

# John Sloan & "The Eight"

## Teacher's Curriculum Guide



© Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

*Spring Rain*, 1912  
John Sloan



DELAWARE ART MUSEUM



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## **NOTICE:**

Several works of art in the Delaware Art Museum’s collection contain partial or full nudity. While we maintain the artistic integrity of these pieces and do not encourage censorship we have marked these pieces in an effort to provide educators with pertinent information. You will see a green inverted triangle ( ▼ ) next to any works that contain partial or full nudity, or mature content. This packet is intended for educators; please preview all materials before distributing to your class.

# HOW TO USE THESE MATERIALS

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These materials are designed to provide teachers with an overview of the artists and their work in this collection. This information can be used before and/or after a visit to the Delaware Art Museum, or as a substitute for teachers and schools that are unable to visit. Teachers should adapt these materials according to the grade level and ability of their students.

## GOALS FOR LEARNING

History	Language	Art
To explore the changes of New York City at the turn of the 20 <sup>th</sup> Century.	Literary influences on art and society	The use of architecture in localizing a setting.
To examine how politics of the time affected Sloan's work.	The place of writing in illustration.	To understand Sloan's aesthetic in relation to Robert Henri and "The Eight."
Turn of the century immigration issues and industrialization.	Narrative in art.	Perceive and interpret visual elements and clues

## LOOKING AT ART WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Museums are among the best places for teaching people how to look carefully and to learn from looking. These skills, obviously critical to understanding art, are also important for experiencing the everyday world. Frequently referred to as "visual literacy", these skills are seldom taught, despite their usefulness.

There are many ways to approach looking at art. All of them are appropriate at different times. With young people, it is important to discover what catches their attention and try to pursue that interest. At other times, it might be useful to point out things you have noticed. In so doing, you help young people expand on their experiences and their capacities to think, analyze, and understand.

Identifying and talking about recognizable subject matter is a frequent beginning point. Inherent or imagined stories are too. Abstract issues can also be observed and discussed; for example, even quite young children can suggest meanings for colors and see the implied energy in a line or brushstroke.

Background information and biographies of artists have less relevance to younger children, although they are almost always of interest to older people. Instead, one can accomplish more by helping young children concentrate on and appreciate the images at hand. An excellent use of time in the Museum, therefore, is for adults and children to point out things to each other, and share their thoughts and feelings about what they might mean. You can, of course, make mental notes of things you might like to ask the artist if he or she were there, but emphasize what you can see and think about, instead of fretting about what you do not know. The process of discovering information in paintings can be fun and serious, in part because there are few rights and wrongs.

*From the Museum of Modern Art's A Brief Guide for Looking at Art*

# JOHN SLOAN BIOGRAPHY

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*Self Portrait in Gray Shirt, 1912*  
John Sloan  
© Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights  
Society (ARS), New York

*"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." ~ John Sloan*

John Sloan was born in 1871 in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania. While still a young boy, his family relocated to Philadelphia where Sloan would attend the prestigious Central High School with fellow artist William Glackens. In 1892 he landed his first full time job in the art department of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. It was his reputation as an illustrator at the *Inquirer* which landed him a position at the *Philadelphia Press* in 1895.

Beyond his commercial work as an illustrator, Sloan also taught himself how to paint from popular how-to manuals, and in 1892 enrolled in evening courses at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the oldest art institution in the country. The friendships Sloan formed at the Academy led to his first meeting with artist Robert Henri, who would become a life-long friend as well as a great influence on Sloan's artistic career.

In 1904 he moved to New York City with his wife of three years, Dolly. He continued to work as a freelance illustrator and became increasingly interested in depicting city life and city scenes, highlighting the streets and parks of his neighborhood in Chelsea, and the working-class people he encountered on his daily travels through the city. In 1912, John and Dolly relocated to Greenwich Village and became part of the burgeoning art scene there.

By 1906 Sloan began to supplement his income by teaching art, initially as a substitute for his friend Robert Henri. For the next decade Sloan taught sporadically within various art schools until 1916, when he became a full-time faculty member at the Art Students League in New York, where he would work until 1937. His students included the young talents of sculptor David Smith and Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock.

In 1939 Sloan's teaching philosophy and techniques were compiled and published in the book called *Gist of Art*. Based in part upon the notes Sloan's student Helen Farr took in his classes and gathered over the years, *Gist of Art* allowed subsequent generations to learn from him. A year after the death of Sloan's wife, Dolly, John married Helen Farr in 1944.

John Sloan died of postoperative complications in Hanover, New Hampshire in 1951.

# SLOAN IN NEW YORK

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*Roofs, Summer Night, 1906*

John Sloan

© Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York

When John and Dolly Sloan arrived in New York City in 1904, they were two of approximately 100,000 people moving to the city that year. As an artist and newcomer, Sloan made sense of this busy and ever-changing metropolis by moving through it and describing it—in his diaries, letters, and pictures. He focused on people, street life, elevated trains, public parks, and the pedestrian experience.

The Sloans settled in Chelsea, one of the city's commercial centers, where shops, moving picture parlors, and entertainment halls of every sort clustered around Sixth Avenue. In Sloan's New York, the parks, like the streets, were places where diverse individuals

encountered each other every day. The city allowed male and female, old and young, affluent and impoverished, to observe and comment on each other, a pleasure which Sloan indulged in his art. Shortly after moving to New York, Sloan began etchings that would become his *New York City Life* series, which recorded the vibrant life the artist witnessed on the streets in addition to the more private realms he witnessed from his windows.

In 1912 Sloan moved first his studio and then his apartment down Sixth Avenue to Greenwich Village. In moving to the Village, Sloan left a commercial center in Chelsea for the heart of the city's liberal, intellectual community, subtly shifting his alliance from the workaday world of Chelsea to the city's most bohemian and artistic quarter. The Village was fast becoming a haven for creative types, and in the popular imagination, it represented a place outside the bounds of middle-class social norms, inhabited by artists, writers, and political radicals.

Sloan found a community in the Village, and many of his paintings and etchings document this community, as seen in his images of Jefferson Market, Washington Square, McSorley's Bar, the Lafayette, and the Golden Swan.

Sloan remained in the Village for more than two decades. In 1927 the Sloans were forced to vacate their apartment because it was being demolished as part of subway construction and the extension of Sixth Avenue southward. They settled on Washington Square South. When New York University took over the building housing Sloan's apartment on Washington Square in 1935, the Sloans could not find affordable accommodations elsewhere in the Village, and returned to Chelsea. For the rest of his life, Sloan kept an apartment in the Chelsea Hotel, only a few blocks from his first home in New York City.

## SLOAN & “THE EIGHT”

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Under Robert Henri’s guidance, John Sloan and his peers focused on painting subjects from their immediate experience. Within their group discussions, Henri would often comment on the role of the artist in the U.S., emphasizing that each artist should develop their own individual form of expression rather than conform to any aesthetic convention.

Sloan’s visions of ordinary people of the streets and in their homes did not always prove popular with the art establishment, and his works and the works of his colleagues were often rejected from juried exhibitions. In 1908, Sloan and his circle organized a protest exhibition at Macbeth Galleries. This show brought together the work of the Philadelphia artists—John Sloan, Robert Henri, William Glackens, George Luks, and Everett Shinn—with Arthur B. Davies, Maurice Prendergast, and Ernest Lawson. In this exhibit they showcased their work independently and democratically without prejudice for one particular style. The show was a surprising success, with approximately 7,000 people attending the exhibition. The show also earned the group a nickname, “The Eight.”

Reviews of The Eight exhibition were mixed. Critics who disapproved of their choice of subject matter—such as alleys and tenements—eventually labeled these artists the “Ashcan School,” a term the artists disliked. While many critics challenged the anti-academic approach taken by Sloan and others like him, forward thinking modernists praised their work as a refreshing departure from styles and subjects with little relevance to modern life.

In the wake of The Eight show Sloan became a public figure in the New York art world, helping to organize important exhibitions, including the 1911 Exhibition of Independent Artists and the 1913 Armory Show, a display of American and European modernist art. Together these exhibitions altered the course of American art produced in the twentieth century. Sloan also served as president of the Society of Independent Artists for more than twenty years.

Today, the Delaware Art Museum has the largest collection of John Sloan works in the world due to the dedicated patronage of John Sloan’s second wife, Helen Farr Sloan. After leaving New York, Helen retired to Delaware and began a close relationship with the Museum. Over time she donated and shared countless works of art, letters, and personal memories with the Museum community. Helen passed away in December 2005.



*Helen at the Easel, 1947, 1950*  
John Sloan  
© Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



# NEW YORK AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

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*Sixth Avenue and Thirtieth Street, 1908*  
John Sloan  
© Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

During the turn of the twentieth century, New York City represented the idea of the “new metropolis,” a major city that was continually changing and expanding.

In 1898, the five boroughs of Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island were consolidated to form the modern city of New York. With the dawn of the twentieth century, new transportation links were created, such as the New York City Subway (1904). These advances in transportation generated an increased spread in population as well as development of the city’s infrastructure.

Over the next few decades, New York City saw an incredible construction boom—from the underground subway system to the construction of skyscrapers, which altered the city’s skyline in addition to the lives of the city’s inhabitants. John Sloan’s art offers viewers a primary document of the New York landscape as it is undergoing these changes.



*Wet Night, Washington Square*  
John Sloan, 1928  
© Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

At this time New York also added waves of immigrants to its population. Over a period of three decades the population of Greater New York more than doubled—from 1.91 million in 1880 to 4.77 million in 1910. Various European catastrophes, such as the potato famine and war, caused a multitude of immigrants to travel to the United States at the turn of the century. With this increased immigration came social upheaval. Overcrowded tenements, unclean water, and poor removal of garbage and sewage caused sickness and epidemics.

Despite the poverty and hard times faced by these immigrants, they developed their own cultural identity in their new city, through the creation of clubs and festivals. John Sloan, by closely studying people and their everyday activities, was able to capture their unique cultural characteristics.

## ART & POLITICS

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In February of 1910, John and Dolly Sloan became members of the Socialist Party, and, that fall, Sloan allowed his name to be placed on the ballot as a Socialist Party candidate for New York State Assembly. Although he did not win the election, he had other talents to offer to the party. Sloan did his part as an illustrator and designed posters and flyers for socialist rallies, lectures, and fundraisers. In the early twentieth century, socialist rallies in major American cities attracted thousands.

Often inspired by specific injustices the artist observed, Sloan's drawings for socialist periodicals could be pointed in their messages. The fire that killed 146 of 500 employees at the Triangle Waist Company in March of 1911 was the subject of one of Sloan's strongest political illustrations. Sloan graphically symbolized the tragedy in the burned body of a young woman, which he surrounded with the triad of "Rent," "Profit," and "Interest" to implicate the larger forces involved.

Much of Sloan's political activism was wrapped up in his involvement with *The Masses*, a socialist magazine which began publication in 1911. He served on the editorial board and was a contributor from 1912 to 1916, receiving no pay. In his illustrations he addressed moral and political injustices, poked fun at fashion and recorded scenes from New York's parks, rooftops, and streets.

At first, *The Masses* offered considerable editorial freedom, because the magazine was not an official organ of the Socialist Party. Over time, it became more entrenched in party politics, and the writers began adding captions to the artists' drawings, often to give them a more clearly socialist spin. In 1917 Sloan resigned the magazine in protest and left the Socialist Party.

John Sloan always maintained the separation of his art and his politics, and though his paintings show his sympathy with the lower classes and distinct dislike of the privileged, Sloan's New York paintings, unlike his illustrations, rarely address political topics directly and specifically.



▼ *The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, 1911*  
John Sloan  
© Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society  
(ARS), New York



# CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

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This information can be taught before and/or after a visit to a museum. Please adapt the information and activities to the grade level, ability, and learning styles of your students. Teachers may find some of them more suitable than others for meeting specific classroom goals. These materials may be reproduced for educational purposes.

## ALL LEVELS

**Visual Thinking Strategies:** Sometimes artwork is off-putting, sometimes it looks complicated, and sometimes it looks like a child could have made it. In order to break down students' pre-conceptions or misconceptions use the screencast tutorial on VTS (Visual Thinking Strategies) to help you and your students feel confident about discussing new art, or discussing art at all! This is especially helpful for use in non-art classrooms.

**Visual Analysis:** Using works of art from E-Museum, have students discuss the basic elements of art. Examining the artist's use of line, color, shape, space, light, and texture encourages students to look beyond the image itself to the ways in which it was painted.

## ELEMENTARY LEVEL

**My City:** Have students create an idea web of their town or city. What makes up their town/city? Have them consider homes, businesses, types of transportation, parks, etc. Once their list is complete, have students look through magazines and newspapers to find objects listed on their idea web to create their own collage city.

**Everyday Life:** John Sloan often depicted neighborhood pastimes, with people engaged in a variety of outdoor activities. Have students create a list some of the everyday pastimes they do with family and friends. Next, have them make sketches of their listed activities, including descriptive captions for each sketch.

**Parks – Then and Now:** Have students look at Sloan's images of parks. What do they tell us about the city parks in the early twentieth century? What types of transportation, games, and leisure activities does he incorporate in his works? How do Sloan's park scenes differ from the parks we enjoy today? Have students create a Venn diagram to show the similarities and differences.

**Letter Writing:** John Sloan regularly wrote letters to friends and family while he was in New York, describing his surroundings and experiences. Using a work of art from the exhibition, have students imagine they are in the scene. Have them write a letter that describes their surroundings.

**Mapping:** John Sloan's artwork shows many places and people that he saw each day while living in New York City. Mapping is a way of recording the places people go and the things they see. Have students map the places they go to in any given day.

## SECONDARY LEVEL

**Journal Writing:** While in New York, Sloan wrote in a journal, documenting his thoughts and the activities of the people he observed while walking throughout the city. These close observations of his urban environment are also recorded in his paintings, prints, and drawings. For one week have students record their thoughts in a journal, and include descriptions of people and activities they see/encounter along the way.

**Social Causes:** Sloan was very aware of the social injustices inflicted upon on the lower class city inhabitants, and often acknowledged social issues in his political illustrations and posters. Which social issues are of wide concern in today's society? Have students select a social issue that they want to address in their own political illustration or poster.

**Travel Guide:** Upon arriving in New York City in 1904, John Sloan became acquainted with his new home by walking the city and rendering its inhabitants, buildings, and constant changes in his art. Divide class into small groups and have them create a travel guide brochure for Sloan to use as he begins to experience New York. What background information should Sloan know about the city? What places should he visit and why?

**Celebrating the City:** Robert Henri encouraged John Sloan and his circle to paint pictures of the American scene, a notion which Walt Whitman had also called on poets and painters to celebrate. Have students select two works from John Sloan—one from his time in Chelsea and the other from Greenwich Village. In what way does Sloan celebrate New York and its inhabitants? What about it is truly American?

**Architecture:** John Sloan's use of architecture in his drawings, prints, and paintings help us in clearly defining the settings of his works. Have students take a photograph of an important intersection in their town or city. How would future historians interpret this photograph? What comment might they make on the significance of the various buildings to those living in the community?

**Debating the Past:** Some critics of the time disliked Sloan and his contemporaries' paintings because their work concentrated on bland, everyday items that were ugly or unpleasant like ash cans or gritty city streets. Stage a debate with opposing sides to this proposition: The Ashcan School painters were creating mediocre work that focused on unappealing subjects, and therefore their work does not deserve a prominent place in art history.

# GLOSSARY

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**Ashcan School:** A group of painters working in New York in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century so labeled because of their penchant for depicting gritty, unpleasant, and everyday scenes like alleys, tenements, or city streets.

**“The Eight”:** A term referring to the group of painters that created the Ashcan School comprised of John Sloan, Robert Henri, William Glackens, George Luks, Everett Shinn, Arthur B. Davies, Maurice Prendergast, and Ernest Lawson.

**New Metropolis:** A major city that was continually changing and expanding—usually upwards with skyscrapers. These cities grew quickly with large influxes of residents.

**Socialist Party:** Political party which believes in the shared value of all production and goods and that all enterprises should be governed by the community as a whole.

## WORKS CONSULTED

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Coyle, Heather Campbell., Joyce K. Schiller, and John Sloan. *John Sloan's New York*. Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 2007. Print.

"John Sloan and the Eight." *Delaware Art Museum: Selected Treasures*. Ed. Shelby Evans. London: Scala, 2004. 81-97. Print.

# IMAGE CREDITS

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## Cover Page:

1. *Spring Rain*, 1912. John Sloan (1871–1951). Oil on canvas, 20 ¼ x 26 ¼ inches. Delaware Art Museum, Gift of John Sloan Memorial Foundation, 1986. © Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

## Page Four:

1. *Self Portrait in Gray Shirt*, 1912. John Sloan (1871–1951). Oil on canvas, 35 x 24 inches. Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1980. © Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

## Page Five:

1. *Roofs, Summer Night*, 1906. John Sloan (1871–1951). Etching, plate: 5 1/4 x 6 15/16 inches, sheet: 9 5/8 x 12 7/8 inches. Delaware Art Museum, Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1963. © Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

## Page Six:

1. *Helen at the Easel*, 1947, 1950. John Sloan (1871–1951). Casein tempera underpaint; oil-varnish glaze on panel (some Shiva Ponsol colors used), 23 15/16 x 20 inches. Delaware Art Museum, Gift of the John Sloan Trust, 2006. © Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

## Page Seven:

1. *Sixth Avenue and Thirtieth Street*, 1908. John Sloan (1871–1951). Lithograph, composition: 13 15/16 x 10 15/16 in. sheet: 17 9/16 x 14 3/4 in. Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1965. © Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
2. *Wet Night, Washington Square*, 1928. John Sloan (1871–1951). Oil on panel, 26 x 20 inches. Delaware Art Museum, Gift of John Sloan Memorial Foundation, 1997. © Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

## Page Eight:

1. *The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*, 1911. John Sloan (1871–1951). Charcoal, ink, and gouache on board, sheet: 18 7/16 x 14 11/16 in. Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1991. © Delaware Art Museum / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.