New Perspective

John Sloan's Moving-Picture Eye

Katherine Manthorne

In 1926 John Sloan etched the figure of a woman descending the steps from the elevated train, her skirt caught by the wind to expose an immodest extent of leg (fig. 1). Its title, *Subway Stairs,* references his old hero Thomas Rowlandson, whose watercolor *Exhibition Stare-Case* (ca. 1800, Courtauld Institute, London) featured the lively interaction of voyeurs and exhibitionists at London's Royal Academy. Together the artists are poking fun at the viewer, who is, of course, caught in the act of staring up at a suddenly revealed bit of female anatomy. As was his habit, Sloan nods to the art of the past while simultaneously looking to modern sources—in this case to cinema. He created this prototype long before the image of Marilyn Monroe, diaphanous dress flaring in an updraft, became an icon of movie glamour. But the subject was, in fact, as old as the movies themselves, captured in an Edison film of 1901 entitled *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City* (fig. 2). This privileged venue for Peeping Toms was at the bottom of the street where Sloan lived; "a high wind this morning and the pranks of the gusts about the Flatiron Building at Fifth Avenue and 23rd St. was interesting to watch," the artist confided to his diary.[1] So we know he was among male spectators who gathered there and were routinely chased away by the police—a ritual that gave rise to the phrase "Twenty-three Skidoo."

This essay focuses on Sloan's series of etchings entitled New York City Life and its relation to early film. The series was his first major project after relocating from Philadelphia to New York in 1904. New York City Life consisted of ten prints—each measuring 5 by 7 inches—that allowed the viewer equal access to his neighborhood's public streets and private dwellings at intimate moments. There was nothing much like this series in American art at the time. And when we stop and reflect that that was one hundred years ago, we feel renewed admiration for Sloan's ability to capture his urban environment in this etching sequence. I argue here that this achievement was related to Sloan's "moving-picture eye." Sloan, at age twenty-five, had been in the audience when the earliest silent films were shown in Philadelphia, and he became a regular moviegoer after settling in New York.[2] His art evolved in tandem with the new medium.

1 John Sloan, *Subway Stairs,* 1926. Etching, 7 x 5 in. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

2 *What Happened on Twenty-third Street, New York City* (Edison, 1901). Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

New York City Life

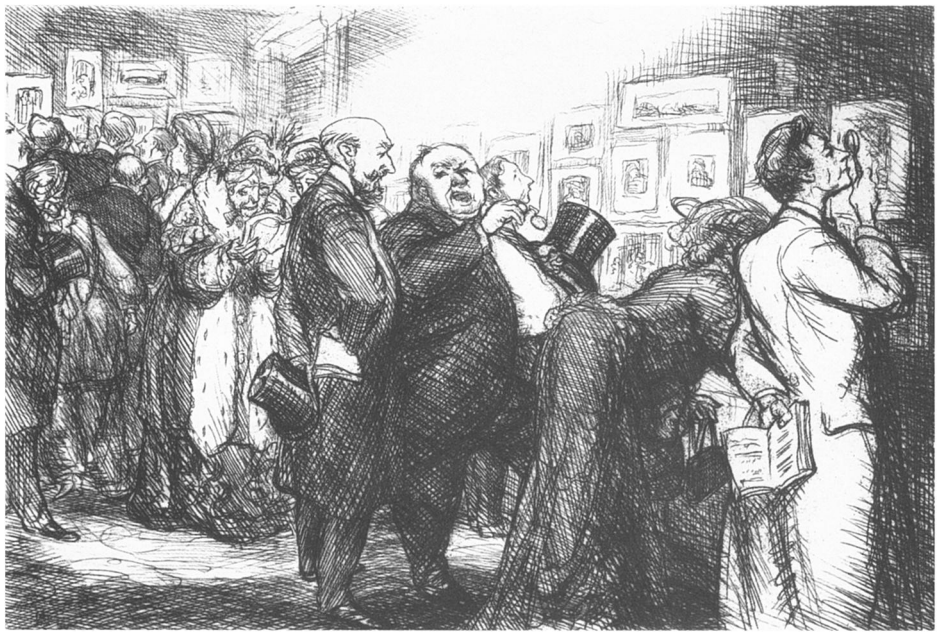
Sloan opens his series with the finely executed etching *Connoisseurs of Prints* (fig. 3) depicting a print show at the old American Art Galleries on Twenty-third Street. He arranges the attendees according to states of attention and expertise, from the undifferentiated group at

the rear of the space to the model connoisseur with gallery guide and magnifying glass in the foreground. Sloan is holding these characters up to mild ridicule—including the taller, bald-headed connoisseur at center who surreptitiously directs his gaze at the backside of the woman bent forward for optimal viewing. Right from the first print in his New York debut series, the artist is challenging the public: critiquing the concept of the specialist's eye as well as institutionalized modes of perception.

In the remaining nine prints, Sloan leads us out the door of the gallery and through the nearby streets, where frame by frame he creates a dynamic portrayal of his neighborhood. The next etching humorously calls attention to a pair of *Fifth Avenue Critics* (fig. 4), identified by the pince-nez one older woman fingers at her chest, ready to raise for closer inspection. She and her companion are ensconced in their open carriage, feeling superior to the attractive younger woman who is about to alight from the opposite conveyance, its closed cabin indicative of her more clandestine—and, they judge, disreputable—purposes. Sloan does not let them get the better of her, though, for he slyly inserted the sign "Antiques" over the critic's head, branding her notions Victorian but also reminding us of rapidly changing modes of vision.

Sloan initially titled this etching *Connoisseurs of Virtue,* indicating his original intent to do a series of connoisseurs. It is generally assumed in the scholarly literature that he abandoned the connoisseurs project after this.[3] I maintain, however, that it merely metamorphosed into a more ambitious project. Broadly defined, the "connoisseur" is one who knows—more specifically in this case, a person competent to appreciate art. In 1905 the connoisseur would have been respected for his or her ability to judge by looking, for the cultivation of a "good eye." Spectatorship in this modern city, Sloan was realizing, required equal expertise. And so this first New York project grew into an extended meditation on the act of seeing in that city, on looking and being looked at: connoisseurs of urban vision.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Sixth Avenue northeast of Greenwich Village acquired a reputation that rivaled that of the Bowery. When the notoriously corrupt Police Captain Alexander "Clubber" Williams was transferred to the West



Thirtieth Street Station in 1876, he was supposed to have said, "I've been living on chuck steak for a long time, and now I'm going to get a little of the tenderloin." And so was christened the Tenderloin—the area west of Sixth Avenue from Forty-second to Twenty-third Street, more or less. In its heyday from 1876 to 1915, it was home to gambling establishments, sexual services, drinking saloons, opium dens—but more upscale than the Bowery versions, and not quite as dangerous.[4]

This locale, curiously, is where Sloan settled with his new bride, Dolly. In September 1904 they moved into a fifth-floor walkup at 165 West Twenty-third Street, where they remained for almost seven years, until May 1911. Artists then as now gravitate to low-rent districts, but in 1904 there were other, more respectable areas where Sloan could have set up housekeeping just as cheaply. Why here? Aside from the obvious "attractions" just enumerated, it was also part of the city's—and the country's—entertainment district. Kinetoscope parlors and storefront movie houses dotted the blocks while cameramen filmed movies on its rooftops and streets (as etched by Sloan in *The "Movey" Troupe* of 1920). Let us imagine Sloan exiting the door of his building and heading down the street. He would pass the Eden Musée, the former waxworks that became the city's first location for continuous movie exhibition, and Koster & Bial's, a glorified concert saloon turned movie house, as well as Proctor's Theater.[5] He made numerous circuits on foot around the neighborhood and into those theaters as he kept an eye out for promising subjects. Not surprisingly, Sloan became one of the first American artists to engage with film in a serious and sustained way.

That engagement had begun in 1896 in Philadelphia with an opinion piece he published following the screening of the Edison film *The Mary Irwin Kiss.*[6] After that, he was hooked, witness to each stage of film's development. This spanned everything from the short projected movies in between live acts in vaudeville theaters to the makeshift storefronts where movies were shown one after another and where Sloan frequently

3 John Sloan, *Connoisseurs of Prints,* 1905, from the series New York City Life. Etching, 5 x 7 in. Prints Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

4 John Sloan, *Fifth Avenue Critics (Connoisseurs of Virtue),* 1905, from the series New York City Life. Etching, 5 x 7 in. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

dropped in. After 1905 nickelodeons sprang up, featuring movie shows all day long and adding more fictional films, and Sloan documented the phenomenon in his canvas *Movies, 5 Cents* (1907, private collection).

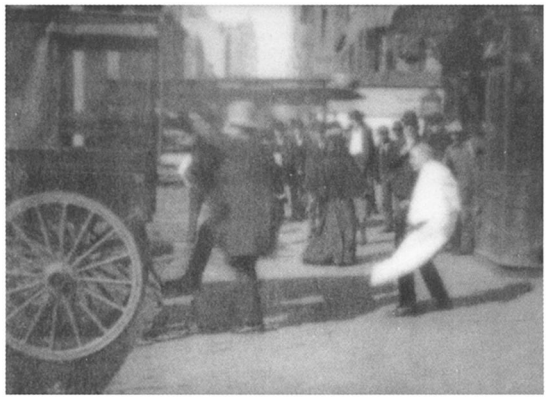
Scholars have recognized the relationship between Sloan's art and film, particularly with respect to what they identify as his interest in popular entertainment, spectatorship, and objectification of the female body.[7] I aim to steer the discussion in other directions, toward the evolution of a way of urban looking that belonged to the moment and overlapped with modern American picture-making and film. The general trend in the literature has been to discuss a few of these prints together with paintings that were done several years later. But in my view the original ten etchings must be treated as an indivisible unit, for Sloan refused either to exhibit or to sell the prints singly. The modern city, film practice, and Sloan's art were all rapidly evolving early in the century; beyond Sloan's protestations about the integrity of his series (which art historians often ignore), we need to zero in on visual practice specific to 1905 and early 1906. The City Life series maps the complexities of visual attention that immediately confronted the artist when he moved to Manhattan. The prints delivered a real jolt to the public when they were exhibited together in 1906, and we should try to recapture some of the excitement they stimulated.

Art from Life—Movie Pictures

The most popular movies at the time were being made by Georges Méliès in France and Edwin S. Porter in New York. Coming to cinema from a background in magic and the theater, Méliès created movies like the renowned *A Trip to the Moon (Le Voyage dans la lune)* of 1902. Close scrutiny of his work reveals that he showed his objects and actors first in one position, then in another; he filmed one frame, stopped the camera, and then set up the next frame. Porter, by contrast, perfected a unique moving-picture style by closely following his characters as they moved about. In *How They Do Things on the Bowery* (fig. 5), Porter for the first time applied the mobile camera associated with actuality production for fiction film making. Headquartered at the Edison Studios on West Twenty-first Street, he frequently followed his characters and filmed in surrounding streets—the very streets where Sloan sketched ideas for pictures.[8]

Much has been written recently about the ways in which the individual is bombarded by stimuli of every sort in the modern city, his or her attention tugged in a variety of directions.[9] Today we have our own ways of dealing with these competing forces, but around 1900—as skyscrapers rose, electric signs appeared, and traffic sped up—people demonstrated a response specific to that moment. Sloan thought long and hard about matters of vision, about looking at the life of the city around him, and about looking at pictures—both still and moving. He discovered in cinema a means of structuring his experiences of the city. This cinematic mode of vision, if you will, operated on a variety of levels. First, he developed a moving-picture eye. As he traveled along the city streets, his eye was arrested by what he called "bits of human drama." Second, as my discussion of the next pair of images demonstrates, Sloan's prints embody the play between attention and inattention that the modern city dweller must master to negotiate his or her environment, and which early modes of film viewing replicated. And third, there are recognizable analogies between his prints and contemporary movie shorts, not only in subject matter but also in psychology and visual strategies.

On February 22, 1908—a holiday—Sloan paid some bills and then headed out for a walk before settling down to paint. He noted in his diary:



5 *How They Do Things on the Bowery* (Edison, 1902; photographed by Edwin S. Porter). Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Walked up Broadway. A beautiful day, Washington's Birthday—and everyone seemed to be out, crowds going to the matinees at the theatres. Watched a moving picture photographer set up his camera. He waited and I did also, to see what he was after. Soon around 34th Street, into Broadway, turned a little parade—Volunteer Firemen of the old days of New York.[10]

Like the cameraman, Sloan spied a little parade of his own—made up of a street musician with drum, cymbals, and hand-organ accompanist—while strolling a side street in the Tenderloin. His fascination with the one-man band who plays to the crowd, seemingly unaware that his performance is disrupting traffic, gave rise to the print *Man Monkey* (fig. 6). Passersby stepped aside to provide a stage for this impromptu entertainment, while a horse-drawn truck and the group at right pull back to avoid a collision. The image reminds us that focusing on a primary action can cause us to overlook another action, a real danger to the city dweller.

Similarly, in *The Little Bride* (fig. 7) the crowd parts around the central action, a bride and groom departing the nearby Church of St. Vincent de Paul. We can imagine following the artist on his peregrinations and pausing to watch this happy couple, even though we do not know who they are. We are held in suspended animation within the life of the city before the spell is broken and we continue on our way. But notice that Sloan has advanced his treatment of time and motion in another way. By constructing a second focal point in the crowd of attendees in the doorway, he suggests that the couple has moved from there to here, thus establishing a temporal dimension. The groom is ducking, the bride descending the steps precariously on high heels, raising her skirt while dodging rice and airborne shoes, the pair's instability contributing to the impression that the artist has caught a moment of the briefest duration. We stop to view the kinetic body, reenacting the paradox of vision embodied in early cinema viewing.

Sloan prowled the streets or watched activities of other households through his apartment's rear window, often with the aid of binoculars. He stalked strangers, following them from place to place, when he found their actions compelling. A passage from the

6 John Sloan, *Man Monkey,* 1905, from the series New York City Life. Etching, 5 x 7 in. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

7 John Sloan, *The Little Bride,* 1906, from the series New York City Life. Etching, 5 x 7 in. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

artist's diary described how he "shadowed a poor wretch of woman on 14th St. Watched her stop to look at billboards, go into Five Cent Stores, take candy, nearly run over at Fifth Avenue, dazed and always trying to arrange her hair and hatpins."[11] While so far as we know this pursuit did not result in a finished painting, it does underscore the artist's tendency to tail unaware subjects as they went about their urban rounds.

In *Fun, One Cent* (fig. 8) two groups of girls crowd around penny-in-the-slot machines. In the central cluster, one girl turns the crank, which flipped photographs to create the illusion of movement, while her companions clamor for a peek. They peer into the viewer to glimpse—as the text on the wall posters promise—"Girls in their Nightgowns" and "Naughty Girls!" This image carries the most extensive textual inscriptions of the series, which call attention to the sometimes spicy content of the moving picture shorts.

We need to pause and ask: What's going on here? Why is Sloan referencing movies via a kinetograph parlor when—as he well knew—movies had been shown projected onto a screen for the past decade? The early movie theaters were filled with distractions such as shifting, guffawing audience members, as Sloan demonstrated in his *Movies, 5 Cents.* The kinetoscope device, by contrast, required the spectator to address the machine, hunching over and putting her face to the viewer, thus blocking out ambient distractions, at least momentarily. The girl's friends press for their turns and for details of what titillating scenes await them, but for that brief moment the individual customer's perception is suspended and her attention has but a single focus. This is the lesson of Sloan's stroll in and around Twenty-third Street and of his art: the city dweller, constantly assaulted with new objects vying for attention, must train herself or himself in this new skill of urban viewing. Sloan manifests the links between city viewing and cinema when he shows what appear to be some of the same girls from the kinetograph parlor who have wandered out onto the street, whereupon Sloan "shoots" another scene.

Display windows were another temptation for anyone walking down a city street. *The Show Case* (fig. 9) features Madam Ryanne's vitrine in which a half-figure mannequin displays a corset, around which the girls have gathered. As we are constantly reminded in our tour of the neighborhood, no single attraction can hold the sidewalk spectator's attention for long. Several girls already have lost interest and begin to move away, following the well-endowed older woman and her male companion who exit stage right. But two girls linger before this curious garment, one of them exploring her own breast as she awakens to her sexuality amid the surrounding commotion. Here as elsewhere in

8 John Sloan, *Fun, One Cent,* 1905, from the series New York City Life. Etching, 5 x 7 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of Ann Kraft

9 John Sloan, *The Show Case,* 1905, from the series New York City Life. Etching, 5 x 7 in. Prints Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

10 *A Busy Day for the Corset Models* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1904). From Laura Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 94

the series we can identify direct parallels with contemporary movies.[12]

Corset and other undergarment displays were featured in several American Mutoscope and Biograph productions of 1904 including *The Shocking Stockings, Four Beautiful Pairs, A Busy Day for the Corset Models,* and *The Way to Sell Corsets,* where they provide a variation on the theme of the male observer objectifying the near-naked woman, only to be punished for his transgressions by the movie's end. *A Busy Day for the Corset Models* (fig. 10) departs from the norm by showing one woman looking at another, demonstrating the impulse to learn the secrets of one's own body and the desire for the acquisition of femininity through observation of another.[13] These parallels can be drawn throughout the series between etchings and early cinema, not only in the increasing use of women's bodies to relay narratives but even more specifically in their manner of presentation.

Conventions of Silent Cinema

As the New York Life series evolved, Sloan moved from public to private and derived material from what he called his "night vigils." With the aid of his binoculars (fellow painter Robert Henri dubbed them "spy glasses") he looked into neighboring apartments, the windowpanes framing the action in the manner of a movie screen. The figures, viewed in the evening hours, were illuminated from behind, again suggesting an analogy to the viewing of moving pictures from a darkened interior. In successive days in early June 1906 Sloan jotted down observations from a dust storm on Fifth Avenue and a visit to Coney Island, and on June 11 noted the following:

Started to paint from memory of the Wind and Dust Storm that we saw and felt Sunday. Across the backyards in a room on the second floor I saw a baby die in its mother's arms. The men of the house powerless, helpless, stupid. She held it in her arms after it had started to pale and stiffen. Hope tried to fight off Fact, then Fact killed hope in her. They took it from her. The men smoked their pipes—sympathetic with her anguish and trying to reason her back to calmness. A bottle of whiskey, and a drink for her. I could hear nothing—but the acting was perfect.[14]

While Sloan apparently did not attempt to portray this specific scene on paper or canvas, his description does shed light on prints such as *Man, Wife, and Child* (fig. 11). For both of these family dramas—the written and visual images—had their origins in his window vigils. Alternatively titled *Wrestling Bout,* the etched scene is certainly less tragic than that of the dying baby, but it too reenacts a domestic drama that was meant to be private. Today we are well indoctrinated into movie spectatorship, but in film's first decade these conventions were yet to be established. Psychologists and physiologists were just beginning to study the mechanism behind the magic; Horace Kallen, for example, argued in 1910 that pantomime on the screen evoked a more vivid response than pantomime on the stage, hypnotizing the audience to fill in the missing details.[15] Sloan's pictures and text confirm that he absorbed the cinematic conventions of 1905 to such an extent that he interpreted and perhaps embellished the scenario in the manner

of a silent movie. He admits in his June diary entry that he could hear nothing; one wonders how much detail he could see from his stated vantage point across the backyards and into the second floor, and whether he could actually discern the baby's body paling, stiffening. But by watching moving pictures, he has become conditioned to interpret a dramatic narrative from a limited number of movements and gestures. He even refers to this poignant moment in the family's life as having been carried out with perfect "acting." The phrasing of the diary text begins to sound like the intertitles from contemporary melodramas: "Hope tried to fight off Fact" and "then Fact killed hope in her." Even his capitalization of "Hope" and "Fact" reminds us of the manner in which nouns in the intertitles were frequently printed with the first letter in uppercase, suggesting a universal concept. Binoculars were necessary but not sufficient to piece together the events in the surrounding tenements; pre-dialogue movies already had begun to shape the way in which Sloan viewed and interpreted the world.

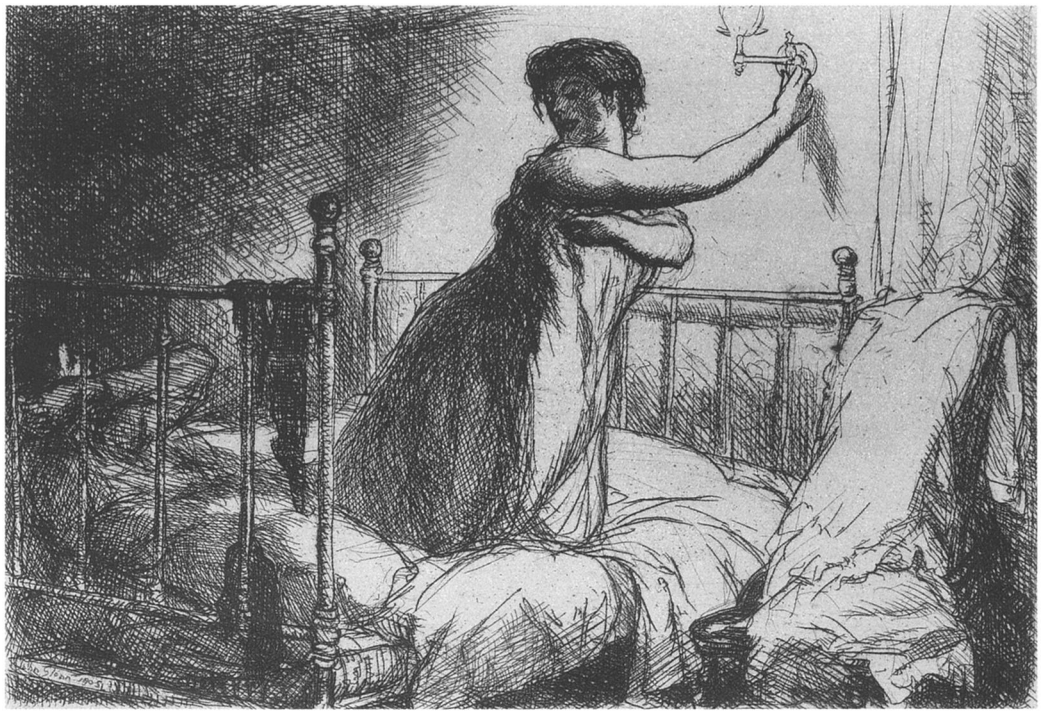
The Women's Page (fig. 12) intrudes on a disheveled woman still in her nightgown. When it was shown in 1906 the *New York Herald* critic praised the artist's humor in showing "a slatternly woman seated in an untidy room, with an unkempt child creeping about and a bed that is still unmade. The woman is eagerly devouring the woman's page of a magazine containing hints for beautifying the home."[16] This comment hints at the underlying theme that connects the print to others in the series. With laundry washboard, child, unmade beds, and tormented cat all competing for her attention, the woman focuses intently on the newspaper, succumbing to the power of the mass media and demonstrating one way in which modern city dwellers cope with its multilayered stimuli.

The remaining two prints—*Turning Out the Light* and *Roofs, Summer Night*—were the most transgressive of Sloan's New York series and, not surprisingly, the most censored. To me, these images are inconceivable without the background of cinema. Here

11 John Sloan, *Man, Wife, and Child (Wrestling Bout),* 1905, from the series New York City Life. Etching, 5 x 7 in. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

12 John Sloan, *The Women's Page,* 1905, from the series New York City Life. Etching, 5 x 7 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Bequest of Frank McClure

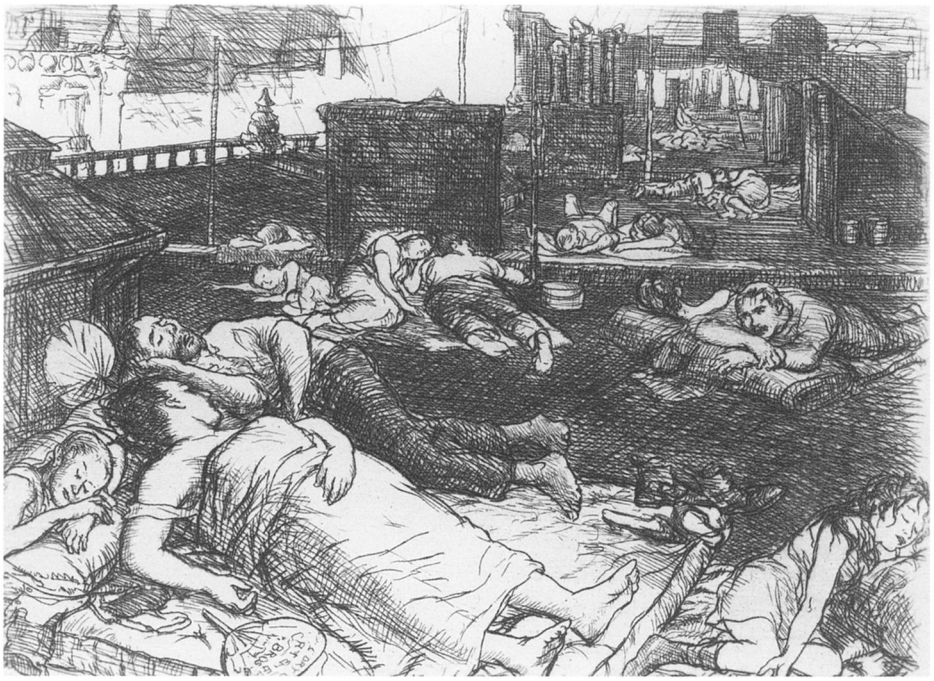
13 John Sloan, *Turning Out the Light,* 1905, from the series New York City Life. Etching, 5 x 7 in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Bequest of Frank McClure



too we could draw superficial analogies to specific film scenes, but my interest instead lies in the visual plots Sloan sets up, the strategies of desire he establishes through the force of the erotic gaze.

Turning Out the Light (fig. 13) frames a woman kneeling in the center of a double bed in a small, bare room with stockings dangling from the bed frame and recently removed clothes piled on a nearby chair (it could almost double for the set of *The Women's Page,* pictured from a slightly different angle). We follow the line of her arm to the light, then crisscross to follow the direction of her glance. Only then do we perceive the man whose head—propped at the end of the bed—appears in the lower register. After this moment, the other four senses will be called into play; this is the last point in time when vision is the prime vehicle for conveying information and emotion. Sloan has portrayed the man and woman gazing at each other with lust and anticipation; his use of viewing angles and frames enhances the expression of their desires. Of course artists pictured people exchanging looks before the modern era. But by 1900—as the cinema both echoed and shaped modern vision—there was more dependence on ricocheting glances to knit compositions together, and on the eye as filter of attention and distraction.

About *Roofs, Summer Night* (fig. 14) Sloan later recalled: "I have always liked to watch the people in the summer, especially the way they live on the roofs."[17] He might well have added that he shared this locale with movie companies, which often used rooftops as outdoor studios. Here Sloan created an amazing image. In the immediate left foreground lies a female figure, somewhat foreshortened, sandwiched between a man and a child. Another couple reclines nearby; that woman too is asleep, but the man by her side is awake, looking over at the wife of his neighbor. His facial expression is accented by a mustache and framed by his shoulders and arms as he raises himself up for a better view. Diagrammed glances and linear perspective convey the expression of male desire for a woman—in this case, one he cannot possess.



14 John Sloan, *Roofs, Summer Night,* 1906, from the series New York City Life. Etching, 5 x 7 in. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

In this image the artist is further evolving the strategies he will carry over into some of his key paintings of the next several years. Eschewing traditional one-point perspective, he develops primary, secondary, and even tertiary foci in the figural groups that cause our eye to jump from rooftop to rooftop until its travel is halted by the string of laundry at rear (clotheslines for some critics function as symbols of film strips).[18] Then the impeccably structured unity of the foreground group pulls our eye back to linger there.

Critical Reaction

Hot off the printing press, the New York City Life prints were shown at a group show in February 1906 at a midtown Manhattan gallery. Initially they were praised by critic Charles FitzGerald, but when Sloan was invited to show them at the American Watercolor Society in March 1906, he was astounded to discover that only six of the series were hung. When he demanded an explanation, he was told that *Turning Out the Light* was one of four prints rejected as too "vulgar" for public display. Insisting to no avail that the ten images had to remain together as a group, Sloan displayed them in the window of a bookshop on Twenty-third Street with a placard indicating that "an incomplete set was shown at the American Watercolor Society."[19] He responded not only to the censorship but more specifically to the violation of the integrity of the series.

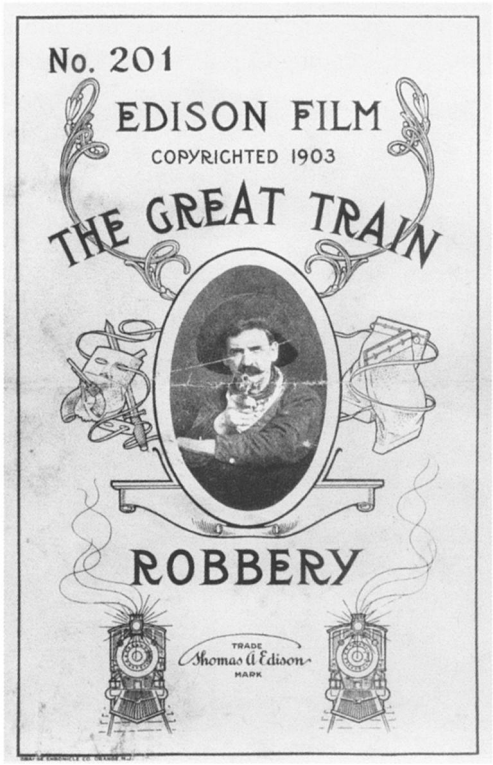
Given the artist's insistence that the prints be exhibited as an integrated unit, we can logically query in what sequence they were intended to appear. From the etchings that are dated, diary entries, and other evidence, we can piece together the order in which they were created, beginning with *Connoisseurs of Prints* and *Connoisseurs of Virtue* in February 1905 and concluding with *Rooftops, Summer Night,* and *The Little Bride* in February 1906. But Sloan seems not to have insisted on a particular numbering. It may have been his unwillingness to put the images in the service of a specific narrative that annoyed the critics and contributed to the excising of four of the prints when the series was shown in 1906. Audiences accustomed to print cycles ranging from William Hogarth's *Marriage à la Mode* (1745) to Max Klinger's *Glove* cycle (1881) expected a story line with a moral or dramatic conclusion.[20] Art historians have tended to look at the images individually, but we need to think more about their order and their interrelations.

Many years after their creation, Sloan was asked to provide commentary on these images and offered a tongue-in-cheek response, insisting that he hoped the little bride lived happily ever after and that the men and women caught in private moments in his interiors were taken for respectable married couples. In truth, Sloan refused to edit his material into a familiar narrative structure. Instead, the images appear on the etched pages as they did to him on the streets, at random and without reason. They collide and

drift as they would on the sidewalks of the modern city and in the cinema of that day.

Between 1902 and 1904 actuality movies—filmed as events occurred or with the intent of looking that way—declined in popularity and narrative films began to be made in the studio. This trend coincided with Edwin Porter's arrival at Thomas Edison's studio, where he made some of its best-known dramas, including *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1902), *Life of an American Fireman* (1902–3), and *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Initially movies were limited to the brief durations contained on a single reel of film, but these quickly expanded to require multiple reels. Exhibitors would order films from catalogues, which would identify the scenes on each reel and allow for the possibility of shuffling the sequence. This is why, in the most famous example, the bandit who raises his pistol in *The Great Train Robbery* (fig. 15) sometimes appeared at the end of the show and at other times at the opening. After 1907, as movies became more popular, a tighter system of control would arise, but in these pioneering days there was a sense of a fluid narrative, of variations on a theme.[21]

On view in theaters immediately after its completion in the fall of 1905 was Porter's *Life of an American Policeman*—a day in the life of an average "beat cop" (fig. 16). It opens with the patrolman at home with his wife and family; then he is shown helping a lost child, chasing a wealthy motorist who speeds and almost runs over a child, rescuing a would-be suicide from the river, and trying to apprehend a burglar.[22] Like Sloan, Porter worked with multiple narrative threads, refusing to limit the sequence to a single story line. Reading Sloan's New York City Life against Porter's moving picture *Life of an American Policeman* demonstrates important parallels in their working method. Sloan's surveillance of his neighborhood for people and incidents that caught his eye can be compared to the policeman's surveillance of his beat, for instance. Both were inspired by actual events and share a focus on common people. These are not heroic characters or historic events, just everyday city life, told in open, reversible texts. Sloan's series, too, is loosely tied together by place and by the artist-observer's movement through the streets. The incidents were dictated by chance, causing him to happen on one incident while missing another.



15 Poster for *The Great Train Robbery* (Edison, 1903; photographed by Edwin S. Porter). Prints and Photographs Division, New York Public Library

So in the face of this misunderstanding and censorship of the New York City Life series, we have to ask: Did Sloan's contemporaries understand what he was up to? Just after he finished his tenth etching, on February 27, 1906, Sloan noted in his diary: "Sadakichi Hartmann, the weird art critic and poet, whom I have known now and then during the past twelve years, came in, accompanied by [artist] A. L. Groll. . . . Groll seemed interested in my etchings and Hartmann also."[23] Hartmann's reaction was perhaps not so difficult to predict, given that the etchings fulfilled the goals he had laid out in 1900 in his *Camera Notes* article "A Plea for the Picturesqueness of New York." There the critic had urged artists and especially photographers to look

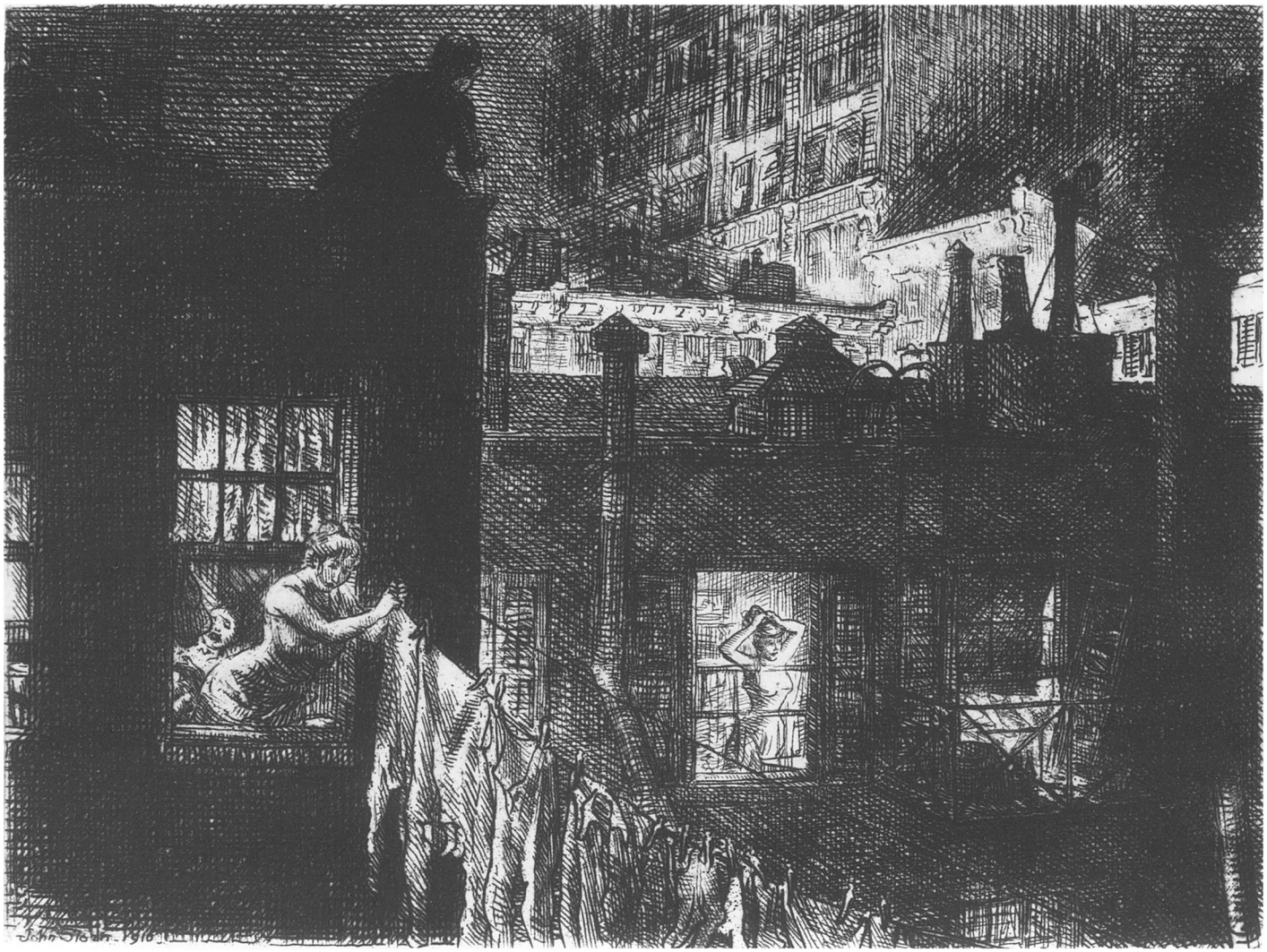
16 *Life of an American Policeman* (Edison Film, 1905; photographed by Edwin S. Porter). Edison National Historic Site, West Orange, New Jersey

long and hard at the actualities of their urban environment. His receptiveness to Sloan's images was enhanced by a mutual fascination with the potential of moving pictures. In 1899 Hartmann published the essay "Portrait Painting and Portrait Photography," which concluded his survey of portraitists with a provocative suggestion: "Only when color photography has been made possible, and kinetoscope photography in the hands of artists has developed to that extent that full justice can be done to the spontaneity of *actual* movement . . . will artistic portrait photography fulfill its highest vocation." Any hope for adequately portraying human life, in other words, lay with cinematography.[24] His *History of American Art* praised Sloan as one of "the most personal, the most gifted and at the same time most modern painters of the period 1903–1917." Hartmann's recognition that Sloan's "knowledge began on the sidewalks and ended on the roof tops" was another demonstration of his gift for seeing "aesthetic possibilities where none had been seen before, for analyzing subterranean influences and inter-connections between the arts."[25]

The closing years of Hartmann's public career logically extend his filmic interests. In 1923 he moved to Hollywood, where he tried his hand at movie scripts and supported himself by writing reviews and gossip columns. Douglas Fairbanks became a friend and cast him in the role of Court Magician in the 1924 film *The Thief of Bagdad* (fig. 17). Although uncontrollable drinking put a quick stop to what seemed to be a promising second career, this brief interlude suggests that as movies evolved in the silent era, Hartmann progressed from contemplating the artistic potential of film to writing and acting for the screen.

17 *The Thief of Bagdad* (Douglas Fairbanks Pictures/United Artists, 1924; Raoul Walsh, director) with Sadakichi Hartmann in the role of Court Magician

Hartmann had been tempted to dismiss moving pictures for what he called their "crude aesthetic" but decided he could not do so and succumbed to the powers of "this kind of pictorialism." Early movies generated not only a new lust for looking but also a license for lust. They were often risqué, even erotic. Quick peeks at the female body were commonly shown, as in *The Gay*



18 John Sloan, *Night Windows,* 1910. Etching, 5 ¼ x 7 in. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Shoe Clerk (Edison, 1903). Others including *Trapeze Disrobing Act* (Edison, 1901) were more explicit. "This kind of pictorialism" empowered Sloan to turn observations that others would have recorded as merely private sketches into public pictures.

By way of conclusion I would like to return briefly to this element of voyeurism, which can still cause today's viewers discomfort with Sloan's art. In several works Sloan shows the spectator—a surrogate self—obscured in shadow or leaning out a window with a telescope, engaged in his self-confessed viewing practices (fig. 18). He defended his actions, claiming artistic privilege; discretion, he insisted, distinguished him from the common "peeper":

I am in the habit of watching every bit *of human life I can see about my windows, but I do it so that I am not observed at it. I "peep" through real interest, not being observed myself. I feel that it is no insult to the people you are watching to do so unseen, but that to do it openly and with great expression of amusement is an evidence of* real vulgarity.[26]

Sloan saw the artist as an expert, a professional looker if you will, like the x-ray technician or medical doctor who had the right to look where others do not. For the artist in America, then, the empirical component of film held great critical appeal—its potential for analyzing

19 *The Story the Biograph Told* (American Mutoscope and Biograph Co., 1904). Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

movement, the essence of life. Remember that in the early days, films went by the names of the projecting mechanisms: Vitascope, Cinematograph, Biograph, literally the probing and graphing of life.

Sloan, Henri, and their circle greatly admired painter Thomas Eakins, the Philadelphia realist whose insistence on the use of nude models in his classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts led to his dismissal. Film provided an invaluable source of carnal knowledge, one that was necessarily acquired through its lens. A frame from the movie *The Story the Biograph Told* (fig. 19) shows the ubiquitous camera eye. Immersed in that same environment of spectatorship, display, and projection, artists and movie cameramen grappled with similar subjects and strategies. By 1905 the city was conceived not only as a place but also as a process. Sloan's mentor Henri had emphasized the importance of depicting the dynamism of the city. Although he was incapable of fully realizing that in paint, Henri passed his credo on to Sloan: art should approximate life, not merely as a visual but as a bodily, mobile experience. What I suggest here, however, is neither a claim to influence of one practitioner over another nor an example of high-low dynamics. The metaphor of the stereopticon provides a means of presenting two interrelated productions—Sloan's New York City Life series and the urban films made by Porter and others—and illuminating these parallel developments and exchanges.

Notes

This essay is taken from my forthcoming book entitled *You Ought to Be in Pictures: American Painters Engaging with Film, 1896–1936.* My thanks to Janice Simon, who organized a session at the 2003 College Art Association conference at which I presented an earlier version of this paper.

1 Bruce St. John, ed., *John Sloan's New York Scene, 1906–1913* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), entry for April 17, 1907, 122–23. The diary originals are located at the Delaware Art Museum in Wilmington; for the convenience of the reader, all citations are taken from published sources unless otherwise indicated.

2 [John Sloan], "Notes," *Chap-Book,* July 15, 1896, 239–40, was based on one such early experience. His New York diaries from 1906 to 1913 document many visits to vaudeville, where movies were initially shown between live acts, and movie houses; see, for example, St. John, *John Sloan's New York Scene,* 66, 75, 111,121–67 passim, 216–17, 239, 248, 290–329 passim, 346, 352, 365, 378, 388, 391, 422, 523, and 563.

3 For two recent instances, see Laural Weintraub, "Women as Urban Spectators in John Sloan's Early Work," *American Art* 15 (Summer 2001): 74, and John Loughery, *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (New York: Holt, 1995), 85–86. Loughery provides the most complete biography.

4 See Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 17.

5 On the move to Twenty-third Street, see Loughery, *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel,* 73. On *The "Movey" Troupe,* see Peter Morse, *John Sloan's Prints: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Etchings, Lithographs, and Posters* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), 222, no. 196. See also Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon:*

Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1991), 116–19 on Eden Musée.

6 This is the subject of Sloan's "Notes," *Chap-Book,* July 15, 1896. Although initially he vehemently expressed his disgust, he later attended movies regularly.

7 Among the few who have gone beyond acknowledging movie-viewing as subject are Lauren Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure: Women, Movies, and Culture in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1998) and Weintraub, "Women as Urban Spectators," 72–83, who provides additional sources.

8 Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon,* 209–11.

9 For my purposes the most intelligent and useful has been Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), which I broadly draw on here.

10 St. John, *John Sloan's New York Scene,* 200, entry for February 22, 1908.

11 Ibid., 131, entry for May 24, 1907.

12 In her "Re-viewing John Sloan's Images of Women," *Oxford Art Journal* 21, no. 2 (1998): 79–97, Janice Coco interprets *The Show Case* and *Fun, One Cent* in the light of what she sees as his fear of women.

13 Rabinovitz, *For the Love of Pleasure,* 94–96.

14 St. John, *John Sloan's New York Scene,* 40, entry for June 11, 1906.

15 Horace Kallen, "The Dramatic Picture Versus the Pictorial Drama: A Study in the Influence of the Cinematograph on the Stage," *Harvard Monthly* 50 (March 1910): 29.

16 Quoted in Virginia Mecklenburg, "Manufacturing Rebellion," in *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1995), 204.

17 Quoted in Roland Elzea and Elizabeth Hawkes, *John Sloan: Spectator of Life* (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 1988), 70.

18 Scott MacDonald, *The Garden in the Machine* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001), 42–43.

19 Loughery, *John Sloan,* 102.

20 The first etched edition of Klinger's cycle appeared in 1881, following the exhibition of the ink drawings in 1878. See Christine Hertel, "Irony, Dream and Kitsch: Max Klinger's *Paraphrase of the Finding of the Glove* and German Modernism," *Art Bulletin* 74 (March 1992): 91–114.

21 Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon,* 235–90.

22 The subject was first shown at two vaudeville benefits for the Police Relief Fund in early December 1905. Ibid., 307–8.

23 St. John, *John Sloan's New York Scene,* 17, entry for February 27, 1906.

24 Sadakichi Hartmann, *The Valiant Knights of Daguerre: Selected Critical Essays on Photography and Profiles of Photographic Pioneers,* ed. Harry Lawton and George Knox (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978), 54–55, editor's introduction 5.

25 Ibid., 26. Hartmann, *A History of American Art,* rev. ed. (New York: L.C. Page, 1932), 299, 301.

26 St. John, *John Sloan's New York Scene,* 549, entry for July 6, 1911.