

SEEING AMERICA: John Sloan's *Election Night*, 1907



Election Night captures the excitement—social, political, technological, and even artistic—of the early twentieth century in the United States.



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)
Election Night, 1907
Oil on canvas
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 41.33
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester

The Art

*Took a walk in the afternoon and saw boys in droves, foraging for fuel for their election fires this evening....After dinner...out again and saw the noisy trumpet blowers, confetti throwers and the "ticklers" in use—a small feather duster on a stick which is pushed in the face of each girl by the men, and in the face of men by the girls. A good humorous crowd, so dense in places that it is impossible to control one's movement. (John Sloan quoted in *Seeing America*, 151)*

All the exuberance, vitality, and detail of that moment in Herald Square, New York City, on November 6, 1907, are portrayed on canvas just one week later in *Election Night*. A boisterous group of men, women, and children crowd into the narrow space between the Herald Building (on the painting's left) and the elevated train tracks on Sixth Avenue. Although John Sloan's journal identifies the specific site, his painting records only a quick impression of the scene: the speed and noise of the train, the glow of the artificial lights, and the energy of a bustling jostling crowd.

Quick brush strokes and dabs of bright colored paint heighten the sense of movement everywhere. Specific faces, eerily lit by the gaslights, appear more mask-like than real; those in the shadows blur into a dark mass that recedes indefinitely into the background. There are no posters, dates, candidates, or objects to connect the painting to a specific election. Sloan saw himself as a



painter of the real world around him, but he did not want to be known as a social/political commentator or reformer.

Sloan has composed *Election Night* to pull the viewer into the scene. The central figure, a woman in her bright red dress, leans forward as if to leave a space for the artist to join the activity amidst the horn-blowers and moving figures. The diagonal lines of both the lit storefronts and the Herald Building confine the foreground space, but suggest the deep expanse in the background. The prominent circles of gaslights as well as the many rectangles of the lit sign and shops, punctuated by columns of the train supports, balance these diagonal lines and the triangle formed by the receding crowd.

Contrast *Election Night* with John Sloan's 1912 painting, *Six O'Clock, Winter* (originally titled *Third Avenue, Six O'Clock*). There, Sloan includes the same artistic elements: dramatic contrasts of light and dark, slashing diagonal lines, one-point perspective; one sees the same crowd of faces, lit store fronts, and gaslights, but now the train dominates the canvas. This later work is a painting of a place rather than of the people. *Election Night*, with a different perspective inviting the viewer to enter, is a painting of New Yorkers and their revelry that November night in 1907 in Herald Square.



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)
Six O'Clock, Winter, 1912
 Oil on canvas
 Acquired 1922
 The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

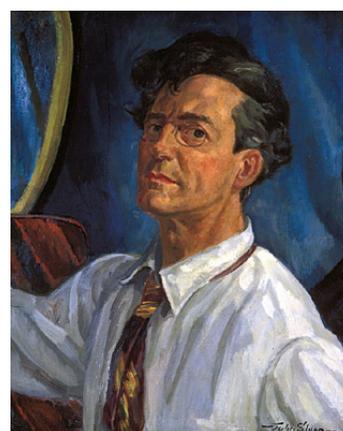
The Artist



Though a living cannot be made at art, art makes life worth living. It makes living, living. It makes starving, living. It makes worry, it makes trouble, it makes a life that would be barren of everything—living. It brings life to life.¹

Born in 1871 in Pennsylvania to a poor family, John Sloan taught himself to draw by copying prints, especially those of his favorite artists Honoré Daumier and William Hogarth, both famous for their political and social satire. In 1891 he went to work at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as a newspaper illustrator and cartoonist. He began formal study of art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1892, and stayed through 1894. In 1904 Sloan and his wife, Dolly, moved to New York City where he continued his work as an illustrator. They lived in Chelsea, one of the city's commercial centers, where shops, moving picture parlors, and entertainment halls of every sort clustered around Sixth Avenue.

Sloan loved New York and became increasingly interested in painting the life of the city. His apartment looked out on what he termed "the busy throng on [West] 23rd Street." The New York Sloan observed become the subject of his prints and paintings—people walking, working, and playing amidst the elevated train tracks, streets, shops, and bars of his neighborhood.



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)
Self-Portrait, Working, 1916
 Oil, Windsor & Newton Copal Varnish, wax finish on canvas
 Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire; Gift of John and Helen Farr Sloan

Defying the traditional techniques and subject matter of the art academies, John Sloan soon became a part of the new group experimenting with urban realism. These artists captured the robust vitality and rough sort of beauty they found in city living. Their freely painted scenes of daily life and portraits of the urban poor earned them the derisive term **Ashcan School**.

Although Sloan's work appeared in many exhibitions, including the legendary 1913 **Armory Show**, he did not find many buyers. He was, however, a successful and popular teacher at New York City's Art Students League, teaching such well-known and diverse artists as Alexander Calder and Reginald Marsh.

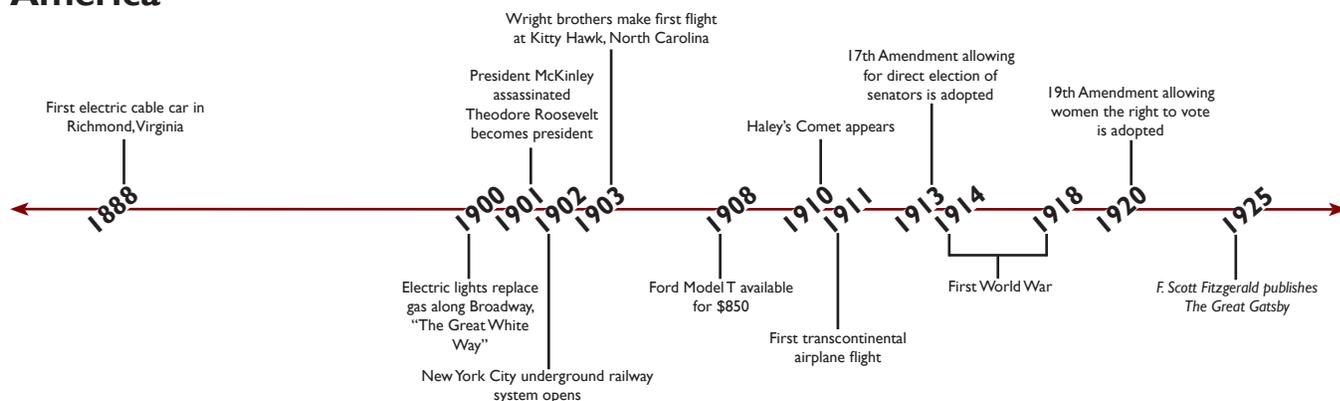
While Sloan himself was very much interested in politics—he favored women's right to vote and was even a member of the Socialist Party—he was adamant that his paintings were not meant to politicize any social or economic issue. His art was a celebration of the life—the beauty as well as the harshness—of the city's neighborhoods and structures.

Glossary

Ashcan School: Early 20th century group of American painters who portrayed scenes of urban life. Originally used by critics as a negative term, deriding their choice of subject matter.

Armory Show: Held in 1913, the Armory Show was the first major international exhibition of modern art held in the United States.

America



The early decades of the twentieth century were a vibrant, expansive, energetic time in America, and no place celebrated more confidently than New York City. The city's population grew rapidly as immigrants from rural America as well as many foreign countries came seeking opportunities and possibilities.

When Teddy Roosevelt, former New York City Police Commissioner and New York State Governor, became President of the United States in 1901, his Progressive Era promised reforms in wages and working conditions. At the same time trade union membership rose, and women were gaining the right to vote in many states. But Tammany Hall, the political patronage machine of "Boss Tweed," still dominated New York politics, and while the women in *Election Night* are celebrating, they would have to wait until November 1920 to actually vote.

The growing city both fostered and fed the twentieth-century romance with new technology. Municipal electricity utilities replaced gas lighting with modern electric lights, and by 1907, the local election results could be triumphantly flashed on the side of the New York Herald Building, as seen in *Election Night* on the far left. In public transportation, New York, already a city of



Herald Square circa 1907, with 34th Street to the left, Broadway in the middle and the elevated train tracks running south down the Avenue of the Americas (6th Avenue), ca. 1907

Photographic print, Geo. P. Hall & Son
Library of Congress

LC-USZ62-131950 and 131951

commuters, eagerly adapted to the needs of the times. Just as the twelve-seat stagecoach had earlier given way to the horse-drawn street railway, by the late nineteenth century, the electric trolley system had replaced the horses. In 1867, the first elevated railway system, the steam-driven “L,” opened, running the length of Manhattan parallel to numbered avenues. And now, early in the new century, electric engines replaced the “L’s” steam engines. From our perspective a century later, *Election Night* seems to prefigure the heady acceleration of the pace of life.

¹John Sloan, *Gist of Art: Principles and Practices Expounded in the Classroom and Studio*, 2nd Edition (New York: American Artists Group, 1944), 35.

See also Grant Holcomb, “John Sloan: Election Night (1907), Chinese Restaurant (1909),” in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 149–51.



Unknown photographer
Hester Street, New York City, ca. 1903
National Archives and Records Administration,
Records of the Public Housing Administration
196-GS-369

Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell you where and when this is?

How does knowing the title, *Election Night*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



Comparing and Contrasting

Compare *Election Night* with John Sloan's 1912 painting, *Six O'clock, Winter* (originally titled *Third Avenue, Six O'Clock*). What evidence can you see that both paintings portray the same New York City location? What changes has the artist made? In what ways do the two paintings produce different effects on the viewer?



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)

Election Night, 1907

Oil on canvas

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Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)

Six O'clock, Winter, 1912

Oil on canvas

Acquired 1922

The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

Finding and Analyzing Point of View

What was life like in early-20th century New York City? Compare John Sloan's view of life in New York City with that of other early-20th century American artists. Explore how each used line, color, composition and choice of subject matter to tell a story.



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Everett Shinn (1876 – 1953)

Sullivan Street, 1900–1905

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 45.45

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)

Chinese Restaurant, 1909

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.12

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Jerome Myers (1867 – 1940)

Sunday Morning, 1907

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 98.74

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

Finding and Analyzing Point of View

American artists lived through periods of great technological change. Many paintings record the transformation of the national landscape while others capture Americans' excitement about the technology itself. What do you think was the point of view of each of these artists?



Stuart Davis (1894 – 1964)

Landscape with Garage Lights, 1931-1932

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.3

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester
Art © Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



John Sloan (1871 – 1951)

Election Night, 1907

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 41.33

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Jonas Lie (1880 – 1940)

Morning on the River, ca. 1911-1912

Oil on canvas

Gift of Ruth Sibley Gade in memory of James G. Averell, 13.6

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Ralston Crawford (1906 – 1978)

Whitstone Bridge, 1939-1940

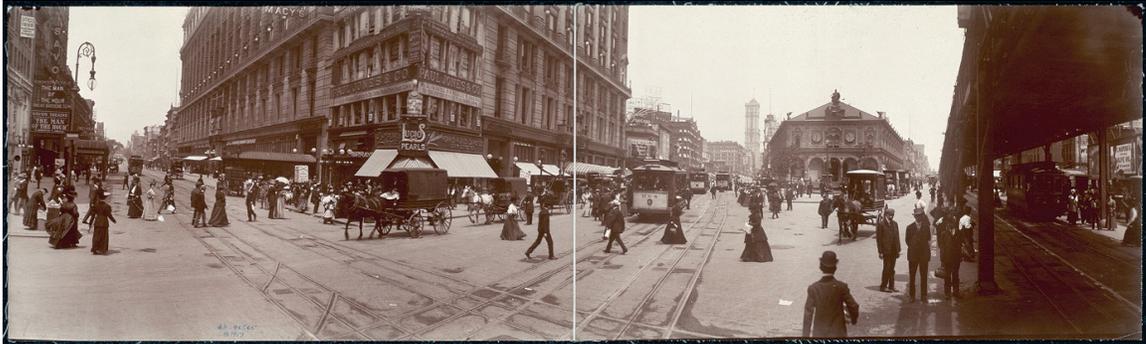
Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.2

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

Exploring the Context

This photograph was taken the same year that John Sloan painted *Election Night*. What similarities can you see between the painting and the photograph? What clues can you find that tell you the location of this street corner? How many modes of transportation can you find in this 1907 photograph of New York City?



Herald Square circa 1907, with 34th Street to the left, Broadway in the middle and the elevated train tracks running south down the Avenue of the Americas (6th Avenue), ca. 1907

Photographic print, Geo. P. Hall & Son

Library of Congress

LC-USZ62-131950 and 131951

Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist* and *America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

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