

Biographical Note and Exhibitions

244

1901

Norman Raeben (né Numa Rabinowitz) was born on March 21, 1901, in Kyiv, then part of the Russian Empire. He was the youngest son of Olga Loyev Rabinovich (1865-1942) and the famous Yiddish-language writer and playwright Solomon Naumovich Rabinovich (1859-1916), a.k.a. Sholem Aleichem, best known for his characters Menahem-Mendl, Motl, and Teyve the milkman and his daughters, the latter of whom was the inspiration for the famous musical *The Fiddler on the Roof*.¹

1904-1906

Following the latest in a series of pogroms against the Jewish citizens of his are, Sholem Aleichem decided to leave Russia, moving his family to various locations within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then to Italy, and finally Switzerland, where Numa, the youngest, attended his first school orders. During this time, Numa learned several languages and developed an interest in drawing by filling notebooks with caricatures and figures of soldiers.²

1906-1907

Numa, his mother, and father landed in New York Harbor on October 14th, 1906, while the rest of the family remained in Europe. Sholem Aleichem was welcomed as a celebrity by a wide range of intellectuals and artists in Jewish circles, including Jacob Adler, who had, over the years, invited Sholem several times to try his luck in New York's burgeoning Yiddish theater scene. As early as June of the following year, disappointed by the lack of financial and literary success they were counting on, the family returned to Europe.

In 1907, Sholem Aleichem published the first part of *Motl, Peysi the Cantor's Son. From Home to America*, a novel filled with autobiographical references recounting the migration affairs of Motl, an exquisitely ironic child with a natural talent for painting, who is inspired by his son.³

1908-1914

During this period, the young Numa resided mainly in Geneva, where he resumed his studies. Despite poor health, Sholem embarked on literary tours across Europe, in need of money. Numa occasionally followed his father,⁴ who in 1908 was hospitalized following a collapse due to an acute episode of tuberculosis from which he had been suffering for some time. He recovered thanks to a long treatment period in Italy at a clinic in Nervi (Genoa).

1914

Following the outbreak of World War I, the family decided to move to New York. Numa set sail from Copenhagen, this time with both his parents and sisters, Ernestina and Marusi—a writer herself, known as Marie Waife-Golberg. His brother, Mischa, affected by tuberculosis, was forced to remain in Europe, along with his sister, Emma. Layala, married to a soldier from Odessa, also stayed in Europe.

1915

On September 19th, Numa's brother, Misha, died under tragic circumstances.

1916

On May 13th, Sholem Aleichem died at his home in the Bronx at the age of fifty-seven from complications due to tuberculosis and diabetes. The funeral was an event of national importance: over one hundred thousand attended the procession, and the author's last wishes were published in major newspapers and read in Congress. An annual family gathering was also established to commemorate the event, during which family and friends read the will and selected passages from the writer's works.

1917-1924

After spending a short time studying painting at the Educational Alliance Art School, from January 1918 to May 1924, Raeben

enrolled in the Art Students League, where he studied with several influential artists, including George Bridgman, Joan Sloan, William Glackens, Robert Luks, Kenneth Hayes Miller, Max Weber, Robert Henri, and Kimon Nicolaïdes.⁵ The most significant influences on the young artist were Robert Henri and Robert Luks. Many of his fellow students were, in turn, destined to become prominent artists, such as Ben Shahn, Isaac and Raphael Soyer, Chaim Gross, and Mark Rothko, among others.⁶ On December 23rd, 1922, Raeben married Miriam Newmauk. The couple postponed their honeymoon until after obtaining their naturalization so as to spend it in Europe. Partly at the suggestion of Max Weber, Numa wished to travel to Paris, to establish contacts with the pictorial avant-gardes artists of the time.

Numa made his first official debut as a painter during this period. Using his birth name, Numa Rabinowitz, he participated in several exhibitions, displaying mainly oil portraits clearly influenced by the lesson of American realism of the Ashcan School of Painting. In 1922, he participated in the sixth annual "Independents" exhibition, held from March 11th to April 2nd in Brooklyn, at the Waldorf Astoria Roof.⁷ The exhibition's curators featured several of Numa's mentors, including George Bellows, Robert Henri, and John Sloan, who also served as president of the Independents Association. Raeben contributed two paintings titled "Study" and "Girl's Head," which are now untraceable. We learn from a brief review published by art critic Marie Trommer in the *Yidishe Gazeten* that these were "two studies of girlhood, strong in color and drawing."⁸ In 1923, Raeben also displayed two oil paintings in the Annual Arts and Crafts of the Jewish Charities exhibition at the Jewish Institute in Detroit.⁹

1924-1925

In 1924, again under the name Numa Rabinowitz, the artist took part in the ninety-ninth annual exhibition of the National Academy of Design in New York, held from November 15th to December 7th, within which he exhibited an oil portrait entitled *Shoula*.¹⁰

On June 24th, the Bronx County Court granted him naturalization, which his wife later received on December 2nd. Shortly thereafter, the couple obtained visas to leave for Europe. An article published on February 4th related the news of their departure for France. The article also attested that Raeben was already well known in Jewish cultural circles of the time, partly because of his father and partly because of his exhibitions, which were mentioned throughout.¹¹ During the following two years abroad, Raeben established relationships, primarily with avant-garde Jewish artists in the French capital. He came to know Jules Pascin and Marc Chagall, who would later work

closely with his sister, Marie Waife-Goldberg, in dealing with American galleries and the press.¹² According to several student reports, Numa also met Henri Matisse around this time.¹³ The most significant influence, however, was that of Chaim Soutine.¹⁴ Before returning to New York, Raeben and his wife travelled through different parts of the Mediterranean, including Palestine and Egypt. They left from Alexandria, Egypt, and arrived back in New York on November 21st, 1925.

1926-1931

In 1926, Miriam gave birth to their first and only son, Jay Raeben. The attribution of the surname Raeben confirms the artist's assumption of his artistic name, which Raeben would then employ until his death.¹⁵ The same year, his studio was robbed shortly before a major exhibition.¹⁶ The event exacerbated the neurosis from which Raeben already suffered and which plagued him for his entire existence. This condition, in turn, worsened by alcohol use, further strained an already unhappy relationship with his wife, whom he divorced in 1931.

In 1926, at the invitation of the writer Isaac Dov Berkowitz, who had married his sister Ernestina, Raeben collaborated in the celebrations for the tenth anniversary of Sholem Aleichem's death, painting one oil portrait of his father and one of his mother.¹⁷ Both are preserved today at the Beth Shalom Aleichem Museum in Tel Aviv.

During this period, Raeben opened the first of several studios at 8 West 29th Street and began teaching painting. Most likely as a result of his father's acquaintances, Raeben at this point was well-connected in several Jewish literary and theatrical circles and knew distinguished authors and musicians such as Hayim Nahman Bialik, Maxim Gorky, Michael Chekhov, and Seymour Osborne.¹⁸ He also preserved relationships with numerous proponents in the world of Yiddish Theater, particularly with Stella Adler, Pearl Polly Adler, Mary Adler, Miriam Kressyn, and Luba Harrington. Several of them were students of the artist, who, in turn, painted many of their portraits, all of which are now part of personal collections, except for a large oil portrait of Stella Adler kept at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in New York.¹⁹ Raeben was also frequently invited to give lectures and talks on art, theater, and literature at private salons and events, an activity he would continue to conduct throughout the rest of his career. 1931 was also the year of the artist's first personal exhibitions, the inaugural taking place at the Jewish Club of New York in March and April, and the second at the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association from early December to January 4th of the following year. From a review by David Mann published in *The Sentinel* magazine,²⁰ we understand that the first solo exhibition at the Jewish Club contained about thirty

oils, primarily views of Provincetown, Long Island, and Maine, cityscapes of Manhattan and Jaffa, and some portraits, including that of his mother.²¹ The description of the works attests to the impact of the studies conducted at the Art Students League and the influence of the French school.²² The two personal shows also garnered a few mentions in the *New York Times*, from which we learn that the second exhibition also contained, for the first time, watercolors, charcoals, and some pastels, a technique Raeben experimented with during the 1930s.²³

246 1932-1933

After the exhibition, Raeben organized another trip to France, this time with artist Isador Steinberg, one of his closest friends and collaborators. In Paris, he resided in an apartment rented to him by painter Roger Bissière. There, Raeben turned his focus to the pastel technique, beginning a cycle of urban cityscapes and landscapes in which he blended the lessons of the Ashcan School of Painting with the post-impressionist and modernist philosophy. He also maintained his activity as a teacher in Paris.²⁴ The following year, he travelled to Palestine with his mother, where he presumably put on another exhibition.²⁵ On November 14th, 1933, he left Port Said with his mother to return to New York on December 1st.

1934-1945

In 1934, Raeben had two of the most important shows of his career. He participated in the “Modern Paintings and Sculpture” exhibit organized at the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association in Newark, New Jersey, from the 7th to the 14th of May. The show displayed an extensive collection of works featuring paintings by several of Raeben’s acquaintances and collaborators and his major artistic influences, including Chaim Soutine, Marc Chagall, Amedeo Modigliani, Jules Pascin, Camille Pissarro, Moïse Kisling, Arshile Gorky, Ben Shahn, Isador Steinberg, Isaac, Moses and Raphael Soyer, and Max Weber. Raeben contributed with a pastel entitled “Landscape”.²⁶

From October 28th to November 10th of the same year, he had a solo show at Contemporary Arts Galleries, a distinguished venue located at 41 West 54th Street. Entitled “Landscapes in Pastel,” the exhibition was comprised of pastel views of New York, France, and Palestine. The collection received a few reviews in the *Forward*, the *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, and, in particular, one in the *New York Times*, in which critic Howard Devree defined the colors of his pastels as breathtaking.²⁷

Within this decade, Raeben became increasingly active as a teacher, primarily in several West Village studios on Houston Street, Lower 5th Avenue, 16th Street, and, in particular, at

51 West 12th Street. Among his students were notable names such as jazz musician Bob Haggart, fashion designer Eve Tartar, painter Esther Davis, and various members of the Adler family. From January 25th to February 6th, 1937, the Guild Art Gallery held a show titled “Norman Raeben Presents an Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by His Students,” which was featured in the *New York Times* and the *New York Evening Post*.²⁸ In April of the same year, Stella Adler hosted an exhibition of Raeben’s paintings at her home.²⁹ During this period, Raeben frequented Allen Adler and Lulla Rosenfeld and their circle of intellectuals, which also included Stanley Moss, Joachim Probst, Ralph Fasanella and Irving Block. He also developed a relationship with Pearl Polly Adler, which came to an end as a result of a combination of his neurosis and the interference of her family. On April 8th, 1938, Raeben lost his sister Ernestina, who died in Tel Aviv.

After the outbreak of war in 1942, Raeben was drafted in the Navy and served as a linguistic expert in creating an English-French-Russian dictionary and deciphering texts and messages.

1946-1950

Raeben returned to New York after the end of the war. As a result of a particularly severe crisis that left him catatonic for a short time, he was hospitalized and treated. Following the episode, the artist decided to withdraw from a career as a professional painter and devoted himself primarily to teaching. In 1946, with Stella Adler’s help, Raeben opened a studio on the 11th floor of Carnegie Hall Tower, where he taught until his death. In addition to taking painting classes, the celebrated actress and acting teacher Stella Adler regularly encouraged her students to study with Raeben, whose theories she considered essential to acquire a more comprehensive and transdisciplinary approach to the creative process. For this reason, as confirmed by Broadway singer and dancer Dorothy Bird, the composition of his classes in the early days was characterized by the presence of numerous actors and dancers, as well as musicians and singers who studied with Stella Adler or his long-time friend Seymour Osborne, almost all of whom shared an Eastern European heritage.³⁰

1951-1969

In May 1951, Raeben returned to Paris, where he remained until September of the same year. To this period dates back a final cycle of city pastels that, while maintaining strong contiguity in the choice of subjects and execution, is characterized by a different approach to the use of color. Upon his return, Raeben was active primarily as a teacher and lecturer. His influence was profound, as he was often invited to salons and

events to offer lectures on art history and literature, particularly the Russian novel and modernist prose. Depending on the year, the nature of his classes varied significantly in terms of both numbers and composition. The lists of students were very heterogeneous and included artists who specialized not only in painting but also in a wide variety of disciplines, as well as devotees of Jewish culture invited by relatives and acquaintances to attend his classes to rediscover their cultural roots in an artistic, laic way.

During this period, Raeben also lost two sisters: Emma Rabinovich Feigenberg, who died on January 8th, 1955, and Layla Kaufman, who passed away on December 24th, 1964.

1970-1977

In 1970, Raeben found a group of highly involved students with whom he travelled to Paris and Brittany. Upon his return, he began collaborating with some of them on a book on art history told from the artist’s perspective, entitled *Behind the Veil*, as well as a series of documentaries on the same subject, directed by Bill and Robin Fertik. Both works were initially

acquired by the Doubleday Multimedia company, which, due to the problematic relations between the artist and editors, terminated the contracts. Both works thus remained unfinished and unpublished. In the spring of 1974, singer-songwriter Bob Dylan attended the artist’s classes for about three months, from which he drew inspiration for making the albums *Blood on the Tracks*, *Desire* and *Street Legal* and the film *Renaldo and Clara*.³¹

1978

On December 12th, 1978, Raeben suffered a heart attack, the result of complications aggravated by diabetes, and died at the age of seventy-seven in his Central Park West apartment. He was buried in Westchester Hills Cemetery Hastings-on-Hudson in Westchester County. Although the family intended to keep the funeral private, numerous artists and students attended the ceremony, and various intellectuals and writers such as Stella Adler, Seymour Osborne, and Bel Kaufman spoke.

¹ Information about the artist’s early years is drawn from various biographies of Sholem Aleichem and his works and letters, family interviews, and Ellis Island archives documents.

² D. Mann, “Portrait of an Artist,” in *The Sentinel*, 10-04-1931, p. 7.

³ Sholem Aleichem, *Motl, Peysi the Cantor’s Son. From Home to America*, New York, Henry Schuman, 1953 (I 1907).

⁴ From the book *Sholem Aleichem Panorama*, we learn that Raeben especially “spent much of his boyhood in Switzerland and Italy, travelling also in Germany and Denmark” (M.W. Grafstein, ed., *Sholom Aleichem Panorama*, London (Ontario), The Jewish Observer, 1948, p. 306).

⁵ Significantly, among Raeben’s primary reading advice, R. Henri’s *The Art Spirit* and K. Nicolaïdes’ *The Natural Way to Draw* always stand out.

⁶ Information on this topic is drawn from research conducted at the Art Students League archives, interviews with various students, and materials held in Norman Raeben’s personal collection, now part of the collection of Josh Raeben.

⁷ Society of Independent Artists, *1922 Catalogue of the Sixth Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artist*, New York, Society of Independent Artists, 1922.

⁸ M. Trommer, “Jewish Artist Show up Well at Independents’ Exhibition,”

in *Yidische Gazeten*, 28-04-1922, p. 16.

⁹ The information comes from the article “Jewish Institute Exhibition Excels Two Previous Ones,” in *The Detroit Jewish Chronicle*, 23-02-1923, p. 1.

¹⁰ National Academy of Design, *1924 Illustrated Catalogue of The Winter Exhibition*, New York, National Academy of Design, 1924, p. 13.

¹¹ The article also corroborates the reasons for the trip: “They sailed on the Cunard liner Aquitania for a two-year stay in France, where Mr. Rabinowitz, an artist, will complete his studies” (“Pair Wed Two Years Start on Honeymoon,” in *The Macon News*, 04-02-1925).

¹² J. L. Huttner, *Tevye’s Daughters: No Laughing Matter*, New York, FF2 Media, 2014, p. 38. Valuable information can also be found on renowned artist and fashion designer Eve Tartar’s website, who took painting lessons from Raeben in Paris: <https://www.evetartar.com> (last consulted on 26-09-2024).

¹³ While no concrete corroborating evidence could be found, the fact appears plausible because of their mutual friendship with Max Weber, who was among the first to introduce Raeben to European art and particularly French painting. A New Yorker by birth, Weber traveled to France in the early twentieth century, where he met Pablo Picasso and