

McSorley's: John Sloan's Visual Commentary on Male Bonding, Prohibition, and the Working Class

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The American realist John Sloan (1871-1951) is famous for his depictions of tenement dwellers' private moments, paintings of people on the streets of New York City, and images of women. Here I will focus on the artist's renderings of men in two of his well-known paintings of McSorley's, an Irish-American bar. These paintings are best understood within the context of early twentieth-century working class concepts of masculinity, the social history of drinking in the United States, and Sloan's own biography. The artist, a native of Pennsylvania, was brought up in a strict Episcopalian household in which his artisan father was unable to support the family. Young Sloan worked as a Philadelphia newspaper illustrator to provide for his parents and sisters. At the paper's office, he saw sketch-reporters depict newsworthy events that they had observed earlier in the day, and their methods may have inspired him to establish his habit of working from memory. Although he studied briefly with Thomas Anshutz at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the young artist was largely self-taught.¹

While he dutifully supported his family, Sloan achieved a freer lifestyle by joining a group of young men, many illustrators, who socialized and studied informally under Robert Henri's watchful eye.² The raucous camaraderie, open discussion, and social freedom that Sloan found in the Philadelphia group contrasted sharply with the conservative atmosphere of his family's home.³ The young Philadelphians often gathered at Henri's studio where he encouraged

them to reject academic idealism and the genteel tradition. According to Van Wyck Brooks, a friend to both Henri and Sloan, Henri preached that “painting was a man’s vocation” and “presented an artist’s life as a virile occupation.” “Through art,” Henri told his followers, “mysterious bonds of understanding and knowledge are established among men. They are the bonds of a greater brotherhood.”⁴ Under Henri’s tutelage, Sloan came to view modern painters as self-sufficient rebels whose spontaneous brushstrokes and unpolished depictions of robust lower-class Americans contrasted sharply with the effete prettiness of much turn-of-the-century American art, which appealed to many critics and collectors. In 1910, Sloan wrote of his distaste for “pandering pictures to please the ignorant Listless Moneyed class in this U.S.”⁵

Sloan lost his full-time job at the *Philadelphia Press*, and in 1904 he moved to New York City to join his artist friends who had taken up residence there. Four years later, he was a key participant when Henri’s group and a few like-minded artists exhibited as The Eight. Sloan worked as a freelance illustrator and built a reputation as a painter and printmaker.⁶ His affinity for depicting woman was evident in early works like *The Cot* (1907), *Hairdresser’s Window* (1907), and *Three AM* (1909). Even the lone figure in his famous *Wake of the Ferry* (number 2, 1907) was a woman.⁷

In 1912, Sloan departed from his usual subject matter when he painted men in McSorley’s saloon, an establishment whose décor and code of conduct had changed little in its half-century of operation. No women were allowed in McSorley’s, not even in the back room, where some New York saloons served females.⁸ Although painting the scene at McSorley’s deprived the artist of a favorite subject, the saloon’s ban on women may have attracted Sloan to the establishment. Before the painter left Philadelphia, he married Anna Wall, a small woman who was known as Dolly. She was the wayward daughter of alcoholic parents and lived independently. Young Dolly’s lively character and sexual freedom appealed to Sloan, but she struggled with alcoholism and depression. During their long marriage, her behavior periodically caused turmoil in their lives. For several days in 1912, for example, Dolly was out-of-town on a drinking binge, and her heavy consumption of liquor continued in 1914. Alcohol and depression brought her close to a breakdown in 1916, and in 1930 she attempted suicide.⁹ For Sloan, a visit to McSorley’s all-male environment may have provided a respite from a turbulent home life.

Sixteen years after he first painted McSorley’s, the artist uncharacteristically returned to the same subject and infused it with nostalgia. Sloan commonly filtered his scenes through memory, but he rarely selected subjects that overtly featured bygone social circumstances or modes of culture. McSorley’s had always been slow to change, but by the time Sloan painted it in the late 1920s, it had become an anachronism, a saloon that still served ale to working men in a city filled with speakeasies that provided cocktails to both sexes. Nationwide prohibition caused a radical transformation of the New York City drink-

ing environment, and it may have been McSorley's ability to retain the past that drew Sloan back to the subject. In all, Sloan painted five canvases that pictured the old New York saloon.¹⁰

The unusual series of paintings offers an opportunity to scrutinize the artist's view of men, especially working class males. Through the close analysis of two paintings, one from 1912 and one from 1928, I will ground the series in the history and traditions of male bonding in working-class saloons, consider the working man's view of prohibition, and highlight social changes that prohibition brought to the New York drinking scene. Although McSorley's all-male environment may have held a special attraction for Sloan, it will become clear that the impetus for the depictions of McSorley's was the painter's bond with working men, his opposition to prohibition, and his distaste for class hierarchies.

John McSorley opened his drinking establishment on Seventh Street in 1854 and named it the Old House at Home. He and later his son William tended the bar and ran the business until 1936, when it left family hands.¹¹ A public house in John McSorley's native Ireland served as a model, and the New York saloon appealed to the Irish workingmen who lived in the neighborhood at the edge of the Bowery.¹² The most famous nineteenth-century patron of the saloon was Peter Cooper, founder of nearby Cooper Union, who spent his final years at McSorley's "philosophizing with the workingmen."¹³ Later, Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) frequented the old saloon, where revelers were discouraged.¹⁴ McSorley's customers were characterized as "thinking" working men who would not act on "hastily considered" ideas. The Seventh Street establishment was said to be the type of place associated with the origins of the labor movement and one "where men talk over, think, and exchange feelings and ideas relating to labor and their lives."¹⁵ American painter Stuart Davis, a friend of Sloan's, remembered McSorley's as an unhurried saloon where "people used to go . . . sit around and drink ale until they had to go away."¹⁶

Prior to depicting McSorley's, Sloan painted the interior of several eating and drinking establishments: *The Rathskeller* (1901), *Chinese Restaurant* (1909), *Yeats at Petitpas* (1910), and *Renganeschi's Saturday Night* (1912).¹⁷ The 1910 painting shows Irish artist and writer John Butler Yeats (1839-1922), father of William Butler Yeats, at the dinner table with the Sloans and a bevy of those in the arts. Sloan's restaurant subjects, and especially his depiction of *Petitpas*, parallel the work of William Glackens, a member of The Eight, who painted *Chez Mouquin* (1905), a restaurant where artists gathered.¹⁸ Sloan's pictures of urban types consuming food and drink set a precedent for his depictions of McSorley's.

With its five-cent ale, sawdust covered floor, and free lunch, McSorley's Old Ale House, as it was renamed in 1908, shared traits with many saloons that catered to working men. Gentlemanly manners associated with polite American

society were ignored. McSorley's bar was long enough to accommodate "approximately ten elbows," and some drinkers stood with one foot on a brass rail while other customers settled in the saloon's sturdy chairs. Although most saloongoers drank with their hats on, McSorley discouraged men from becoming drunk or "teed to the hat" in the jargon of the day.¹⁹ Like other saloons of its type, McSorley's had an environment that encouraged male camaraderie and supported a "self-sufficient male culture" that emphasized the desires of the working man.²⁰

In 1915, there was 1 saloon for every 515 persons in New York City. Many saloonkeepers, like the McSorleys, had working-class origins and lived over their bars. Patrons commonly shared an ethnic heritage or occupation, and the workingman's saloon provided neighborhood services and social functions. At midday, many saloons, including McSorley's, served a free lunch while the bartender dispensed the latest sports news and gossip. Early in the twentieth century, a saloon's public toilet and watering trough for horses provided practical incentives for noontime visits. In the evening, men sang songs, placed sports bets, and socialized in a space that was often more comfortable than their own lodgings. Alcohol lowered inhibitions and paved the way for boisterous familiarity among men. Saloons often offered newspapers, cards, billiards, or similar entertainment, while union leaders or political bosses used the neighborhood gathering places to spread their messages or organize their followers.²¹

In a 1913 article, New York writer Frank Charles Laubach estimated that "Three-fourths of the saloon's patrons are impelled thither by one of the finest cravings of the soul, the craving for human fellowship." He added that the most convenient place "the tired, dirty laborer knows where he is sure of a plain, uncritical welcome is the saloon."²² As Sloan matured at the turn of the twentieth century, Theodore Roosevelt urged American men to be rugged and decisive. Saloons often fostered a sense of group autonomy and presented workers, who held little power in the larger world, with the opportunity to affirm their manliness. The saloon environment offered camaraderie, but as the figures deep in conversation on the right in *McSorley's Bar* (Figure 1, 1912) suggest, it was also the site of good natured competition for status. Winning a bet, telling a good story, or defending ethnic honor could lift a man to local prominence and bolster his self-esteem.²³ Indeed, it is likely that the men at McSorley's appreciated Sloan's quick wit and critiques of the wealthy.

Many lower-class men refused to adopt middle-class notions of a strong work ethic or leisure as a time for family activities. Saloons, places of working-class leisure, were not conducive to sobriety, productivity, or great aspirations. The drinking establishments promised self-indulgence and subverted work discipline. Industrialists often saw saloons as direct threats to reliable work habits and tried to prevent bars from operating near factory gates.²⁴ Even the most sedate saloongoers, such as the ones at the left of *McSorley's Bar*, violated middle-class propriety because, as historian Roy Rosenzweig put it, they would "im-



Figure 1: John Sloan, *McSorley's Bar*, 1912, Founders Society Purchase, General Membership Fund, Photograph © 1987, The Detroit Institute of Arts.

plicitly question and sometimes explicitly reject the goals and values of industrial society.²⁵ At the saloon, the working man exercised autonomy over his life; he was beyond the reach of his employer and family. In 1913, between one and two million men in New York City spent a part of every day in drinking establishments. A growing number of Americans, however, believed that saloons exercised a sinister influence over private and political morality.²⁶

There were about 13,000 saloons in New York City in 1913. License fees were high and competition was fierce. To survive, saloons went into partnership with corporate brewers, and many owners tolerated or encouraged the presence of prostitutes in the belief that women improved liquor sales.²⁷ Although McSorley's resisted the trend, drinking became inextricably entwined with low sexual morals, and saloons earned a reputation for debauchery and depravity.²⁸

Sloan was aware of the sordid reputation of American saloons and the looming possibility of prohibition. In 1908, he wrote that a friend

tells me that he is convinced that inside of ten years . . . complete prohibition will be in force over the whole United States. He . . . says it is bound to come. That the Distillers and Brewers are too short sighted to remove all objectionable saloons

as they could by refusing to supply them [with alcoholic beverages].²⁹

Much later, Sloan commented: “Had all saloons been conducted with the dignity and decorum of McSorley’s, prohibition could never have been brought about.”³⁰

As anti-saloon sentiment grew, Sloan visually refuted the evil saloon stereotype when he painted *McSorley’s Bar*, which pictures a few men standing and drinking ale. Scholars have stressed the nostalgic flavor of the half-century old establishment and noted the services that saloons traditionally provided for working men.³¹ The artist’s early attraction to the subject of McSorley’s seemed to lie in his identification with saloongoers and his opposition to the anti-saloon movement.³²

The Anti-Saloon League of America held its first convention in 1895. The movement gained force in the early years of the twentieth century as churches provided financial support, and many people came to the conclusion that saloons were an affront to polite society.³³ In 1913, a year after Sloan first painted McSorley’s, Norman Hapgood, the editor of *Harper’s Weekly*, asked his brother to write a piece on the old New York saloon and hired Sloan to illustrate it. The article appeared in October, just two months before a major anti-saloon march on Washington, D.C. As if to counteract growing anti-saloon sentiment, Hutchins Hapgood created a non-threatening word-picture of McSorley’s, and Sloan’s illustration substantiated Hapgood’s thesis. The article described the memorabilia on the walls and the “atmosphere of . . . permanence” which surrounded “the quiet workmen sipping their genial ale, wrapped in the shadows of tradition. . . .” The author stressed that Bill McSorley regarded “his father as one of the great moral characters of the age” and was dedicated to continuing the saloon’s conservative customs and standards.³⁴ Hapgood, like Sloan, made the point that neither saloons nor those who visited them were immoral.

By the spring of 1909, Sloan was supporting socialism, and the following year he and Dolly formally joined the Socialist Party. Although their close friend John Butler Yeats characterized the Sloans as “great fighters against everybody and everything,” the couple strongly supported the cause of the working man.³⁵ They were both active in the production of *The Masses*, a radical magazine that published the artist’s political drawings. In 1914, with the First World War underway in Europe, Yeats complained that Sloan was almost obsessed with the socialist response to events: “But for [Dolly] he’d talk nothing else, our silence itself an offense, even though he knows we are all sympathetic. . . .”³⁶

Sloan, a forty-one year old painter who earned an erratic income, could not afford to buy a home and supported an alcoholic wife. He grew up without a strong male role model and entered middle age without the earning power and financial stability that American men traditionally equate with self-assured masculinity. The painter may have had a tenuous grasp on manhood. He seems to

have feared failing financially and being relegated to a feminine sphere. As Janice M. Coco has pointed out, the painter viewed his father as a failure who had retreated to the family home, a domain dominated by women.³⁷ In many ways, Sloan occupied a marginal place in society and had no more financial security than an ordinary laborer. It is not surprising that the artist, the son and grandson of cabinet makers, identified with working men.

Sloan also claimed Irish heritage, which may have solidified his union with the men at McSorley's.³⁸ The Irish had a tradition that manhood began with a male's first visit to the public house in the company of the local bachelor group. Their shared drinking marked entry into the adult male community. In environments where economic hardship made traditional markers of status (such as land ownership) ever more difficult to obtain, Irishmen began to garner respect through hard drinking, athletic accomplishments, and storytelling. In the United States, drinking became part of the Irish ethnic identity.³⁹ Sloan, like these common working men, must have found that McSorley's offered refuge from deadlines, money troubles, and the pressures of home life.⁴⁰ There a man could feel that he was the master of his own fate. In his words, the old Irish saloon provided "a place where the world seems shut out, where there is no time, no turmoil. . . ."⁴¹ The camaraderie at McSorley's, moreover, must have played a part in Sloan's self-worth as a man and reminded him of his youthful experience as a member of Henri's group in Philadelphia.

Modern scholars have recognized American saloons as part of an alternative or oppositional culture that rejected aspects of "industrial society such as homeownership, thrift, social mobility, and punctuality."⁴² Sloan had much in common with this culture. Throughout his life, he was a freethinker who often opposed the prim codes of the middle class and strained the boundaries of social propriety. At the turn of the twentieth century, he lived with and later married Dolly, an alcoholic with a questionable sexual history.⁴³ He stubbornly rejected established artistic norms when he painted the lower classes with unapologetic frankness. The painter summed up his contrary political philosophy in his oft repeated phrase, "I'm Irish and agin the government," and he further acknowledged his own oppositional nature when he wrote: "All my life I have been in rebellion against conformity, fashion, the orthodox."⁴⁴ In 1912, Sloan created *McSorley's Bar* and celebrated men like him who ignored or opposed the conventional paths to success. Through the virile act of painting, he increased his bond with them and soothed the raw edges of his manhood.⁴⁵

In the early 1920s, Sloan sold *McSorley's Bar* to the Detroit Institute of Arts and issued a written statement that emphasized the drinking establishment's untainted history. Sloan explained that the saloon was "run by the founder John McSorley 'till his death at 87 years in 1910 and since by his son William in the strict ethics of his father's rules—[The artist observed that] nothing but ale [was] sold over the bar, no beer, no mixed drinks, [and] no 'drunks' [were allowed in the saloon]. Closing always at midnight. . . . I hope," wrote Sloan, "that Detroit

will enjoy this record of New York temperance days. McSorley's Ale House was the temple of Temperance."⁴⁶ The last sentence, written in the past tense, seems to memorialize the saloon as if it were a great institution that had passed into history, but McSorley's was open daily throughout the prohibition era.

Bill McSorley stubbornly remained in business by brewing ale in the saloon's basement, and in 1928, the year that Sloan returned to the subject of McSorley's, the painter could have visited the old saloon to paint a fresh image of it.⁴⁷ Instead, he based his painting *McSorley's Cats* (Figure 2, 1928) on the 1913 illustration that he had created for *Harper's Weekly* and made changes to the original composition. In the nostalgic re-working of the image, Sloan identified three customers on the right of *McSorley's Cats* as "familiar guests," and two of the three are more jauntily dressed and posed than similar men in the *Harper's Weekly* illustration. The original composition was further modified by revising a group of seated figures in the foreground to depict Sloan with three friends of 1913, who were still part of the New York scene in 1928. An easy fellowship dominates the painted environment. The group of four clusters around a small table as they smoke, laugh, and grip their mugs of ale. The hardy camaraderie has been momentarily interrupted by Bill McSorley's call to his cats. Although the date of the painting is secure, the image seems to suggest a re-occurring event. Sloan's depiction of himself with his friends can be read as a visual tribute to the idea of enduring male friendships.

Sloan wrote that in *McSorley's Cats* "the characters at the table, left foreground are Hippolyte Havel, Art Young, George O. Hamlin and J.S."⁴⁸ At the extreme left of *McSorley's Cats*, illustrator and cartoonist Art Young, a Socialist, sits behind the table. In 1909, Sloan had commented: "Art Young is a man of interesting character. His work I have long admired, strong, simple, direct—the expression of a good mind."⁴⁹ Sloan and Young both volunteered their services at the offices of *The Masses*, where the two artists had a falling out around 1916.⁵⁰ They seem to have smoothed over their differences by 1928 when Young remembered Sloan as a "man of universal vision and understanding" who "did some of his best drawings for *The Masses* . . . [and] was always ready with a cryptic comment, a witticism, or a sarcastic spurt of indignation—outwardly looking like a calm professor."⁵¹ When Young published his 1928 book *On My Way*, he autographed the Sloans' copy: "In memory of the romantic days."⁵²

On the back side of the table in Sloan's painting, Havel, a steady customer at McSorley's, is easily distinguished as the man with the mustache and eye glasses. He was an anarchist from Eastern Europe who contributed to Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth*, a radical publication, and founded the magazine *Revolt*, which called for revolution. Hutchens Hapgood described Havel, a well-known character among artists and socialists, as "a fiery little man with a violent tongue, yet honorable and responsible, when not drunk," and noted that under the right circumstances the anarchist's conversation could be "happy and charming."⁵³



Figure 2: John Sloan, *McSorley's Cats*, 1928, Photograph Courtesy of the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California.

In *McSorley's Cats*, George O. Hamlin is seated in the foreground with his back to the viewer, and Sloan is on his left. Dolly Sloan's friend from Philadelphia, Elizabeth Garrett, married Hamlin and the two couples socialized intermittently through the first decades of the twentieth century.⁵⁴ Although Hamlin was not an active member of the political left, Sloan "spouted Socialism to him" in 1909 and noted that "he seems to be thinking that way."⁵⁵ The businessman from Philadelphia often visited Manhattan, and in 1912 he moved his family to New York.⁵⁶ Success came quickly to Hamlin, who was an official of the Viscose Company when he and his wife made a single purchase of twenty of Sloan's paintings, partly in response to the artist's 1923 financial crisis.⁵⁷

Through his image of four men clustered around a table, Sloan emphasizes the issues of male bonding and mutual assistance. *McSorley's Cats* portrays Sloan's friends and supporters in a traditional barroom and projects the security and continuity achieved through attachment to place, a manly place. Sub-groups within the saloon are united through their shared amusement at the antics of McSorley's cats, who respond enthusiastically to the dinner call. The painting seems to be a nostalgic memorial to an untroubled time and location where men mingled in good-humored fellowship and shut out the demands of family and society. When describing Sloan's work, Yeats commented that "we yield to him

because he plays all so seductively upon our imaginative longings.”⁵⁸ Sloan celebrates male camaraderie in an idealized scene and suggests that the remembered past continues into the present. In 1928, when Sloan produced this image of McSorley’s, he chose to present the old saloon as a restorative force, a saloon that retained the best of the past, and one which could resist the wave of corruption and death brought on by Prohibition (1919-1933).

During the first years of the twentieth century, beer, ale, and hard liquor were available in New York at low prices. With the advent of prohibition, many saloons closed, but they were soon replaced by speakeasies.⁵⁹ Prohibition made alcoholic beverages expensive, and by the late 1920s drinking became a form of conspicuous consumption.⁶⁰ Those who could afford to buy mixed drinks were often viewed as a glamorous and privileged group.⁶¹ Higher-class speakeasies promoted this image by offering elaborate décor, providing entertainment, and encouraging patrons to wear evening attire. The best speakeasies scrutinized those who approached, and admittance conveyed status.⁶² Fashionable women were attracted to these striking establishments, where a new masculine behavior flourished.⁶³ Unlike conservative old working-men’s saloons, upscale speakeasies were perfectly attuned to a culture where appearances and personality were important and success was demonstrated through material consumption. Cheaper speakeasies were rough places that offered no frills, but they served women. In 1926, it was estimated that there were 15,000 speakeasies of all types in New York City. In 1929, the estimate was revised upward to 32,000.⁶⁴ As competition grew, many speakeasies began to employ women as “hostesses” to entice men to stay and drink. Prostitution, which had long been a problem at drinking establishments, became epidemic in New York speakeasies where the presence of women of all types was not only permitted but encouraged.⁶⁵

Upscale speakeasies proliferated, but Sloan chose not to depict them. Instead, he painted a seventy-four-year-old saloon that was steadfastly upholding its tradition of selling ale to men in a dingy barroom festooned with cobwebs.⁶⁶ In 1928, McSorley’s men-only policy stood in stark contrast to the practices of most New York drinking establishments. It seems likely that Sloan painted the old New York saloon that year because it played a part in his search for self-definition and manhood. He had a weak father and no brothers. By 1928, his relationship with Henri, a paternal figure, and the original Philadelphia group had faded. John Butler Yeats, another father-like figure in Sloan’s life, had died in 1922. McSorley’s, however, remained a site of the same strong male companionship that Sloan had found there in 1912. The artist’s 1928 painting may also signal nostalgia for the days before prohibition when there were few public places where women could drink and may indicate a longing for a time when a man could easily shield his wife from public consumption of liquor. Dolly’s alcoholism was an ongoing concern, and as one magazine article of the era suggested, a male felt virile and protective when he controlled his wife’s use of alcohol.⁶⁷

Around the time that Sloan was painting *McSorley's Cats*, drinking in New York was a dangerous undertaking. In 1927, the city's Prohibition Administrator estimated that 98 percent of the liquor on the market was made from denatured alcohol, which was poisonous.⁶⁸ In 1918, before prohibition, 89 New Yorker's died as a direct result of alcohol consumption. That figure reached 741 in 1926.⁶⁹ Deaths directly attributed to alcohol set new records and were front page news in October 1928 when 39 New Yorkers died in two days.⁷⁰ Within this deadly environment Sloan, who opposed prohibition, began to paint his remembrance of McSorley's. Many poor and working class drinkers resented the ban on alcohol sales and production, which they believed was being imposed on them by the upper classes. It was widely held that the rich had filled their cellars with liquor before the advent of prohibition and continued to drink in both private and public. In 1922, for example, a *New York Times* opinion piece stated that prohibition "makes one rule for the rich with their cellars and another for the poor[man] who is deprived of his beer," and the writer went on to express the belief that prohibition was "put over by certain capitalists as a means for securing industrial efficiency."⁷¹ It is likely that Sloan agreed with these opinions. Huge profits, meanwhile, were being made as cheap alcohol intended for industrial use was diverted to lower-class speakeasies, where it was sold by the drink. As part of ongoing negative news coverage, one report asserted that "the government authorized the poisoning of 60,000,000 gallons of industrial alcohol annually . . . knowing that 6,000,000 gallons of this will be drunk . . . by American citizens."⁷²

Fifty cents to a dollar was needed to buy a single drink at an upscale speakeasy where the customer could be reasonably certain that the beverage was not lethal.⁷³ Only the rich could afford the price. The poor drank in speakeasies on the Lower East Side or waterfront where a drink could still be had for 5 or 10 cents. These establishments, however, often sold slightly altered industrial alcohol or raw alcohol so powerful that an "ounce or two of it [had] an effect on the heart equal to that of a whole bottle of liquor."⁷⁴

In the fall of 1928, Sloan, a drinker and the husband of an alcoholic, must have been made uneasy by newspaper headlines that announced the daily and weekly death-count from alcoholic poisoning. In *McSorley's Cats*, he offers an alternative to the harsh realities of the prohibition era. The painting has specificity and a sense of locality. At the same time, the fixed décor and presence of "regulars" at the old saloon harks back to simpler times when there were few dangers associated with drinking in New York.⁷⁵ The unchanging character of the old saloon is emphasized by the objects on the walls in *McSorley's Bar* and *McSorley's Cats*, paintings produced sixteen years apart. An ale pump, arched mirror, and image of Abraham Lincoln appear behind the bar in both. High on the walls on the left of *McSorley's Bar* and just visible in the same location in *McSorley's Cats* are masks that symbolize comedy and tragedy. They may make reference to the 1882 comedy *McSorley's Inflation* by Harrigan and Hart, which was inspired by the saloon. Most of the objects in the bar were placed there by

old John McSorley. In 1910, young Bill nailed down the pictures, clippings, and other items that his father had casually mounted on the walls. Thereafter, Bill obsessively maintained the saloon as it had been during his father's life and, thereby, insured its nostalgic flavor.

As Sloan painted *McSorley's Cats* in 1928, he included two major elements that are missing from his 1912 painting *McSorley's Bar*. The earlier painting pays little heed to the cats that traditionally inhabited the old saloon, but as the title suggests Sloan featured the pets in his 1928 painting. In Western culture, felines have often been associated with women, and cats have been repeatedly linked to prostitutes.⁷⁶ In the 1920s, "cathouse" was a slang term for a house of prostitution, where women might gather around a male visitor as McSorley's cats swarm around him. One cat paws at Bill McSorley, another rubs against his leg, and a third postures high above. They all give him their undivided attention, the same attention a man would receive in a house of prostitution. By featuring cats in his 1928 painting, Sloan emphasizes the absence of women, especially prostitutes, from "the temple of temperance." Linking cats to prostitutes has a clear precedent in Sloan's *Chinese Restaurant* which depicts a woman, almost certainly a prostitute, holding a morsel of food and tantalizing a cat. In Sloan's own words, he based the painting on his observation of a "strikingly gotten up girl with dashing red feathers in her hat playing with the restaurant's fat cat." Research has convincingly linked both the woman's attire and her environment to prostitution in New York City.⁷⁷

In Sloan's 1912 painting *McSorley's Bar*, all the saloongoers seem to be unfashionable lower-class men. Traditionally, the saloon was the site of the working man's passive resistance to the demands of industrial society, and prohibition made drinking even more of a forbidden pleasure for the lower classes. By including himself in *McSorley's Cats*, Sloan suggests his continued identification with working men. The types at the bar in the 1928 painting, however, range from a working-class man in a cap to a swaggering gent who has tucked an ornamental cane under the sleeve of his expensive suit. Politicians were said to frequent McSorley's, and the fashionably dressed fellow stands at the end of the bar with a group of prosperous and seemingly influential men. In this painting created at the height of prohibition, New Yorkers ignore the law. Sloan claimed that his paintings were free of the social and political commentary found in the drawings that he contributed to *The Masses*. There is irony, however, in Sloan's 1928 depiction of McSorley's where working men stand at the bar with "upstanding" citizens, and they all drink the same prohibited beverage. Sloan visually asserts that prohibition had failed to shape public morality in a positive way (as many had anticipated) and unmasks the hypocrisy of those politicians and upper-class patrons who supported the establishment of prohibition and then violated it openly.

Notes

1. John Loughery, *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 34, 66. For more on Sloan's reliance on memory see Janice M. Coco, *John Sloan's Women: A Psychoanalysis of Vision* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 14-16.
2. Rebecca Zurier, Robert W. Snyder, and Virginia M. Mecklenburg, *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1995), 61; James Kraft, *John Sloan: A Printmaker* (Washington, D.C.: International Exhibitions Foundation, 1984), 18-19; Loughery, *Painter and Rebel*, 23-4, 35-6. Sloan and Henri shared an interest in Walt Whitman and individualism, see Coco, *John Sloan's Women*, 23.
3. Loughery, *Painter and Rebel*, 3, 9, 19, 52, 66.
4. Van Wyck Brooks, *A Painter's Life* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1955), 21, 43. In 1912, Sloan praised Anshutz's "Thirty years of service, splendid manly service" at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. John Sloan, *John Sloan's New York Scene: from the Diaries, Notes and Correspondence, 1906-1913*, ed. Bruce St. John (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), 621. On "greater brotherhood" see Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1923), 19.
5. Sloan, *New York Scene*, 443, July 26, 1910. In December 1911, John Butler Yeats wrote that "Sloan had become impossible on the subject of the well-to-do." William M. Murphy, *Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats (1839-1922)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 618 note 44.
6. Scholars have devoted little attention to Sloan's depiction of men, but numerous articles have examined Sloan's women. See, for example, John Baker, "Voyeurism in the Art of John Sloan: The Psychodynamics of a 'Naturalistic' Motif," *Art Quarterly* 1 (1978): 379-395; Patricia Hills, "John Sloan's Images of Working-Class Women: A Case Study of the Roles and Interrelationships of Politics, Personality, and Patrons in the Development of Sloan's Art, 1905-1916," *Prospects* 5 (1980): 157-195; Suzanne L. Kinser, "Prostitutes in the Art of John Sloan," *Prospects* 9 (1984): 231-253; Deborah Fairman, "The Landscape of Display: The Ashcan School, Spectacle, and the Staging of Everyday Life," *Prospects* 18 (1993): 205-235; Janice M. Coco, "Re-viewing John Sloan's Images of Women," *Oxford Art Journal* 21, no. 2 (1998): 79-97; Janice M. Coco, "Inscribing Boundaries in John Sloan's *Hairdresser's Window*: Privacy and the Politics of Vision," *Prospects* 24 (1999): 393-416; and Laural Weintraub, "Women as Urban Spectators in John Sloan's Early Work," *American Art* 15 (Summer 2001): 72-83. Also see Janice M. Coco's essays in *John Sloan's Women*. Art historians often discuss Sloan in connection with the Ash Can painters.
7. The locations of the paintings: *The Cot*, Bowdoin College Museum of Art; *Hairdresser's Window*, The Wadsworth Atheneum; *Three AM*, Philadelphia Museum of Art; and *Wake of the Ferry* (number 2), Phillips Collection.
8. Joseph Mitchell, *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943; New York: Pantheon Books of Random House, 2001), 3-11, 20; John M. Kingsdale, "The 'Poor Man's Club': Social Functions of the Urban Working-Class Saloon," *American Quarterly* 25 (October 1973): 474-75. In most saloons, women were not allowed in the main bar room; exceptions were often made for prostitutes. Many saloons had a back room where females were allowed, but women who frequented bars were viewed as being of questionable character. The back rooms of some bars resembled the foyers of brothels.
9. Loughery, *Painter and Rebel*, 175, 199-200, 306, 311; Murphy, *Prodigal Father*, 478. See note 40 below for information on Sloan's visits to McSorley's.
10. *McSorley's Bar*, 1912, and *McSorley's Cats*, 1928, are discussed here. The other three are *McSorley's Back Room*, 1912 (Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College), *McSorley's at Home*, 1928 (private collection), and *McSorley's Saturday Night*, 1929-30, 1948 (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden). Sloan also produced many images of McSorley's on paper. See Grant Holcomb, "John Sloan and 'McSorley's Wonderful Saloon,'" *American Art Journal* 15 (Spring 1983): 5-20. Holcomb presents a connoisseur's view of Sloan's works but does not discuss political context or gender issues. Sloan referred to McSorley's as the "old standby" and said that his feelings were similar to those of Edgar Lee Masters' about *Spoon River*; he could not "get away from it." Brooks, *Painter's Life*, 60.
11. The saloon remains in operation.
12. Mitchell, *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*, 3-4; Sloan, *New York Scene*, 631. For a brief sketch of the Irish in nearby Greenwich Village, see Gerald W. McFarland, *Inside Greenwich Village: A New York City Neighborhood, 1898-1918* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2001), 36-48.
13. Mitchell, *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*, 6. Peter Cooper (1791-1893) founded Cooper Union in 1859. Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art is a private institution of higher learning where students do not pay tuition.
14. "Life Visits McSorley's Old Ale House," *Life*, August 23, 1943, 121.

15. Hutchins Hapgood, "McSorley's Saloon," *Harper's Weekly*, October 25, 1913, 15-17.
16. Harlan Phillips, "An Interview with Stuart Davis [in 1962]," *Archives of American Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (1991): 7.
17. Locations of the paintings: *The Rathskeller*, Cleveland Museum of Art; *Chinese Restaurant*, Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester; *Yeats at Pettipas*, Corcoran Gallery of Art; and *Renganeschi's Saturday Night*, Art Institute of Chicago.
18. Glacken's picture (Art Institute of Chicago) showed James Moore, the owner of the upscale restaurant, and a woman before a mirror that reflects images of Glacken's wife and art critic Charles FitzGerald. The painting was inspired (in turn) by Edouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies Bergere* (1881-82, Courtauld Institute), a painting of a French barmaid who posed in front of a mirror and may have prostituted herself to earn additional income. Sloan's saloon paintings have a modest precedent in nineteenth-century American art that pictured men in taverns. Several early-twentieth-century American artists also recorded bar images. George Bellows, an Ash Can painter, depicted prizefighters in the ring, and those fights often took place in large saloons or men's clubs. In 1913, Edward Hopper painted *New York Corner* (Museum of Modern Art) which depicted the outside of a saloon.
19. John T. McManus, "Is Woman's Place at the Bars?" *New York Times Magazine*, January 3, 1937, 8.
20. Kingsdale, "Poor Man's Club," 485. Also see McManus, "Woman's Place," 8.
21. E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 180; Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 53; Kingsdale, "Poor Man's Club," 472-89.
22. Frank Charles Laubach, "What the Church May Learn from the Saloon," *Survey*, September 27, 1913, 752.
23. On Roosevelt and manhood see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 170-216 and Sarah Watts, *Rough Rider in the White House: Theodore Roosevelt and the Politics of Desire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Elliott J. Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 133-34, 141-43.
24. Kingsdale, "Poor Man's Club," 487-88; Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours*, 35-40, 224; P.W. Wilson, "After Two 'Dry' Years," *New York Times*, January 15, 1922, sec. R, 1.
25. Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours*, 62.
26. Laubach, "What the Church May Learn," 751. Norman H. Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil: An Interpretation of American Prohibition* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1976), 116. Raymond Calkins, *Substitutes for the Saloon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919), iv.
27. Laubach, "What the Church May Learn," 751; Kingsdale, "Poor Man's Club," 481; Hapgood, "McSorley's Saloon," 15. For a graphic description of several New York dives (c. 1911), see McFarland, *Inside Greenwich Village*, 159-61.
28. Robert Alston Stevenson, "Saloons," *Scribner's Magazine*, May 1901, 576; Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 116.
29. Sloan, *New York Scene*, 262.
30. John Sloan, *Gist of Art* (New York: American Artists Group, 1939), 305.
31. H. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Curry, *American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885-1915* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 231; Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours*, 53; Kingsdale, "Poor Man's Club," 475-76.
32. Sloan, *Gist of Art*, 8.
33. Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 94-100.
34. Hapgood, "McSorley's Saloon," 15-17. For several years the Sloans devoted much of their time to the Socialist Party. In the spring of 1912, John Sloan rented a new studio and began to concentrate more on his painting. *John Sloan: 1871-1951*, (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1971), 20.
35. Murphy, *Prodigal Father*, 370.
36. The statement ends: "sympathetic, except for his violence—and his violence is never in the same direction two days running." Murphy, *Prodigal Father*, 429. Sloan also contributed drawings to the *New York Call*, a Socialist daily.
37. Lougherty, *Painter and Rebel*, 78-79, 175, 191; Brooks, *A Painter's Life*, 35; Sloan, *New York Scene*, xvi, 449-50, 497, 507, 526. Dolly Sloan was Irish-American. For more on drinking among this ethnic group see Richard Stivers, *Hair of the Dog: Irish Drinking and its American Stereotype*, revised ed. (New York: Continuum, 1976), 187-88. On Sloan's manhood as it relates to his fear of women and his relationship with his father see Coco, "Re-viewing," 79 and *John Sloan's Women*, 20-30.
38. Sloan's second wife questioned his Irish heritage; Sloan, *New York Scene*, xiii.
39. Stivers, *Hair of the Dog*, 87, 92-93, 188.

40. Rowland Elzea, *John Sloan's Oil Paintings: A Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991), 15; Sloan, *New York Scene*, xiii, 614, 617, 631. Sloan's diary for 1912 consists of irregular entries for January through June, and he recorded visits to McSorley's on March 28, April 4, and April 20. There are only a few diary entries for 1913, and Sloan recorded a visit to McSorley's on January 11. In his late years, Sloan claimed that he had visited McSorley's about ten times in his life. Sloan, *New York Scene*, xx. It seems likely that he underestimated his visits. Mitchell reported that painters like Sloan and George Luks began coming to McSorley's around 1911. Mitchell, *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*, 12. Stuart Davis was still a dedicated customer in 1933. James J. Sweeney, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1945), 29. In 1928, Sloan painted a German customer in *McSorley's At Home* and described him as a regular who faded out around 1917. The artist also spoke of painting other regular customers at McSorley's. Elzea, *John Sloan's Oil Paintings*, 300. It is difficult to imagine that the painter knew and long remembered customers and their histories unless he himself had been a regular patron over an extended period.

41. Elzea, *John Sloan's Oil Paintings*, 117.

42. Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours*, 62, 222-24; Marianne Dozema, *George Bellows and Urban America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 78.

43. Loughery, *Painter and Rebel*, 49-52, 54.

44. Brooks, *A Painter's Life*, 5; Sloan, *Gist of Art*, 28; Kraft, *Printmaker*, 22. On bachelors and saloons, see Kingsdale, "Poor Man's Club," 486-489; on Irish manhood, see Stivers, *Hair of the Dog*, 92-93, 188.

45. Henri indicated that painting was "a man's vocation" and called life as an artist "a virile occupation." See note 4 above.

46. Elzea, *John Sloan's Oil Paintings*, 117.

47. Mitchell, *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*, 10. That McSorley's remained open Sloan characterized as an example of the "triumph of right over might." Sloan, *Gist of Art*, 305. Many New York drinking establishments remained in operation during prohibition. Some claimed to sell legal beverages with a very low alcohol content, some disguised liquor as tea, some bribed authorities, and many tried to keep a low profile. Elzea dates *McSorley's Cats* to 1928 and notes that Sloan gave the date of completion as 1929. The photograph of the work published in *Gist of Art* (1939, 301) clearly differs from the final painting. Elzea, *John Sloan's Oil Paintings*, 300-01.

48. Elzea, *John Sloan's Oil Paintings*, 300-01.

49. Sloan, *New York Scene*, 356.

50. Sloan remembered that he and Young differed over whether *The Masses* "should be a magazine of social satire rather than party propaganda." Young made a remark about painters who "thought they were contributing to the revolution" by putting "an ash can in a drawing." *John Sloan, Robert Henri: Their Philadelphia Years (1886-1904)* (Philadelphia: Moore College of Art Gallery, 1976), 31.

51. Art Young, *On My Way: Being the Book of Art Young in Text and Picture* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1928), 279-80. Young had a full face. "Art Young, Editor and Cartoonist, 77," *New York Times*, December 31, 1943, 15.

52. Loughery, *Painter and Rebel*, 395.

53. Mitchell, *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*, 12. A 1916 photograph taken in connection with a Provincetown Players' production shows Havel looking very much as he does in Sloan's painting. See Arthur Frank Wertheim, *The New York Little Renaissance: Iconoclasm, Modernism, and Nationalism in American Culture, 1908-1917* (New York: New York University Press, 1976), Figure 20 on page 160, also see 49-50; "Social Outcasts' Deal Out Shocks," *New York Times*, November 18, 1910, 8; "Just One Policeman Stops 2,000 Anarchs," *New York Times*, January 30, 1911, 1; Hutchins Hapgood, *A Victorian in the Modern World* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1939), 198-99, 318, 327-28.

54. Sloan, *New York Scene*, 46, 223, 273, 309, 319, 321-23, 364, 520, 560, 597, 607, and 623.

55. Sloan, *New York Scene*, 319.

56. Entries for April 17 and June 21, 1912. Sloan, *New York Scene*, 618, 630.

57. *The Art of John Sloan*, 10. The Hamlins paid \$5,000 for the paintings, or \$250 each. This was far below the asking price for similar paintings being offered by Sloan's New York art dealer, but major paintings were going unsold at that gallery. Although Hamlin was not responsible for the publicity that followed the sale, news stories appeared that suggested that Sloan had made a fortune. The artist's taxes were audited. Many assumed he was rich when in truth he had just enough money to pay off his debts. Loughery, *Painter and Rebel*, 263-65.

58. John Butler Yeats, "The Work of John Sloan," *Harper's Weekly*, November 22, 1913, 20-21. John Butler Yeats greatly admired Sloan's work, and the old Irishman was close to Sloan for some years.

59. Ernest W. Mandeville, "The Biggest City and Its Booze," *Outlook*, March 4, 1925, 340.

38 Mariea Caudill Dennison

60. On the “de luxe” speakeasy see John Chapman Hilder, “New York Speakeasy: A Study of a Social Institution,” *Harper’s Monthly*, April 1932, 591-601; Clark, *Deliver Us From Evil*, 148.

61. H.I. Brock, “Now Our Night Life Grows Anew,” *New York Times Magazine*, February 11, 1934, 10; H.I. Brock, “A New Drinking Code Sets a New Tone,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 15, 1934, 9.

62. Hilder, “New York Speakeasy: A Study of a Social Institution,” 591-601; H.I. Brock, “Night Life: New York’s Vast Monopoly,” *New York Times*, March 2, 1930, 9.

63. Kay Kennedy, “Sisters of the Hollow Leg,” *Outlook and Independent*, May 21, 1930, 92; Tom Pendergast, *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture, 1900-1950* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 124-26.

64. “150 More Dry Agents Ordered Here in War on Bootleg Alcohol,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1926, 1; “Whalen Says City Has 32,000 Speakeasies and Lays Crime Increase to Prohibition,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1929, 1.

65. Henry F. Pringle, “Vice and the Volstead Act,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, November 1928, 760-67; “City Vice Conditions Worst in 20 Years, Survey Declares,” *New York Times*, July 9, 1928, 1; “Drys Ask Whalen to Close Speakeasies,” *New York Times*, April 15, 1929, 1; H.I. Brock, “The Bar that Was and Cannot Return,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 11, 1933, 12.

66. Phillips, “An Interview,” 8.

67. Eudora Richardson, “Drinking Mothers,” *Outlook and Independent*, June 10, 1931, 174. Both before and during prohibition Dolly Sloan would drink in front of her husband as well as obtain alcohol and get drunk behind his back. It seems likely that John Sloan found her public drunkenness particularly embarrassing, and he was more able to control her public drinking in the days before women were commonly served in speakeasies or saloons.

68. “Mills Warns Club of Poisonous Rum,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1927, 11.

69. “New York’s Poison-Liquor Epidemic,” *Literary Digest*, October 27, 1928, 16; “Most of Our Liquor Poison, 741 Deaths in City in 1926, Norris Reports to Walker,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1927, 1.

70. This two-day toll was just part of a larger October wave of death. “A Prohibition By-Product,” *New York Times*, October 10, 1928, 28; “New York’s Poison Liquor Epidemic,” 16. Also see “20 Speakeasies Raided in Drive Backed by Mayor as Liquor Kills 21 in Day,” *New York Times*, October 9, 1928, 1 and Will Rogers, “Will Rogers Discusses the ‘Speakeasy’ Business,” *New York Times*, October 12, 1928, 27.

71. Wilson, “After Two Dry Years,” 1.

72. “Liquor Toll Inquiry Ordered by Tuttle,” *New York Times*, October 10, 1928, 1.

73. Mandeville, “The Biggest City and its Booze,” 340-41; Hilder, “New York Speakeasy,” 591-94.

74. “A Prohibition By-Product,” 28.

75. Two of the men at the end of the bar in *McSorley’s Cats* look remarkably like two men who listen to Old John McSorley in Sloan’s print *McSorley’s Back Room*, 1916.

76. For example, Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863, Louvre). Also see Coco, “Inscribing Boundaries in John Sloan’s Hairdresser’s Window,” 400-01.

77. Kinser, “Prostitutes in the Art of John Sloan,” 242. The viewer is left wondering what other fat cats this woman has tantalized. Although there is no strong evidence that playful cats in Sloan’s *Green’s Cats* (c. 1899), the alley cats in *Backyards Greenwich Village* (1914) or the cat over Dolly Sloan in *Our Corner of the Studio* (1935) make reference to prostitutes, a pattern of linking cats to prostitution should be considered in Sloan’s works.