

36: John Sloan *Election Night* (1907) *Chinese Restaurant* (1909)

Grant Holcomb

During his lifetime, John Sloan was often referred to as “the American Hogarth” for his robust and animated depictions of life in New York City during the early years of the twentieth century. And, shortly after his death, he was called “one of the chief creative artists of his time.”¹ Today, Sloan is considered the quintessential representative of the “Ashcan” school, that group of urban realists who painted the unfashionable, unpretentious city life they found around them. Few paintings from this period better represent this tradition in American art and in the artist’s total oeuvre than Sloan’s *Election Night* and *Chinese Restaurant*. If tame to our eyes today, we must remember that they were considered by many to be radical and progressive, even revolutionary and vulgar, a century ago.



John Sloan,
1871–1951
Election Night, 1907
Oil on canvas, 26¼ x 32¼ in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
41.33

Sloan, like Walt Whitman, was an inveterate walker of the streets of Manhattan and, like the poet, could claim that “every hour of the day and night has given me copious pictures.”² As Sloan wrote, “I saw people living in the streets and [on] the rooftops of the city and I liked their fine animal spirits.”³ His diaries of 1906–13 provide critical information as to how certain city scenes caught the artist’s attention and were subsequently recorded on canvas. In his entry for November 5, 1907, he reveals how he came across the scene recorded in *Election Night*:



Took a walk in the afternoon and saw boys in droves, foraging for fuel for their election fires this evening...After dinner...out again and saw the noisy trumpet blowers, confetti throwers and the "ticklers" in use—a small feather duster on a stick which is pushed in the face of each girl by the men, and in the face of men by the girls. A good humorous crowd, so dense in places that it is impossible to control one's movement.⁴

Exactly one week later, he records that he is working on the painting from memory and declares it "one of my best things."⁵

In passages like this, Sloan's diary reveals his delight in "the human comedy," in this case, the roar of the street and the raucous, lively crowd on the eve of an off-year election. The site, Sloan tells us, "was Herald Square, Sixth Avenue and 34th Street,"⁶ where young and old watched the election results projected on the side of the now demolished New York Herald building.⁷ A crowded composition with slashing diagonals and dramatic contrasts of light and dark convey the energy and excitement that the artist first observed on that early November evening.⁸

In addition to observing life on the city streets, Sloan enjoyed watching people eating, drinking, and conversing in the city restaurants, whether it was John Butler Yeats holding forth at Petitpas on West Twenty-ninth Street or male camaraderie at McSorley's Bar on East Seventh. And, certainly, the Memorial Art Gallery's *Chinese Restaurant* well represents this thematic interest of the artist.

In the winter of 1909, Sloan entered a small Chinese restaurant near his apartment on West Twenty-third Street. He was immediately taken by "a strikingly gotten up girl with dashing red feathers in her hat playing with the restaurant's fat cat." He later records in his diary (February 23, 1909) that "It would be a good thing to paint" and adds "I might make a go at it."⁹ Approximately three weeks later he starts painting the scene from memory. His entry for March 18 reads, "Painted on my 'Chinese Restaurant' picture girl with red feather—and went to the restaurant for my dinner to refresh my memory of the place."¹⁰

Chinese Restaurant possesses the affection and good humor that typifies most, if not all, of Sloan's pictures of city life. Here an intimacy is achieved by placing the viewer in close proximity to the scene. The figures are arranged laterally across the composition and united by a rhythmical line that runs from the hand of the figure at the far left to the hand of the young woman; it continues up to her hat and down to her left hand and, finally, up and across to the hands of the two men at the far right. The narrative tension of the picture centers on the young woman with her bright red feather hat and her left hand that holds out a scrap of food for the hopeful cat.

Sloan's comment that "The girl is feeding her boy friend, before taking him home,"¹¹ has been interpreted by some critics to indicate that the woman depicted in *Chinese Restaurant* is a prostitute. One finds Sloan's use of the word "boy friend" a mere euphemism while others have written that "The titles of some of Sloan's pictures identify prostitutes with particular locales...."¹² Whatever the social or "commercial" situation, Sloan admired the painting's graphic expression and resonance of color.¹³

(Facing page)
John Sloan,
1871–1951
Chinese Restaurant, 1909
Oil on canvas, 26 x 32¼ in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.12

Three years before his death in 1951, Sloan summed up his career as an artist by saying that he was interested, from the beginning, "in something about the people in a place, something about the mood, a thing John Butler Yeats called poetry."¹⁴ Both *Election Night* and *Chinese Restaurant* possess this poetry of place and mood.



Irving Underhill, photographer
Herald Building and Herald Square, New York City, ca. 1910
Photograph, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division,
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Grant Holcomb is The Mary W. and Donald R. Clark Director of the Memorial Art Gallery.