

# John Sloan

John Sloan was born in 1871 in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania. As a boy he was an avid reader and especially enjoyed books illustrated by Walter Crane, a well-known British artist. He began designing his own bookplates but didn't show much drawing talent.

His first job was making pen and ink copies of etchings and engravings for a bookseller. At twenty-one he went to work for the newspaper, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and because he was not good at reportorial news drawings he ended up in the art department. He made drawings from photographs for linecut and became a very successful newspaper artist and magazine illustrator. He discovered the brush and ink drawings of the Japanese and used these qualities in his drawings.

He entered the Pennsylvania Academy in a drawing class but broke away and joined a group called the Charcoal Club. There he met Robert Henri who became his lifelong friend and mentor. Henri encouraged him to move to New York City and to pursue a career as a painter. In 1904 he and his wife Dolly moved from Philadelphia to New York but he continued to do pictorial puzzles for the Press and illustrations for *Collier's* and *The Century* magazines

In 1905-1906 he created a series of etchings called "New York City Life" which became perhaps his most eloquent achievement. Observation of life in furnished rooms back of his 23rd Street studio inspired many of his etchings and paintings of this period. The chief motivating force of his art was his interest in human beings, not humanity as a vague abstraction, but real men and women. He liked what was common, everyday and universal.

Three etchings from this collection at the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts are:

## Fun, One Cent

In this picture he has captured girls peeking somewhat shocked and giggling at the hand-cranked moving photographs at the Nickelodeon. We can read titles on the machines that say "Those Naughty Girls", "Girls In the Night" and can feel Sloan's amusement at observing this scene which he tells us was on 14th Street near Third Ave. He had a keen eye for detail and an instinctive humanity which made him a superb recorder of city life.

## The Women's Page

Observing the detail in this picture we see a woman sitting in her cluttered apartment; her son teasing the cat, stockings hanging to dry, scrub board and basin visible while she reads about "society" women. She is able to enjoy and perhaps aspire to what other women enjoy, escaping her mean and meager surroundings.

## Turning Out the Light

Here Sloan has captured the healthy relationship of a man and woman. There is a sense of deep tenderness in this moment before she turns out the light. Some reviewers of Sloan's work find this one of his most moving works.

Sloan is probably best remembered as a member of "the Eight", the group of anti-academic painters organized in 1908 by Robert Henri. The title of Ashcan School often applied to this group was mainly due to Sloan's very dark palette at the time used in depicting genre urban scenes.

His paintings included not just city scenes but paintings of the desert landscapes of the Southwest and out-of-doors studies of light and color done summers in Gloucester, MA. Later in life he turned to studying the Masters and began painting female nudes which were very sturdy, robust, almost masculine in character with no obvious sex appeal. He combined his painting style and graphic using extensive cross-hatching to create a sculptural form of a nude rather than an anatomical realistic nude.

He was never a financial success in his lifetime and by age 50 had only sold 10 oil paintings. Sloan supported himself and his wife, Dolly, mostly by doing illustrations and later teaching at the Arts Student's League of New York. Opposed to the jury system as he felt it suppressed new artists ability to have their work shown, he remained a champion of the Society of Independent Artists his entire life and died at the age of 80.