

BEST FRIENDS FOREVER? JOHN SLOAN, ROBERT HENRI, AND THE PROBLEM OF MEMORY

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FIGURE 129
Photographer unknown
**Robert Henri and John Sloan
at baseball game, 1893**
Photograph, 3½ × 4¾ inches
John Sloan Manuscript Collection
Delaware Art Museum

Look for a moment at a photograph taken in the spring of 1893 [FIG. 129]. The image features two men: Robert Henri on the bicycle and John Sloan running behind him. Both men, of course, would become important artists shaping the dialogue about art in America in the first decade of the twentieth century. Yet in the photo they appear as two young men, friends playing in a park. The image may be merely a pleasant memento, but should we look harder? Is this photo perhaps a metaphor for their relationship, with Henri in the lead and Sloan running to catch up? Or does it show a wobbly and unsteady Henri with his trusty friend in the back, ready to catch him should he fall? Does this photograph allow viewers, more than a century later, to see some part of their relationship exposed, or is it an irreverent, insignificant snapshot?

While the photograph is suggestive of complex questions about relationships and memory, the typical art historical narrative surrounding Sloan and Henri is far less dynamic. The story usually begins with Sloan starting out as a newspaper illustrator, but after meeting Henri, a painter who was a few years older, he began to focus his energy on oil painting. With encouragement from Henri, Sloan and a few of his fellow illustrators moved to New York City, where they worked as artists and attempted to carve out a space for themselves and their art. Following the lead of Henri, who advocated painting real life and focusing on the urban scene, Sloan painted his new city in a way that reflected the gritty realities of turn-of-the-century urban life. Meeting with perceived hostility from the established art community, Henri brought together eight artists, including Sloan, for an exhibition at Macbeth Galleries in 1908. Organized as a response and protest to the National Academy of Design's jury selection and installation of their Eighty-second Annual, which excluded or marginalized several of Henri's friends and students, the Macbeth exhibition caused a tremendous stir in the art scene and broke apart the stranglehold of the conservative art community. Six artists—Sloan, Henri, George Luks, Everett Shinn, William Glackens, and George Bellows—emerged from this period as the Ashcan School, a group of men representative of the new, urban-focused art of this period.

These are the "facts," told and retold in countless exhibitions and art historical texts. But does this historical recounting tell the whole story? We can

certainly verify the dates that Sloan moved to New York, or the reception individual paintings received at the Macbeth Galleries show, but what about the more ambiguous details? Was Henri a Svengali-like leader whom Sloan followed or just a helpful and encouraging friend? And what about the Ashcan School? What was the relationship of these six men to one another? How is that name useful in considering these artists? In other words, what part of this art historical retelling of Sloan's career is reality, and what part is memory or invention? And can we draw a distinction?

It is not possible, a century on, to re-create the complete picture. But we can begin to address these questions by considering the ways in which Sloan's early career and his relationship with Henri have been remembered in three distinct historical moments. To begin, the wonderful collection of letters Sloan and Henri wrote to each other, now in the collection of the Delaware Art Museum, sheds light on the way the two artists experienced their relationship. These letters often are accompanied by drawings that are intimate and telling about each artist's anxieties and aspirations. Next, Sloan's own words about Henri after Henri's death in 1929 suggest how the process of memory changed Sloan's view of certain aspects of their relationship. Finally, the way art historians have understood the artists' relationship, particularly within the scope of the "Ashcan School," can be reexamined. Henri in particular has been seen as the "leader" of the Ashcan School in ways that the letters of Henri and Sloan ultimately do not justify.

What I would like to propose in this essay is that to reconsider the relationship between Sloan and Henri, and thus between Sloan and the idea of an "Ashcan School," is not to tear these bonds apart but rather to join them together in more meaningful ways. In assessing the history of any moment, scholars are forced to engage a number of terms that elicit the idea of association: *collaborators*, *group*, *club*, *society*, *friends*, and even *school*. But in ordinary, daily use, such terms can have radically

different meanings. Collaborators could be enemies who work together; friends might have emotional bonds but not intellectual connections; and club members may have joined for reasons other than the organization's stated purpose. When these terms are used colloquially, they retain a great deal of elasticity. Academically, however, such nuances can get lost, and collaborations, groups, and friendships become bound in ways that strangle the individual participants and their agency. By closely investigating the fissures in evidence, memory, and scholarship, it may be possible to map out what it might have meant to Sloan and Henri to be leaders, followers, collaborators, or friends. Or, in thinking of the photograph, what it meant to be the guy on the bike or the man running behind it.

In attempting to reconstruct and reconsider the relationship between John Sloan and Robert Henri, scholars have two unique sets of documents available to consult. The first is the collection of letters written by Sloan and Henri, and the second is a diary that Sloan kept beginning in 1906. These documents should not be seen as composing a wholly authentic or complete record, however. The letters were edited by Sloan and his second wife, Helen Farr Sloan; there is no way to know whether unflattering letters were destroyed. Similarly, the diary was edited.¹ In short, while these documents provide excellent source material, it is important to remain aware that they are heavily processed.

That said, the letters and diary provide enormous insight into the daily hopes and fears of the two central figures. Both sources have been well examined by scholars for information about specific paintings and about the organization of the famous 1908 show at Macbeth Galleries. Recently, the letters were even compiled into a full-length book titled *Revolutionaries of Realism* (1997). The noted art historian Bennard Perlman, who has written numerous books and articles about the Ashcan School, writes in the preface to the book, "Robert Henri and John Sloan stand tall among those in