In August 1910 the realist painter John Sloan began this group portrait of regulars at Petitpas', a French restaurant and boardinghouse in the Chelsea district of Manhattan. The work joined other Ashcan school artists' depictions of casual dining experiences in urban eateries that focused on portraiture and narrative, such as *At Mouquin's* by William Glackens (American, 1870 - 1938) [fig. 1]. The Ashcan school, informally led by Robert Henri (American, 1865 - 1929), generally focused on the everyday life of the working classes rather than idealized views of the city. George Luks (American, 1866 - 1933) and George Bellows (American, 1882 - 1925) completed a watercolor and a print, respectively, featuring Petitpas' as well [fig. 2], but Sloan’s large image in oil is the most ambitious of the three. [2]

The scene takes place in the enclosed backyard of the restaurant, where the dining room was located in the hot summer months. The party gathers around a table placed under an awning decorated with a French flag. [3] At the head sits John Butler Yeats, smoking and sketching. Yeats, the Irish portrait painter and father of the poet William Butler Yeats, lived at Petitpas’ from 1909 until his death in 1922. While in residence, he attracted artists and literary figures to his table with his
reputation as an excellent conversationalist. Those who dine with Yeats in Sloan’s depiction include (around the table from left to right) Van Wyck Brooks, the future literary critic, to the left of Yeats; Alan Seeger, a poet; Dolly Sloan, wife of the artist; Robert Sneddon, a Scottish writer of popular fiction; Eulabee Dix, a miniature painter; the artist; Frederick King, the editor of Literary Digest; and Vera Jelihovsky Johnston, the wife of the Irish scholar Charles Johnston. [4] Celestine Petitpas, the youngest of the three sisters who ran the establishment, stands behind Sneddon and offers him a piece of fruit.

While many 20th-century writers and critics characterized the painting as an illustration of the conversationalist Yeats’s nightly salons or as a representation of early New York bohemianism, recent scholars have interpreted the group portrait set at Petitpas’ as a tribute to the artist John Butler Yeats, who was a significant mentor to Sloan. [5] Sloan’s first influential adviser, Henri, had advocated depicting urban subjects quickly and succinctly in order to capture their vitality. According to Sloan’s biographer, Van Wyck Brooks, Sloan rejected Henri’s methods later in his career, because he believed Henri’s teaching had not adequately emphasized detailed study. [6] This bothered Sloan most when attempting portraits, with which he struggled his entire career. Unlike Henri, Yeats encouraged the younger man to “finish his work to the last degree . . . to give it importance and force.” [7] Yeats strongly believed that making likenesses was a vital learning tool for all artists, and that the practice of self-portraiture tested an artist’s skills most heavily, since it was especially hard to render one’s own likeness to one’s satisfaction. [8] Yeats himself constantly made self-portraits, including them in his letters to family and friends. In addition to his advice, Yeats’s regular practice of drawing his companions influenced Sloan and his work. Sloan owned several of Yeats’s sketches, including portraits of Dix [fig. 3], Celestine Petitpas [fig. 4], and Sneddon [fig. 5]. Sloan probably referred to these drawings when painting Yeats at Petitpas’, as his renderings of these individuals appear very similar to Yeats’s sketches. [9]

Sloan’s admiration of, and even deference to, Yeats as a portraitist reveals itself in Yeats at Petitpas’. Most New Yorkers, even his intimates, saw the older man primarily as a superb conversationalist and a direct link to the Irish literary revival, led in part by Yeats’s famous son. [10] Bellows’s lithograph of Petitpas’ features Yeats standing in discussion with Henri and Bellows while Henri’s wife draws at a table in the background. But in Sloan’s painting, Yeats is silent, a cigar in his mouth, and the red-haired Frederick King holds forth. Importantly, Sloan shows Yeats making a portrait, likely of Mrs. Johnston, who poses opposite him on the near side
of the table, while Sloan himself sits quietly at the far corner of the table, nearly removed from the scene altogether. By picturing Yeats sketching one of the group, Sloan refers to the fact that Yeats helped supply the likenesses of these people. Sloan’s careful rendering of himself also functions as a tribute to Yeats, the perpetual self-portraitist. Sloan’s head is the most finished of the group. His bust-length pose and detached gaze, which make him seem distanced from the interactions of the table, are more in line with formal portraits than with the quickly sketched, animated likenesses of his friends. Sloan has taken the advice of his mentor and worked hard on his own visage, an exercise he must have hoped would aid him in the future.

The painting’s title pays tribute to one man, but Yeats at Petitpas’ can also be interpreted as a commemoration by Sloan of an important period in his own life. Sloan’s diaries reveal that as his friendship with Yeats gathered momentum during late 1909 and 1910, Yeats introduced the Sloans to his coterie of friends who frequented Petitpas’, including many of those featured in this painting. Soon the couple were regular, welcomed members of an exclusive circle. In addition to warm social connections, Sloan must have associated Petitpas’ with several professional accomplishments of that year. In April a party was held there after a viewing of the Exhibition of Independent Artists, a project Sloan had worked ceaselessly to realize and which enjoyed great popular success. [11] Then, on June 10 at Petitpas’, Yeats paid Sloan an important compliment, which the artist eagerly recorded in his diary: “of all the contemporary painting and etching in America mine was most likely to last!” [12] Sloan decided to begin Yeats at Petitpas’ on his birthday, August 2, further attesting to the painting’s function as a commemoration of a year of new friends and artistic self-confidence. [13]

Laura Napolitano
August 17, 2018

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

NOTES


[2] Luks’s watercolor (location unknown) is entitled John Butler Yeats at Petitpas’ (n.d.).


[9] Rowland Elzea, the author of the Sloan paintings catalogue raisonné, believes Sloan used these portraits as aide-mémoire for the painting; Rowland Elzea to Joan Gaines (daughter of Eulabee Dix), May 19, 1988, NGA curatorial files.


TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting was executed on a plain-weave, medium-weight canvas and, using a wax adhesive, was lined with a linen of similar weight. The fabric has an ivory-colored ground that is smoothly applied, leaving the fabric texture still visible. The ground may have been commercially applied, but it is impossible to be certain because the tacking margins have been removed. The stretcher is a modern replacement. In general the paint is relatively opaque and thick with additions of a good amount of white. Evidence suggests that the artist first sketched the design with thin, dark paint, as can be seen in the figure of the young man with his head on his hand. Next Sloan used medium thick paint applied with vigorous brush strokes to largely complete the composition, often blending the paint wet into wet. After the paint had dried the artist made modifications, lightening some areas and darkening others, often with thinner, semitransparent paint. No major compositional changes have been noted. According to the conservation files of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, the painting was “patched, filled, inpainted and varnished” in 1967. In 1971 an old glue lining was removed and replaced with a new lining with a wax/resin adhesive at which time the stretcher was replaced. The varnish and some old retouching were then removed, a new varnish was applied, and a small loss beneath the table was inpainted. At the time of this treatment a natural resin was applied. In 1982 the painting was revarnished with two more layers of synthetic resin.

PROVENANCE

(C.W. Kraushaar Galleries, New York); purchased 1932 by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1917 Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings and Etchings by John Sloan, C.W. Kraushaar Art Galleries, New York, 19 March - 7 April 1917, no. 8.


1921 John Sloan, George Luks and Augustus Vincent Tack, City Club, New York, March-April 1921.

1927 26th Annual International Exhibition of Paintings, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 13 October - 4 December 1927, no. 77, repro.


1928 The Twenty-Sixth Annual International Exhibition of Paintings Organized by the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Brooklyn Museum, 9 January - 19 February 1928, no. 77.


1934 A Survey of American Painting, Baltimore Museum of Art, 10 January - 28 February 1934, no. 54.


1957 Portraiture: The 19th and 20th Centuries, Munson-Williams-Procter Institute, Utica; Baltimore Museum of Art; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts; Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, 1957, no. 40.

1958 Retrospective Exhibition of Paintings from Previous Internationals, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 5 December 1958 - 8 February 1959, no. 43.


1985 John Sloan: Painter of the American Scene, Queens Museum, Flushing, 5 October - 17 November 1985, no. 3.
1985 Strokes of Genius, Dulin Gallery of Art, Knoxville, 30 March - 28 April 1985, no. 35.


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    3 (January 1928): 44, repro.
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    Telegraph (c. 29 March 1928): newspaper clipping, John Sloan Vertical
1928  "Sloan Sale Sets American Record." Chicago Evening Post (3 April 1928):
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1932 *Art News* 31, no. 6 (5 November 1932): 2, repro.
1932 "Corcoran Buys Three Works from Biennial." *Art Digest* 7, no. 7 (1 January 1933): 15, repro.
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