



Smithsonian American Art Museum

March 2012



Subway

1934

Lily Furedi

Born: Budapest, Hungary, 1896

Died: New York, New York,
1969

oil on canvas

39 x 48 1/4 in. (99.1 x 122.6
cm.)

Smithsonian American Art
Museum

Transfer from the U.S.

Department of the Interior,
National Park Service

1965.18.43

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

*Researcher Ann originally investigated this painting quickly for the exhibition **1934: A New Deal for Artists**; now she has the opportunity to find out much more. She now has time to ask fresh questions about life on the New York subway in 1934. Researcher Ann asks:*

- **Is Furedi's painting an accurate representation of a New York subway car and its passengers in 1934?**
- **What social history of New York subway passengers is shown in this painting and how accurate is it?**

My research began with a search for books about subways in general, the New York subway in particular, and art depicting subways. I wound up with a large pile of subway books. I discarded the less specific books about the national and international history of subways. Scholarly articles on subways were of less use, so I concentrated on the New York subway books.

I did some research on the artist, Lily Furedi, but there is not much published about her. Outside of our own *1934* exhibition catalog and commentary on other shows including *Subway*, I found

mainly very brief mentions in contemporary newspaper articles. Many of these were about group exhibitions from 1932 to 1936 that included Furedi's art. These articles reveal that Furedi exhibited in New York City and was the daughter of Hungarian immigrant cellist Samuel Furedi ("Mural to be Dedicated," *New York Times* (1941)). I see the violinist in the foreground of the painting as a parallel to Furedi's father. This helps to show how the artist brought her own experience to the creation of this painting of the subway. She must often have ridden the subway.

To determine the relative accuracy of Furedi's representation, I looked at depictions of the New York subway by other artists during the same era. In the Smithsonian American Art Museum's own collection, I found photographs by [Reginald Marsh](#) and prints by [John Sloan](#), [Fritz Eichenberg](#), and [Reginald Marsh](#), among many others. I also consulted books about subway art. (Fitzpatrick, 2009; Brooks, 1997). Many images, like Furedi's painting, showed people reading to avoid the gazes of other people as well as to fill the time. I was amused that a book on subways in art (Fitzpatrick, 2009) led me to a pair of 1920s newspaper articles that discussed not only the widespread phenomenon of people reading on subways but also people reading over other people's shoulders. I've been known to do that myself! ("It's Quite All Right to Read Over the Shoulder in Subway," *New York Times* (1925); "Passengers in Subway are Intensive Readers," *The Washington Post* (1926))

The 1926 article stressed how people of diverse racial and national backgrounds, reading publications in diverse languages, rode side by side on the New York subways, "Yellow, white and black people, representatives of all nations, are the underground commuters." ("Passengers in Subway," (1926). Furedi, like other artists, ([Marsh's Boy on Subway Seat](#)), also showed people of different races and, judging from their clothing, of different economic classes and with types of employment, riding together on the subway. Furedi's riders are in a pleasant, clean setting where few of them have to stand and all have plenty of space. Other artists from Furedi's time, like Eichenberg and Marsh, depict crowds on the subway packed in together on dirty cars and platforms.

Why did Furedi create so much brighter and more optimistic an image of mass transit? One reason emerged when I did research to determine what kind of subway car appears in Furedi's painting. Gene Sansone's book *Evolution of New York City Subways: An Illustrated History of New York City's Transit Cars, 1867-1997* includes photographs, descriptions, and technical specifications for New York subway cars. I carefully compared Furedi's painting with the images in this book, looking for cars with the ceiling fans, curved railings, and mixed alignment seating that Furedi showed. I soon determined that the artist had painted an R1 or R4 car very accurately. These cars were manufactured between 1930 and 1933 for the Independent subway system called the IND (Sansone, 1997). Books on the history of the New York subway told me that the IND system opened to the public in 1932, so it was very new when Furedi created her painting in early 1934. The IND system was a municipally operated system that would be a rival for the much older privately operated Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT) and the

Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation (BMT) systems. In 1934 all three systems used the traditional nickel fare that allowed even poor New Yorkers to ride the subway to work places, homes, and other facilities all over New York. On many routes, the IND system provided a faster and more comfortable alternative to the older elevated lines known as the el. For a while at least, the new IND lines must have seemed cleaner and more modern than the other subway lines. Therefore Furedi's painting shows New Yorkers enjoying the advances of the new system, including the overhead fans that helped to keep them comfortable (See Hood, 1993; Fischler, 1976; and Cudahy, 1979).

One of the things that struck me about Furedi's view of the New York subway was the bright color scheme. Could it have been based on reality? I'm sure that New Yorkers didn't wear purple suits, but did they ride in subway cars with bright red floors? Since Sansone's book was illustrated in black and white, I had to look elsewhere to see R1 and R4 cars in color. An online search showed me that the [New York Transit Museum](#) owns examples of these cars. I found color images of R1 and R4 cars on a web site called [Forgotten New York](#), which I noticed was mounted in association with the Greater Astoria Historical Society. There were articles about the "nostalgia trains" run by the New York subway during the holiday season, when they temporarily put old cars like the R1 and R4 back on the rails. I e-mailed the archives of the New York Transit Museum and they sent me color interior and exterior photographs of their R1 and R4 cars. Their R1 car is number 100, the very first such car ever manufactured! The color images on [Forgotten New York](#) and from the Transit Museum showed that most of Furedi's colors used to depict the subway car were accurate. The wicker seats were the yellow ochre that Furedi showed them, and the floors were bright red cement. However, Furedi lightened the dark olive walls and toned down the white porcelain enamel railings. A book on the design history of the New York subways suggested to me that the bright greens, oranges, and purples of the clothing of subway riders in Furedi's painting reflected the colors used in the design of IND stations, including the colored tiles in the stations (New York Transit Museum and Garn, 2004).

A Transit Museum archivist also e-mailed me information, confirming facts I had found elsewhere on the web. I was interested to know the service dates of car 100, which ran from 1931 until 1970. Many living New Yorkers must remember riding on car 100 and others like it. Only, I imagine car 100 was pretty grimy by the time it was retired. It would take a lot of care before it again looked the way Furedi depicted such a car in 1934.

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