



Seeing the City: Sloan's New York

May 22 – September 14, 2008

Exhibition Overview

Organized by the Delaware Art Museum, *Seeing the City: Sloan's New York* travels to the Smart Museum this spring. The exhibition presents paintings, prints, drawings, and letters from 1900 to the 1930s by New York artist John Sloan (1871–1951). Known for his depictions of the “workaday city” and the pedestrian aesthetic, Sloan mapped New York through his works and helped define the city in the popular imagination.

Born in small-town Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, Sloan moved with his family to Philadelphia when he was small. As a teenager, he “drifted into art,” making copies of Old Master works for a bookstore and designing hand-colored greeting cards as a way to help support his parents and two younger siblings. Sloan taught himself to paint, supplementing his self-instruction from the book *A Manual of Painting* with evening classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. His first painting was a self-portrait, created in 1890.

Sloan worked as an illustrator at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and later worked for the *Philadelphia Press*. In Philadelphia, he met and socialized with other artists including William Glackens (1870–1938), Everett Shinn (1876–1953), George Luks (1867–1933), and Robert Henri (1865–1929)—all of whom later became known for their depictions of gritty urban subject matter and scenes of everyday life. Robert Henri was a particularly close friend and mentor, who encouraged Sloan to pursue painting.

In 1904, Sloan and his wife of three years, Dolly, moved to New York City's Chelsea neighborhood. Sloan continued to work as a freelance illustrator—the commissions he received paid for living expenses and also helped foster studio time for Sloan to create his own art. Sloan's inspiration came from exploring the city on foot and from making observations of the people in his neighborhood. He noted in a diary entry dated January 25, 1912, “Out for a walk down to Bleecker and Carmine Sts. where I think I have soaked in something to paint.” Sloan primarily worked from memory, often recording urban encounters in his diary and noting particularly interesting scenes with details about location, atmosphere, color, and surrounding light. Sometimes sketches and photographs supplemented his written notations.

In 1906, Sloan supplemented his income by substitute teaching for Robert Henri at the New York School of Art. By 1916, Sloan was teaching full-time at the Art Students League of New York—a position he held until 1937. His teaching philosophy and technical advice to students and fellow artists were published in the book *Gist of Art* in 1939. These personal reflections and teaching notes were compiled in part by one of his former students, Helen Farr. Following the death of his wife Dolly in 1944, John Sloan married Helen Farr.



John Sloan, *Self-Portrait in Gray Shirt*, 1912, oil on canvas, Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1980-207



John Sloan, *Red Kimono on the Roof*, 1912, oil on canvas, Indianapolis Museum of Art, James E. Roberts Fund, 54.55

Sloan's subjects reflected aspects of the city—the elevated train, window shoppers, parks and people at leisure, New York neighborhoods such as Chelsea and Greenwich Village (and landmarks within them), politics, and the working class. His compositions also reflect his perspective—both as a *flâneur* (or leisured person who strolls the city to observe it) and as a visual artist. Sloan's works depict both a “street level” perspective and a rooftop point of view—vantage points of the “mole and the pigeon.” His time spent in several high-rise apartment buildings provided much fodder for a skyline perspective of the city. His painted observations of daily life and architectural landmarks, make Sloan something of an inadvertent historian.

John Sloan is best known for his association with a group of artists known as “The Eight” or Ashcan School. In 1908, Sloan and his Philadelphia artist friends (Henri, Glackens, Luks, and Shinn) exhibited together with Arthur B. Davies (1862–1928), Maurice B. Prendergast (1858–1924), and Ernest Lawson (1873–1939) at Macbeth Galleries in New York City. Their depictions of everyday urban imagery incited critics and viewers alike. Images of tenement buildings, back alleys, poverty, the working class, and other “low-brow” subjects challenged the conventions of fine art but drove up attendance and sales. More than 7,000 people attended the exhibition and the gallery made impressive sales. Despite the success, reviews were mixed. The Eight rebelled against European modernism and communicated a new American realism, influencing later artists such as Edward Hopper (1882–1967) and George Bellows (1882–1925).



John Sloan, *Picture Shop Window*, 1907, oil on canvas, Collection of The Newark Museum, Gift of Mrs. Felix Fuld, 1925

Questions and Topics for Discussion

Discuss how John Sloan's artwork “maps” the city of New York. In what ways is John Sloan an historian? Consider the places in which you've lived and what a visual map of these places would look like. Does your personal map correspond to a city map of Chicago? A map of the United States? A map of the world?

John Sloan communicates much about “point of view” with his work. Discuss the varied perspectives from which he created his compositions. Which works are at “mole level” and which are at “pigeon level?” Many of Sloan's works also convey a particular opinion or point of view. Although some works are merely an observation of early 20th century life in the city, others illustrate a personal point of view or social commentary in relation to politics, economic class, or working conditions. Examine the drawing *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*. What do you think Sloan's personal point of view was with this work? What do you think Sloan was trying to express?

In *Gist of Art*, a book published about Sloan's philosophy of art and teaching practice, Sloan writes, “We are all students and we always will be. Learn to yearn. Never spare yourself from hard work and the yearning to understand. Search into the meaning of things, the reality of life.” In thinking about Sloan's artwork and artistic practice, how would you say Sloan was a lifelong seeker? How did he show the reality of life?



John Sloan, *The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*, 1911, ink, Chinese white, and crayon on illustration board, Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1991–98

Examine *The City from Greenwich Village, 1922*, and describe in detail all that you see. Answer the following questions: “What is going on in this picture? What else do you see? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?” Here is what John Sloan noted in his diary about this work:

Looking south over lower Sixth Avenue from the roof of my Washington Place studio, on a winter evening. The distant lights of the great office buildings downtown are seen in the gathering darkness. The triangular loft building on the right had contained my studio for three years before. Although painted from memory it seems thoroughly convincing in its handling of light and space. The spot on which the spectator stands is now an imaginary point since all the buildings as far as the turn of the elevated have been removed, and Sixth Avenue has been extended straight down to the business district. The picture makes a record of the beauty of the older city which is giving way to the chopped-out towers of the modern New York. Pencil sketch provided details.



John Sloan, *The City from Greenwich Village*, 1922, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1970 (1970.1.1)

What additional information did you learn about this image from Sloan’s notes? What else do you think about when you look at this picture? Why? If you were to make a painting or photograph of your city, what would you include in the composition to describe it?

New York vs. Chicago

Both the “first” (New York) and “second” (Chicago) cities in the 1880s were facing dramatic modernization, industrialization, and immigration. Compare the following statistics about population in both cities and consider how this rapid growth affected the urban environment.

	New York	Chicago
1880	1.91 million	500,000
1910	4.77 million	2.19 million

In 1885, the world’s first skyscraper was constructed in Chicago. Research more Chicago history. What other “firsts” in the “second city” were notable between 1880 and 1940?

Alignment with Illinois Learning Standards & Goals for the Visual Arts

Docent-led discussions of *Seeing the City: Sloan’s New York* at the Smart Museum, related follow-up discussion in the classroom, and *Seeing the City*-inspired classroom hands-on activities reinforce elements of the Illinois standards and goals for the visual arts by encouraging students to recognize and solve artistic problems, express and interpret information and ideas, work as a team as part of a larger group hands-on project, and make connections between the visual arts and other disciplines (history, social studies, and language arts). Teachers are encouraged to make connections between seeing the city of Chicago and seeing Sloan’s city depictions of New York. Using writing, historic research, photography, architecture, and sketching as tools, teachers have the potential to make a multitude of multi-disciplinary connections in the classroom centered around subjects and themes depicted in John Sloan’s work.

STATE GOAL 25: Know the language of the arts.

- A. Understand the sensory elements, organizational principles and expressive qualities of the arts.
- B. Understand the similarities, distinctions and connections in and among the arts.

STATE GOAL 26: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced.

- A. Understand processes, traditional tools and modern technologies used in the arts.
- B. Apply skills and knowledge necessary to create and perform in one or more of the arts.

STATE GOAL 27: Understand the role of the arts in civilizations, past and present.

- A. Analyze how the arts function in history, society and everyday life.
- B. Understand how the arts shape and reflect history, society and everyday life.

Additional Resources

Coyle, Heather Campbell, and Joyce K. Schiller. *John Sloan's New York*. Exh. cat. Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2007.

Dreiser, Theodore. *Sister Carrie*. New York: Doubleday, 1900.

Hales, Peter. *Silver Cities: Photographing American Urbanization, 1839-1939*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005.

Kennedy, Elizabeth, ed. *Chicago Modern, 1893-1945: Pursuit of the New*. Exh. cat. Chicago: Terra Museum of American Art, 2004.

Perlman, Bennard, ed. *Revolutionaries of Realism: The Letters of John Sloan and Robert Henri*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Sandburg, Carl. *Chicago Poems*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1916.

Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*. New York: Doubleday, 1906.

Sloan, John. *John Sloan on Drawing and Painting (The Gist of Art)*. Mineola: Dover Publications Inc., 1977.

Smith, Carl S. *The Plan of Chicago: Daniel Burnham and the Making of the American City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Zurier, Rebecca, Robert W. Snyder, and Virginia M. Mecklenburg. *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York*. Exh. cat. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1995.

Zurier, Rebecca. *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

<http://johnsloansnewyork.org/>

<http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/chicago/>

<http://www.cityofchicago.org/Landmarks/Index.html>

<http://www.biblioserver.com/newberry/index.php>