



32: Everett Shinn *Sullivan Street* (1900–1905)

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“*The Eight, by One of Them*” was the intriguing title of artist Everett Shinn’s talk at the Memorial Art Gallery on the occasion of a 1944 exhibition of “*The Eight*,” the group of New York-based artists who first exhibited together at Macbeth Gallery in 1908.¹ In 1944, Shinn, along with John Sloan, was one of the last two surviving members of the group. *The Eight* had come together to protest the jurying practices of the Academy, and also because they admired the independent spirit of their mentor, Robert Henri, who encouraged them to seek the beauty in the world around them, liberated from conventional restraints of style or subject.

Having moved from Philadelphia in 1897 to find his fortune in New York City, Everett Shinn lived around the corner from the Greenwich Village scene that he painted with flourishing brushwork in *Sullivan Street*. The streets of lower Manhattan and its picturesque park, Washington Square, were among his most frequent subjects during the early years of his career, when he wasn’t painting theater and dance scenes. His talent was quickly recognized, and fortuitous high-society contacts led to interior design commissions that were mentioned in newspapers and magazines, moving Shinn from the role of struggling artist to that of the accomplished and sought-after man about town.² Unlike other members of *The Eight*, Shinn seemed less engaged with artistic politics, and in fact actively debunked the “radical” nature of *The Eight* in talks and articles later in his life:

He is amused at the legend of “The Eight.” Sloan, Glackens and Luks had been newspaper-illustrator friends of his in Philadelphia. The group showed together without plan, “without anything against anyone. We just painted what we were used to drawing and seeing....Not one of us had a program....[S]ure, we were against the monocle-pictures at the Academy, but that was all. None of us had a message—and its funny now when they try to make me a “protest” painter. I wasn’t....Actually, because I wasn’t as interested as the others in people sleeping under bridges...I was often accused then of being a social snob. Not at all—it’s just that the uptown life with all its glitter was more good-looking. The people made pictures.”³

His comments notwithstanding, some of Shinn’s most evocative paintings depict the “downtown life.” *Sullivan Street* contains within it elements of the city that were cautionary—an isolated observer, ramshackle buildings, and street laborers—the very kinds of things that would earn *The Eight* the sobriquet of “Ashcan painters.” Washington Square’s trees are visible at the end of the block, but it is the texture of the street that intrigues Shinn in this particular work.

For the contemporary viewer, a Greenwich Village street conjures up romantic images of either the intellectual world of writers Henry James and Edith Wharton, or the bohemian world of social reformers John Reed and Emma Goldman. At the time that Shinn was painting, however, he would have known that *Sullivan Street*, and the neighborhood south of Washington Square, was peopled by immigrants, primarily Italian, and home to some of the poorest residents of New York. It also had the reputation of being one of the toughest neighborhoods in the city. In the 1890s, journalist Jacob Riis photographed areas near *Sullivan Street*, the “vile rookeries of Thompson Street and South Fifth Avenue” where the “old Africa [was] fast becoming a modern Italy.”⁴ And, “by 1900 most of [Greenwich Village’s] elite residents had departed....[T]he area was known simply as the Ninth Ward, dominated by working-class Italian immigrants.”⁵ An Italian immigrant named Anacleto Sermolino “recalled that after standing on the corner of Bleecker and *Sullivan* for the first time

Everett Shinn,
1876–1953
Sullivan Street, 1900–1905
Oil on canvas, 8 x 10 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
45.45

[after his arrival in the United States in the 1890s] and seeing pushcarts loaded with Italian cheeses, pasta and vegetables and hearing women shoppers conversing in Italian, he had told his wife: 'This is not a strange land we have come to, but a little piece of Italy.'⁶

Shinn's record book contains several references to a *Sullivan Street* title, beginning in 1901 in lists of work at Boussod, Valadon & Co., his dealer. Also, a label on the back of the frame of MAG's *Sullivan Street* gives the date as 1900. At this point, Shinn was doing primarily pastels, making it difficult to ascertain fully that the 1901 record book reference to *Sullivan Street* is the same work as the MAG painting. Contributing to the confusion is the fact that the MAG painting has a 1905 date on the lower left, the date that is assigned to it in the 1943–44 circulating exhibition from which it was purchased. Whether Shinn painted two versions of *Sullivan Street* is unknown. Further confusion arises in a physical examination of the work, for it then becomes clear that the painting extended over three of the sides wrapped around the stretcher. Had Shinn painted a larger version, and then cut it down to fit an older frame? Had it been damaged in shipping, and then cut down to its current size? Did he simply misremember the date that it was painted, or, since it was put into an exhibition about The Eight, did he choose to date the painting closer to 1908?⁷



Everett Shinn,
1876–1953
Sullivan Street (detail),
1900–1905
Oil on canvas, 8 x 10 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
45.45

Following his Memorial Art Gallery lecture in 1944, Shinn and the curator, Isabel Herdle, reached an agreement about having *Sullivan Street* enter MAG's collection. A heated correspondence ensued. According to a telegram sent to Herdle from Margaret Jarden at the Museum of Modern Art, *Sullivan Street* was held back by MAG, presumably for purchase consideration, when the rest of the exhibition returned to New York in January 1945.⁸ Soon thereafter, Shinn wrote Herdle to negotiate a price for the painting. "After the terrific pressure put on me in doing the 3 large murals for the Hotel Plaza new bar [the Oak Bar] is over I can get down to the sifting of the advantages and monetary [sic] losses on my pictures in case you accept my following

propositions....*Sullivan Street* being of old New York is of more value at the moment but no better than the French street [another painting by Shinn being considered]."⁹ He closed by saying, "It's nice to know that you would risk me talking again in the Museum."¹⁰

On March 6, 1945, Shinn contacted Isabel Herdle (whom he referred to as "Miss Hurdle") and alerted her to the fact that he had just sent her "a package containing a copy each of Rip Van Winkle for you and your sister [Gertrude Herdle Moore, MAG's director]....I sent one copy also to the sugar givers and they should get theirs about the same time....Please let me hear from you."¹¹ Shinn was asking \$300 for the painting. Two weeks later, he implored: "Probably my hardest, most persistent [sic] and disappointing task is to get a reply to my many letters directed to you....What is the decision about the Sullivan street picture? Please let me hear from you....I feel I do deserve a reply. Yet, thanks for all your interest."¹²

Desperation sets in by April. Shinn tries a new tack:

Please give me some sign that there is a Rochester and that I had not been in a dream state and believed that I talked in your Museum and met some delightful people and that there was some talk of purchasing one of my pictures for the museum.

Perhaps this is all imagination and there never existed "The Eight" and I am not an artist but a solicitor for a charity.

It has been months and months since my visit (if not a dream) and I do wish that you would unwind these coils of my delirium and make it definite about the painting (Sullivan Street)....

Please let me know...as I haven't the time to go to your Museum steps and wait for you.¹³

Anger soon replaces desperation: "I cannot understand why I cannot get an answer to my many letters of inquiry about 'Sullivan Street'....I have told you repeatedly that I would prefer it being in a gallery of your standing and I feel that my price is ridiculously little....Either buy it at my price or return it at once....P.S. I am not starving for recognition or money but I have a genuine hunger for getting things done that have been started."¹⁴

On May 1, Shinn's wish was granted. Miss Herdle wrote, deftly:

You have every right to be as annoyed as your letter sounded. It has been months since we first began negotiations about "Sullivan Street", and months since I have written you. I swore a little private oath that after this length of time had elapsed that I would not write until I could report a definite verdict on the painting. So here I am—at long last!

The delays in the Accessions Committee meeting are almost beyond belief—snow storms, Florida jaunts of committee members, illnesses, about a month ago the death of the Chairman of the Committee and the founder of the Gallery, and finally the election of new committee personnel. All this will not interest you, but it is the reason that no decision has been reached until now....

A check for \$300.00 from the University of Rochester which handles our purchase funds will go to you shortly. Since this final step does not involve any member of our board or staff whom the gods of delay seem to delight to plague this year, there should be no further delay.

Again I am very sorry that you have had all this troublesome delay. Please forgive us!¹⁵

The happy ending for both parties was that the painting, certainly one of Shinn's gems, remained at the Memorial Art Gallery to form, with other works by *The Eight*, the nucleus of MAG's pre-eminent Ashcan collection. And the story of Shinn at MAG continues: New York artist Ken Aptekar appropriated Shinn's image in 2001 in his painting *Everett Shinn Writes Isabel Herdle*, in which he enlarged the tiny painting by several hundred percent and invited viewers to take a closer look. Shinn would have been intrigued by Aptekar's innovative technique and probably entertained by the fact that his words were enduringly incorporated into an homage to *Sullivan Street*.¹⁶

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