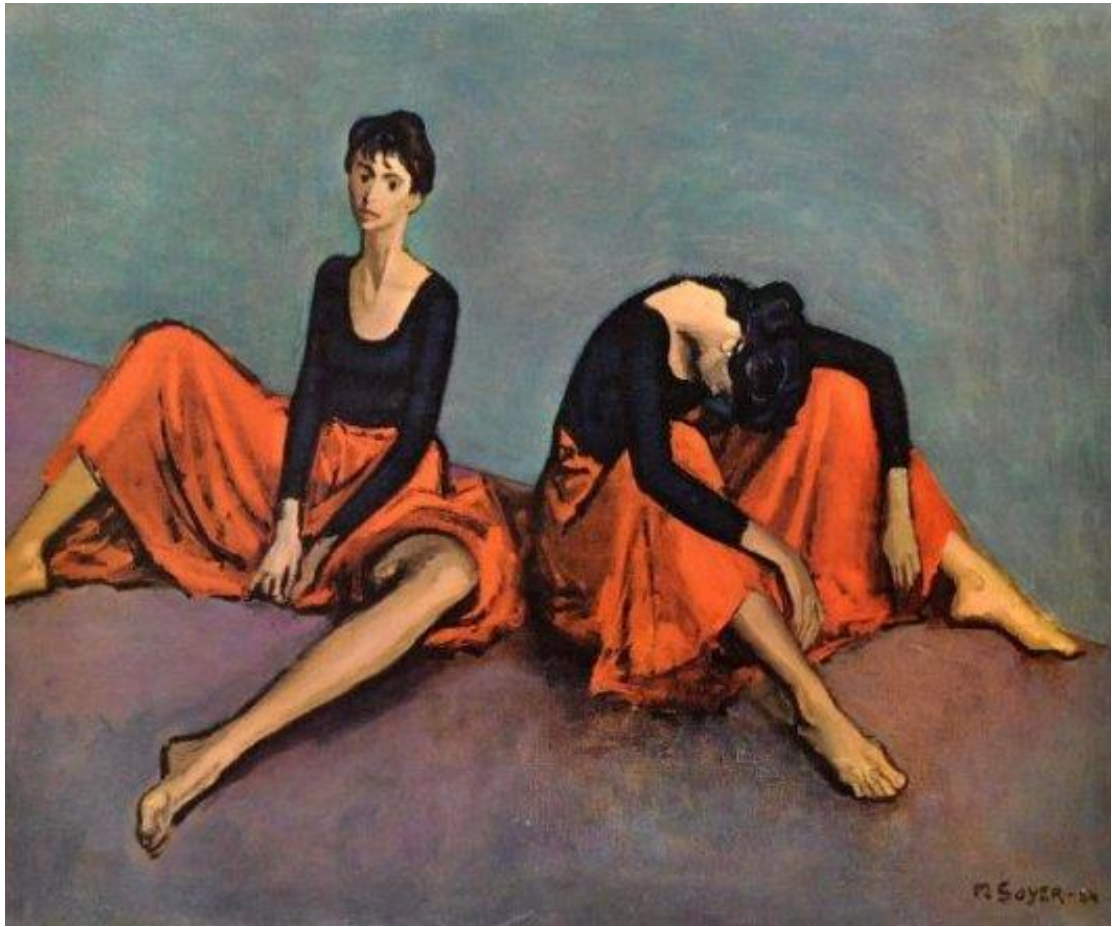


Fig. 52 Moses Soyer, *Dancers Reposed*, undated. Collection unknown.

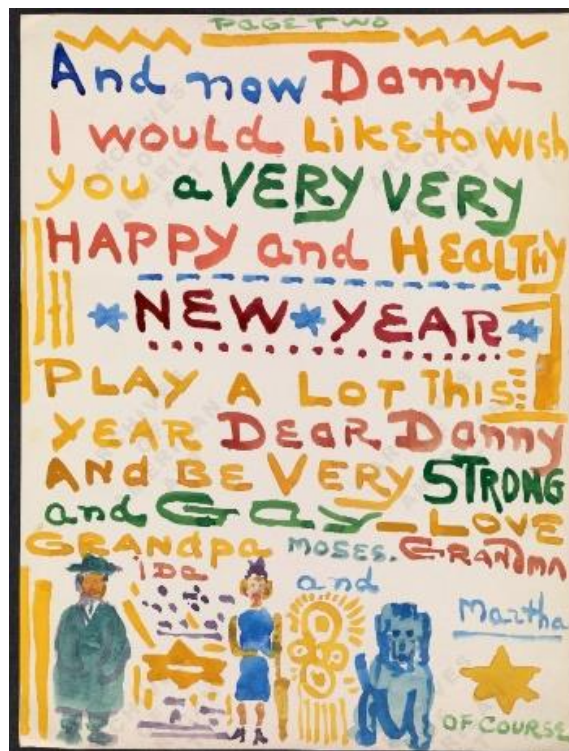
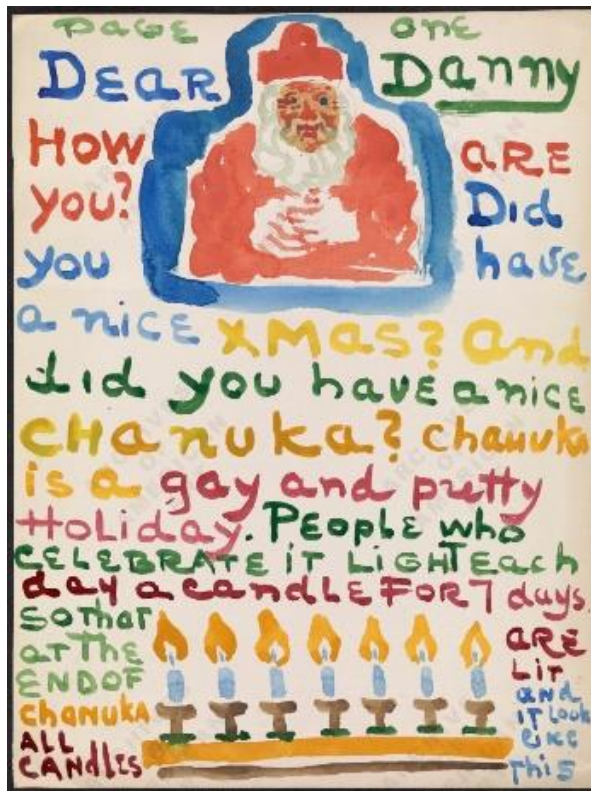


Fig. 53 Moses Soyer, letter to Daniel Soyer, ca. 1970. Found in the Archives of American Art.