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Phyllis Rosenzweig

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Drawings and Prints by Slavic and Slavic-Born Artists in the Collection of the Smithsonian Institution, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

PHYLLIS ROSENZWEIG

Smithsonian Institution, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, District of Columbia, USA

This essay surveys and examines the prints and drawings by Slavic and Slavic-born artists in the collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, most of which were donated to the museum by Joseph H. Hirshhorn and were formerly in his private collection. Many of the artists whose works on paper Hirshhorn acquired were refugees from Jewish communities in Tsarist Russia or immigrated after the Russian Revolution. This essay considers the fact that Hirshhorn himself was an émigré from a Slavic country, having come from Russian-controlled Latvia as a child.

KEYWORDS *Joseph H. Hirshhorn, Latvia, Great Depression, Russian Revolution, modern art, contemporary art, American Contemporary Artists (ACA) Gallery, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Slavic*

When the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden opened to the public in Washington, D.C. in 1974, it was designated as the nation's museum of modern and contemporary art. At its opening its collection consisted entirely of works of art that had been acquired by Joseph H. Hirshhorn and gifted to the Smithsonian Institution in 1966 and 1972. The collection was then known for

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Address correspondence to Phyllis Rosenzweig, Curator Emerita, Smithsonian Institution, Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, 2009 Belmont Rd. NW, Apt. 203 Washington, DC 20009, USA. E-mail: prosenzweig1@earthlink.net

its in-depth holdings of sculpture by world-renowned artists such as Edgar Degas, Auguste Rodin, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, and paintings by American modernists and artists such as Morris Louis and other representatives of the Washington Color School. Early exhibitions of the collection attempted to present it as reflecting, if in a somewhat skewed and quirky manner, a mainstream history of recent Western art. Since then, through its acquisition and exhibition programs, the museum has both broadened and focused its mission and enhanced its status as a world-class institution devoted to the collection and display of significant contemporary art on an international scale.

Because the thousands of works of art that came to the museum with Joseph Hirshhorn's original gifts—and the additional thousands that were added by bequest after his death in 1981—were received on such a massive scale, many objects in the collection, and especially works on paper, have yet to be fully catalogued. Many have not been on public display in the museum's galleries, photographed for the museum's Web site, or published or exhibited elsewhere. At the core of this unpublished and un-exhibited and thus "hidden" collection are a large number of prints and drawings by Slavic and Slavic-born artists that, for the most part, had been acquired by Joseph Hirshhorn in his lifetime. Collections of works on paper by the artists Isac Friedlander (1908–1968), Raphael Soyer (1899–1987), and Abraham Walkowitz (1880–1965) number in the hundreds. Many other Baltic, Slavic, and Slavic-born artists are represented in the collection by works of art on paper as well, if not always in such great numbers. The objects themselves, and letters and documents related to them that are in the museum's curatorial files, constitute a rich source of information about the artists and, since many of them came to the United States either with their families from Tsarist Russia, or after the Revolution, and established their careers in the United States during the Great Depression, provide an intimate view of significant periods in Slavic and American history.

The approximately 300 prints and drawings in the collection by Isac Friedlander, mostly scenes of Russian farm and village life, Depression-era New York City, and religious subjects, hint at a particularly interesting and personal story. Friedlander is not generally well-known today, and very little primary documentation on him exists in the museum's curatorial files. However, according to secondary sources in the files, he was well-regarded in his lifetime as a print-maker, received many printmaking awards, and is represented in the collections of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Library of Congress, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., the Brooklyn Museum, and the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York. Additionally, the artist's widow and daughter donated a large collection of Friedlander's papers and prints to the Special Collections of the Lauinger Library, Georgetown University, in Washington, D.C., and his widow later donated 120 works to the Neuberger Museum of Art at Purchase College, State University of New York.

Friedlander was born in Latvia in 1908. Friedlander was also Joseph Hirshhorn's cousin, and Hirshhorn assisted or urged his emigration to New

York some time in the early 1930s. In correspondence between the artist, the artist's widow, and Joseph and Olga Hirshhorn in the museum's curatorial files, he is affectionately and familiarly referred to as "Itzik."¹

According to one of the letters from Friedlander's widow in the museum's files, Hirshhorn visited his cousin in Latvia in 1928, and brought back many of Friedlander's prints from that trip.² About half a dozen paintings and works on paper by Friedlander are listed in a 1945 Hirshhorn insurance inventory, but no formal invoices for any works by him have so far been found. Since works by Friedlander in the collection date through the 1960s, it is possible to surmise that Hirshhorn continued to acquire his cousin's work, either by purchase or gift, throughout his life. Most of the work by Friedlander in the museum's collection, however, was not part of Hirshhorn's original gift to the Smithsonian, but was acquired later, by bequest, after Hirshhorn's death.

Further research is needed in order to document Friedlander's life, his relationship with Hirshhorn, and to learn more about how or if they may have influenced each other's thinking about art. Friedlander's arrival in New York coincided with Hirshhorn's desire to become a collector of work by contemporary living artists, and that the cousins socialized and continued to look at art together is evident. In a letter from Hirshhorn to Herman Baron, director of the ACA Gallery, September 11, 1943, which also includes his thoughtful observations on the work of several artists, Hirshhorn wrote:

I saw my cousin last night. He had dinner with me. We both discussed how beautiful the gallery looks and how friendly and warm it is. I have the feeling just as you that the gallery cannot help but be successful, because of you and Ella [Baron's wife] and what you both stand for.³

Although it is difficult to determine to what degree the personal relationship between Hirshhorn and his cousin may have affected Hirshhorn's acquisition of so much of his work, Friedlander's prints and drawings fall within the scope and are typical of the kind of work that Hirshhorn began investing in as a collector in the late 1920s and 1930s, and that he continued to collect into the 1940s and 1950s.

Many of the works Hirshhorn acquired early in his collecting career were through the ACA Gallery, which he began to frequent soon after Baron—who was also Slavic in origin, born in Lithuania in 1892—opened it in downtown Manhattan in 1932. Hirshhorn also began to meet many artists there. In his gallery Baron promoted what he referred to as "Social Art,"⁴ and showed the work of many politically active, leftist-oriented artists who espoused themes of social justice in their work. The gallery's initials, ACA, stood for American Contemporary Artists. Not all, but many, of these contemporary "American" artists to whom Hirshhorn was attracted were of Slavic origin. Among the Slavic-born artists Hirshhorn got to know through the ACA Gallery were David Burliuk (1882–1967), Moses (1899–1974) and Raphael Soyer, Abraham Walkowitz, and

Max Weber (1881–1961), and, through these artists, others in their circle such as Arshile Gorky (1904–1948), a refugee from what was then Turkish Armenia.

Gorky was born Vosdanik Manuk Adoian, in Khorkom, Armenia, came to the United States and lived with relatives in Massachusetts in 1920, and went to New York in 1925. There, perhaps laying claim to what he perceived to be the more prestigious cultural heritage of the artists he knew, he changed his name and pretended to be related to the Russian writer Maxim Gorky (whose name is also a pseudonym). Hirshhorn was an early collector of Gorky's paintings, but four drawings by him in the collection were not purchased until the 1960s, and date from the 1940s when Gorky had already broken with this group of immigrant artists and had begun to establish a reputation for his lyrical, somewhat Surrealist-inspired, abstract paintings.

The fact that Hirshhorn himself was an immigrant from a Slavic country—Latvia was under Tsarist rule at the time—adds a human dimension and focus to the story of his collecting activity. Although a truly scholarly biography of him has yet to be published, the broad outlines of Hirshhorn's life may be found in several publications, including one full-length book, several journal articles, and an interview in the *Archives of American Art*.⁵ Born in Jukst, a town southwest of Riga, Latvia, in 1900, he was brought to the United States as a child in 1907, was raised in relative poverty in Brooklyn, along with his nine siblings, by his widowed mother. He began working on Wall Street as a teen-ager, did well in the stock market even through the Great Depression and went on to make a fortune in mining interests in Canada. As he acquired greater wealth he also acquired, as many do, the desire to accumulate those complex symbols of human expression and higher values as well as of status and taste; that is, works of art.

Hirshhorn often related to interviewers that, as a child, he saved the illustrations from wall calendars in his family's Brooklyn apartment. By the late 1920s Hirshhorn had begun to purchase rare books and manuscripts, and conventional, academic, sometimes sentimental pictures, most of which he later sold. In the 1930s, about the time he brought his cousin Isac to the United States, in the midst of the Depression, and while he was also cultivating an interest in French artists such as Matisse, Picasso, and Rouault, Hirshhorn began buying the work of his contemporaries, living artists, working in New York City.

Records of many of Hirshhorn's early purchases are lacking but, in a 1959 recollection of his gallery, Baron recalled Hirshhorn's early patronage. He wrote: "The ACA opened in August 16, 1932 ... the year the art market shrank to insignificant proportions. The proverbial artist starving in a garret became a horrifying reality. . . I remember a rainy day when Joseph H. Hirshhorn came into the gallery. He said [falsely], 'I am an ice and coal peddler, but I like that painting. How much is it?' He has now become a legendary figure in the art world [known for] [h]is visits to galleries and his rapid-fire decisions on what to acquire. . . [h]is catholic tastes, his munificence when he hears of artists in distress and his generosity. . ."⁶

Raphael and Moses Soyer are among the artists that Hirshhorn was likely to have met, and supported, through the ACA Gallery in its early days. Like Hirshhorn and his cousin, the Soyers were born in Tsarist Russia, in Borisoglebsk, in 1899. They emigrated with their parents and younger brother Isaac, who also became an artist, first to Philadelphia in 1912, and then to New York, in 1913. One work on paper by Moses Soyer, a lithographic self-portrait, along with two small oils, is in the Hirshhorn Museum collection while his perhaps better known twin brother, Raphael is represented by almost three hundred prints and drawings. Many of these are portraits and figure studies but, like Friedlander, his subjects were also often the poor, the downtrodden, and the everyday.

Although he did not start collecting Raphael Soyer's work seriously until the 1950s, Hirshhorn stated, in a 1973 letter, that he had "known Raphael Soyer since 1938 or 1940" and owned a great many of his paintings.⁷ The earliest invoices for a work by Raphael Soyer in the museum's files are from the Associated American Artists gallery, from 1951, and the ACA Gallery from 1953. But only a few of Soyer's works on paper in the museum's collection, as well as a number of major paintings, are from Hirshhorn's original gift. In 1981 Soyer made a large donation of graphic work to the museum in honor of Hirshhorn who, he said: "bought my paintings early on and has put into the collection of the museum some of my major works. . ."⁸ Although they do not constitute a complete set of the artist's prints, the collection of so much of his graphic work in one place affords an intimate look at Soyer's working practices and, along with his paintings, reflections of a community.⁹

Abraham Walkowitz, another artist associated with the ACA Gallery and who is also represented in the Hirshhorn Museum collection by hundreds of works on paper, was born in Tiumen', Russia. He came to the United States as a child in the 1880s. He later studied art at the Académie Julian in Paris and returned to New York bringing with him a modernist style, producing Cubist-inspired cityscapes, abstractions, and hundreds of drawings and watercolors of the dancer Isadora Duncan (see Figure 1).

According to a 1943 letter from Hirshhorn to Milton Avery (1885-1965), another (American-born) artist in the ACA circle, Walkowitz had seen a work by Avery that Hirshhorn had recently purchased, in Moses Soyer's studio, where Hirshhorn had brought it to be framed.¹⁰ From the letter we get a glimpse of the interconnectedness of this art world community, a hint that Walkowitz was a bit jealous of Avery, and the information that Moses Soyer was framing works of art for Hirshhorn at the time. The first record of a purchase by Hirshhorn of a work by Walkowitz in the museum's files is of an Isadora Duncan watercolor, purchased from the ACA Gallery in 1952. Hirshhorn continued to collect Walkowitz's work consistently through the 1970s, and attempted to convince the Whitney Museum of American Art to organize a retrospective after Walkowitz died.



FIGURE 1 Abraham Walkowitz, *Isadora Duncan*, n.d. Pencil, watercolor, and pen & ink on paper, 17 13/16 × 12 ¼ in. (45.3 × 35.1 cm). Smithsonian Institution, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. Photograph by Lee Stalsworth.

Another artist in the ACA Gallery and Soyer brothers circle, and who was well-known and important in his day, was David Burliuk. Burliuk was regarded as the most established and “worldly” artist of the group, and his studio was often the site of dinners and gatherings of these fellow Russian immigrants and their friends. Burliuk was born in a small town in Ukraine. Unlike the Soyers and Walkowitz who came to the United States as children, Burliuk studied art in Russia, Munich, and Paris, and exhibited with the Blaue Reiter group in Munich and with Kazimir Malevich and other avant-garde Russian artists in Moscow before coming to the United States in 1923. By then he also practiced a faux Russian folk art style in which he depicted peasant and farm scenes. Hirshhorn’s 1945 collection inventory indicates that he owned over thirty watercolors and oil paintings by Burliuk at that time, along with two pencil portraits from the 1940s, one of Burliuk’s wife, Marussia, and the other of Arshile Gorky. These and other acquisitions support Barry Hyams’ account of weekend trips made by Hirshhorn in the 1940s, when he was dividing his time between New York and Toronto, where his mining business was. “[A]fter lunch at the Sherry-Netherlands” he would go, with other collectors, “to galleries, studios, and homes of artists such as Milton Avery, David Burliuk, Philip Evergood, Chaim Gross and the Soyers.”¹¹

Chaim Gross (1904-1991) who was born in Wołów, Poland, and came to the United States in 1921, is represented in the museum's collection by many sketches and watercolors, as well as sculpture. Nicolai Cikovsky (1894-1984), another painter in the ACA circle and a friend of Burliuk's, was born in Russia, had studied art there, and came to the United States in 1923. He is represented in the museum collection by several paintings and four works on paper. Max Weber, who was also associated with ACA gallery, was born in Białystok, Poland, and came to the United States in 1891. He is represented in the collection by many Cubist-inspired paintings, sculptures, and drawings (see Figure 2).

Hirshhorn's collection grew and his collecting interests broadened in the 1950s and 1960s, but he continued to be drawn to artists of Baltic and Slavic descent. His acquisitions included works on paper by Ben Shahn (1898-1969), a painter well-known for his portrayals of social injustice. Shahn, who was born in Kaunas, Lithuania, and came to the United States in 1906, is represented in the museum's collection by a number of images in gouache on paper. There is also the interesting but little-known painter Eugenie Baizerman (1899-1949), who was born Eugenie Silverman in Warsaw, Poland and came to New York in 1913. Although Hirshhorn did not begin to purchase her work until the 1960s (the first record of a purchase by him is from the Oscar Krasner Gallery, in

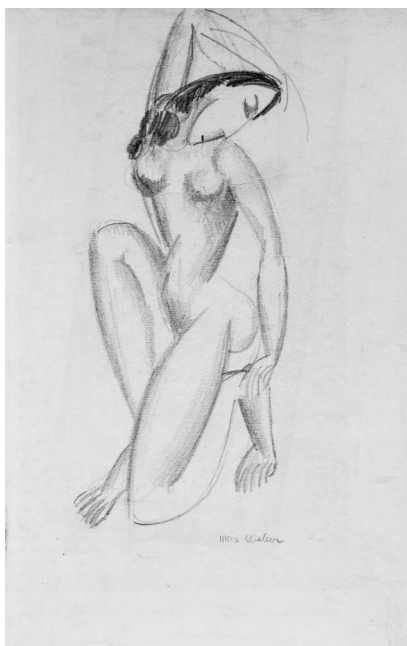


FIGURE 2 Max Weber, *Kneeling Female Nude*, n.d. Pencil on paper mounted to paper, 8 × 5 in. (20.3 × 12.7 cm). Smithsonian Institution, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966. Photograph by Lee Stalsworth.

1961), she is represented in the museum by many works on paper, as well as by oil paintings, in an expressive figurative style.

Works on paper by many other Slavic and Slavic-born artists collected by Hirshhorn contribute to the museum's holdings. Some of the artists are more well-known than others. They represent many different historical periods and diverse movements and styles. The Russian avant-garde artist Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) is represented in the collection by a portfolio of woodcuts (see Figure 3), and two additional prints. Kandinsky was born in Moscow, lived in Germany, returned to Moscow in 1914, then left again for Germany, where he taught at the Bauhaus until it was closed by the Nazis in 1933, when he then went to France. The prints are fine examples of his work from the Bauhaus years.

The artist, designer, photographer, and graphic artist El Lissitzky (1890–1941), an important figure in the development of an art of geometric abstraction was, like Kandinsky, born in Moscow, lived in Germany, and returned to Russia in 1914. Unlike Kandinsky, he remained in Russia. Two lithographs by him in the collection are of figures from a 1921 recreation of the Russian avant-garde opera, *Victory Over the Sun*. Naum Gabo (1890–1977) who, along with his older brother, Antoine Pevsner (1886–1962), was an abstract Constructivist sculptor whose work emphasized the exploration of space rather than mass. Born in Briansk, Russia, he studied in Munich, where

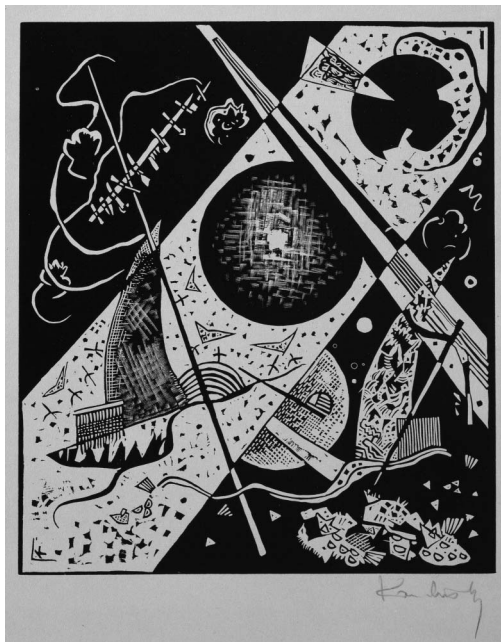


FIGURE 3 Wassily Kandinsky, *Small Worlds #6*, 1922. Woodcut on paper, 14 × 10 in. (37.5 x 27.4 cm). Smithsonian Institution, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1974. Photograph by Lee Stalworth.

he met Kandinsky. He returned to Russia in 1917, then also returned to Germany and taught at the Bauhaus until the Nazis came to power. In 1936 he relocated to England and then came to the United States in 1946. Both brothers are represented in the museum's collection by sculpture, but only Gabo is also represented by a work on paper: one monoprint woodcut.

Eugene Berman (1899–1972) and Pavel Tchelitchew (1898–1957), two Russian-born artists working in a figurative, romantic, Surrealist vein, are amply represented in the collection by works on paper. Berman was born in Saint Petersburg, left Russia during the Revolution, lived in Paris where he became part of a group of Neo-Romantic, semi-Surrealist painters that also included his countryman, Pavel Tchelitchew, and came to the United States in the late 1930s. Berman is represented in the museum's collection by drawings from the 1940s and 1960s, some of which Hirshhorn purchased directly from him. Tchelitchew, who was born near Moscow in the village of Kalugo, also fled the Revolution and lived in Berlin and Paris before coming to New York in 1934. He is represented by several paintings and ten works on paper, some of which are related to his famous painting *Hide and Seek*, 1940–42 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York). Hirshhorn purchased work directly from Tchelitchew as well.

Some of the works on paper by Slavic and Slavic-born artists in the museum's collection that Hirshhorn acquired in the 1960s are directly related to his interest in modern sculpture. For example, Ossip Zadkine (1890–1967), who was born in Smolensk, Russia, but later lived in France, is represented in the collection by sculpture and several cubist-inspired works on paper from the 1920s. Theodore Roszak (1907–1981), was born in Poznań, Poland, came to the United States when he was young, lived in Chicago, and then came to New York in the 1930s. His early work was influenced by Constructivism, but later became more expressionistic. He is represented in the collection by several sculptures from the 1940s, and several drawings related to them (one of which was purchased by the museum in 1977). Louise Nevelson (1900–1988) was born Louise Berliawsky, in Kiev, and was brought to the United States in 1905. She grew up in Maine but came to New York in 1932, where she studied sculpture with, among others, Theodore Roszak. She became well-known in the 1950s for her sculptural constructions of black wooden boxes. She is represented in the collection by many sculptures, as well as by several series of collages and prints from the early 1970s. Ilya Bolotowsky (1907–1981) was born in Petrograd, Russia and came to the United States in 1923. A major practitioner of geometric abstraction in two and three dimensions, he is represented in the collection by drawings, paintings, and sculpture from the 1960s and 1970s.

Some less well-known Baltic- and Slavic-born artists from whom Hirshhorn acquired works on paper that are now in the museum's collection include: Arbit Blatas (1908–1999), a sculptor and painter who was born in Kaunas, and came to the United States in 1940, is represented by one drawing; Joseph Solman (1909–2008), who was born in Vitsebsk, Russia (now in Belarus) and came to the United States in 1912, is represented by several

works in tempera on paper; Raymond Breinen (1910–2000), also born in Vitsebsk, and fled with his family to the United States in 1922, is represented by a gouache from the 1930s in a Surrealist style; and Yosef Foshko (1891/2–1971), who was born in Odesa, Ukraine and was in the United States by the 1930s, is represented by two watercolors: *East Side Market*, and *Elderly Gentleman*, both ca. 1945, in a social realist manner. The abstract artist Adja Yunkers (1900–1983), who was born in Riga, is represented in the collection by two pastels from the 1950s, and there are fourteen works on paper from the 1960s by Victor Vasarely (1908–1997), born in Pécs, Hungary, who is well-known for his boldly colored, intricate, geometrically patterned work.

The extent and range of works on paper by Baltic, Slavic and Slavic-born artists “hidden” within the Hirshhorn Museum’s collection is, thus, surprisingly large, and the collection offers many opportunities for research. Biographical information on some of the artists is incomplete or contradictory. No doubt more Slavic-born artists represented by works on paper can be found than are mentioned here. Many other artists of Slavic origin are represented in the museum’s collection, but not by works on paper, and so have been omitted from this essay. Altogether, the collection provides a rich resource for the study of Slavic artists working at different periods and under varied social conditions. Further information about artists and their works in the museum’s collection may be found by going to the museum’s Web site, <http://hirshhorn.si.edu/info/>, and clicking on Search Art Collection.

NOTES

1. Secondary sources in the museum’s curatorial files on Friedlander include: Kathe Beals, “Friedlander Art on View at SUNY,” *Westchester Weekend*, December 27, 1927, 3; and JoAnn Lewis, [review of an exhibition of Friedlander’s prints at the Bethesda Art Center], *Washington Post*, March 7, 1981 (the title and the page number of the review are missing). See also: Barry Hyams, *Hirshhorn: Medici From Brooklyn* (New York: Dutton, 1979). Primary sources referred to here, and throughout this essay, are from the museum’s files unless otherwise indicated. Much information in these sources is undocumented and sometimes contradictory. For instance, JoAnn Lewis gives Friedlander’s arrival date as 1930, while Hyams (p. 104) gives it as 1932. Hyams (p. 30) records that Hirshhorn lived with his mother’s brother, Peretz Friedlander and his wife Zette in 1906 before joining his mother in New York, but it is not clear if these are Isaac’s parents.

2. According to Hyams (p. 47), Hirshhorn made a trip to Latvia with his mother and his then wife in 1927. It is not clear if Hirshhorn made two trips or if there is some confusion about the dates of one of them.

3. Joseph H. Hirshhorn to Herman Baron, September 11, 1943, ACA Galleries records, 1917–1963, Archives of American Art, Roll D304, Frame 486. The gallery opened on West 8th Street, but had moved to 63 East 57th Street by the time this letter was written.

4. Herman Baron, [unpublished manuscript], ACA Galleries records, Frame 591.

5. Barry Hyams, *Hirshhorn: Medici From Brooklyn: A Biography* (New York: Dutton, 1979); Jay Jacobs, “Collector: Joseph H. Hirshhorn,” *Art in America* 57 (July–August 1969): 56–71; reprinted as “Quality as Well as Quantity: Joseph Hirshhorn,” in Jean Lipman, ed. *The Collector in America* (New York: Viking, 1971), 74–88; Abram Lerner, “Introduction,” *Selected Paintings and Sculpture from the Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden* (New York: Abrams, 1974), 11–24; Aline B. Saarinen, “Joseph Hirshhorn,” in *The Proud Possessors: The Lives, Times and Tastes of some Adventurous American Art Collectors* (New York: Random House, 1958), 269–286; and Joseph H. Hirshhorn, Interview by Paul Cummings, New York, December 16, 1976, Archives of American Art, transcript in Hirshhorn Museum files.

6. Herman Baron, "The ACA Gallery: Impressions and Recollections," *31 American Contemporary Artists: [Exhibition Catalog]* (New York: ACA Gallery, 1959); copy in ACA Galleries records, Archives of American Art, Frames 984, 986–7.
7. Raphael Soyer curatorial files, Hirshhorn Museum.
8. Raphael Soyer files, Hirshhorn Museum.
9. Soyer's prints include many portraits of his family, friends and other artists, including Arshile Gorky. There are also oil portraits of fellow immigrant artists David Burliuk and Abraham Walkowitz.
10. Abraham Walkowitz curatorial files, Hirshhorn Museum.
11. Hyams, *Medici From Brooklyn*, 113.