



## Introduction

Fabio Fantuzzi

In some rare cases, scholars happen to come across remarkable figures who eluded the attention of critics and escaped the watchful eye of academia. More often than not, they are artists who have failed to find their place in the dynamics of the contemporary art world and have not fit in its trends, usually due to a lack of ability to promote their art or a shortage of connections and collaborations. Norman Raeben is one of them, and this is the first catalogue of his works. His case may seem even more singular and perhaps somewhat paradoxical than that of others who shared the same doom of being reassessed posthumously. While the shortage of advertisements about his teaching activity and limited number of exhibitions attest to his poor promoting abilities, his connections with and influence on prominent artists are long known. This is true to such an extent that his name is mentioned in dozens of books, essays, articles, and blogs—especially in connection to his father, the famous Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem—as well as his influence on Bob Dylan, who attended his studio in the spring of 1974. Some enthusiastic statements shared by Dylan in various interviews, particularly in the late 1970s, created an air of interest and mystery around Norman Raeben. A decade after the artist's death, a short article by Bert Cartwright titled *The Mysterious Norman Raeben*<sup>1</sup> further contributed to the rise in interest in the world of Dylan studies, turning this mystery into an over thirty-year-long debate on the nature of his art and relevance of his influence. Despite this curiosity, up until recently, due to the almost complete unavailability of Raeben's materials, writings and works of art, as well as details about his career, the information offered in the literature on the subject was scarce and defective.

In more recent years, two milestone studies on Dylan, *La voce di Bob Dylan. Un racconto dell'America* (2001) by Alessandro Carrera<sup>2</sup> and *Bob Dylan in America* (2010) by Sean Wilentz<sup>3</sup>, provided some crucial information on

Raeben, which was further enriched by student Carolyn Schlam in the book *The Creative Path* (2018).<sup>4</sup> Inspired by these contributions, the curator carried out a doctoral project on Raeben and Dylan, whose initial results were first presented at the international conference “Bob Dylan and the Arts. Masked and Anonymous: The Many Facets of the Art of Bob Dylan,” organized by Università degli Studi Roma Tre in 2018, and later included in the doctoral thesis *“All the Way from New Orleans to New Jerusalem”: Norman Raeben e Bob Dylan (2020)*<sup>5</sup> and the section *Art* of the book *Bob Dylan and the Arts: Songs, Film, Painting, and Sculpture in Dylan's Universe (2020)*.<sup>6</sup> These studies revealed a sophisticated artist and an erudite, influential teacher whose long career spanned across some of the most influential 20th-century American and European artistic movements and cultural milieus. However, still limited information was available on his painting career and collaborations, particularly about his works of art, which were all privately owned and had, for the most part, yet to be retraced, edited, and published. Filling in this lack of materials and studies on his impact on the New York art scene were two main objectives of the EU-funded Marie Skłodowska-Curie project POYESIS. The project analyzed Raeben's career and his artistic collaborations as a case study to deepen the knowledge of the evolution of Ukrainian Yiddish-derived culture and art in New York in the 20th century. Mostly conducted in the United States at the Columbia University's Department of Germanic Languages, the fieldwork entailed researching several archives, including the Smithsonian Libraries, The Carnegie Hall Susan W. Rose Archives, the YIVO, the Art Students League, the Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library, the Stanford Libraries, and the Bob Dylan Center. The most substantial part of the research, however, consisted in examining private collections belonging to the artist's students, collaborators, and relatives. The study of these

archives uncovered a wide range of information about his life, career, and collaborations; it also unearthed a corpus of unpublished materials, including letters and documents, videos and audios of his lessons, various lectures, excerpts of an unfinished book on art history, and an extensive collection of his paintings. This catalogue enriches our knowledge of Raeben's art by presenting a variety of essays based on these never-before-studied materials and by offering biographical notes and a compendium of his works for the first time. It brings together contributions from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, reflecting the distinctly transatlantic approach that characterized Raeben's art.

Born in Kyiv in 1901, Raeben was educated in various parts of Europe before emigrating to the United States in 1914. There, he joined the flourishing Jewish artistic milieu of New York City and studied with exponents of the American realist movement of the Ashcan School, being influenced especially by Robert Henri, John Sloan, George Luks, and Max Weber. These first collaborations led to a full-time painting career in the 1920s and 1930s, marked by long journeys in North Africa and Europe, where he refined his style, complementing his early realist approach with influences derived from the European tradition and especially the School of Paris. While the artistic languages of the Old Continent had a major impact on his art, New York always exerted a unique attraction. In a 1931 interview, he spoke of his dream of having a studio with large windows on the 100th floor of a New York skyscraper to paint a few more inches of the view of downtown New York every day, capturing the turbulent pace of its life. The chaotic vitality and incessant movement of the city, with its chromatic and formal characteristics, are the ciphers of his major cityscape cycles, which often represent the city's most emblematic places, such as Times Square, Central Park, Broadway, automats, old subway entrances or buildings with a towering and iconic form such as the Flatiron Building. The theme of travel and this deep fascination for modern metropolises are among the trademarks of the work of an artist of both the old and new worlds.

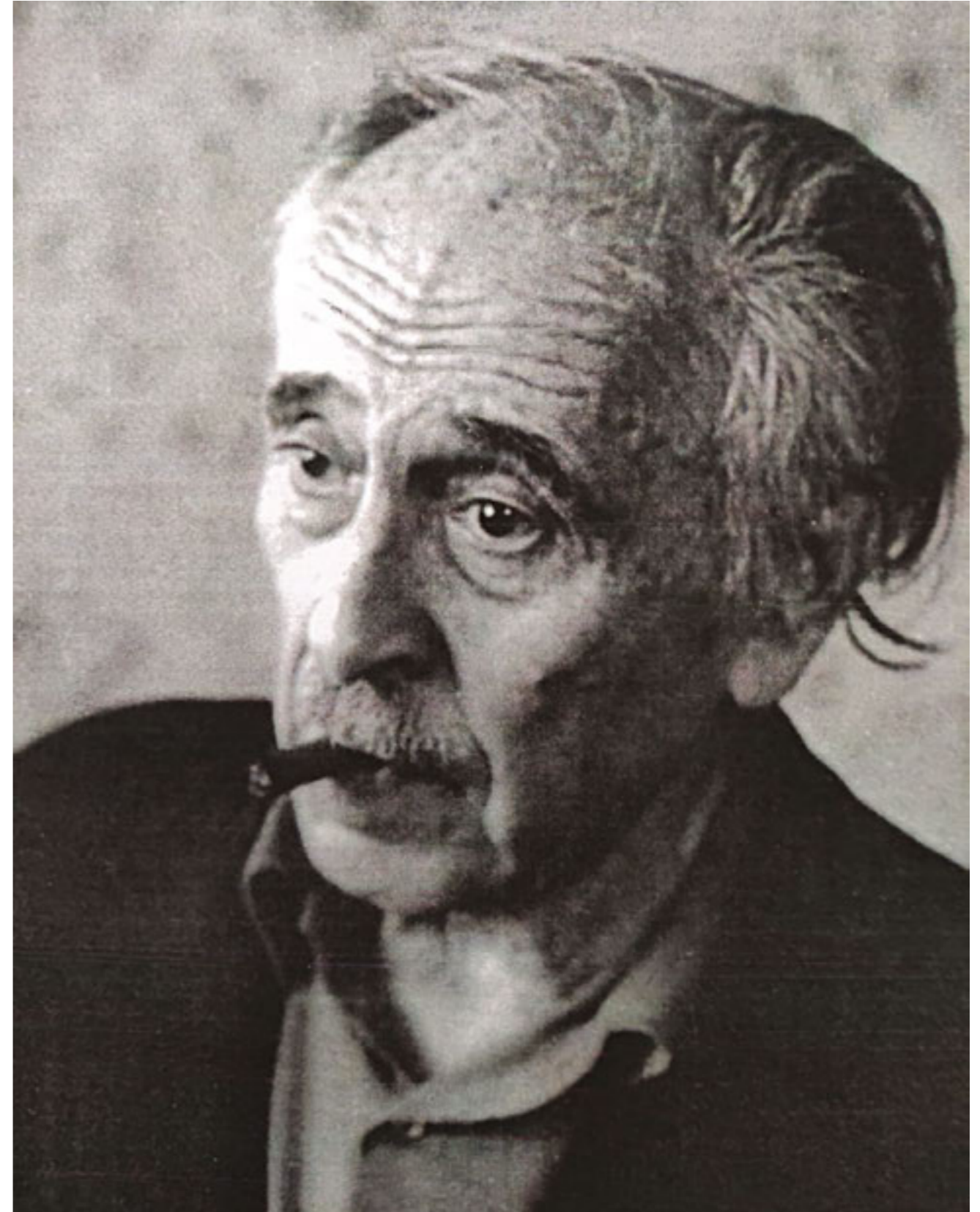
It is, in fact, the relationship between these two foci of Raeben's—travel and metropolis—that illuminates more than anything else his artistic evolution and the relevance of his contribution to the art world. His early paintings attest to roots in American realism and, in particular, show the influence of John Sloan, George Bellows, and Robert Henri's city scenes. Raeben inherited from them the interest in the chaotic vitality of metropolises and

what Rebecca Zurrier defined as the "mobile observer" approach of the ashcanners:<sup>7</sup> he captured city scenes and landscapes working *en plain air* and on the move, trying to grasp the fleeting quality of the scenes almost as if his paintings were glimpses or 'shots'. In the works he made in the 1930s after his Parisian periods, he retained this wandering attitude, but he combined it with the languages of the Paris School, achieving highly autonomous results. This commingling of languages, themes, and approaches of the Old and New Continents is the highest point of his creative research and his most important and unique contribution: in these works, he reached the apex of his poetics, finding a synthesis between fidelity to the visual context on the one hand and autonomy of sign and color on the other.

Raeben's artistic journey culminated in his role as a prominent art teacher and lecturer after World War II. In 1946, he opened a studio at Carnegie Hall, fulfilling his dreams of having a studio in Midtown, New York. On the 11th floor of Carnegie Hall Tower, surrounded by hundreds of studios of artists, actors, musicians, and singers, he devoted himself primarily to teaching in a cultural environment teeming with creativity until the day he died on December 12, 1978, while keeping alive his relationship with the Old Continent painting tradition through several more visits to France and Israel.

The first retrospective exhibition of his works, titled "Norman Raeben (1901-1978): The Wandering Painting" (Jewish Museum in Venice, November 24, 2024 – January 14, 2025), narrates his career and relationships intertwining the themes of travel and the dialogue between cultures and artistic traditions. Raeben himself evoked this entwinement with his artistic choices: rhythm, colors and style, in fact, emphasize how most of his works were made 'on the road'. Moreover, starting from the mid-1930s, Raeben stopped giving titles to cityscapes and intentionally did not provide indications, dates, or progressive numbering, forcing the viewer into a journey, both real and ideal, among and within the works in a circular path with no beginning and no end.

The journey thus becomes the very substance of the artistic process as both subject and method. Such transposition of a wandering approach, rooted within traditional Jewish and American culture, into painting foreshadowed the incoming cultural zeitgeist that shortly thereafter would mark the essence of 1950s and 1960s Americanism. This exhibition embraces this ideal by taking visitors through the places that defined



Norman Raeben's career: from Kyiv to both New York and Paris, the two main poles of attraction in his career. Each of these metropolises and the cities he traveled through on his long, artistic path left a unique mark on his development: an impact of different cultures and traditions manifest in both his works and teachings, as well as in the network of intellectuals that he influenced with his ideas and innovative style.

The catalogue, in turn, offers itineraries through places and stages of Raeben's creative and theoretical evolution, traversing some of the most significant artistic scenes of the twentieth century. Andrea Pappas places Raeben's artistic experience within the context of American art. She takes the reader into the New York art environment between the two great wars, delving into his relationships with the Ashcan School of Painting movement, the galleries and art market of that time, and the circles of New York's Yiddish culture. Pappas explains, however, that Raeben's work cannot be outlined drawing only from his time in America. His style and career place him in the groove of the burgeoning trans-Atlantic exchange that characterized that period, which Raeben embraced and interpreted fusing "modern subject matter, particularly depictions of the city, with the freedom of color and atmosphere drawn from the Impressionists and Postimpressionists." "His drawings," Pappas further explains, are notable "for their high-key color, a legacy of turn-of-the-century modern art in general and the Fauve group around Henri Matisse in particular." Rich in musicality and colors, his semi-abstract pastels convey a profound sense of spontaneity that pervades his works on paper, capturing fleeting street views that "seem to thrum with city sounds." Therefore, these trademarks place his work in the context of what Pappas defines as mid-garde Modernism. Along with other artists of this movement, Raeben sought a third way to merge tradition and modernity: an exploration that aims to carry forward the discipline and innovate its means of expression, at the same time attentive to render its content understandable. Or, to borrow a term dear to Raeben, to make it perceptible to every spectator and not only to the circles of the cultural elites.

However, the story that Pappas retraced based on unpublished materials and ground research portrays the image of a painter detached from the commercial circles, political involvement, and mainstream culture of his time. Such a condition of otherness is reflected into his works, which "put the viewer at a substantial distance from the

scene. The small size of the pedestrians strung across the foreground further separates them from the viewer, situating us as an observer, rather than participant, in the scene." Like their creator, these are wandering figures that traverse modernity with the distant eyes of the other. As Pappas states, "For all their energy and color, his works convey social detachment: figures are not identifiable beyond their gender, and they register as a crowd, not as a series of individuals. They remain part of the overall image, rather than the city becoming a backdrop for the figures."

Stefania Portinari takes the reader to Paris, unfolding the influences that helped Raeben develop his mature style. It is a journey through the streets of Montmartre, where the artist found in the Jewish avant-garde circles a "safe point of reference, a supportive and welcoming group that already knew of his father's reputation." We learn about his direct contacts with artists of the caliber of Chaïm Soutine, Jules Pascin, and Marc Chagall, who, years later, asked Raeben's sister, Marie Waife-Goldberg, to serve as a liaison for contacts with American galleries and magazines on Chagall's behalf, highlighting the relevance of their common Yiddish cultural background. His mid-1920s Parisian period allowed him to see firsthand an "established canon of art" and to feel tangibly the artistic legacy of impressionists, post-impressionists, and modernists like Camille Pissarro, Cézanne, Maurice Utrillo, Matisse, and Soutine, whose lessons, according to Portinari, Raeben filtered through the knowledge of the ashcanners' teachings, particularly of Robert Henri. It was, however, his second stay in the early 1930s that shaped Raeben's more mature artistic language. This artistic turning point found expression in rapid and light handling offered by the media of pastels and sandpaper, which lend themselves well to an itinerant approach and a swift, musical style. His wandering through the streets of Paris then was, more than anything else, an opportunity for artistic renewal, a desire to detach himself from the highly traditional styles of his first mentors, resulting, as Portinari explains, in "a visual update with 'pleasant' tones, which can be seen in various cityscapes" teeming with Parisian "typical places of socializing and entertainment, people in cafés, fashionable passersby, in acidic and pastel colors, yet drawn in a seismographic and symphonic style, rendered with barely sketched strokes like visual notes, though rich in irony and festivity." Raeben learned to master "a type of post-Expressionism with a quick, graceful touch that leaned

towards Expressionism," revealing a fascination for the Fauves and Matisse's liberating explorations, vibrant and unnatural use of color, and apparent carefreeness, and for the works of artists like Maurice Utrillo or Marcel Dufy for the "whispers of small human silhouettes" in his cityscapes. Based on these trademarks and his artistic connections, one would be tempted to situate his works in the framework of the École de Paris, particularly with soft tonalism. However, as Portinari observes, Raeben was not a part of this group and did not feature in their collective exhibitions. Like Pappas's analysis, this essay presents Norman Raeben as an outsider. His works also seem to transcend these classifications because "if the artist can be interpreted in a post-Impressionist sensitivity [...], he has also moved beyond it, into a kind of 'delicate' expressionism" that views the work of art as an expression of a sensation experienced. Like the silhouetted figures of his cityscapes, his art embodied the paradigm of otherness and wandering because "in a world where technique was disintegrating," Raeben was "in search of capturing modernity."

Nico Stringa's essay analyzes how Raeben merged the influences he gathered on the two sides of the ocean. Stringa journeys through the stages of the artist's pictorial evolution, creating an itinerary within the paintings. His path *per exempla* takes the lead from *Venice* (1920s), a post-impressionist landscape that places Raeben "at the level of many distinguished painters of the late 1800s, from Walter Sickert to Maurice B. Prendergast—not to mention those American painters who had helped shape him." We come to learn that Raeben began to abandon 'touch' painting after his first Parisian period, looking for a more modern approach in landscapes and depictions of Provincetown, Maine, and Long Island. According to Stringa, the turning point was his understanding of Paul Cézanne's role, whose research allowed him to distance himself from fully figurative representation. Stringa then moves to Raeben's time in Paris and New York, walking the reader through "the 'cinema' of urban life, the ribbon of houses that seem to move in their vivid colors and almost transparent structures" and the "roads filled with people in motion, rich in local color, and buildings overlapping and captured in quick succession, observed by an amused and unprejudiced eye." With his fleeting, almost cinematic, attention to the two metropolises, "Raeben manages to replace the picturesque with an anti-picturesque, which, in turn, has an extremely pictorial character" that unfolded through "the use of

pastels, which allowed the artist to 'speak' a slang understandable to everyone, to 'play' a lively and universally appreciable jazz."

A profound reflection on identity and displacement also emerges from this analysis. Stringa portrays the artist as a figure of otherness, "an American in Paris, European in New York," noticing that "the role of human figures is entirely secondary—not only from a quantitative standpoint but, more importantly, from the perspective of their compositional value." He warns us, however, that this movement "should not be interpreted in a modernist tone but, rather, as a highly original and profound reinterpretation of the relationship between Cézanne and Cubism." Starting from the Cubist and abstract revolutions, which he observed from a distance, Raeben "identified a third path" developing a specific pictorial language of his own: an "unexpected metropolitan magical realism."

The following essay proves that even Raeben's portraits tell a story of wandering that offers insights into New York's artistic circles, often tied to the Eastern Europe Yiddish diaspora. A story that starts in what is now Ukraine and ends in New York, whose beginning part is recounted by Sholem Aleichem in his last unfinished novel, *Mottl. The Adventure of the Cantor's Son*.<sup>8</sup> To create the character, Sholem Aleichem took inspiration from his youngest son, Norman Raeben, and his own emigration experience from Kyiv to New York. However, afflicted by tuberculosis, he could not finish the second part of the novel, leaving a blank page for his son to complete the story of a character so much like himself.

Raeben's portraits complete this final, unfinished page and bring the viewer into the lesser-known New York cultural milieus. Thanks to the connections made by his father, Raeben grew immersed in literary and theatrical circles, perhaps even more so than the artistic ones, as the relevance and nature of his collaborations and the breadth and richness of his lessons attest. Far from being limited to art history and painting, his lectures and ideas were wide-ranging and encompassed various disciplines, putting philosophy, music, literature, theater, Jewish culture, and visual arts in dialogue. He used to tell his students he learned how to paint like realists and impressionists by reading Chekhov and Proust. It is unsurprising, then, that this unique, multidisciplinary approach to art had a substantial impact on several prominent artists who had notable careers in other fields. Among his portraits, there are exponents of the Yiddish Theater, like



Luba Harrington and Miriam Kressyn, Broadway artists and opera singers such as Alexandra Danilova, Dorothy Bird, and Seymour Osborne, who mentored Broadway stars like George Rose, William Daniels, Fred Gwynne, John Cullum and many others. The list of his students also comprises notable musicians such as Bob Haggart, Jimmy Randal, and Steve Postels, among others, as well as many famous actresses. Raeben also taught and painted various members of the Adler family, including Mary, Pearl Pearson, Diana, Allen, and the more famous Stella, who, as part of the famous Group Theater, introduced the Stanislavski method in the United States, revolutionizing the history of contemporary American theater. Most of these intellectuals have a common Eastern European Yiddish cultural heritage, which Bob Dylan, the last of his famous students, also shared.

The essay's path comes to an end, unveiling how the songwriter translated Raeben's ideas on time and human subjects' representation. In his mid-1970s albums, Dylan sought to break down narrative temporality and linearity through the experimental use of personal pronouns, portraying his characters like the evanescent human figures of Raeben's cityscapes. Doomed to a ceaseless existential journey with no beginning and no end, the protagonists of the narrative songs on these albums are also depicted as fleeting presences rapidly sketched as pure vibrations, as voices in constantly open and evolving works of art.

This exploration concludes by bringing the reader into the artist's studio with two essays. Firstly, New York artist Roz Jacobs, a pupil of Raeben, recreates the atmosphere of the atelier and shares a vivid and personal picture of the teacher. Reading these pages feels like seeing him paint as he dissects philosophy and literature while dropping quotations from Tolstoy, Braque, Freud, or Einstein. We see an artist at work who can create bridges and links between distant universes and make them communicate with each other on a page that becomes a lively cosmos. His was a school of life, not just painting, a philosophical school whose mentor's first and primary aim was teaching his pupils to see in the most profound meaning of the term: to "visualize and make tangible with all of your senses what is before you—unwrapping the symbol to experience what is." In Raeben's words, "The eye touches as it looks." Reading these pages, one may think about Bob Dylan's memories of the artist, who, he said, "taught me how to see. He put my mind and my hand and my eye

together in a way that allowed me to do consciously what I unconsciously felt."

This portrait shows that the teacher and artist were two faces of the same coin. Uninterested in the commercial aspects of art, Raeben taught a semi-abstract language that aimed to discover the world on the canvas like his major works, which he never wanted to show his students. Jacobs recounts that he "spoke of a kind of hide and seek between the material and the immaterial, between the real and the spiritual to achieve a complete or aesthetic experience." A lesson that students would learn from him daily: "As his student, I learned how to "enter" the page as if it were infinite in space and time. I didn't feel like I was drawing on top of a piece of paper. Instead, I had the sense that the paper was space and while I was drawing, the subject would arrive out of that space. It was not paper. It was a universe that was alive—and full of darkness and light, wonder and possibilities."

Secondly, Antonella Martinato points a magnifying glass to the artist's techniques and media. Her detailed overview accounts for the conservation needs of these itinerant paintings and the challenges required to restore these works so that they can fully tell their wandering stories and continue to do so in the future. In doing so, the restorer also offers fascinating insights into the painter's style and painting choices. Her analysis of the sandpaper chosen by the artist initially from rolls of paper sold for sharpening knives is most eye-opening. Raeben found the ideal medium for his pastels in this coarse-grained, densely textured sandpaper, which he cut hastily, obtaining a shape similar to that of ancient parchment. Easily transportable, such a medium with its rough surface allowed him to capture the fleeting quality of modern life in a vivid and richly colorful way.

The last section, *Paintings and Drawings*, also takes the form of a journey. The progression, as much as possible, chronicles the stages of Raeben's artistic evolution, grouping the works by technique and subject in order to offer a complete chronological overview of the many directions of his painting.

The last section, *Studio Works*, which are creations of a different nature, deserves notable mention. They are mostly demonstration works Raeben painted in his studio to performatively exemplify the day's lesson to his students, usually in just a few minutes. The section is particularly revealing because it opens a window into the artist's creative process, offering glimpses into his teachings and allowing a deeper understanding of the artist's

stylistic choices and pictorial theories. An ingenious and rhapsodic teacher, Raeben constantly invented new exercises and strategies to force his students to focus on sensory perception of the subject and cast aside the mind's rationalizing will. One of them was the "head study," which Raeben would have his students paint with only a few colors, often just black and white, from under-exposed and upside-down images, thus forcing them to capture the movements of light and shadow instead of trying to draw the subject. Another fascinating aspect is what the artist used to call "the abstract," a perceptive pictorial background that serves as a springboard for creation. Raeben, in fact, conceived the creative process as a hermeneutic of perception. As he explained in the lecture *The Metaphor*, "there is feeling that comes from your senses and feeling that comes from your mind, which we call imagination. And you find that there is a contradiction. If you understand them, instead of a contradiction, you will find a paradox, which is known in literature as the metaphor; and that, of course, is beauty. Our desire for the metaphor shows us what it is we really want from art." For this reason, he believed creating an abstract pictorial context was necessary to translate the pure, unmediated perception that the subject engenders in the painter. The only objective link to the real, the abstract background provides the springboard for creation: the atmosphere in which the subject can breathe and come alive.

Moreover, during the lessons, Raeben used to walk around the studio through the easels and analyze the students' works. He would not only give advice and direction: when he found a student struggling with some significant pictorial aspect that he had difficulty grasping and translating onto canvas, Raeben would take the brush from his hand and paint over the unfortunate victim

of the day's work with a few quick strokes to make the concept clear and visible. Though they were not meant to be considered as finished works intended for exhibition, given the relevance of his teachings and the importance of the artists he influenced, the catalogue gathers a couple of these examples in the final part of this section.

Each from a different perspective, all these wide-ranging contributions portray Raeben as a liminal figure placing his oeuvre in the context of the phenomenon of the "mid-garde." Like those of other painters who fall into this markedly heterogeneous category, instead of fully conforming with the trends and characteristics of the avant-garde movements that shaped his era, Raeben's works show an investment in bringing forward the artistic tradition to a more communal and comprehensible space. His artistic languages strive to find common ground between the realist lesson of the Ashcan School of Painting movement and the new expressiveness offered by the School of Paris, springing and thriving between the two artistic poles of New York and Paris. Thus, as Nico Stringa aptly states, he was indeed "an American in Paris and a European in New York:" incarnating the 'other' on both sides of the Atlantic, he was a wandering figure of an artist in his search for an artistic language "compatible to these two artistic traditions." Faithful to a conception of the creative process strictly intended as a means to bring forward the art of living by providing new means to feel and interpret the real and new ways to express them in paint, his works did not fit into an artistic context permeated by the conflicting languages of the avant-garde movements of his time. Such a conception and the world of wandering from which his art and career unfolded was thus left aside. Recreating it with its colors, music, style, and wandering stories is the purpose of this first catalogue of his works.

<sup>1</sup> B. Cartwright, "The Mysterious Norman Raeben," in J. Bauldie, *Wanted Man, In Search of Bob Dylan*, New York, 1991, pp. 85-90.

<sup>2</sup> A. Carrera, *La voce di Bob Dylan. Un racconto dell'America*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2011, pp. 296-310.

<sup>3</sup> S. Wilentz, *Bob Dylan in America*, New York, 2011, pp. 137-139.

<sup>4</sup> C. Schlam, *The Creative Path. A View From the Studio On the Making Of Art*, New York, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> F. Fantuzzi, "All the Way from New Orleans to New

*Jerusalem": Norman Raeben e Bob Dylan*, Ph.D. thesis, Università degli Studi Roma Tre, Rome, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> A. Carrera, F. Fantuzzi, M.A. Stefanelli, eds., *Bob Dylan and the Arts. Songs, Film, Paintings, and Sculpture in Dylan's Universe*, Rome, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2020, pp. 191-232.

<sup>7</sup> R. Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 2006, p. 86.

<sup>8</sup> Sholem Aleichem, *Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son*, translated by Tamara Kahana, New York, 1953.

