

The Art of Symeon Shimin

“By far the larger part of contemporary painting fails to excite me. I keep looking hopefully for something that will open my eyes and understanding to a new conception of art expression. And I found it the other day in Washington, on the third floor of the Department of Justice. The painter’s name, Symeon Shimin, meant nothing to me, but unless I am hopelessly sunk in the swirling sea of art appreciation, that name will mean something in the long history of painting. The subject is *Contemporary Justice and the Child*. The medium tempera on canvas. Any attempt of mine to describe it in words would be as futile as a Baedeker description of Mona Lisa. It is good.”

Henry J. Saylor, *The Architectural Forum*, December 1940

Metamorphosis

Autobiography of an Artist - The Beginnings

I do not know by what mystery or alchemy I was transformed into becoming an artist—a painter—when up to the age of eleven years, I wanted above all else to be a musician. However, when I was told in no uncertain terms that I would not be allowed to be one, within a week I began to draw for the first time in my life, and to this day I never stopped drawing and painting. What makes this event more strange is the fact that from the very beginning I drew as an adult and not as a child. It was people that I wanted to paint, then and now. I was deeply affected not only by our own poverty but by the teeming life around me as well—their haunting faces and their dignity never left me.

Memories, established points in my life taking me back in time and place, which in turn act as pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. When they are put together extraordinary relationships take place. Everything that previously seemed so isolated fit into a design, and it all begins to make sense.

Where are my sources as an artist? Where does the impulse and drive come from, and in which direction does it go? What are the layers of meaning in my paintings and the links that bind them together?

I was born on November 1, 1902, in the city of Astrakhan, Russia, which is at the mouth of the Volga River and which flows into the Caspian Sea; it’s a city of mixed origin, part European and part Asian. From the earliest times it formed an important link of commercial intercourse between the European part of Russia and Central Asia. I saw daily caravans of camels plodding through the streets at the same time that there were streetcars run by electricity. Among my companions were

Russians, Calmuks, Tartars, Persians and Turks. We were inventive, entertaining ourselves in many ways. We would put up a tent in an enormous courtyard and perform our fantasies for each other. All my life I inherited a passion for music, although I never played a conventional instrument; instead I carved out of wood an imaginary instrument which was a cross between a violin and a guitar, and played on it with a bow I made and plucked the strings. The sounds emerging from it must have been harsh on the ears, but it gave me great pleasure because I made them. Each of us made and decorated our own costumes.

The building we lived in was a large rectangular one of European style, three stories high, covering the equivalent of a square block. Within were two enormous courtyards. In each there was a water pump from which the occupants supplied themselves with water. Around each story, exposed to the courtyards, ran a wide terrace on all four sides. Sometimes, on rainy days, it was here that we would put up our tent and sit on the floor so each of us had a chance to perform.

Our household was made up of grandmother, our parents, two younger brothers, Alex and Louis, two uncles—Paul, a jeweler and designer of elaborate settings, and Eli a musician—as well as a family who provided household help. In addition, almost from habit, and stemming from needier days, there was also a boarder.

My brothers and I were unlike each other in temperament and interests. Alex was favored by grandmother, due to his gentleness and obedience, and Louis, in contrast was volatile. Grandmother looked like a marvelous gypsy. In fact, I suspected that she had a secret past steeped in Gypsy life...that was my fantasy. She was the center of our family, somewhat strict and a devoutly religious person who punished me severely when I was rebellious or acted on some wild impulse not sanctioned by the family. Yet, I had great admiration for her, possibly because she was such a colorful personality.

In his youth and mature years father had become a cabinet maker, a fine craftsman, and later a dealer of antiques. He bought out estates comprising not only furniture of an earlier period but also libraries of rare books, art objects, icons and musical instruments. There were small, intriguing cabinets, which had secret drawers. I would go to this fascinating store and fondle these objects, caress the surfaces of colorful woods which were so exquisite to the touch. My fantasies went rampant.

Father was a tall, handsome man with fine, firm, bony hands. He looked particularly grand in the winter when he wore his Astrakhan fur hat, fur coat and knee length boots. I was proud of him. During the week I did not see much of him, except when I visited the store. When I did see him, I found much pleasure in his company. He was both quick-tempered and at the same time gentle.

In contrast, mother was even-tempered throughout, moving around quietly and gently, never permitting herself to express anger, nor even raising her voice. I could not bear seeing her reduced to silence. Until we emigrated to the United States she

always worked as a milliner. She had been working since she was nine years old, when she and her seven sisters were left orphans.

She was apprenticed to the same millinery firm, making those enormous hats, which were like beds and bushes of flowers, then worn as the height of fashion. Since the hours of work continued to be long for both parents, we saw very little of them during the week, except at nighttime, and on Sundays and holidays. On such days it was a special treat walking between father and mother through the park—mother in a long black dress, high coiffeur, large flowered hat, long trailing skirt and father looking elegant. Holding the hands of both and looking up, I was so proud to be close to them, not knowing then what was brewing for them that would change their lives and mine.

Of all the activities of my youth, none mattered more to me than being involved with music. I seemed to have an insatiable appetite responding intensely to it. For that reason I was especially enamored of Uncle Eli, who was a composer, but was then an advanced student at the Conservatory of Music. He was also an excellent violinist. I used to sit spellbound, absorbed, listening to his playing. He left an indelible impression on me. Many of his musical friends came to our house and there, around the grand piano music was made. I felt sound taking shape. The afternoons and evenings were filled with wonderful music and I knew then that this is the world I wanted to be part of—that I would be a musician. Though I was about six years old, I was determined in my resolve. It is significant that despite my ambition which was so openly expressed, Uncle Eli never made any effort to teach me. He took me for granted but I did not take music for granted.

I had no elementary education in Russian schools. My parents reasoned, wrongly, that since we planned to emigrate to the United States we should concentrate on the study of Hebrew. We were sent to a private religious class, known as Cheder—where I was unhappy and which I found to be cruel in practice. I was sent there when I was five.

Except at the beginning, I walked by myself which was some distance away, crossing several bridges over canals. I learned quickly to read and write. It was baffling and completely incomprehensible to me why I was taught a language when the meaning was not taught. When I questioned the teacher his answer was that when I prayed in Hebrew, which was all that I was taught, it was enough for god to understand, that I did not have to understand. Even then, that did not make sense to me.

One day, I sat beside a boy who was quietly sobbing. He was my age—his face was gaunt, delicate and of a pallid complexion, but looking in appearance much older as if he had never known laughter. I asked him why he was crying, and he said only that a new baby was born in his family. I answered “well...is that any reason to cry?” “Yes,” he said, “there will be one more to feed.”

Within those stark bleak walls there occurred for me an experience of humiliation. Daily, we intoned the prayers. We were in groups, facing the wall, grouped according to our accomplishments. I was with the honored and more advanced group of four or five children. In my mischief I uttered garbled sounds—not in Hebrew—but a variation of mumbo-jumbo. Unknown to me, the teacher, who kept a sharp lookout, passed in back of me and overheard the sounds. He placed his hands on my shoulders and with a firm grip made me come over to the center of the floor. He waited for the group to finish praying and had all the children turn their faces away from the wall and look upon the punishment to be meted out to me. He made me lower my knickers and exposing my bare behind, hit me with a strap. I do not remember whether I cried or not but I hated him for humiliating me before my contemporaries.

On a number of occasions, I was severely punished by grandmother. There seemed to surge an impulse in me to share with others what we had, whether it was food or utensils to make our costumes for our improvised plays under the tent. Grandmother would put me into a dark closet and kept the door shut for a long stretch. This did not change anything except making me more rebellious.

An event took place in a remote village at about this time, which seemed to engulf all the grief of the land. It was the death of an extraordinary man. Although I was much too young and didn't know the reasons why he was so highly esteemed, a great deal buzzed around me, and enough seeped through to me to fire my imagination. The mere mention of his name electrified everyone. The story is well known. The man, accompanied by his daughter, left his home and family for good and while waiting at a wayside railroad station, died. This was 1910 and his name was Leo Tolstoy.

Only later when I was thirteen years old and living in the United States, did I begin to read his books in translation. His writings moved me. With limited understanding of the English language, I read *War and Peace*. It was Tolstoy's humanity and love—his condemnation and hatred of the stupidity and tragedy of war and greed—that has proven to be my pervading involvement throughout my life. He believed in giving away worldly possessions, that they should be shared, and that appealed to my sense of justice.

There were some activities of father's which were kept a secret in the family, and with good reason. Many young men left the country to evade serving a term in the Czarist army, or for political reasons. The parents of these men would come to father to help them from being molested by officials. He was able to do so by giving them objects of art from his store. Sometimes, through the streets, I saw political prisoners with iron balls and chains attached to their ankles, being driven away in wagons on their way to Siberia, the men singing a poignant, powerful revolutionary song.

Winters in Astrakhan were long; snow would remain piled up high, six to eight feet, for most of the winter as there was no snow removed—it just melted when spring came. When father would travel to Moscow or other cities for business, mother would make a special occasion on moonlit nights by treating us to a troika—a three horse sleigh—bundling us up to ride through the city at a brisk gallop on the encrusted snow.

In the summer mother would take us for a long trip on a river boat, going up the Volga River. By this time, she had a more important position at the millinery establishment—she was a designer and was able to take summers off. The boat would stop at every village on the way, where we would get off for refreshments and tea. It took almost a week to reach the larger cities. We stopped at Tsaritsyn, some three hundred miles above Astrakhan, a city which has been the scene of stirring events in Russian history. It was taken and plundered by the fabulous river-pirate Stenka Razin, about whom there is a popular song known throughout the land. We got off at Nizhni Novgorod to visit mother's sisters living there, who were married to some rather foolish and boorish merchants. This was a city of many colorful fairs and bazaars, surrounded everywhere by Byzantine churches. I couldn't get away fast enough from the dull bourgeois families to be in the country itself where we would spend part of the time on some farm and where we could run around barefooted. I wore a long one-piece red blouse. It was a playful and carefree period, unlike any other I have ever known.

My first awareness of our eventual parting from our birthplace was when I was helping grandmother pack her trunk. She was leaving for America, and was expecting us to follow her, since father's brothers left at an earlier date. We were receiving glowing letters from abroad telling us of the great opportunities in the new land to which we were planning to emigrate—that we would be enormously enriched by the kind of education we would receive. Another baby came into our lives—a girl was born about a year before we departed. She was named Chaye, meaning “Life”. The future seemed so full of promise.

It was the end of May—the year of 1912—we were part of a wave of immigration when we left. We made the first part of the journey by train to the seaport of Libau on the Baltic Sea. It took two weeks to cross the breadth of Russia, sleeping and eating in confined quarters. Passengers got off for a stretch at many of the stops at villages, buying food and tea. It was gray and drizzling when we embarked on the ship that was to take us to America. On the pier, as a parting gesture, a band puffed and played marches as the ship began to glide toward the open sea.

Though it was now the month of June, it was a rough crossing. Throughout the voyage there was considerable apprehension, for we were still under the shadow of the tragedy of the “unsinkable ship” the Titanic, which hit an iceberg and sank a few months earlier. The adults around us were solemn, fearful and prayed, which cast an uneasy spell on the young. The day before landing, we were asked to stand on deck

for a medical examination. It was hard on mother and the baby, as it was sharp and cold, and because of the unnecessary stupidity the baby caught pneumonia.

On the fourteenth day, at five in the morning, we were crowding the rails to feast our eyes on some sparkling lights, seen dimly. We were told it was Coney Island. It was our first glimpse of American soil.

We landed at Ellis Island, the Immigration Center, on one of the hottest days of the year. As the ferry dropped us at the pier at last, I was startled to see, as my first sight, a sea of hard straw hats that men wore.

Uncle Paul and Eli met us and after an emotional greeting, we rode on an elevated train to the East Side, where we walked and jostled through sweltering crowds, passed pushcarts to the tenement house, and walked up six flights of stairs to what was our home for the next three months, shared with grandmother and both uncles. What I saw on father's face haunted me.

When we came to this country, I was overwhelmed by a bewildering emotion. I saw father lose confidence when he felt he could not cope with such a totally alien environment. From the very beginning, he wanted to return to Russia. After months of trying to establish himself in business he saw his resources dwindling away, with opportunities for the kind of work he knew well becoming dimmer. He was persuaded by his relatives to do what was available to him—he opened a delicatessen store.

It was a small place in Brooklyn. In the back where we all lived the rooms consisted of a tiny windowless bedroom and a kitchen, where the three children slept—a table in the store served as our dining room. That was our home. Before we were able to settle into our new environment, we were hit by a grievous event. On the second day, after the opening of the store, our baby died; she never recovered from pneumonia.

It was at this time, when I saw father panic and become a changed man, that I too changed, but in the opposite direction. I felt transformed. I shed being a boy, and became a man, by taking upon myself the problems of an adult, concerned and responsible, and in a deep sense, bid farewell to my childhood.

Despite my age—nearing ten—I was placed in 1A in the Public School, for I did not have any previous elementary education. Being much older and taller than the others standing on the line, I was a natural target for the older bullies standing on other lines. The teacher, to whom I was forever grateful, understanding my plight, gave up part of her lunch period to tutor me. I learned quickly and every month I was promoted to a higher grade, so that during the first term I leapt five classes.

I helped my parents in the store, washing dishes or waiting on customers behind the counter after school and on weekends. Wearing a long white apron, I looked older, but when my back was turned, I was indeed a boy wearing knickers.

During the first summer vacation I worked in a grocery store from five in the morning until six in the afternoon, delivering groceries for three dollars a week. After

a week of this I quit—refusing to be exploited and decided to be my own man. For the rest of the summer, I sold pretzels at one penny a piece.

Music was always part of the air I breathed; it was always in my head. Whenever I learned of a free concert being given, no matter where, I made every effort to be there. It was an obsession over which I had no control. I could scarcely contain myself any longer—waiting for the right time to tell my parents—that now, I must learn music. I felt I could depend on uncle to teach me. He was expected to visit us soon and I made up my mind what I was going to do.

The air was charged with the talk of war. I was shaken but did not understand the full significance of the tragic events that were about to take place. I devoured reading the news from newspapers abandoned in the streets. We were cold during that winter and found ourselves short of fuel. I made a wagon out of a box and after school pulled it to the coal bins to collect whatever coal was dropped in the gutter from the trucks. In the evenings, I listened on street corners to fiery speeches, which was my first introduction to political thinking as to the nature of the war. I learned how little I knew and how much there was to understand.

It was when I was just twelve that my moment came. The family gathered together, including Uncle Eli, sitting on chairs on the sidewalk, in front of the store. In my excitement I blurted out that I wanted to be a musician.

Although my parents were well aware for a long time of my ambition, they were swayed by Uncle Eli, who ridiculed my desire to be one. He uttered a resounding “No! One failure in the family was enough.”

I was stunned. I knew that he was a disillusioned composer and bitter that he was not recognized. I did not know then that there were musical centers where free courses were given.

A week later, without expectation, an eventful episode took place. Without ever drawing before, unlike most children, I began to draw for the very first time in my life. I could not believe when I saw what I drew. The drawings were of people I observed around me—done with fidelity to reality. As I later learned what was unique was the fact that they were not at all like a child’s drawings but conceived and drawn by an adult. Not having paper to draw on, I used brown paper bags which were used to wrap up the delicatessen in the store.

No one showed me the way nor informed me that there were free art museums or free libraries. It was as if a magnetic pull led me to discover them by myself.

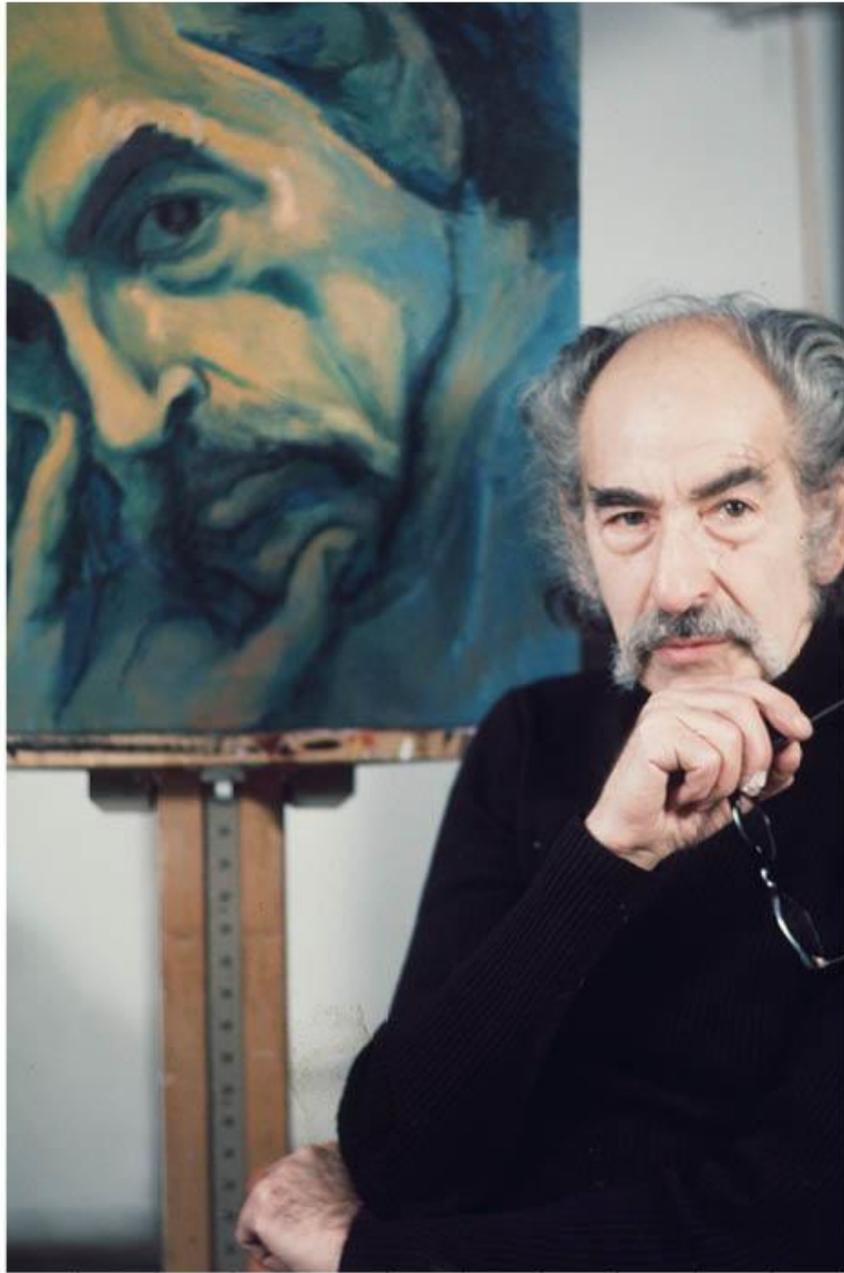
Once I saw art books and art magazines at the library, I knew that a new world opened up to me. I went alone to the Metropolitan Museum and looked at the paintings. I was overwhelmed to discover a new dimension, the power of expression in color and form, and felt that these paintings could only be the work of gods, that

no mortal could possibly have painted them. Secretly, I vowed to myself, “I will become such an artist.”

There were many hardships, sometimes so acute that it was enough to break my back, yet the will to create was much stronger and continues to be so. There were also many rich experiences since that memorable day, when, as if by some mystery it was revealed to me that I am an artist.

From that fateful day until now, I never stopped drawing and painting. A ringing sound went through me that nothing and no one can take this away from me. This is mine.

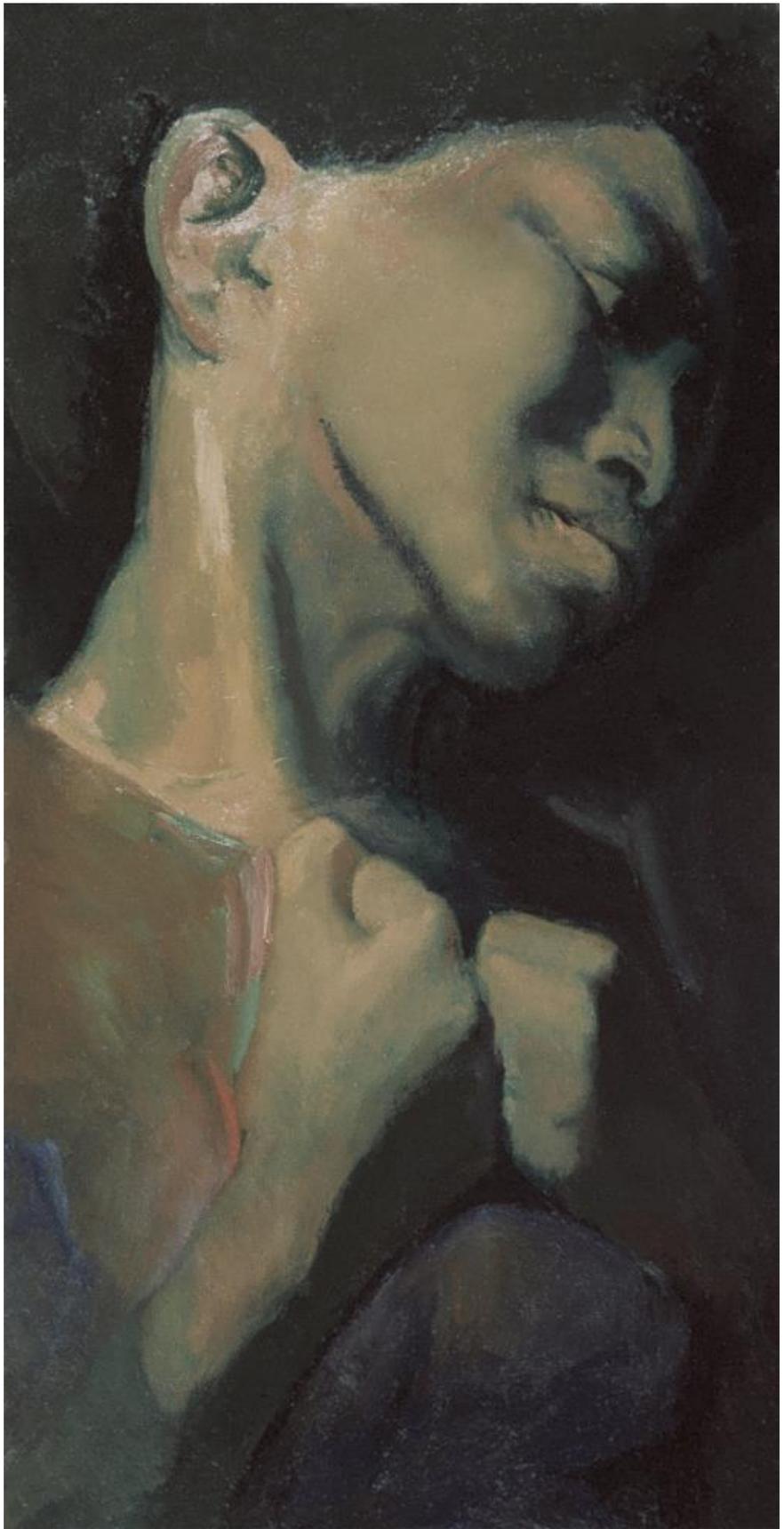
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Symeon Shimin, 1976. Photo: Estate of Symeon Shimin.



Contemporary Justice and The Child, 1936-1940, Washington, DC, page 49



Woman With Hands at Chest, 1973-76, page 134



of things—rites of passage, the loss of innocence, and more clearly, male and painterly identity. This underlying message is made clear in the following quote from Shimizu in reference to another such work, the *Gesturing Boy* (plate 23).

"When in Italy in 1956 the first painting I did, having not painted in oil for a good fifteen years, imagine... was of a boy holding a flower. I wanted to say, through this figure, thanks for allowing me to paint again. However, that boy I couldn't resist, seeing as this boy was also very arrogant and young—15—and wanting to look 18. Then realized I didn't need the flower, I just needed the gesture, so I removed the flower."

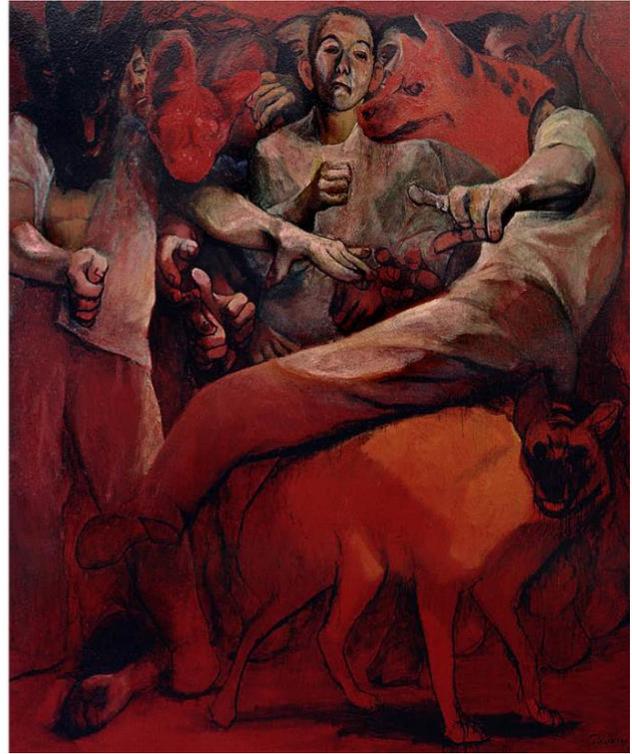
With the benefit of hindsight, it seems obvious from this description, and in particular from the telling phrase "thanks for allowing me to paint again," that the gesturing boy was a kind of self-portrait of the artist during those fifteen years when his gesture was there, but the flower of his art was not. It's fascinating to consider how this anecdote reflects the artist's ambivalence about the lost years of work, and announces his mixed feelings of ambition and insecurity as he labored in the long shadow of the great painters of the early part of the 20th century.

Portraits, Self-Portraits, Paris, and *The Peck*

Upon returning from Italy, Shimizu began a long period of renewed productivity, especially as a painter of psychologically complex portraits. A smoother line and a softer use of light

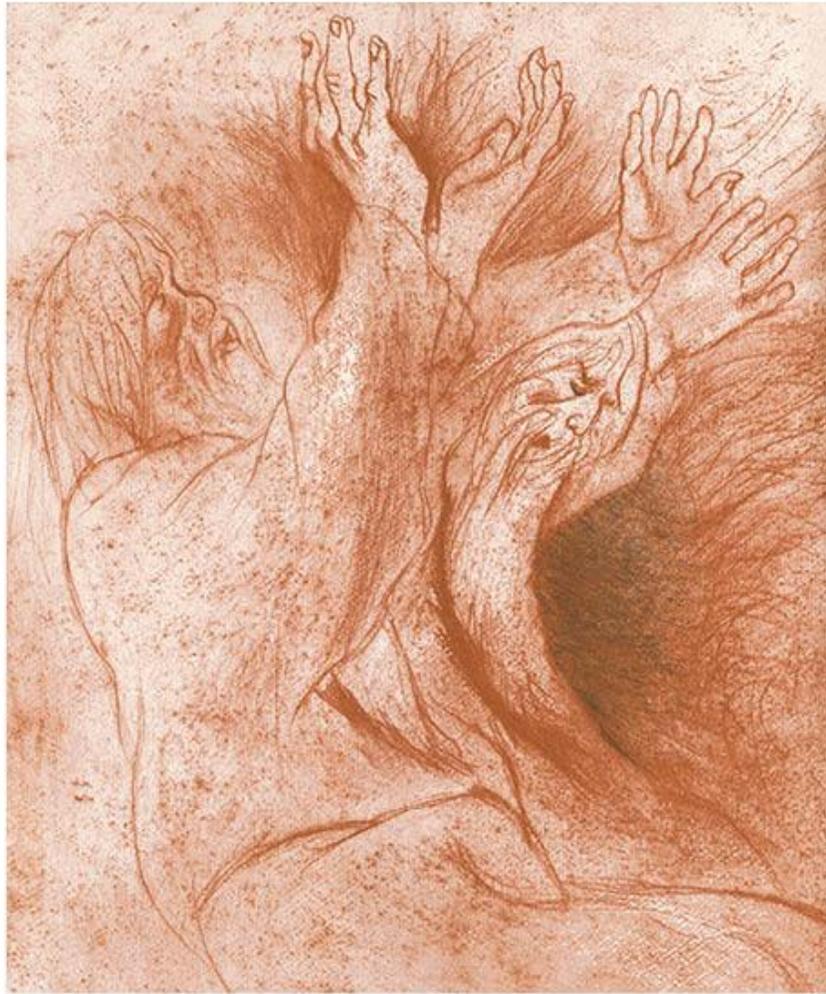
Gesturing Boy, 1956–1959. Oil on canvas, 23" x 29". Collection of Rachel Da Silva.

The Peck, 1959. Oil on canvas, 76" x 81 1/2". Collection of Tessa Shimizu.





Discussion Group I, pages 44-45



Joseph and Koza or the Sacrifice of the Vistula collaboration with Isaac Bashevis Singer, 1970, published by Farrar Straus and Giroux-Macmillan.

that he could channel some of his feeling for the heightened state of imagination in childhood into his work. Particularly successful projects include *Dance in the Desert*, by Madeleine L'Engle, which came out in 1969 and describes a magical night before the advent of fear when all the animals came to dance with the

human caravan, a kind of children's fable version of the *Peaceable Kingdom* paintings by the Quaker artist Edward Hicks. *One Small Blue Bead*, 1965, also reveals the nuance and sophistication that made Shimin so much more than a hired hand. All of the works he created for children had positive messages, and

many drew on traditional materials that must have reminded him of his own childhood and the stories told in Russia. In this category Shimin achieved his most prestigious and resonant collaborative partnership, with Isaac Bashevis Singer on *Joseph and Koza or the Sacrifice of the Vistula* in 1970.



Tonia and Symeon, 1978, page 21



Two Hands Reaching, page 137