

JOHN SLOAN: HIS ART AND ITS INSPIRATION: BY MARY FANTON ROBERTS



I REMEMBER some years ago going up into a very tall building to see John Sloan's paintings. His studio was so high that, looking out of his windows, all the roofs of the city seemed spread out below. This tall old building was in Greenwich Village, so that many interesting phases of family life were released to the artist's eyes as he gazed from roof to roof—old women were there hanging up clothes to blow in the fresh wind, young women sat on the coping washing their hair and drying it in the sunlight, children played games and lovers met in the moonlight. At night burglars might be seen creeping about the skylights quite unconscious of the artist far overhead, and early in the morning work-worn old folks came up with their knitting and sewing and gossiped happily for hours.

"It is all the world," John Sloan said to me as we looked out of his window. "Work, play, love, sorrow, vanity, the schoolgirl, the old mother, the thief, the truant, the harlot. I see them all down there without disguise. These wonderful roofs of New York bring to me all of humanity."

And that is the inspiration for John Sloan's art—"all of humanity." He paints age as the old feel it, and youth a flame, as only youth can feel and express ecstasy. He knows that poverty can have its moments of rare exaltation, that poetry is often the sacred possession of the outlaw.

I have always loved one particular painting of his: two young girls crossing Madison Square on a spring afternoon, so full of life and interest and intensity that the Park is breathless as they go through. Older women watch them with envy, young men with desire—only the drunkard is too sad to enjoy them. The whole picture is painted in a light key and the flowers circling the fountain are no more a sign that spring has come than these two girls in rose and white and lavender. John Sloan is not telling any story or preaching any moral or painting just for art's sake. He felt spring this day just as it bloomed over the square, as it saturated the heart of youth, and that is why he could reveal it to us on canvas.



Because John Sloan loves all youth, the simplest, the most complex, we are told that John Sloan is a socialist. He may be and he may not be—that has nothing to do with his art. His interest is in life, in the fire that burns in young life, its robust energy. Young girls and young men and children are loved by John Sloan as he loves plants and turf and trees. He is interested in the psychology and the sociology of all existence, and has the rare vision that enables him to see the truth about it, and the rare gift that enables him to help you to see the truth also. He has no criticism of life; the most commonplace thing interests him, and because it interests him, he gives it to you with a graciousness of line and color that somehow brings to you a sense of delight and beauty. Through every painting of Sloan's there is a marvellous quality of unity, there is no chance selection of subject, of spacing, of grouping in Sloan's pictures. He finds for his canvas the unity that he sees in life.

He paints largely, as George Moore writes. Whatever the sub-



ject, whatever the occupation, Moore so handles his medium that you get the bigness and splendor of life itself in his stories, and John Sloan does this with canvases. On a walk up Fifth Avenue, this artist will see the rich young girl with her beauty and her ignorances of life, he will see the poor daughter of the poorest workman with all her grime and her ignorances, but, also, he will give them both to you through his art so that you feel and see their possibilities and hopes and beauty.

Feeling that only someone who had known John Sloan all his life, through all his development, should really speak of his art, I went to see Robert Henri, and asked him to talk to me about Sloan, and the following words, which seemed really most worthy of Sloan, he wrote down while I waited. At intervals he stopped writing and talked of this man, whom he considered so great an artist, so rare a human being:

“**JOHN SLOAN**: a great lover and sympathizer with humanity, remarkably gifted with visual memory, artist all the way through, a true friend, a delightful wit, mimic and actor, a student always, a thinker, as gentle as a woman, but hard to curry below the knees.

“Intense student of color, arriving at color as an expressive medium, not interested in color for its prettiness, but using it as a constructive power, expressing the deeper reality—his color is not pretty—it has the sterner quality of beauty.

“He meets nature with no casual affableness, he is not a superficial lover, what he does is without apology. There is the great reality back of everything, it is the reality which interests him—he sees past the surface, his technic is bent and molded to carry us beyond into the intricate wonders of the yet unknown—the deeper lives and feelings of humanity. Because he has motive his line and his color must be constructive, must have unity, must lead, and we must be caught in the sway and the power of it—carried on because of its strength of correlation into his kind of thought and feeling about nature, about life, about the human heart. If we can but get into his drift, if we can follow and read his line and color, we will have entered into the thought of another soul—and one who has had from the beginning instinctively a great love for all humanity and who has studied and thought along



this line, because it was his nature to do so.

“When expression has common or insincere motive it is easy to follow and it does not offend the idle spirit, but when the course is positive the accent of the line and the color becomes exact. The medium must go straight through, not around difficulties; sometimes to follow is a work in itself—but such work! The enjoyment of a work of art is a feat in itself. It would be well to get



this. Without effort there can be no enjoyment. So with Sloan's work, because it is positive and deep reaching in its motives we will not recognize its message, nor will we recognize the great craftsmanship of it unless we have the power of enjoyment—the power of participation. It takes years—pleasurable years, and it takes energy to understand the works of masters.

"It is commonly thought that the old masters are now understood. I think not. We have more to learn from them. We must rise to it. In the drawings of Rembrandt we have always the sustained interest because they are so intimate, because we feel so close to the mind and the spirit which moved every line of them.

"We are human, intensely human in all our interests, despite any effort we make to be otherwise. In all lines and forms we seek our own likeness—we feel the kinship. In a recent exhibition of water-colors by the great high priest of Modernism, Cezanne, I became interested to know the secret of their beauty—or rather to know what influenced me in them, and, in my study, I found that all the forms, although of landscape, trees, rocks, were as though made up of human shapes, beautiful fragments interwoven. It was so obvious, that I think Cezanne must have had in mind this tendency of ours to our kind when he made the sketches. At any rate, if Rembrandt had been less human, less a deep-thinking, kind, searching heart, I am sure our love for his work would not have lasted and would never have been of the quality it has been. I do not say that all art should be as Rembrandt's—men are different and the human interest is different, therefore the colder elegance of Ingres will have its appeal, and will carry its human message.

"It is interesting to me that there exists in our time such totally different and equally disturbing humanists as are John Sloan and Arthur B. Davies. They might rise in indignation because I call them humanists—but it is just this very intense character, this depth of interest which makes necessary to them the power and richness of their expression. Such men must invent new and very special technics and they must build with great surety. To follow, if we can, the pace they set, must be an exciting activity and full of enjoyment.

"Sloan is of his time—he is like the old masters because they were of their time. I do not think he is so much interested in being an artist as he is interested in the pleasure of saying just what he has to say and for this reason he is the greater artist. It is for this reason that his paints must fit together, that all he does must be organic, and that the lover of play-together, construction, growth—the meaningful line and the meaningful significant color can find in his sheer technic a great delight. When I go with Sloan in his pictures, I go with one who sees, who is kind and his expression is an integrity. I have had an experience with one who has wit, a great heart, and who is valiant and capable in expression."

