

WASHINGTON, D. C.

## A Hole in the Heart

ARTHUR SACKLER NEVER ACTUALLY promised his sought-after collection of ancient Far Eastern art to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, but the strong hope of such a gift from the psychiatrist/publisher led the Met to set aside a storage room in 1966 for many of Sackler's finest objects—a room which is still run by Sackler's personal curator. Now, with the recent announcement that the cream of Sackler's huge collection—some 1,000 objects initially, with more expected to follow—is soon to be housed in a planned new Arthur M. Sackler Gallery to be built by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the main reason for the existence of the "Sackler enclave" at the Met has been eliminated. The Met, meanwhile, is still left with a hole in the heart of its Chinese art collection, which the Sackler bronzes, jades and other treasures might have filled.

The victors—the Smithsonian and its Freer Gallery—possess some obvious charms (although the exact reasons for Sackler's decision are unclear, because others will not speak for him and he's not talking). Charles Blitzer, the Smithsonian's assistant secretary for art and history, did say that the two most important factors in the Smithsonian's favor were its prestigious location on the Mall in Washington and the new gallery's link to the Freer, one of the country's finest museums for art of the Near and Far East. John Rosenfield, acting director of the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard and professor of oriental art there, says that the new Smithsonian facility is the "most logical and proper place" for Sackler's works, because it will have "the resources to absorb such a large collection." Rosenfield, who has helped supervise the compilation at Harvard of a planned three-volume catalogue of ritual bronze vessels from the Sackler Collection, also stressed Sackler's substantial commitment to research, which will be strongly emphasized at the new facility, with expected financial help from Sackler. (He has also promised \$4 million toward the \$25 million construction cost of the new museum.)

Still, the Smithsonian deal might never have happened if Sackler's relationship with the Met had not gone sour. Among Sackler's gifts to the Met in happier days were funds for the Sackler Wing that now houses the Temple of Dendur as well as major temporary exhibitions. (It had been expected eventually to display a permanent exhibition of objects from Sackler's holdings.)

The relationship between the Met and Sackler began to founder over plans for a show of masterpieces from Sackler's collection. Due to what Met Director Philippe de Montebello said were scheduling conflicts and "the inability to reach agreement on certain issues with Dr. Sackler," the show, planned for many years, never took place. (A much smaller show, of 70 to 80 ritual bronze masterworks, is set for next spring and summer at the Fogg, to which Sackler has also promised a reported \$6 million for construction of its planned new wing.) Sackler is said to have been extremely annoyed at the Met's failure to protect him from investigations by the press and the New York State attorney general into his unusual storage arrangement at the Met. The attorney general found no wrongdoing on Sackler's part, but did find that the Met had been lax about keeping track of the Sackler enclave's objects and operations.

Sackler and the Met also had a falling out over the museum's decision (since modified) to cancel a planned show of antiquities from Israel. Sackler, a strong supporter of Israel, is known to feel that anti-Semitism was behind this and other actions at the museum, a charge that de Montebello dismissed as "preposterous." If Sackler wants to continue his role as a Met donor, said de Montebello, "I have no problems with him." He added that he and Sackler (or their representatives) would probably meet soon to discuss their future relationship. He indicated, though, that the Met would probably not be interested in donations from Sackler's collection of oriental art if the Smithsonian objects are "the 1,000 best." Wen Fong, the Met's special consultant for Far Eastern affairs, however, did not want to rule out donations from Sackler's collection and added that "perhaps now, having made a deal with Washington, he may be prepared to make a deal with us. He feels no single place is large enough for his entire collection. I'm willing to take a humble and pragmatic point of view, though I can't say we have no standards. I would like to see what is still there."

Thomas Lawton, director of the Freer, said that he had selected the Smithsonian objects on the basis of two criteria: quality and representativeness of the breadth of Sackler's holdings. He said that he "saw all the things in all the warehouses" (including the Sackler enclave at the Met) and added that the collector had been "very magnanimous. . . . He agreed to our selections without a murmur and didn't say, 'I want to keep this one or that one.'" Sackler's gift includes 475 Chinese jades from Neolithic times to the 20th century, 150 Chinese bronzes from the Shang

through the Han dynasties and 68 Chinese paintings from the tenth through the 20th centuries. There are also examples of Chinese lacquer, Near Eastern metalwork and sculpture from ancient Cambodia, India and Thailand.

Rosenfield called Sackler's collection "unparalleled in ritual bronzes and jades. There is no private collection equal to it in the world." Blitzer said that the original estimate of the gift's value at \$50 million was too conservative; it is worth about \$75 million. Lawton added that Sackler had made no stipulations about how the objects should be used or how the museum should be run. (Sackler will be a member of its advisory committee.)

It was the severe restrictions placed by Charles Freer on his gift to the Smithsonian that in large part prompted the drive for a new building for oriental art. According to the provisions in his will, the Freer Gallery may neither lend nor borrow objects, nor may it display traveling exhibitions. The new facility will have the same staff and director as the Freer, but the collections, due to Freer's restrictions, cannot be commingled. Smithsonian officials hope that other collectors will donate objects to the Sackler Gallery, and Lawton added that "Dr. Sackler will, I think, over the years make other additions" to the collection.

The Sackler Gallery is one part of a \$75 million construction project that includes, as its other major component, a new building for the National Museum of African Art, now housed in a row of nine townhouses on Capitol Hill. The complex (all of which will be underground, except for two small entrance pavilions, one for each museum) will also include meeting facilities for international symposia as well as offices for other Smithsonian outreach programs (the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and the National and Resident Associate Programs). The Sackler Gallery will be connected underground to the Freer, and the entire complex will form the fourth side of a quadrangle that also includes the original Smithsonian Building (known as the Castle) and the Arts and Industries Building. Japanese architect Junzo Yoshimura conceived the design for the new project, and the Boston firm of Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson and Abbott, with its principal architect, Jean Paul Carlhian, developed the plans for the site.

Planning during the past four years has been funded by \$1.5 million from the Smithsonian plus a \$960,000 federal appropriation. An additional \$36.5 million for construction was appropriated by Congress in October (with President Reagan's support), and the Smithsonian must raise another \$36.5 million privately. Some \$27



million has already been raised in cash and pledges, according to Blitzer, including, in addition to Sackler's \$4 million pledge, \$1 million each from the governments of Japan and Korea, \$9 million from Smithsonian funds and a projected \$2 million from the planned sale of buildings that have housed the National Museum of African Art.

The appropriation for the new Eastern and African art facilities comes at a time of fiscal austerity, when federal funds for existing museums around the country are being cut. But Smithsonian and Reagan administration officials maintain that each request for federal funds must be considered on its own merits, and that the new facilities are urgently needed. Construction is scheduled to begin this spring and to be completed by 1986.

Sackler has also strengthened his ties to another Washington institution, the National Gallery of Art, where he was recently named to a new trustees council, formed in September to advise and support the museum's nine-member board. The National Gallery has mounted two shows of works from Sackler's collections: European terra-cotta sculptures from the 15th through the 20th centuries and 16th-century Italian majolica. (The latter show also included selections from the National Gallery's own Widener Collection.)

Meanwhile, his future relationship, if any, with the Met is at best uncertain, and the status of the Sackler enclave will, according to Met officials, be reviewed in light of recent developments.

—Lee Rosenbaum

## Raphael Soyer

Hirshhorn Museum and  
Sculpture Garden

IN 1981, SOYER PRESENTED THE Hirshhorn with a large body of lithographs and etchings from his own collection. Their acquisition was the impetus for "Sixty-five Years of Printmaking," the exhibition that, with "Soyer Since 1960," makes up the Hirshhorn's double tribute to the 82-year-old artist. Soyer has already had a show at the museum—in 1979, he was given "A Birthday Celebration" exhibition of 28 paintings from the collection—but as an index of long-term development in the more intimate print medium and a catalogue of images that have served as Soyer touchstones, "Sixty-Five Years" made some interesting points about the artist's work as a whole.

Arranged in chronological order, it escaped that constraint to stress the essentially timeless qualities of Soyer's portraits and groups. Only in the social portraits of the Depression era and the flower children of the 1960s, or in Soyer's self-portraits,



Raphael Soyer, *Miriam with Folded Arms*, 1979, oil on canvas, 55¼ by 31¼ inches. Hirshhorn Museum.

does one encounter either a sense of specific time or of time's passage. The psychological sensitivity and nuances of the 1934 *Girl at Table* or 1941 *Laundress* are present with equal intensity and handling in the 1963 etching *Pensive Girl*. It is clear that one of Soyer's great skills is his ability to render strong, thoughtful women whose expressions testify to a full inner life. From 1917 (the date of the first print) onward, he manages to present women without turning them into idealizations or earth mother/goddesses.

The small place allowed for sentimentality was also striking. Only in the '60s-generation prints does Soyer fall prey to using pretty or unsubtle symbols, first in *Flower Child*, in which a palm-out benediction and flower lie too sweetly on the image of a young girl, and again in *Mother and Child*, in which a young woman takes a madonna pose under the halo of a fallout shelter sign. The irony is without Soyer's usual subtlety. Most of the street scenes of this period are a letdown, as well, with their empty, characterless subjects. In contrast, his Bowery bums series and other images from the '30s have a life of their own—or the hint of one.

From the prints, one moves into "Soyer Since 1960," an exhibition of 17 paintings in a larger format than is usually associated with Soyer's earlier art. Only *Model Resting* and *Self-Portrait* are executed in the more intimate scale. The large canvases of *Columbus Avenue*, *Avenue of the Americas* and other city streets, along with two for-

mal group portraits, dominate. Unfortunately, despite the active stances and painterly devices that mark the street scenes—bright clothes, placards and posters in the background—the overall effect is strangely friezelike, almost lifeless. Soyer's ghostly presence, in the form of a self-portrait in suit, hat and eye-masking glasses, only adds to the eerie quality. Although there are a few striking faces, most of the people in the crowd are not individuated. *Quo Vadis*, a simpler 1980 painting with Soyer in the foreground and figures moving diagonally away from him, presents quite a different crowd. Its introversion, expressed by the title, shows on the faces of the assorted ages and sexes in the group, making the metaphorical connections between exterior and interior journeys clear.

Two formal group portraits present the biggest problem. In the first, *Homage to Thomas Eakins*, Soyer places fellow realist artists and admirers of Eakins around a table with three Eakins paintings visible on the wall behind. Among those in the group are Edward Hopper, John Dobbs and Soyer himself. Although this is the largest work in the show, the arrangement of the figures results in a cramped, claustrophobic interior. Something in the green background and the academic group make one long for Eakins' vitality as antidote. Painted ten years later, in 1974, *Portraits at a Party* suffers from the same sense of setup. Two-thirds of the picture consists of a flowing group of artists, including Alex Katz, John Dobbs, Benny Andrews, Donna Dennis and Philip Pearlstein, who anchors the center of the picture. Fading in the background, under a pressed-tin loft ceiling that seems to actually slant in on them, stand the three Soyer brothers, short, elderly, in subdued gray suits. They are nearly lost in the vibrancy of the other crowd. Yet an amused self-perception is at work here to redeem the poignancy of their isolation. It isn't just art-world styles and generations represented here but the larger issue of age ceding to youth, yet holding its own.

The individual portraits are the real strength here. The expressive brushwork of *Mimi Gross Grooms*, with its resonating greens and purples, and the classic elegance of *Young Woman at the Mirror*, where a model adjusting her skirt becomes an archetypal image of woman confronting her reflective "Other," show Soyer to be more solid than ever. His *Portrait of Mervin Jules*, in which the old man sits on a folded chair in a tattered house that looks like time and wind have swept it bare, is a moving evocation of time's passage and the experience of old age. Equally arresting is *Paula Hodius*, whose tired but straightforward gaze challenges the viewer to understand a lifetime of experience. There is a forcefulness to these paintings that derives

COURTESY FORUM GALLERY, N.Y.