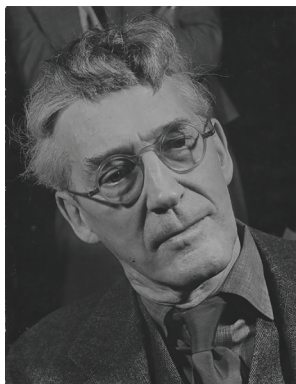


John Sloan



John Sloan, ca. 1930 / Hansel Mieth, photographer. Forbes Watson papers, 1840–1967, bulk 1900–1960. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

John French Sloan was born in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, on August 2, 1871, to James Dixon Sloan, a salesman, and Henrietta Ireland, an English teacher. His father, an unsuccessful businessman, struggled financially, and eventually the Sloans lost their home and moved to Philadelphia. At sixteen, Sloan left high school to help support his parents and two sisters. He briefly worked as an errand boy at a law firm before securing a job at a book and print store. There, he copied drawings and taught himself how to etch using Philip Gilbert Hamerton's *The Etcher's Handbook*. In 1890, he began to work at a stationery store, where he designed calendars and greeting cards in addition to selling his etchings.

While working at the stationery store Sloan attended night classes at the Spring Garden Institute, and, in 1892, he joined the staff of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as a newspaper artist. The same year, he began to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts under artist Thomas Anshutz (1851–1912). He met artist Robert Henri (1865–1929) around this time, who encouraged Sloan to become a painter. He joined Henri's circle of friends, which included artists William Glackens (1870–1938), Everett Shinn (1876–1953), and George Luks (1867–1933). In 1895, Sloan took a job at the *Philadelphia Press*, where he created illustrations, puzzles, and comic-strip riddles. This job would later serve as his main source of steady income as he tried to transition to a career as an artist.

Sloan married Anna Maria Wall (known as Dolly) in 1901, and the couple moved to New York City in 1904. They settled in Greenwich Village, and he began to paint scenes of urban street life. In contrast to romanticized genre paintings that were popular among the establishment, Sloan chose to portray working class subjects and the gritty realities of the city. Many of his friends from Philadelphia had also migrated to New York City by this point. He became a part of a group known as “The Eight,” which was organized by Henri and included Glackens, Shinn, and Luks, as well as Ernest Lawson (1873–1939), Arthur B. Davies (1863–1928), and Maurice Prendergast (1858–1924). The Eight eschewed aestheticism and conventional artistic styles in favor of representational realism. They often worked from direct observation and sought to depict authentic images from American life.

Initially, Sloan did not receive commercial success as an artist, and he struggled to sell his paintings. He did, however, participate in several important exhibitions: *The Eight* at the MacBeth Gallery in 1908, the *Exhibition of Independent Artists* in 1910, and *The Armory Show* in 1913. These avant-garde shows worked to expand the

exhibiting opportunities for artists outside of the National Academy and brought European modernism to the United States. Finally, in 1916, Sloan received a solo show at Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's gallery.

Although Sloan depicted working-class people and was sympathetic to their plight, he did not allow politics to filter into his art. Politically progressive, he joined the Socialist party in 1910 and began to serve as the art editor for the socialist magazine, *The Masses*, two years later. He eventually resigned from the magazine in 1916, in part because of his unwillingness to incorporate overt political content in his illustrations.

During the mid-1910s, Sloan spent several summers in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and he moved away from dark, somber urban, scenes in favor of bright, fauvist landscapes. The artist also began to teach at the Arts Students League during this time. An energetic instructor known for his intense critiques, he taught students Alexander Calder (1898–1976), David Smith (1906–1965), and Barnett Newman (1905–1970). In 1918, Sloan was named president of the Society of Independent Artists, and he held that position until his death.

Sloan spent his first summer in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1919. The next year, he bought a house there and returned most summers for the rest of his life. Sloan became integrated into the community and local art scene, and



John Sloan (American, 1871–1951), *The Lafayette*, 1927, 30 1/2 x 36 1/8 in., oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of The Friends of John Sloan, 1928, 28.18

he was especially interested in American Indian art. In New Mexico, he primarily painted southwestern landscapes, Indian traditions, and Santa Fe street scenes. Besides these works, Sloan shifted his artistic focus in the 1920s to female nudes. He experimented with a new technique, overlaying graphic hatch marks on his painted figures.

In 1939, Sloan published *Gist of Art*, a book that expounded his artistic philosophy and the motivations behind his work. He continued to produce art despite some health problems in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and in 1950, he was awarded a gold medal for painting by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1951, Sloan spent the summer in Hanover, New Hampshire, while preparing for a major retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He died September 7, 1951, several months before the exhibition opened in January of 1952.

John Sloan and his wife, Dolly, moved from Philadelphia to Greenwich Village in 1904. He became a fascinated observer of daily New York City life. In his first few years there, he created a series of voyeuristic urban paintings, depicting scenes from everyday life. *Sunset, West Twenty-third Street* (23rd Street, Roofs, *Sunset*) is one such work, and the first in a series of rooftop subjects. Started in early 1906, the image depicts an unexpectedly tranquil moment in Manhattan. In the bottom right corner of the painting Dolly stands on the roof of their studio apartment on West Twenty-Third Street with her back to the viewer. She pauses from hanging her laundry on the line and looks out towards the sunset.

The hulking mass of the old Fifth Avenue Hotel (which was located on 200 Fifth Avenue between Twenty-Third and Twenty-Fourth Streets from 1859 to 1908) dominates the view; its shadowed form rising above nearby buildings. Unlike the majority of Sloan's city scenes, where buildings and streets function as a backdrop for human activity, this painting highlights the built environment. He transforms the otherwise unremarkable setting into a panoramic vista. The expanse of dark buildings silhouetted against the orange sun-streaked sky overshadows the small figure in the corner, and the sunset adds drama to the scene. Sloan depicts the sky in broad, spontaneous strokes, its orange light contrasting with his otherwise somber palette. Most of his colors are on the darker end of the spectrum, but even in the shadows he employs a range of tones with subtle grays, off-whites, and browns. The resulting painting captures the beauty of the changing times of day and offers a snapshot into everyday unvarnished city life.

According to diary entries, Sloan spent much of the winter of 1906 working on *Sunset, West Twenty-third Street*. He submitted the completed painting to the Society of American Artists exhibition jury for its spring show, but the work was not accepted. This rejection was typical of Sloan's experiences with the academic art world early in his career. His frank and honest depictions of urban life were too radical for the prevailing tastes of the time. Years later, in his book *Gist of Art*, Sloan reflected on this work, writing, “In the foreground Dolly Sloan, the little woman, looks toward the west from the roof of our studio apartment, not knowing that thirty years later we will have two studios off that way, one in the Hotel Chelsea in the next block, one beyond the horizon in Santa Fe, New Mexico.”

Discussion Questions

What can you discover about New York City from John Sloan's artworks?



What was 'The Eight's' philosophical approach to art?



How did immigration impact Sloan's compositions?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's related academic standards and lesson plans.

Immigration in John Sloan's New York City

keen observer of everyday urban life, depicted immigrants in his paintings. His voyeuristic works frequently portray people going about their daily business, which provides an insight into the immigrant experience at the turn of the century.

Prior to the Civil War and up through the 1880s, the majority of immigrants arriving on the East Coast came from Western Europe—countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Germany. In the last few decades of the nineteenth century, the face of immigration shifted, with more people arriving from Eastern European countries such as Poland, Russia, and Italy. Though there were several ports through which these immigrants could arrive, over 70 percent came through New York City, which became known as the “Golden Door.” Cities on the West Coast, in contrast, mainly saw the arrival of immigrants from Asia.

The flood of newcomers prompted anti-immigrant sentiment among some Americans as well as a series of legislation enacted to control the arrival of immigrants. The first significant law was the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred Chinese laborers from entering the United States for a ten year period and placed strict requirements on Chinese nationals who had already immigrated. The 1891 Immigration Act created broader restrictions on who could enter the country, namely excluding those who could be deemed a public charge on society—that is, someone who is dependent on the government for subsistence. With the passage of this act, the United States

The Eight



Everett Shinn, Robert Henri, and John Sloan, c. 1896 (unidentified photographer, black and white print). Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

The Eight was a group of American Realist painters that emerged in New York City around the turn of the twentieth century. It included Robert Henri (1865–1929), the group's founder and leader, Arthur B. Davies (1863–1928), William J. Glackens (1870–1938), Ernest Lawson (1873–1939), George Luks (1867–1933), Maurice Prendergast (1858–1924), Everett Shinn (1876–1953), and John Sloan (1871–1951). The artists set themselves apart by rejecting American Impressionism and academic art, the prevailing artistic trends of the time. Instead, members of The Eight looked to European realists such as Wilhelm Liebl (1844–1900), Édouard Manet (1832–1883), and Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) for inspiration.

The artists that made up The Eight were united by their approach to art and their portrayal of similar subject matter, rather than by style or technique. Subscribing to Henri's credo “art for life's sake,” they believed in creating works whose significance transcended the world of art and bore meaning in everyday life. The artists painted raw scenes from contemporary urban culture. Their art recorded the underbelly or seedy side of New York City, often featuring tenements and slums, pool halls, street urchins, and immigrants in their works. The America they depicted was one in the process of transformation. Immigration to the United States was surging, rapid technological advances were altering daily life, and the politics of the progressive era were bringing political shifts as well. Through their paintings, members of The Eight documented these changing times with optimism.

In 1908, the artists had their first and only group show, *The Eight*, at the MacBeth Gallery in New York City. The show was popular among the general public and was well attended, although it received mixed reviews from art critics. Some critics were impressed by the daring nature of the work, whereas others disliked the subject matter and dismissed the art as poorly made.

New Shoes



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): George Luks (American, 1867–1933) *New Shoes*, 1921, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in., Gift of Mrs. Bertha Mengedoht-Hatz, 1956.166; Robert Henri (American, 1865–1929), *Consuelo in Black*, 1924, oil on canvas, 32 x 26 in., Anonymous gift, 2012.6; George Luks, *Widow McGee*, 1902, oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in., Museum purchase, J. Laurie Wallace Memorial Fund, 1954.146; all Joslyn Art Museum collection

Several years after the MacBeth Gallery exhibition, The Eight were redubbed the Ashcan School, initially intended as a disparaging term, by critics and curators. The name originates from a drawing by American realist and Henri student, George Bellows (1882–1925), entitled “Disappointments of the Ash Can” (1915). In the black and white newspaper drawing, three bums look at scraps taken from a trashcan. Over time this artificial categorization grew to encompass later generations of realists as well, including Bellows, Gifford Beal (1879–1956), and Jerome Myers (1867–1940).

Although The Eight only exhibited together once, they were an important group in the development and progression of American art in the first part of the twentieth century. By pushing against American artistic conventions, these artists established themselves as early avant-gardists in the United States. Furthermore, their landmark exhibition paved the way for later avant-garde shows, such as *The Armory Show* in 1913 that brought European modernism in full force to the North American continent.



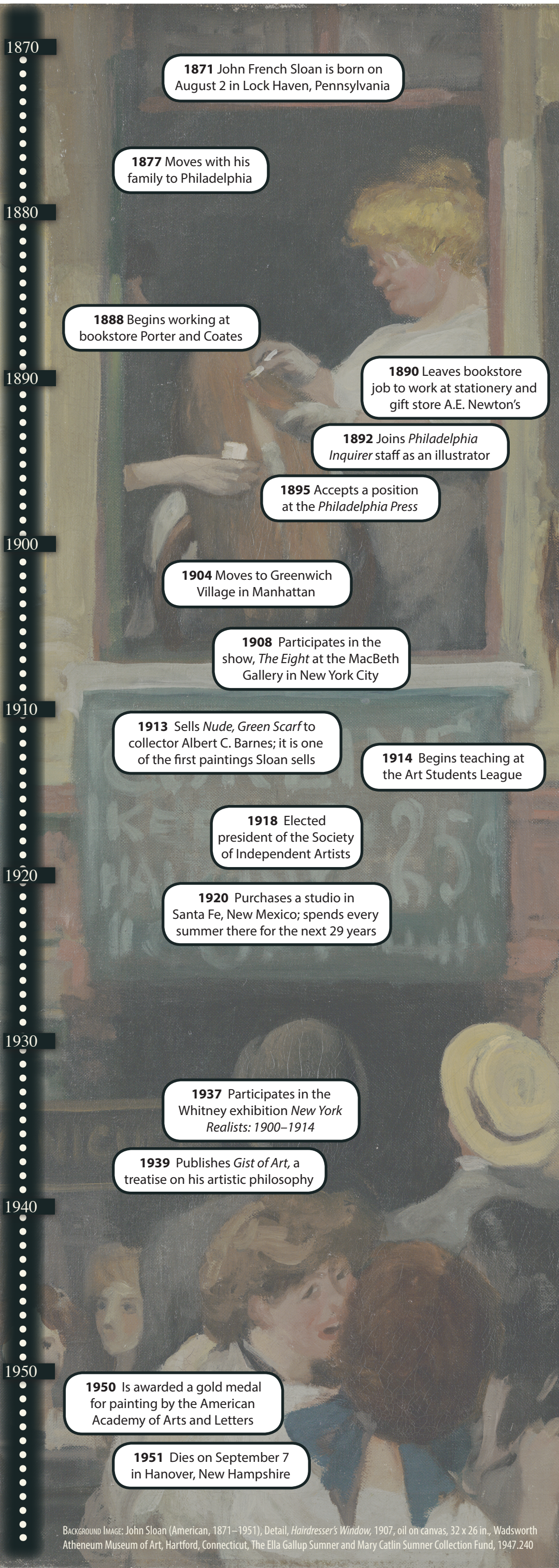
IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM): John Sloan (American, 1871–1951), *Dust Storm, Fifth Avenue*, 1906, oil on canvas, 22 x 27 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, George A. Hearn Fund, 1921, 21.42.2; John Sloan, *Sunday, Women Drying Their Hair*, 1912, oil on canvas, 26 1/8 x 32 1/8 in., Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts, Museum Purchase, 1938.67

government established the processing center on Ellis Island in New York Harbor. Ellis Island was in operation from 1892 to 1954 and millions of people passed through its doors over the years.

Once in the United States, immigrants often sought out communities of their homelands and settled near ports of entry. This meant that New York City became a hub for newly arrived immigrants. Though they had reached the so-called land of opportunity, life remained difficult for immigrants. Sloan, who arrived in New York City from Philadelphia in 1904, would have been at the center of this influx of newcomers. He and his wife, Dolly, settled in lower Manhattan, where many immigrants lived in tenements: crowded, low-rise houses that had been divided into multiple apartments. Tenements were cramped and unsanitary, often lacking indoor plumbing or adequate lighting. By 1900 two-thirds of New York City's population was living in tenement districts.

Additionally, finding well-paying work was challenging. Employment in overcrowded cities was scarce and employers often took advantage of immigrants, paying them less than their American-born counterparts. Immigrant women were paid even less. Over time, however, immigrant groups' conditions improved as they became more and more established in the United States. European ethnic groups became accepted into American society and their diverse backgrounds and traditions transformed American culture.

Timeline



1871 John French Sloan is born on August 2 in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania

1877 Moves with his family to Philadelphia

1888 Begins working at bookstore Porter and Coates

1890 Leaves bookstore job to work at stationery and gift store A.E. Newton's

1892 Joins *Philadelphia Inquirer* staff as an illustrator

1895 Accepts a position at the *Philadelphia Press*

1904 Moves to Greenwich Village in Manhattan

1908 Participates in the show, *The Eight* at the MacBeth Gallery in New York City

1913 Sells *Nude, Green Scarf* to collector Albert C. Barnes; it is one of the first paintings Sloan sells

1914 Begins teaching at the Art Students League

1918 Elected president of the Society of Independent Artists

1920 Purchases a studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico; spends every summer there for the next 29 years

1937 Participates in the Whitney exhibition *New York Realists: 1900–1914*

1939 Publishes *Gist of Art*, a treatise on his artistic philosophy

1950 Is awarded a gold medal for painting by the American Academy of Arts and Letters

1951 Dies on September 7 in Hanover, New Hampshire

Background Image: John Sloan (American, 1871–1951), Detail, *Hairdresser's Window*, 1907, oil on canvas, 32 x 26 in., Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund, 1947.240



JOHN SLOAN
American, 1871–1951

SUNSET, WEST TWENTY-THIRD STREET (23RD STREET, ROOFS, SUNSET)
1906, oil on canvas, 25 1/8 x 45 1/8 in.

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM OMAHA, NEBRASKA
25th Anniversary Purchase, 1957.15