

MODERN ART COLLECTION

Raphael Soyer

In Washington Square

ca. 1935

Oil on canvas

20 × 24½ in. (50.8 × 62.2 cm)

Museum purchase by exchange, gift of William H. and Eloise R. Chandler

1996.2

Raphael Soyer's choice of urban subjects was motivated by his experiences in New York City after emigrating with his family from Russia in 1913. Soyer studied painting in New York at Cooper Union, the National Academy of Design, and the Art Students League, where he also taught intermittently from 1933 until 1942. By the mid-1930s he was a leading advocate of realism and captured scenes of ordinary city life in his paintings, watercolors, lithographs, and book illustrations.

Along with his brothers Moses and Isaac, who were also painters, Soyer was prominent in the Fourteenth Street School of painters working and living in Greenwich Village in the 1920s. This group of social realist artists was interested in capturing men and women in contemporary settings such as the parks, streets, and subways of New York City. Yet unlike the painters of the earlier Ashcan School, Soyer and his contemporaries approached these themes not as picturesque spectacle but with greater attention to social concerns.

As a witness to the Depression, Soyer in his social realist paintings recorded the lives of the working class and the unemployed. *In Washington Square* depicts a crowded urban setting, yet the artist has taken great care to portray the individualized character of his subjects, who often came from the rather poor neighborhoods where his family lived. In fact, these portraits are likely derived from the many studies he executed of the unemployed during the Depression. Caught in a moment of quiet self-absorption, his figures are conveyed with great sensitivity and humanity.

