THE REAL DRAMA OF THE SLUMS, AS TOLD IN JOHN SLOAN’S ETCHINGS: BY CHARLES WISNER BARRELL

WHEN an artist feels within him the strong tide of desire to get down into the recesses of human nature and to depict it as it is, he turns, almost perforce, to the phases of human life which are farthest removed from the softening influences of wealth and culture,—not that he does not recognize that human nature, whether in the rough or polished until all the angles are decorously rounded, is all one, and that “the Colonel’s lady and Judy O’Grady are sisters under their skin,”—but the nearer he can get to the unveiled play of passions and sensations, or to the mere seeking for animal well-being or the dull suffering that comes when it is lacking, the more trenchant are his strokes and the more sweeping his masses of color. The art of a man like Sargent lies in the insight and the power of subtle depiction which leaves the veil intact even while it reveals the inmost nature of the soul which glimmers through and stamps itself upon delicately chiseled and well-controlled features. But the art of men like Eugene Higgins or John Sloan is more obvious and direct, for it comes down to such bald realities as we find in the stories of Jack London and of the late Frank Norris, showing, in all its native tragedy or grotesqueness, the life of that part of humanity which to most of us is known only vaguely as the “other half.”

Even in the closest approach to the raw reality of things, it is difficult for an artist to avoid idealizing and so dignifying his subject. The strong, heavy, patient figures of Millet’s peasants have at times the immensity of Titans, so close are they to the great primal things of earth and of life; the terrible, heart-wringing poverty, which is the chosen theme of Eugene Higgins, has also a sense of universality, as if the artist saw only abstract human wretchedness in great shadowy masses and painted what he saw. But John Sloan, both in his paintings and in the brilliant relentless little etchings which give us such vivid glimpses of New York life, shows no tendency to grasp human wretchedness in the mass, but rather to show here and there a detached bit of life which has the power of suggesting the whole turbid current.

Master of a psychologic outlook that seems one with that of Dickens or of Balzac, Sloan has registered on canvas, copper and paper his appreciation of the swarming life of the big American cities in which he has lived. He has not sought feverishly for academic motives and poetic nuances, so-called,—everything that is
human has been grist for his mill, though it may be said that he has more than often found a dash of saving humor in the situations he has depicted. It seems natural that he should be an admirer of the work of Hogarth and of the two Cruikshanks, H. K. Browne and Honore Daumier, and in this connection it is interesting that, even at this stage of his career, he has evinced a greater versatility in his handling of vehicles than any of these famous commentators on the human comedy,—with, possibly, the exception of Hogarth. Indeed, it is with an insight, sympathy and relish quite similar to that which actuated the great eighteenth-century master that he has set about his self-appointed task of tallying with the pencil, brush and needle "the broadcast doings of the day and night." His work proclaims him as the possessor of the same keen, retentive eye as that which distinguished the painter of "The Rake's Progress." By this I do not mean in the least that Sloan imitates Hogarth's manner, for the point of similarity between the famous Englishman and the young American artist lies in the fact that both seem temperamentally akin in their appreciation of the common, everyday life of parlor and pave.

Seeking for a literary analogy to Sloan's art, I have compared
his viewpoint to that expressed in the work of both Dickens and Balzac, but it might be nearer the mark to mention him in conjunction with William Ernest Henley, the poet laureate of the city street,—the London street in particular. Henley would have reveled in such an illustrator, for in Sloan he would have found an able collaborator, one with an unfailing "sense of the poetry of cities, that rarer than pastoral poetry, the romance of what lies beneath our eyes, in the humanity of the streets, if we have but the vision and the point of view!"


The scenes represented in the etchings range from Fifth Avenue during the afternoon driving hour to the slum roof-tops on a sweltering midsummer night. Sloan has made them as brutally frank and as inherently humorous as life itself. He has put in all the warts and jocular curves. Mrs. Grundy would disapprove of many of these bald depictions, but the man who finds the essence
of romance, tragedy and humor in actuality will probably go back to them again and again with an ever-deepening appreciation not only of their relentless truthfulness but of their significance in showing the trend of some phases of what we are pleased to style civilization.

Among the paintings, perhaps the best known are "The Rathskeller," "The Picnic Ground" and "The Coffee Line,"—often mis-called "The Bread Line,"—as these three canvases have attracted no little attention when they have been exhibited on various occasions. "The Coffee Line," which received honorable mention at the Carnegie Institute in nineteen hundred and five was the most talked of picture of the entire exhibition, and it was largely the strong impression which Sloan made at that time that brought about his recent appointment as head instructor of the Art Students’ League of Pittsburgh. Sloan and his brother revolutionaries are often called "Apostles of the Ugly," but the critic who first applied the phrase must never have seen his "Foreign Girl," a beautiful and trenchantly handled study of robust femininity, with graceful unconventional pose and living flesh tints. "The Rathskeller" gives us a glimpse of a scene below ground in the heart of metropolitan Philadelphia—a place of gloomy corners, filled now with bibulous mirth and the rattle of steins and
now with the spirit of imminent tragedy which hovers over the *demi-
monde*. On "The Picnic Ground," which was shown at the nineteen
hundred and six and seven National Academy, a bevy of city hoydens
are romping through a game of tag. They are evidently guests at
an "outing" given by a political association in the vicinity of East
Fourteenth Street, and Sloan has preserved for us here a vivid slice
of familiar observation. The scene of "The Coffee Line" is Madison
Square on a bitter, blustery night in winter when the shivering unem-
ployed are forming a ragged waiting line at the rear of a hot coffee
wagon. Startling in its fidelity, the picture displays Sloan in one of
his most tense and dramatic moods. It is as great a depiction and as
bating a commentary upon the social system of our big cities as
Stephen Crane’s unforgettable prose sketch entitled "The Men in
the Storm," or one of Gorky’s poignant little masterpieces.

**JOHN SLOAN** is classed as a member of what is known in our
academic art circles as the "Revolutionary Gang," or the "Black
School." To speak more plainly, he belongs to that coterie of
earnest American realists of which Robert Henri and George Luks
are noteworthy members. In common with Luks and many of the
others, his work has suffered rejection time and again at the hands of
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official juries of selection, although a few of his canvases have been hung at exhibitions at different times, on which occasions they have aroused the interest, not to say the enthusiasm, of the discerning.

Sloan was born in the lumbering community of Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, on the second of August, eighteen hundred and seventy-one. He studied in the evenings for a term or two at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, but in general he may be said to be self-taught in art. He owes much of his deftness and vivid human interest to his long newspaper apprenticeship. For several years he was a staff artist on the Philadelphia Press. It is rather interesting at this point to note that Luks, Shinn, Glackens, and one or two other brilliant members of the revolutionary forces, were also newspaper artists during the chrysalis stages of their respective careers. Indeed, the illustrated American newspaper seems destined to become a training school for American painters in almost the same degree that it has become a training school for American novelists. Through his journalistic work Sloan developed a rapidity of execution and a clear-cut, incisive facility of expression in varied forms, which he might never have gained in any other way. He early learned to handle the etcher’s needle with a measure of distinction, but he did not take up painting until about ten years ago. His first canvases were all done in a much lower key than that which he now affects. “Independence Square,” “The Look of a Woman,” “Violin Player,” “Boy with Piccolo,” “Dock Street, Philadelphia,” and “Tugs,” are the names of the best examples of his first serious work in oils. Somber in tone these pictures are, almost without exception, but interesting to a degree.

In nineteen hundred and four Sloan left Philadelphia, and since then he has made his home in the heart of New York City in a picturesque top-story den on West Twenty-third Street, just on the outskirts of the seething Tenderloin. New York is to him America crystallized, and from his roof or his studio windows he can watch the pageant of humanity stream by in all its million phases. He has not traveled to distant lands for material or sought to surprise life and nature in unfamiliar guises, but has taken the subjects that are commonest and nearest at hand and limned them forth with the strong, sure strokes of a man who sees life with clear eyes and knows how to interpret that which he sees.