



John Sloan
American, 1871 - 1951

The City from Greenwich Village

1922

oil on canvas

overall: 66 x 85.7 cm (26 x 33 3/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left: John Sloan

Gift of Helen Farr Sloan 1970.1.1

ENTRY

Painted in 1922, *The City from Greenwich Village* is closely related to a number of John Sloan's earlier paintings, and is the culmination of his many views of New York City. The painting's special significance to the artist is evidenced by the fact that there are more preparatory drawings associated with this work than any of his other pictures. Sloan's book, *Gist of Art*, provides a lengthy description of *The City from Greenwich Village*:

Looking south over lower Sixth Avenue from the roof of my Washington Place studio, on a winter evening. The distant lights of the great office buildings downtown are seen in the gathering darkness. The triangular loft building on the right had contained my studio for three years before. Although painted from memory it seems thoroughly convincing in its handling of light and space. The spot on which the spectator stands is now an imaginary point since all the buildings as far as the turn of the elevated have been removed, and Sixth Avenue has been extended straight down to the business district. The picture makes a record of the beauty of

the older city which is giving way to the chopped-out towers of the modern New York. [1]

Unlike the majority of Sloan's earlier and more spontaneously executed realist paintings that represent episodes in the daily lives of New Yorkers, the subject of *The City from Greenwich Village* is the city itself. This panoramic aerial view from the roof of Sloan's studio apartment at 88 Washington Place, where he lived from 1915 to 1927, shows lower Sixth Avenue on a rainy evening as an elevated train turns the corner at Third Street and heads north. The viewer's eye is led over the picturesque rooftops to the distant upper left, where brilliantly illuminated skyscrapers are silhouetted on the horizon. The taller one, on the left, is the 60-story gothic revival Woolworth Building (completed in 1913, designed by Cass Gilbert, and the world's tallest building at that time), and at its right is the Singer Tower (1908). [2] The train boldly bisects the composition, separating the low, dormered structures on the left from the triangular loft building that rises up on the right, beyond the upper limit of the composition.

Sloan included the elevated train in a number of important early paintings, in which it serves as a backdrop for some aspect of human activity. [3] But here, only a few pedestrians have ventured forth into the inclement night, and two automobiles appear in the center foreground. *The City from Greenwich Village* is closely related to *Jefferson Market* [fig. 1], a view of the Sixth Avenue train seen from the north window of Sloan's fifth-story, Washington Place apartment. Additionally, the Varitype Building (a triangular structure in which Sloan had leased his first Greenwich Village studio in 1912) featured in the Gallery's painting is considerably smaller than the more famous but similarly shaped Flatiron Building, which Sloan included in his *Dust Storm, Fifth Avenue* (1906, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), and occupies a similar place in the composition. [4] Sloan also depicted the Varitype Building in *Cornelia Street* (1920, private collection).

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of *The City from Greenwich Village* is Sloan's skillful combination of natural and artificial light. The dim haze of the city is punctuated by numerous sources of electric light from the shop windows, a streetlight, and the headlights of the train and a car that are in turn reflected off the rainy surfaces of the street and buildings. The eminent historian of American art Lloyd Goodrich has noted that Sloan painted cityscapes "from a poetic viewpoint like that of the landscapist," and observed how, in this particular work, the artist has achieved "a subtler and deeper realization of night color than any of his early

works, which seem almost monochromatic by comparison.” [5] In addition to his nuanced portrayal of urban lighting, Sloan has also commented wittily on the artifice of the modern city by including the Moonshine advertisement on the façade of the building at the lower left. “Moonshine,” a term meaning nonsense or foolish talk, was also used to describe the illicitly distilled and distributed liquor that became popular during Prohibition. [6] Just below the fictional brand name, a truncated image of the moon evokes what the city’s artificial electric lighting so effectively obscures: natural moonlight.

In his article on *The City from Greenwich Village*, David W. Scott analyzes the five preparatory studies in the Gallery’s collection and concludes that it is impossible to place them in chronological order and definitively trace the evolution of the composition [fig. 2] [fig. 3] [fig. 4] [fig. 5] [fig. 6]. [7] None of the drawings completely accounts for the final image. For instance, in some of the sketches, Sloan has concentrated on the triangular Varitype Building and the train but omitted the distant view of lower Manhattan and its skyscrapers. Scott also discerned in Sloan’s drawings the use of the Golden Section, a system of proportions that Sloan had advocated, in the dominant vertical plane in the composition’s center. [8]

The detailed account of the painting that Sloan gives in *Gist of Art* implied that he wanted to illustrate how modernization, in the form of skyscrapers and public mass transportation systems such as elevated trains, had destroyed Greenwich Village’s formerly intimate, 19th-century ambience. The artist had lived in the Village—New York’s bohemian neighborhood—from 1912 to 1935, and during those years he had the opportunity to observe the changes wrought by urban renovation; many of the houses that he found “small and old fashioned” [9] in 1908 were demolished to make way for modern buildings. Sloan scholar Rowland Elzea cites a quote in which the artist recalled: “Automobiles fill the streets and Prohibition turned the night life of the city into a nightmare of clubs and commercial entertainment. The city was spoiled for me.” [10] Over the last two decades of his career Sloan rarely depicted New York.

Although Sloan may not have extolled New York’s transformation into a modern metropolis in *The City from Greenwich Village*, neither did he completely condemn it. Despite Sloan’s negative description of new buildings as “chopped out towers,” there is nothing particularly sinister in his depiction of lower Manhattan’s skyscrapers. On the contrary, *The City from Greenwich Village* possesses a magical quality that has led John Loughery to equate it with the Emerald City of Oz. [11] Far from being a wholesale condemnation of modernization and progress,

Sloan's painting, like Alfred Stieglitz's photograph *Old and New New York*, evokes the romanticism of the past while acknowledging contemporary realities in order to deftly capture a city in transition. [12]

Robert Torchia

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

NOTES

- [1] John Sloan, *The Gist of Art*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1977), 267.
- [2] The Singer Tower had briefly been the world's tallest building until 1909, when a 700-foot tower was added to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Building on Madison Avenue between 23rd and 24th Streets.
- [3] Examples are *Election Night in Herald Square* (1907, Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York), *Sixth Avenue and Thirtieth Street* (1907, Philadelphia Museum of Art), and *Six O'Clock, Winter* (1912, The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC). The later *Sixth Avenue Elevated at Third Street* (1928, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York) shows the bend of the El from the south, looking north toward the Jefferson Market.
- [4] David W. Scott, "The City from Greenwich Village," *Studies in the History of Art 4* (1971–1972), 108–111, has noted that this similarity is especially evident in the preparatory sketches, and has further observed that the rooftop vista devoid of human activity is characteristic of *Sunset, West Twenty-Third Street* (1906, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska), and *Rainbow, New York City* (1912, private collection).
- [5] Lloyd Goodrich, *John Sloan* (New York 1952), 54.
- [6] Rowland Elzea, *John Sloan's Oil Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (Newark, DE, 1991) 2:258, notes this double meaning.
- [7] The artist's wife, Helen Farr Sloan, donated the drawings to the National Gallery of Art in 1971 and 1972. E. John Bullard has suggested that one of them "may have been a preparatory study for an etching, which Sloan never did" (David W. Scott and E. John Bullard, *John Sloan 1871–1951* [Washington, DC, 1971], 169). David W. Scott, "The City from Greenwich Village," *Studies in the History of Art 4* (1971–1972), 108 n. 3, has cited Helen Farr Sloan's opinion that her husband "sometimes prepared precise drawings for

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transfer to an etching plate, he remarked that too much detail was a deterrent to freedom, so he may have changed his mind about making an etching after working on the complex subject.”

- [8] David W. Scott, “*The City from Greenwich Village*,” *Studies in the History of Art* (1971–1972), 115 n. 14. Scott notes that the Golden Section is also used in another of Sloan’s paintings capturing Greenwich Village’s inimitable ambience: *Bleecker Street, Saturday Night* (1918, private collection).
- [9] Diary entry of July 8, 1908, quoted in David W. Scott, “*The City from Greenwich Village*,” *Studies in the History of Art* (1971–1972), 115.
- [10] John Sloan, Notes (unpublished, recorded by Helen Farr Sloan), John Sloan Trust, Delaware Art Museum, 142. Quoted in Rowland Elzea, *John Sloan’s Oil Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (Newark, DE, 1991) 2:257.
- [11] John Loughery, *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (New York, 1995), 261. Some skyscrapers were considered more aesthetically pleasing than others. For instance, Will Irwin, *Highlights of Manhattan* (New York, 1927), 16–17, noted that the Woolworth Building was widely admired as the “Cathedral of Commerce” and considered by many to be “the most beautiful new structure in Manhattan,” while the Singer Tower was criticized for resembling “all too much one of those garish embroideries which Mr. Singer used to exhibit in the windows of his branch agencies to show what his machine could do.”
- [12] Susan Danly Walther, *The Railroad in the American Landscape: 1850–1950* (Wellesley, MA, 1981), 120, has pointed out that Stieglitz had dealt with a similar theme in his photogravure *Old and New New York* (1910, Metropolitan Museum of Art), which was illustrated in *Camera Work* 36 (Oct. 1911), plate VI.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave canvas that was primed with a white ground that is not thick enough to disguise the weave of the canvas. In 1970, National Gallery of Art conservator Frank Sullivan cut the painting from its stretcher, removing the original tacking margins in the process. It was then relined with an aqueous adhesive and stretched onto a new support. [1] The work was also cleaned and revarnished with a synthetic resin during this treatment. The paint layer is thickly applied with one layer painted over another, often with some moderate blending with the brush. For the most part, although the paint is thick the impasto and brush markings are not very pronounced. The paint layer is in good condition, with only a few small inpainted but not filled losses located in the upper

portion of the work.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Because the conservator who lined the painting also trimmed its tacking margins, it is probably near its original dimensions.

PROVENANCE

The artist [1871-1951]; his estate;[1] gift 1970 to NGA.

[1] The letter of 12 January 1970 from the artist's widow, Helen Farr Sloan, to John Bullard of the NGA (in NGA curatorial files), includes the following notes about the painting: "1923 - the picture is consigned to Kraushaar" and "1945 - Sloan gave the picture to HFS - it has been in the John Sloan Trust since Estate Period."

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1922 Sixth Annual Exhibition of The Society of Independent Artists, Waldorf Astoria, New York, March-April 1922, no. 701, as The City from Greenwich.

1922 Twenty-First Annual International Exhibition of Paintings, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, April-June 1922, no. 108, as The City, from Greenwich.

1923 Baltimore Charcoal Club, 1923.

1924 Tenth Annual Exhibition of Paintings by American Artists, Detroit Institute of Art, 1924, no. 30.

1925 First Pan-American Exhibition of Oil Paintings, Los Angeles Museum, 1925-1926.

1925 Thirty-Eighth Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture, Art Institute of Chicago, 1925, no. 200, as New York from Greenwich Village.

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1926 Sesqui-Centennial International Exposition: Paintings, Sculpture and Prints in the Department of Fine Arts, Philadelphia Museum of Art, June-December 1926, no. 280.

1926 The Tenth Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, April-May 1926, no. 259, as *The City from Greenwich*.

1932 Grand Central Gallery, New York, 1932.[1]

1934 John Sloan, Montross Gallery, New York, 1934, no. 14.

1938 John Sloan: Retrospective Exhibition, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, 1938, no. 18, repro.

1939 46th Annual Exhibition, Nebraska Art Association, Lincoln, March-April 1939, no. 39.

1939 The Forty-Sixth Annual Exhibition of American Art, Cincinnati Art Museum, October-November 1939, no. 132.

1940 John Sloan, Art Department, University of Missouri, Columbia, 1940.

1940 Oil Paintings by John Sloan, Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire, January 1940.

1941 American Landscape Painting: George Inness to George Bellows, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, May 1941, no. 18.

1941 Fort Worth Art Association, March 1941.

1943 Living American Painters, John Herron Art Museum, Indianapolis, February 1943, no. 53.

1943 Romantic Painting in America, Museum of Modern Art, New York, followed by other venues as a traveling exhibition, 1943-1945, no. 184, repro.

1945 Artists of the Philadelphia Press: William Glackens, George Luks, Everett Shinn, John Sloan, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1945, no. 63.

1946 John Sloan: Painting and Prints. Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective, Carpenter Galleries, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, 1946, no. 12.

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1948 John Sloan Paintings, Dayton Art Institute, April 1948.

1948 John Sloan: Retrospective Exhibition, Kraushaar Galleries, New York, February 1948, no. 20, repro.

1949 The Turn of the Century: American Artists 1890-1920, Des Moines Art Center, 1949, unnumbered catalogue.

1952 John Sloan 1871-1951, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, 1952, no. 52, repro.

1961 Oil Paintings by John Sloan, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, November-December 1961, no. 7.

1961 The Life and Times of John Sloan, Delaware Art Center, Wilmington, September-October 1961, no. 29, repro.

1962 The Art of John Sloan 1871-1951, Walker Art Museum, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, 1962, no. 46, repro.

1971 John Sloan 1871-1951, National Gallery of Art, Washington; Georgia Museum of Art, Athens; M.H. DeYoung Memorial Museum, San Francisco; City Art Museum of St. Louis; Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1971-1972, no. 135, repro.

1981 John Sloan: Paintings, Prints, Drawings, traveling exhibition organized by Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, 6 venues, 1981-1983, no. 13, repro. (shown only in Hanover).

1981 The Railroad in the American Landscape: 1850-1950, Wellesley College Museum, Wellesley, Massachusetts, 1981, no. 53, repro.

1982 Japanese Artists Who Studied in [the] U.S.A. and The American Scene, National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo; National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto, 1982, no. 78, color repro.

1984 Museo de los Museos: arte universal a través de los tiempos, Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, 1984, no. 42, repro.

1985 Night Lights: 19th and 20th Century American Nocturne Paintings, The Taft Museum, Cincinnati, 1985, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

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1988 John Sloan: *Spectator of Life*, IBM Gallery of Science and Art, New York; Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, 1988, no. 97, repro.

2007 *Seeing the City*: Sloan's New York, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington; Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Greensburg, Pennsylvania; David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago; Reynolda House, Museum of American Art, Winston-Salem, 2007-2009, unnumbered catalogue, fig. 52.

EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES

[1] According to the artist's records, the painting was "briefly" exhibited at the Grand Central Gallery; see the letter of 12 January 1970 from the artist's widow, Helen Sloan, to John Bullard of the NGA, in NGA curatorial files.

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- 1975 Scott, David W. *John Sloan*. New York, 1975: 162, color pl. 28.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 223, repro.
- 1980 Simms, Patterson. *John Sloan: A Concentration of Works from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of Art*. New York, 1980: 20-21, repro.
- 1980 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1980: 17, no. 55, color repro.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: 209, repro. 210-211, color repro. 224.
- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 572, no. 876, color repro.
- 1987 Catchpole, Hubert R. "The Cover." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 257 (24 April 1987): 2125, cover repro.
- 1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 170, no. 62, color repro.
- 1991 Elzea, Rowland. *John Sloan's Oil Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné*. 2

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- vols. Newark, 1991: 257-258, repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 337, repro.
- 1992 *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 250, repro.
- 1993 Dougherty, James. *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye*. Baton Rouge, 1993: 264-266, fig. 12.
- 1995 Loughery John. *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel*. New York, 1995: 261-262.
- 1998 Lamia, Stephen. "Night." In *Encyclopedia of Comparative Iconography: Themes Depicted in Works of Art*. Edited by Helene E. Roberts. 2 vols. Chicago, 1998: 2:657.
- 2004 Hand, John Oliver. *National Gallery of Art: Master Paintings from the Collection*. Washington and New York, 2004: 404, no. 334, color repro.
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