

John Sloan's Newspaper Career: An Alternative to Art School

ELIZABETH H. HAWKES

IN THE 1890s aspiring artists often lacked the financial means to pursue conventional art training, which entailed lengthy study at American and European academies. For John Sloan (1871–1951), gaining employment as a newspaper artist served as an alternative art education. Sloan spent twelve years as an artist working for two Philadelphia newspapers, the *Inquirer* and the *Press*, with a brief three-month hiatus at the *New York Herald*. He began his first newspaper job in 1892 at the age of twenty.

SLOAN'S EARLY YEARS

John Sloan was born in the central Pennsylvania lumber town of Lock Haven. His family moved to Philadelphia when he was about six.¹ His father, a photographer and cabinetmaker in Lock Haven, hoped for a better business opportunity and found employment as a salesman in a stationery business. The Sloans lived

I wish to acknowledge the support of Helen Farr Sloan; the John Sloan Memorial Foundation; Harriet Memeger, Librarian, of the Helen Farr Sloan Library at the Delaware Art Museum; and Mary F. Holahan, Registrar, Delaware Art Museum.

1. Sloan was still in Lock Haven in April 1877. Betty Elzea, *The Wards and the Sloans: The Family Connection Between the Irish Firm of Colour Printers and the American Artist John Sloan* (Wilmington: Delaware Art Museum, 1990), 36.

ELIZABETH H. HAWKES is an independent curator from West Chester, Pennsylvania, specializing in American painting and illustration. She served as Associate Curator at the Delaware Art Museum and Curator of the Museum's John Sloan Collection. She was co-author of *John Sloan: Spectator of Life* (1988) and author of *John Sloan's Book and Magazine Illustrations* (1993).

Copyright © 1995 by American Antiquarian Society

modestly. His mother Henrietta, a former schoolteacher, nurtured her children's love of books and pictures. Though the family had little money, there were always books to read. As a child, Sloan exhibited a precociousness for drawing and decorated his copy of *Treasure Island* with ink drawings.² He perused copies of books lavishly illustrated by Walter Crane, George Cruikshank, and Gustave Doré, among others.³ Sloan's later involvement with art and illustration can be traced to these seeds planted in his youth. In 1884 he entered Philadelphia's Central High School, a public school for exceptionally bright students, where he was a classmate of William Glackens and Albert C. Barnes. Sadly, his father's health failed, and at age sixteen Sloan had to quit high school to support his family.

Between leaving Central High School and getting a job at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sloan worked as a book store cashier, a greeting card and calendar designer, and a freelance artist. He recalled: 'I sort of drifted into art as a way of earning a living.'⁴ Having had little art schooling, he enrolled in a freehand drawing night class at Spring Garden Institute in 1890. He taught himself to etch by reading Philip Hamerton's book on etching and completed his first oil painting, a self portrait, in 1890 after reading a painting manual.⁵

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER AND THE NEWSPAPER
BUSINESS IN THE EARLY 1890S

In 1892 the *Philadelphia Inquirer* hired twenty-year-old John Sloan to work as a newspaper artist. The paper's publisher James Elverson had bought the *Inquirer* in 1889 and had immediately

2. This copy of *Treasure Island* is in the John Sloan Collection, Helen Farr Sloan Library, Delaware Art Museum.

3. From John Sloan's autobiographical notes collected by Helen Farr Sloan in *The Poster Period of John Sloan* (Lock Haven, Pa.: Hammermill Paper Co., 1967), unpaginated.

4. Quoted in *The Poster Period of John Sloan*.

5. Sloan's copies of Philip Gilbert Hamerton's *The Etcher's Handbook* (London: Charles Roberson and Co., 1881) and John Collier's *A Manual of Oil Painting* (London: Cassell and Co., 1886) are in the John Sloan Collection, Helen Farr Sloan Library, Delaware Art Museum.

begun transforming the lackluster paper to appeal to a new larger readership. Elverson used Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* as a model.⁶ Pulitzer, an immigrant, had bought the *World* in 1883 and increased its circulation from 15,000 to 1,000,000 readers in only fifteen years. Pulitzer changed the content of the *World* as well as its appearance. Sensational headlines and pictures of news events caught the attention of potential buyers. Human interest stories, fashion, and fiction enlarged his base of women readers. Throughout America, newspapers followed the Pulitzer formula in an effort to attract readers and increase both circulation and advertising revenues.⁷

James Elverson lowered the price of the daily *Inquirer* to one cent (most papers in Philadelphia sold for two or three cents). Newsboys shouted out the headlines. Some *Inquirer* headlines from 1892 were matter-of-fact: 'Arguing women's rights' and 'Substantial aid for Russians'; others were bizarre: 'She murdered her rival,' 'He held dynamite between his teeth,' and 'Killed herself by her own hair.'⁸

Like Pulitzer, Elverson targeted a new mass audience—an influx of Americans from farms and small towns, as well as European immigrants, who flooded Philadelphia as well as New York and other metropolitan centers, seeking jobs, housing, and a better way of life. The *Inquirer* prided itself on appealing 'to everyone and to every condition of life,' instead of catering to the educated male readers newspapers had relied on in the past.⁹ Though battling a language barrier, foreign immigrants learned to read headlines and classified ads. In the ten-year period from 1890 to 1900, circulation figures of American daily newspapers doubled (from 8 million to 15 million). As readership increased, so did advertising by department stores and retail businesses seek-

6. From 1889 to 1892, the circulation of the daily *Inquirer* increased from less than 5,000 to 70,000. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 10, 1892, 4.

7. Pulitzer's chief competitor in New York City was William Randolph Hearst, who acquired the rival *New York Journal* in 1895.

8. These headlines appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1892.

9. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 16, 1894, 44.

ing to appeal to this new mass market. On each day's editorial page, the *Inquirer* proudly printed daily circulation figures in bold typeface with an accompanying statement: 'The Largest Circulation of any Republican daily newspaper in the United States,' thereby persuading advertisers that their ads would reach a large audience.

In January 1892, the month Sloan joined the staff, the *Inquirer* expanded its Sunday paper to sixteen pages. Elverson recognized the circulation potential provided by working people who had Sunday off (most Americans worked a six-day week). Reading the Sunday paper became a form of leisure and a family activity. In a headpiece for the 'Boys and Girls Page,' Sloan drew an attractive young mother reading the paper to her children.¹⁰ The new Sunday *Inquirer* boasted of fiction by accomplished contemporary Americans such as Mark Twain and Bret Harte; a 'women's page' of fashion and how-to-do articles, for example 'Coming Styles in Bonnets' or 'Buying Groceries'; and a popular society page.¹¹ For children there were stories, puzzles, and a page of jokes and cartoons. In other words, the Sunday *Inquirer* had all the ingredients of a weekly magazine but cost only three cents in direct competition with ten- and fifteen-cent magazines.¹²

Appealing to working-class families as a serious readership was a cunning move. In the past newspapers had focused on male readers with articles about politics and business. But when department stores became major advertisers, newspapers changed focus and began targeting women readers. Clearly women, who oversaw shopping trips, made decisions about what clothes, furniture, and food to buy. The *Inquirer* reminded potential advertisers that 'the family man and the family woman' were the pay-

10. The drawing served as a headpiece for the 'Boys and Girls Page,' *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 16, 1894, 30.

11. 'Each Sunday there will be a page devoted exclusively to matters of interest to women. These will be written, not for the wealthy few, but for the great mass of people who want helpful hints in housekeeping, dressmaking, cooking, etc.' *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 10, 1892, 20.

12. The Sunday paper was advertised as 'a weekly illustrated magazine by the best authors that cannot be duplicated.' *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 10, 1892, 20.

ing client.¹³ Newspapers became influential forums for promoting new products. Soon advertising income surpassed subscriptions as the newspaper's chief source of revenue.

The *Inquirer* promoted its own services. During the recession of 1894 the paper argued that reading newspapers was good for business. An unsigned ad, now attributed to John Sloan, shows a comfortable family scene in which a businessman reads a newspaper, while his wife and children study books in their library. According to the picture's caption, the businessman confides: 'Yes, the times are pretty hard all over the country, but . . . I have plenty of work. . . . I attribute our good fortune to the fact that I have always kept abreast of the times.'¹⁴ The meaning was obvious: businessmen should read the *Inquirer*.

In 1894 the *Inquirer* opened a new six-story office building in Philadelphia to house the editorial, business, and printing facilities. It was acclaimed as 'the most thoroughly equipped newspaper office in the world,' with a new press capable of printing 100,000 eight-page newspapers an hour.¹⁵ The *Inquirer* published a picture of guests attending the opening celebration with an article describing how the picture was prepared. First, staff artists copied a photograph of dignitaries at the reception. On a rush job, several artists worked on different parts of a single drawing to meet the deadline. Within two hours the drawing was sent to the engraving room. It took only 3 1/2 hours from the time the photograph was taken until the engraved plate was in the press ready to be printed. This was a phenomenal feat for the time.¹⁶

Recognizing that pictures sold newspapers, Elverson hired young artists to draw not only the daily political cartoon which had

13. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 16, 1894, 44.

14. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 20, 1894, 16.

15. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 16, 1894, 37. The *Inquirer* published a special supplement about the new building and the paper, see 37-44. The article announced that the new press was the largest and 'speediest' in the world and had safety guards to prevent loss of fingers, a common accident in the press room. It also noted that there were 250 incandescent lights in the business office and that 'bright-looking men of the nattiest-looking type' worked in the advertising office.

16. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 16, 1894, 1.

long been a staple in papers, but also pictures of news events, prominent leaders, fashion designs, and advertisements. But within a few years, due to technological advances, photographs could be printed on newsprint without the intervention of an artist.¹⁷ Photographers quickly displaced artists. Newspapers' dependence on artists was a short-lived phenomenon lasting only about a decade.

WORKING AS A NEWSPAPER ARTIST

When John Sloan joined the *Inquirer* in 1892, the paper boasted that its illustrations were 'excelled by no newspaper in the country.'¹⁸ Though this assertion was exaggerated, pictures were a prominent feature in the paper and drew the attention of readers eager to see as well as read the daily news, whether a fire in downtown Philadelphia, a trolley accident, or Benjamin Harrison's nomination at the Republican convention.¹⁹ Newspaper artists sketched on the site, from photographs, or from descriptions received by telegraph, that were considered as timely then as television's live coverage is today.

Newspapers hired young artists with basic drawing skills and trained them on the job. There were at least five artists on the *Inquirer* staff when Sloan worked there. R. C. Swayze provided a daily political cartoon and also covered news stories; for example, his drawings of a tragic theater fire that killed six performers appeared in a front-page story. Harry Ponitz specialized in fashion illustration and copied photographs of people in the news, whether murderers or politicians.²⁰ Edward Davis, known today as the father of famous American painter Stuart Davis, also worked at the *Inquirer* for a few years before moving to the *Philadelphia Press*. Everett Shinn worked there briefly in 1894.

17. An article about tornadoes in the Midwest featured dramatic photographs of the storms. 'Tornadoes Caught by the Camera,' *Sunday Philadelphia Press*, June 18, 1899, 29.

18. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 10, 1892, 20.

19. For examples, see the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 11, 1892, 1; May 21, 1894, 1; and January 28, 1895, 1.

20. For a description of the paper's art department, a list of staff, and photographs, see *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 16, 1894, 39, 40, 43. For drawings by Swayze and Ponitz, see *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 28, 1892, 1, and February 14, 1892, 1.



Fig. 1. John Sloan (right) and other staff artists at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1894. Photograph. John Sloan Collection, Helen Farr Sloan Library, Delaware Art Museum.

The art department manager Joe Laub designed headings, advertisements, and decorative borders.

These young *Inquirer* artists typically worked a six-day week sitting at drawing boards along a row of windows (fig. 1).²¹ They joked together, argued about politics, and rushed to scenes of news-breaking events. Years later, Sloan recalled the camaraderie of his newspaper days: 'But we were as happy a group as could be found and the fun we had there took the place of college for me.'²² Some

21. A photograph of Sloan seated at his drawing board appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 16, 1894, 38.

22. Sloan described the *Press* art department: 'a dusty room with windows on Chestnut

newspaper artists enrolled in night classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts to augment their drawing skills. Sloan enrolled in a course where he drew from plaster casts of classical sculpture and briefly attended Thomas Anshutz's life drawing class. But he was frustrated by the Academy's classes. His newspaper experience provided real-life situations that art school did not. At work, he copied photographs of people, buildings, and events. He drew people on the street and in courtrooms or at sports events and charity balls. Copying plaster casts and nude models seemed contrived in comparison to drawing real-life situations. As a newspaper artist, Sloan developed a keen memory for what he saw, a useful skill when he became a painter.

Not all newspaper artists became painters. Swayze, Ponitz, Laub, and Davis from the *Inquirer* did not. Frederic R. Gruger, who worked for the *Philadelphia Press*, won painting prizes while studying at the Academy, but he became a successful magazine illustrator providing a steady income and comfortable life style for his wife and children. By contrast, Sloan, Shinn, Glackens, and George Luks all got their start working for newspapers and then went on to become respected painters.²³ Robert Henri, a young and dynamic artist, inspired them to paint. Before meeting Henri, Sloan was interested in becoming only a good illustrator, but Henri motivated him to get serious about painting.

Sloan's early drawings for the *Inquirer* were hesitant and not particularly distinguished, but his skill developed quickly. His portrait drawing of Charles A. Dana, editor of the *New York Sun*, published on the *Inquirer*'s front page (April 24, 1892), imitated the style of magazine wood engraving. According to the caption, Sloan copied Dana's 'latest photograph,' emphasizing the timeli-

and Seventh Streets—walls plastered with caricatures of our friends and ourselves, a worn board floor, old chairs and tables close together, "no smoking" signs and a heavy odor of tobacco, and Democrats (as the roaches were called in this Republican stronghold) crawling everywhere.' 'Artists of the *Philadelphia Press*,' *Philadelphia Museum Bulletin* 41 (November 1945): 7.

23. American writers Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Lincoln Steffens began their writing careers as newspaper reporters.

ness of the image. Photographs of prominent figures, politicians, actors, and community leaders were kept on file in the art department for artists to copy. Another early assignment, an investigative story about recent boiler explosions in Philadelphia, showed the wreckage of a hotel destroyed by an explosion killing twenty-three people. Though an immature example of his work, the drawing captured the devastation of the scene. Sloan, however, was not particularly proficient at making rapid-fire drawings of action scenes—accidents, fires, and other catastrophes. On the other hand, Everett Shinn and William Glackens were adept at action work done under the heat of a deadline. Sloan's early assignments gravitated toward decorative headings and portraits of debutantes and brides for the Society page.

Sloan met Beisen Kubota, a Japanese artist who taught him how to sketch in brush and ink in the Japanese manner. This gave Sloan the impulse to adapt elements of the Japanese style, namely, asymmetrical designs, flat patterns, and crisp outlines in his newspaper drawings. Sloan's Japanese style was part of a broader movement, generally called the 'poster style,' that swept America in the mid-1890s. From about 1894 to 1899, magazine publishers issued colorful posters incorporating Japanesque design elements to advertise upcoming issues of their magazines. Sloan became the first artist to use the poster style for newspaper work in a drawing of spectators at a tennis match (June 10, 1894).²⁴ The composition differed radically from standard newspaper drawings. The figures of the men and women were reduced to flat black and white shapes in outline and were asymmetrically balanced by patterned areas (fig. 2).

Becoming his hallmark, Sloan's poster-style drawings appeared regularly in the *Inquirer* in 1894–95 accompanying feature arti-

24. Sloan's first poster-style drawing was published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 10, 1894, 12. In earlier literature concerning Sloan's newspaper work, another drawing of a tennis match, *On the Court at Wissabickon Heights*, is mistakenly identified as his first newspaper poster-style drawing and incorrectly dated February 12, 1892; the drawing was actually published June 13, 1894.



Fig. 2. John Sloan, *Tennis at Wissabickon*. Ink on paper, 6½ in. x 5 in. Published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 10, 1894. Delaware Art Museum, gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1993.

cles, society reports, and fiction. For example, drawings depicted scenes at New Jersey seaside resorts (fig. 3), guests at the German-American Charity Ball held at the Academy of Music, and episodes from a short story, 'An Episode in an Artist's Life.'²⁵ By then Sloan was aware of Aubrey Beardsley's drawings in *The Yellow Book*, as well as posters by Jules Chéret and Edward Penfield.²⁶

In 1895 Sloan gained his first national recognition when the *Chap-Book* and *Inland Printer* magazines featured his poster-style drawings. He also sent poster-style drawings to other privately printed 'little magazines'—*Echo*, *Gil Blas*, and *Moods*. While serving as art editor of *Moods*, a short-lived art/literary magazine published in Philadelphia, he produced a striking cover design. His consummate skill at abstract design, practiced in both his newspaper and magazine illustrations, informed his early paintings as in the deft composition for the restaurant scene, *The Rathskeller*, 1901 (Cleveland Museum of Art).

After four years at the *Inquirer*, Sloan moved to the competitor, the *Philadelphia Press*, where his friends William Glackens and Edward Davis now worked. Sloan wrote to Henri in December 1895 explaining his move: 'I have one wheel out of the rut, or at least into a shallower rut, I have left the *Inquirer*. . . . I am in better company and am getting more money. . . .'²⁷ He worked at the *Press* more than two years and then moved briefly to the *New York Herald* during the summer of 1898. The *Herald* hired artists to replace those sent to Cuba to cover the Spanish-American War. Sloan made drawings for stories filed by reporters about the war. Then, when the *Philadelphia Press* offered him a salary increase, Sloan returned to the paper in the fall to work on the Sunday Supplement. In an ad for the Supplement, the *Press* promised

25. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 22, 1894, 10; August 12, 1894; January 6, 1895, 20; and January 22, 1895, 3.

26. Two of Beardsley's drawings from *The Yellow Book* were reproduced in 'Porter's London Letter,' *Philadelphia Press*, February 10, 1895, 31.

27. Sloan to Henri, December 8, 1895, Robert Henri Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.



Fig. 3. John Sloan, *On the Pier*. Ink on paper, 13¹/₈ in. x 17³/₄ in. Published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 22, 1894. Delaware Art Museum, gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1980.

'colored and photographic pages . . . without a rival in the great field of newspaper illustration.'²⁸ Sloan was hired to illustrate fiction, create children's puzzles, and design decorative borders.

When Sloan returned to the *Press* in 1898, the days of the newspaper artist were numbered. Newspapers were reproducing photographs regularly. Sometimes, both an artist and a photographer were dispatched to an assignment; if the photograph failed, the artist could supply the necessary drawing. By 1900 most newspaper artists had lost their jobs to photographers. Sloan hung onto his job at the *Press* until 1903, because he worked as a designer and illustrator for the Sunday Magazine Supplement, not as an artist-reporter.

Sloan employed different styles and experimented with color, ink, and crayon for the Sunday paper. He devised new contests, puzzles, and games to entertain children. In one contest, children colored pictures in the paper and sent them to the *Press*, where the one judged best was published and awarded a prize. Even this stimulated sales, because parents bought newspapers so their children could enter the contest.

Sloan's more imaginative and ambitious works for the *Press* were his full-page puzzle drawings printed in color, for example, the *Snake Charmer Puzzle* (May 5, 1901). The objective was to find a young boy playing the flute cleverly hidden in the design (fig. 4). Sloan's 'Word Charade Puzzles' offered popular entertainment. He drew a series of fifteen pictures each of which represented a word. An example was the letter Z followed by a sketch of a cat knocking over a bottle of ink; the answer was Zinc.²⁹ Readers responding with correct answers were listed in the next week's paper. Also, using his skills as a designer, Sloan made intricate decorative borders for pages of text and photographs.

Sloan also illustrated serialized fiction in the Sunday Supplement of the *Press*. His ink drawings for 'Jennie Baxter, Journalist' were done in a style reminiscent of nineteenth-century English

28. *Philadelphia Press*, December 25, 1898.

29. *Philadelphia Press*, November 1, 1903.



Fig. 4. John Sloan, *Snake Charmer Puzzle*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 5, 1901. Color line cut reproduction, 22 3/8 in. x 17 3/4 in. John Sloan Collection, Helen Farr Sloan Library, Delaware Art Museum.

artist John Tenniel. Sloan's crayon drawings for short humorous pieces by John Kendrick Bangs and W. E. Norris were based on French prototypes by Honoré Daumier, Gavarni, and Jean Louis Forain (fig. 5).³⁰ Later, Sloan expanded his realist vision in the De Kock book illustrations, New York City etchings, and magazine illustrations for *McClure's* and *The Masses*.

Sloan lost his job at the *Press* in December 1903, when the newspaper stopped producing the Sunday Supplement, subscribing instead to a syndicated magazine. However, he negotiated with the *Press* to continue supplying 'Word Charade Puzzles,' which provided a modest, but steady, income. Sloan decided to move to New York City with his wife Dolly to work as a freelance magazine illustrator. His fellow newspaper artists and friends, Glackens, Shinn, Luks, Laub, and Davis had already moved to New York, as had Robert Henri. Losing his job provided Sloan with the necessary incentive to move. In New York Sloan earned his living first as an illustrator and later as a teacher, while he concentrated seriously on painting and etching.

What did Sloan gain from this newspaper experience? First of all, he had the opportunity to experiment with different styles, media, and subjects. He gained considerable skill as a designer of composition that transferred to his work as a painter and etcher. Also, he developed an eye for anecdotes in real life that made good, though unconventional, subjects for paintings: buying flowers on a rainy Easter eve (*Easter Eve*, 1907, private collection), children playing in the snow (*Backyards, Greenwich Village*, 1914, Whitney Museum of American Art), or spectators watching a hairdresser at work (*Hairdresser's Window*, 1907, Wadsworth Atheneum).

His newspaper experience nurtured his irreverent attitude toward the status quo, whether elitist leaders of the academic art establishment or narrow-minded party politicians. Sloan developed a healthy respect for his newspaper audience—the 'common man

30. See examples of the 'Jennie Baxter' and John Kendrick Bangs illustrations in *Philadelphia Press*, June 4, 1899, and November 8, 1903.

and woman,' whom he saw both as his subject and his audience. Finally, he learned that the power of the press could shape and influence public opinion. So, it is not surprising that when Sloan and his friends staged the historic 'Exhibition of the Eight' at the Macbeth Gallery in New York City in 1908—a show that changed the direction of American art—they welcomed the extensive press coverage.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.