

Basic Detail Report



Title: Main Street, Gloucester

Date: 1917

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3ef38

Medium: Oil on canvas

Description: Sloan spent each summer from 1914 to 1918 in the small Cape Ann, Massachusetts, town of Gloucester. This work, executed during the fourth summer, reveals an aesthetic sophistication stimulated by the artist's absorption of the 1913 Armory Show's provocative presentation of avant-garde and modernist art. That landmark exhibition, coupled with those he helped to organize for The Eight in 1908 and the Exhibition of Independent Artists in 1910, inspired Sloan to explore a constellation of new ideas and methods. The body of work he created during the Gloucester years speaks of a renewed rigor as well as an intrepid and vigorous spirit of experimentation that would endure throughout his career.(1) Initially, "Main Street, Gloucester" captivates as one of Sloan's distinctive "city-life" pictures, for which he garnered an enormous reputation. In the decade and a half preceding this painting's creation, his keen powers of observation, selection, and rendering were honed

Basic Detail Report

through his work as an illustrator, etcher, and painter of the urban scene. Yet his production during the Gloucester period represented a fundamental shift in his methods of conception and execution. I had been dependent on waiting for the inspiration to paint a picture because I had so little leisure time to work for myself. So I decided to save up enough money to take off for a few months, go to the country and work from nature to get fresh ideas about plastic design and color rhythms.(2) Thus issues of pure painting, rather than subject, motivated his work at this time. This redirection toward plasticity, design, and color resulted from Sloan's thoughtful analysis of the work of what he called the "ultra-moderns" at the Armory Show. Sloan recalled the impact of that landmark exhibition: "It was exciting, it pointed many ways to freedom of expression, color, texture, most of all "graphics". It pointed the way back to mental rather than visual thinking."(3) He credited the works of Cézanne, Matisse, and Van Gogh, among others, as powerful antidotes for the disease of "clever eyesight painting," the scourge of art production and consumption since the advent of photography.(4) He wrote: "Many intelligent people have accepted the false idea that accuracy in representing visual facts is a sign of progress in art. Such imitation of superficial effects has nothing to do with art, which is and always has been the making of mental concepts."(5) Sloan's summers in Gloucester precipitated the auspicious convergence of several paths of inquiry in his own work. Using color as a constructive, expressive element in painting had been one of his preoccupations since 1909, when Robert Henri introduced him to Hardesty Maratta's experimental color system. Through it, Sloan had moved away from a dark tonal palette by increasing the presence of bright vivid colors. Maratta's system was predicated on the analogous relationship of the twelve colors in the chromatic wheel to notes in an octave of music.(6) The careful, precise orchestration of notes, chords, and harmonies was facilitated through the use of a set palette of premixed colors. With this palette, Sloan was confident that he could maintain the continuity of a painting's colors as he worked on it over time: These Maratta colors opened up the palette for me. I had been analyzing the color of the city streets and the few things I painted from the model, in terms of color changes away from a basic raw umber note. With the Maratta colors I had six, twelve color-hues to work with, and from there could think of branching up into notes of higher intensity.(7) His use of the Maratta system was given fresh impetus when he coupled it with plein-air techniques. The genre of landscape provided a comfortable arena in which to experiment with color that was often somewhat antinaturalistic. "After selecting the subject I would take half an hour to set my palette. Then I would pick up those set tones and draw with paint. Instead of imitating the colors in nature, I decided on some quality of color that interested me and set a limited palette."(8) His deep sympathy for humanity prevented his taking too many liberties with human subjects. "There is no better subject [than landscape] to free one of color habits. The variety in nature offers new color combinations, new ideas. You also feel more free to take liberties with color in nature than when painting from the figure."(9) In "Main Street,

Basic Detail Report

Gloucester" Sloan effectively merged plein-air techniques with his exploration of color rhythms and plastic design. Through the skilled massing and organization of form, volume, and color, he devised a composition that is at once stable and balanced yet highly animated. By the artist's criteria for a successful composition, "Main Street, Gloucester" is a successful work. "A good design has stability. It is at rest with itself. Sense the opposition of horizontal and vertical rhythms to the dynamic movement of diagonal curves. Feel the weight of tones and colors, balance and counterbalance them against line and mass."(10) Art dealer Charles Kraushaar exhibited "Main Street, Gloucester" in his second solo show of Sloan's work. "Art News" drew attention to the changes in the artist's palette: An appreciable stride forward is made by John Sloan in his 18 works on view . . . at Kraushaar's. This advance is particularly noticeable in the matter of color. Although still heavy and rather thick and wanting in what the academicians would call "values" in tone, Sloan's color is gaining in 'quality' and in varieties of quality.(11) Caroline Caffin praised Sloan's work for "a growth in power and authority" and noted that "his handling [had] more of the painter quality and less of the illustrator's.(12) "Main Street, Gloucester" reveals Sloan's effort to advance his reputation as one of the foremost figurative artists of his day by endowing his work with a fresh, new perspective born of a spirit of inquiry and investigation in the years following the Armory Show. JT Bibliography: John Sloan, "Gist of Art" (New York: American Artists Group, 1939); Bruce St. John, ed., }"John Sloan's New York Scene" (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); Peter Morse, "John Sloan's Prints: A Catalogue Raisonné of the Etchings, Lithographs and Posters" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969); Rowland Elzea, "John Sloan's Oil Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné" (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991); John Loughery, "John Sloan: Painter and Rebel" (New York: Henry Holt, 1995). Notes: . For an extended treatment of Sloan's life and work in this period, see Grant Holcomb, "John Sloan: The Gloucester Years", exhib. cat. (Springfield, Mass.: Springfield Library and Museums Association, 1980) and Loughery, "John Sloan", pp. 186-247. 2. Helen Farr Sloan, Notes, John Sloan Trust, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington. 3. Ibid 4. Ibid. 5. Sloan, "Gist", p. 12. 6. See Elizabeth Handy, "H. G. Maratta's Color Theory and Its Influence on the Painters Robert Henri, John Sloan and George Bellows," M. A. Thesis, University of Delaware: Sloan's diaries and related archival materials (John Sloan Trust) are among the primary sources of information about Sloan's experiments with this color system. 7. Sloan, Notes. 8 . Lloyd Goodrich, "John Sloan, 1871-1951", exhib. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1952), p. 50. 9. Sloan, Notes. 10. Sloan, Gist, p. 71. 11.J. B., "Works by John Sloan," "American Art News", 16, March 16, 1918, John Sloan Trust. 2. Caroline Caffin, "John Sloan as an Interpreter of Life," "New York American", March 18, 1918, 10. Dimensions: 26 x 32 1/4 in. (66 x 81.9 cm) Frame Dimension: 32 1/2 x 38 1/2 x 2 1/4 in. (82.6 x 97.8 x 5.7 cm)