



John Sloan
American, 1871 - 1951

Yeats at Petitpas'

1910/c. 1914

oil on canvas

overall: 66.2 × 81.28 cm (26 1/16 × 32 in.)

framed: 80.96 × 96.36 × 6.51 cm (31 7/8 × 37 15/16 × 2 9/16 in.)

Inscription: lower right: John Sloan

Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, Gallery Fund) 2014.136.54

ENTRY

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]. [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

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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



fig. 1 William Glackens, *At Mouquin's*, 1925, oil on canvas, The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection, 1925.295. © The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY



fig. 2 George Bellows, *Artists' Evening*, 1916, lithograph, The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Museum Purchase, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts Endowment Fund, 1967.22.11. © The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

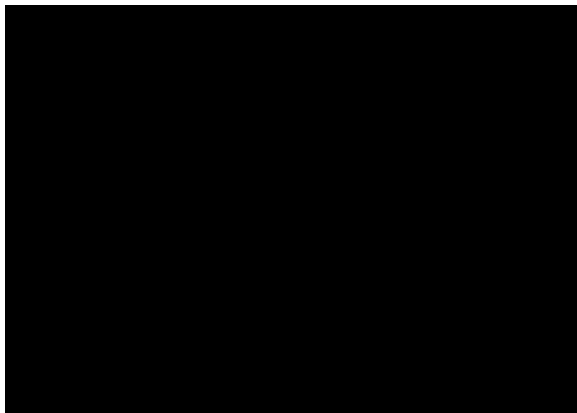


fig. 3 John Butler Yeats, *Miss Eulabee Dix*, c. 1910, graphite on heavy paper, Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1978

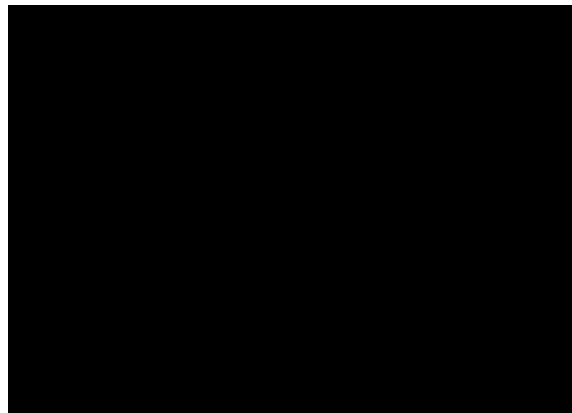


fig. 4 John Butler Yeats, *Mlle. Petitpas*, c. 1910, graphite on heavy paper, Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1978

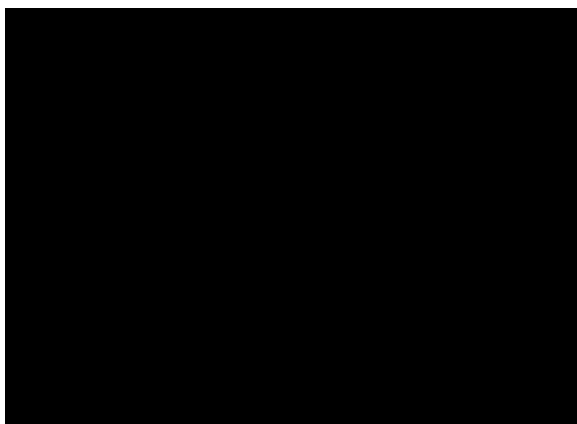


fig. 5 John Butler Yeats, *Robert W. Sneddon*, c. 1910, graphite on heavy paper, Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1978

NOTES

- [1] Valerie Ann Leeds, “Pictorial Pleasures: Leisure Themes and the Henri Circle,” in James W. Tottis et al., *Life’s Pleasures: The Ashcan Artists’ Brush with Leisure, 1895–1925* (New York, 2007), 25.

- [2] Luks's watercolor (location unknown) is entitled *John Butler Yeats at Petitpas'* (n.d.).
- [3] The backyard of Petitpas' is described in W. Adolph Roberts, "He Started Again after 70," *New York Herald Tribune Magazine*, Feb. 19, 1933, sec. 11, 9.
- [4] Van Wyck Brooks, *John Sloan: A Painter's Life* (New York, 1955), 102.
- [5] For older views of the painting, see James C. Young, "Yeats of Petitpas'," *New York Times Book Review and Magazine*, Feb. 19, 1922, 14; Herbert Gorman, "The Bohemian Life in America: Its History from the 1850s down to Greenwich Village Days," *New York Times Book Review*, Mar. 5, 1933, sec. 5, 1; and William M. Murphy, "John Butler Yeats: The Artist and the Man," in Fintan Cullen, *The Drawings of John Butler Yeats* (Albany, NY, 1986), 15. For readings of the picture as honoring and celebrating Yeats, see Laura Groves Napolitano, "Yeats at Petitpas': John Sloan's Tribute to an Artistic Mentor," (unpublished manuscript, 2003), NGA curatorial files; Valerie Ann Leeds, "Pictorial Pleasures: Leisure Themes and the Henri Circle," in James W. Tottis et al., *Life's Pleasures: The Ashcan Artists' Brush with Leisure, 1895–1925* (New York, 2007), 27; and Katherine E. Manthorne, "John Sloan, Moving Pictures, and Celtic Spirits," in Heather Campbell Coyle and Joyce K. Schiller, *John Sloan's New York* (Wilmington, DE, 2007), 152.
- [6] Yeats criticized Sloan's style as having a certain carelessness, which he attributed to Henri's early influence; Van Wyck Brooks, *John Sloan: A Painter's Life* (New York, 1955), 118–119.
- [7] Yeats to Sloan, quoted in Van Wyck Brooks, *John Sloan: A Painter's Life* (New York, 1955), 120.
- [8] James C. Young, "Yeats of Petitpas'," *New York Times Book Review and Magazine*, Feb. 19, 1922, 14. Yeats wrote to Sloan that "there is nothing so improving as painting portraits, particularly if you meet with terrible difficulties"; quoted in John Loughery, *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (New York, 1995), 166.
- [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.
- [10] Van Wyck Brooks, *Scenes and Portraits: Memories of Childhood and Youth* (New York, 1954), 172–173.
- [11] Sloan, diary entry dated Apr. 5, 1910, in *John Sloan's New York Scene*, ed. Bruce St. John (New York, 1965), 407.
- [12] Sloan, diary entry dated June 10, 1910, in *John Sloan's New York Scene*, ed. Bruce St. John (New York, 1965), 432–433.

[13] Sloan, diary entry dated Aug. 2, 1910, in *John Sloan's New York Scene*, ed. Bruce St. John (New York, 1965), 444–445.

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

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1916 Robert Henri, George Bellows, John Sloan, Arts Club of Chicago, November 1916.

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

1918 113th Annual Exhibition, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 3 February - 24 March 1918, no. 462.

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.

1927 Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings, Etchings and Lithographs by John Sloan, C.W. Kraushaar Art Galleries, New York, 15 February - 5 March 1927, no. 4.

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

1932 John Sloan, Van Deering Perrine and Helen M. Turner, Grand Central Art Galleries, New York, October 1932.

1932 Thirteenth Exhibition of Contemporary American Oils, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 4 December 1932 - 15 January 1933, no. 133.

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

1937 New York Realists 1900-1914, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 9 February - 5 March 1937, no. 77.

1938 John Sloan: Retrospective Exhibition, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, 1938, no. 13.

1942 20th Century Portraits, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 9 December 1942 - 24 January 1943, unnumbered checklist.

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1945 Artists of the Philadelphia Press: William Glackens, George Luks, Everett Shinn, John Sloan, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 14 October - 18 November 1945, no. 58, repro.

1952 John Sloan, 1871-1951, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, Toledo (Ohio) Museum of Art, 1952, no. 26.

1956 Marsden Hartley, Edward Hopper, Walt Kuhn, John Sloan, Arts Club of Chicago, 8 May - 15 June 1956, no. 37.

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.

1962 The Art of John Sloan 1871-1951, Walker Art Museum, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, 20 January - 28 February 1962, no. 17, repro.

1966 Past and Present: 250 Years of American Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 15 April - 30 September 1966, unpublished checklist.

1971 John Sloan: 1871-1951, National Gallery of Art, Washington; Georgia Museum of Art, Athens; M.H. De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, 1971-1972, no. 71.

1972 Conservation in the Museum, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 15 September - 22 October 1972, unpublished checklist.

1976 The American Genius: W.W. Corcoran, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 24 January - 4 April 1976, unnumbered catalogue.

1982 Japanese Artists Who Studied in the USA and the American Scene, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, 1982, no. 71.

1985 Henri's Circle, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 20 April - 16 June 1985, unnumbered checklist.

1985 John Sloan: Painter of the American Scene, Queens Museum, Flushing, 5 October - 17 November 1985, no. 3.

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1985 Strokes of Genius, Dulin Gallery of Art, Knoxville, 30 March - 28 April 1985, no. 35.

1988 John Sloan: Spectator of Life, IBM Gallery of Science and Art, New York; Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington; Columbus Museum of Art; Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, 1988, no. 51.

1996 Gaelic Gotham: A History of the Irish in New York, Museum of the City of New York, 13 March - 27 October 1996.

1998 The Forty-Fifth Biennial: The Corcoran Collects, Corcoran Gallery of Art, 17 July - 29 September 1998, unnumbered catalogue.

2003 The Impressionist Tradition in America, Corcoran Gallery of Art, 19 July 2003 - 18 October 2004, unpublished checklist.

2004 Figuratively Speaking: The Human Form in American Art, 1770-1950, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 20 November 2004 - 7 August 2005, unpublished checklist.

2005 Encouraging American Genius: Master Paintings from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, 2005-2007, checklist no. 67.

2007 Life's Pleasures: The Ashcan Artists' Brush with Leisure, 1895-1925, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville; New-York Historical Society; Detroit Institute of Arts, 2007-2008, no. 11.

2009 American Paintings from the Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 6 June - 18 October 2009, unpublished checklist.

2013 American Journeys: Visions of Place, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013 - 28 September 2014, unpublished checklist.

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Yeats at Petitpas'

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