



Raphael Soyer (American, b. Russia, 1899–1987)  
*Girl Standing Semi-nude*, c. 1940  
Oil on canvas, 20 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 10 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irvin Dagen, 1984

By Bryna R. Campbell

*Girl Standing Semi-nude* (c. 1940), by Russian-born, Jewish American artist Raphael Soyer, is an intimate and subtle portrait of female vulnerability.<sup>1</sup> In the work, a bare-breasted woman stands awkwardly, in a contained pose that suggests a sense of self-consciousness. In her left hand, she holds a deep crimson blouse, the only bit of color in the somber canvas, that hangs in vertical folds against her torso and pelvis. She is no idealized beauty, but rather a working-class woman, in plain clothes, with unkempt hair. She faces outward, but does not return the viewer's gaze. Instead, she looks downward as though lost in thought—passive and withdrawn. Created toward the end of the Great Depression, this work conveys a sense of introspection rarely seen in depictions of women produced in this period. It also speaks to a sense of estrangement experienced by many Depression-era working-class women—office secretaries, shop girls, dancers—forced by economic conditions to work in exploitive occupations. When considered in the context of Soyer's immigrant and ethnic background, coupled with his strong commitment to progressive political activism, *Girl Standing Semi-nude* can be seen to articulate the artist's ongoing, socially engaged, yet deeply personal exploration of the psychological dynamics of social alienation. This essay considers this largely unknown painting within the sociohistorical context of the period, positing the work as a representative example of Soyer's sympathetic project to bring greater consciousness to the plight of working-class women in the 1930s and 1940s.

*Girl Standing Semi-nude* is one of dozens of depictions of women that Soyer produced after moving to New York City's Union Square neighborhood in 1931.<sup>2</sup> Like many other artists in

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<sup>1</sup> The original owners, Mr. and Mrs. Irvin Dagen purchased *Girl Standing Semi-nude* in the early 1940s, thereby dating the painting to no later than 1945. However, because Soyer created similar portraits throughout the 1930s, and because records are incomplete, the exact date is difficult to determine. The fact that the model bears a striking resemblance to the woman in Soyer's *Girl Asleep*, painted around 1930, and that stylistically the work is comparable to Soyer's studies made in the mid- to late-1930s, indicate that the date may indeed be earlier than 1940.

<sup>2</sup> As a painter of urban subjects that included not just women but also unemployed men, Soyer has been variously labeled an "urban realist," a "social realist" (which implies a political subtext), a painter of the "American scene," and a member of the Fourteenth Street school, an unorganized group of artists defined by their shared geography and choices of subject matter. Though none of these descriptors are completely satisfactory (due in part to their vagueness), I frame this discussion of Soyer's work within the discourses of the Fourteenth Street school and social realism in order to focus especially on his images on women and on his

the period, the Russian Jewish immigrant was drawn to Union Square not only because of its affordable rent, but also because of its up-and-coming status, which made it an area especially worth capturing in pictures. Featuring the headquarters to the Communist-supported journal, *New Masses*, as well as a virtual icon of capitalism, the major department store S. Klein, the neighborhood was a center for the city's social tensions. For Soyer and such artists as Reginald Marsh and Kenneth Hayes Miller, all members of the Fourteenth Street school, the increased visibility of women as shoppers, dancers, and employees in the neighborhood constituted an especially compelling subject through which to explore these frictions. As scholar Ellen Wiley Todd has pointed out, through seemingly natural yet highly constructed works, these artists produced a distinct iconography of American womanhood that situated social tensions on shifting gender expectations shaped by the pressures of consumerism, mass culture, and other manifestations of capitalism.<sup>3</sup>

Working on two fronts, Soyer examined these tensions through depictions of women in public—both as shoppers and employees—and through more intimate interior scenes that featured individualized models sitting or standing in introspective poses, as in *Girl Standing Semi-nude*. In both cases the artist constructed his scenes in his studio and used models he met in the neighborhood—“mostly young girls who are interested in dancing or writing or philosophy,” he explained in a 1948 interview, noting sympathetically that “usually they are not very happy.”<sup>4</sup> Like the model in *Girl Standing Semi-nude*, who appears in at least two other works by Soyer, he would use these models repeatedly.<sup>5</sup> Because he believed that painting naturalistically would appeal to a broader audience, he self-consciously produced these works in a realistic style. He looked for inspiration to the work of Thomas Eakins and, especially, Edgar Degas, who had produced some of the best-known and most nuanced studies of working women in France in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

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political beliefs. On his part, Soyer was never comfortable with the label “social realism,” since it implied an activist propaganda; he preferred the more benign label of “social artist.” For more on Soyer’s career and his views, which he recorded in three memoirs, see Raphael Soyer, *A Painter’s Pilgrimage* (New York: Crown, 1962), *Homage to Thomas Eakins, Etc.*, ed. Rebecca L. Soyer (South Brunswick, NJ: T. Yoseloff, 1966), and *Self-Revelment, A Memoir* (New York: Maecenas Press, 1969), as well as primary texts published in Lloyd Goodrich, *Raphael Soyer* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1967); Milton Brown, “Oral History Interview with Raphael Soyer,” *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution* (May 13–June 1, 1981); Samantha Baskind, *Raphael Soyer and the Search for Modern Jewish Art* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004); and Ellen Wiley Todd, *The “New Woman” Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), chapters 2 and 6.

<sup>3</sup> See Todd, *The “New Woman” Revised*, xxv–xxvi. Todd frames these artists’ explorations within the context of what she calls a “new” New Woman discourse that developed a decade after women secured the right to vote. This revised discourse echoed earlier sentiments about individual freedoms and sexual liberty, but, unlike the New Woman discourse at the turn of the century, it also embraced unabashed femininity.

<sup>4</sup> Raphael Soyer, “Art,” *Time* magazine (March 22, 1948), 59–60.

<sup>5</sup> The woman in *Girl Standing Semi-nude* shares a striking resemblance not only to the model in *Girl Asleep* (c. 1930), but also to the brunette depicted in Soyer’s *Pensive Girl* (c. 1946–47). See Todd, *The “New Woman” Revised*, chapter 6, for more on Soyer’s use of models in his artistic process.

<sup>6</sup> Soyer was so taken with Thomas Eakins that he produced a memoir in his honor: *Homage to Thomas Eakins, Etc.*, ed. Rebecca L. Soyer (South Brunswick, NJ: T. Yoseloff, 1966). For more on his interest in Edgar Degas, see Brown, “Oral History Interview.”

Like his colleagues Marsh and Miller, Soyer foregrounded feminine sexuality in these works. For instance, in *Girl Standing Semi-nude*, he emphasized the brunette's sexuality by placing her breasts almost directly in the center of the canvas. Yet in contrast especially to Marsh's paintings, which typically feature busty blondes enamored by shop window displays, Soyer's works do not so much promote demeaning feminine stereotypes in modern consumer society, but focus on their alienating effects. His women, who navigate the city streets or sit alone in their modest apartments, seem estranged from the world around them.<sup>7</sup> Also unlike Marsh and Miller, who produced idealized feminine depictions deriving from Renaissance Madonna prototypes (in the case of Miller) or Hollywood stars (in the case of Marsh), Soyer featured women from far more humble backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> The model in *Girl Standing Semi-nude* is exemplary in this regard: she is a working-class, perhaps immigrant, woman, holding a plain if brightly colored blouse and wearing a simple A-line skirt, with unwieldy dark hair barely contained by its hairpiece.<sup>9</sup>

Soyer's engagement with Communist political activism—as evidenced in part through his membership in the John Reed Art Club, a leftist group of artists who believed in using art as propaganda to address exploitive economic and social policies—further distinguished him from his fellow Fourteenth Street school artists. Indeed, his depictions of women's lower-class status suggest a sympathy born out of class consciousness. Yet it is important to note that, unlike such contemporaries as William Gropper or Philip Evergood, Soyer was not producing works that promoted class struggle; that is to say, they did not act in the interest of the Communist party as forms of proletarian propaganda, in part due to their distinct focus on women rather than men. Far more introspective, even sentimental and romantic, Soyer's depictions of women are better understood as what Todd has called a “poetry of female labor.”<sup>10</sup>

Soyer's sympathetic perspective toward working-class women is distinctive in this period. It takes on a deeper meaning when viewed within the context of the artist's own background: he self-identified as “an American, a Russian, and a Jew” whose family moved to the United

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<sup>7</sup> Soyer's 1936 lithograph, *Dancers Resting* (Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum), which depicts two women completely disengaged from another, aptly displays this quality within an interior context.

<sup>8</sup> Numerous scholars have tied Marsh's paintings to female types constructed by the Hollywood industry. See, for example, Erika Doss, “Images of American Women in the 1930s: Reginald Marsh and Paramount Pictures,” in *Critical Issues in American Art*, ed. Mary Ann Calo (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998). See also Todd, *The “New Woman” Revised*, chapters 4 and 5, for a greater discussion of both Hayes's and Marsh's work, and chapter 6 for a discussion of Soyer's works.

<sup>9</sup> Although Soyer's painting is a particularly sympathetic portrayal of Great Depression era women, one that speaks subtly and eloquently to working-class women's experiences of social estrangement, it is important to note that the nudity in this work makes the woman visually available to the artist and viewer as an object of scrutiny. In this way, the work can also be seen as voyeuristic.

<sup>10</sup> Todd, *The “New Woman” Revised*, 229. For more on Soyer's work in the context of his Communist affiliations, see Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 241.

States when the artist was twelve.<sup>11</sup> Though the Jewish immigrant experience, as many Jewish writers have since noted, was necessarily different than that of working-class women (whose plight was invisible even to many proletarian artists with their concentration on masculinity and male labor), theirs was an experience similarly defined by a self-conscious sense of inadequacy and alienation in a social environment rife with stereotypes against immigrants, women, and Jews.<sup>12</sup> Soyer may have been drawn to this theme because he identified with working-class women's experiences of estrangement. His sexually revealing but nonerotic poses, as exemplified in *Girl Standing Semi-nude*, convey this sense of self-consciousness. In addition, as Samantha Baskind has convincingly argued, the artist's purposeful alignment with well-known American artist Thomas Eakins, especially his use of pictorial naturalism, can be seen as Soyer's own embrace of an American tradition that camouflages his Jewishness—in other words, as a personal and perhaps even unconscious artistic reaction to his difficulties as a Jewish immigrant.<sup>13</sup> Notably, in later years, Soyer would refer to his paintings as acts of “revelment.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, when viewed in this light, a work like *Girl Standing Semi-nude* can be seen as a displaced, but implicitly autobiographical, reflection on the psychological experience of the dislocated and disenfranchised. Thus, *Girl Standing Semi-nude* operates, on multiple registers, as part of an exploration of female labor informed by progressive social activism; as a highly personal reflection on social alienation in the 1930s; and as a sympathetic meditation on the intersection of social status and gender in the Great Depression.

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<sup>11</sup> Soyer, in Brown, “Oral History Interview.”

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of Soyer's work in the context of his Jewish identity and the Jewish immigrant experience in general, see Baskind, *Raphael Soyer and the Search for Modern Jewish Art*, especially chapter 2.

<sup>13</sup> See Baskind, *Raphael Soyer and the Search for Modern Jewish Art*, 7. As Baskind notes in her book, which specifically probes his self-portraits, this act of assimilation is also evident in his early self-portrait signatures, in which he designates himself specifically a “New York Artist.”

<sup>14</sup> Soyer, *Self-Revelment*, 11.