



Raphael Soyer  
American, born Russia, 1899 - 1987

## *Blond Figure*

1940s

oil on canvas

overall: 81.4 x 53.3 cm (32 1/16 x 21 in.)

framed: 94.6 x 66.7 x 4.4 cm (37 1/4 x 26 1/4 x 1 3/4 in.)

Inscription: upper left: RAPHAEL / SOYER

Gift of James N. Rosenberg 1989.25.1

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### ENTRY

Throughout his long career, Raphael Soyer was preoccupied with the female figure, and he painted numerous images of solitary nude or semiclothed models posing in his studio or home. In the background of his largest painting and artistic manifesto, *Homage to Thomas Eakins* (1963–1965, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC), Soyer included *William Rush Carving His Allegorical Figure of the Schuylkill River* (1876–1877, Philadelphia Museum of Art) by Thomas Eakins (American, 1844 - 1916), which prominently features a nude model posing in an artist's studio. [1]

Shown in three-quarter length, the woman in *Blond Figure* stands off-center toward the right of the composition, next to a table. She is set against a shallow, dark background and pressed close to the picture plane. Her form is softly illuminated by light that emanates from an unseen source on the left. The woman clutches her white slip, seemingly about to remove it. She has turned her head to her left and closed her eyes. Soyer's expert draftsmanship in delineating anatomical details and drapery folds, a skill derived from years of drawing directly from the model and sketching after the Old Masters, is evident. His subdued palette consists of delicate harmonies of gray, brown, and white.

As with many of Soyer's subjects, the woman has a disheveled appearance. Her hair is tousled, and one of the straps of her garment is untied. Soyer often represented women in states of partial undress, resulting in paintings with pronounced but ambiguous sexual undertones. The deep drapery folds enhance

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*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

the subject's implicit eroticism. The image is intimate, capturing a private, unguarded moment. The model's withdrawn, remote, and anguished quality imbues the scene with a mysterious sense of melancholy. Lloyd Goodrich noted how Soyer combined psychological and sensual components, with the result that his models appear as lonely figures, "eyes downcast or gazing into space, hands tightly clasped, haunted faces withdrawn into their subjective worlds." [2]

Soyer's interest in the psychology of his sitter was indebted to Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606 - 1669). *Blond Figure* bears a strong resemblance to *A Woman Bathing in a Stream (Hendrickje Stoffels?)* [fig. 1] as well as other nude and seminude figures by the Dutch artist. Soyer described himself as being "hypnotized" by Rembrandt's *Danaë* (1636, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg) and wrote that "one has to wait for a Degas to find again this profound treatment of a nude, though on a less epic scale." [3]

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Rembrandt van Rijn, *A Woman Bathing in a Stream (Hendrickje Stoffels?)*, 1654, oil on oak, National Gallery, London, Holwell Carr Bequest, 1831, NG54. Image © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY

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## NOTES

- [1] *Homage to Thomas Eakins* is a group portrait based on Henri Fantin-Latour's *Hommage à Delacroix* (1864, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), in which Soyer represented himself, family members, fellow artists, and friends before three paintings by Eakins. A smaller study dated 1963–1965 is also in the collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.
- [2] Lloyd Goodrich, *Raphael Soyer* (New York, 1972), 155.
- [3] Raphael Soyer, *Homage to Thomas Eakins, Etc.* (South Brunswick, NJ, 1966), 87.
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## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined, plain-weave fabric support remains mounted on its original stretcher, which is a commercial stretcher manufactured by ANCO. The tacking edges are intact, and a selvage is present on the bottom margin. The different color and consistency of paint along the right margin suggest that the support had been used previously. The artist freely applied paint in a thick, textured, and opaque manner over a commercially applied ground. The x-radiograph shows thinner paint around the outline of the figure, suggesting that a reserve was left by the artist. Infrared reflectography indicates that originally the model's left arm was crossed above her right arm, with the thumb of her left hand resting on the fold of her right arm. In the completed painting, the model's left arm is below her right arm and her left hand is not visible. The painting is in very good condition. The surface is covered with a layer of slightly yellowed varnish.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

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## PROVENANCE

James N. Rosenberg [1874-1970], New York; gift 1947 to National Collection of Fine Arts (now Smithsonian American Art Museum), Washington, D.C.;<sup>[1]</sup> transferred May 1989 to NGA.

[1] 1947 gift stipulated that the painting was to be transferred to the National Gallery of Art twenty years after the artist's death, or "when eligible" to enter the collection.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

2008 American Artists from the Russian Empire, Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, The University of Oklahoma, Norman; The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg; State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow; San Diego Museum of Art, 2008-2010, no. 53, repro.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 339, repro.

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