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Article Title: A Painter's First Commission: The Portraits of Mr and Mrs Gottlieb Storz of Omaha

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Article Summary: John Sloan (1871-1951) was one of the leading painters of the twentieth century. While Sloan was painting his monuments of city life in New York, he was also painting a prodigious number of portraits. His "debut" as a portrait painter came in 1911 when he was recommended to paint the portrait of Gottlieb Storz, a wealthy Omaha brewer.

Cataloging Information:

Names: John Sloan, Lloyd Goodrich, Jessica Finch, Gottlieb Storz, Ernest Lawson, Dolly Sloan, Mrs Gottlieb Storz, Robert Henri

Photographs / Images: "Hairdresser's Window" 1907 oil on canvas by John Sloan; "Daisy with a Duster, 1905, John Sloan; the Gottlieb Storz residence, 3708 Farnam, Omaha; Mrs Gottlieb Storz, 1912 oil on canvas; Mr Gottlieb Storz 1912 oil on canvas both by John Sloan

A PAINTER'S FIRST COMMISSION:
THE PORTRAITS
OF MR. AND MRS. GOTTLIEB STORZ
OF OMAHA

By Grant Holcomb

John Sloan (1871-1951) is recognized as one of the leading painters of the twentieth century. His genre paintings of New York City (Figure 1), painted at the turn of the century, revealed a new stimulus and direction in the development of American art. Drawing upon the aesthetic ideals of Emerson, Whitman, and Robert Henri, Sloan became one of the first American artists to probe the commonplace and the unheroic in urban America. He observed, with a keen and sympathetic eye, the lives of the teeming masses. His pictorial documents of life in New York City represent one of the significant achievements in the history of American art.

It is interesting to note, however, that while Sloan was painting his monuments of city life, he was also painting a prodigious number of portraits. This phase of his art has rarely been studied even though approximately one-half of the paintings created between 1900 and 1914 were portraits (Figure 2). Sloan's portraits were usually of friends and relatives and, like his city scenes, were painted with a limited palette and dynamic brushwork. Plasticity of form was concentrated in the area of the head while the rest of the composition was summarily worked with broad, loose brushstrokes. Unlike his city scenes, however, they were not painted from memory nor were they completed without frustrations and struggles. His diaries record the ease

with which he began and completed a genre scene; they also record the battles and, at times, the failures of his work in portraiture.¹ Though Sloan painted many portraits throughout his career, he never considered himself a portrait painter. He painted from the model in order to study and develop his understanding of the general principles of art. As Lloyd Goodrich has noted, these exercises from the model "were a form of retarded studentship" for an artist who had little formal art instruction.²

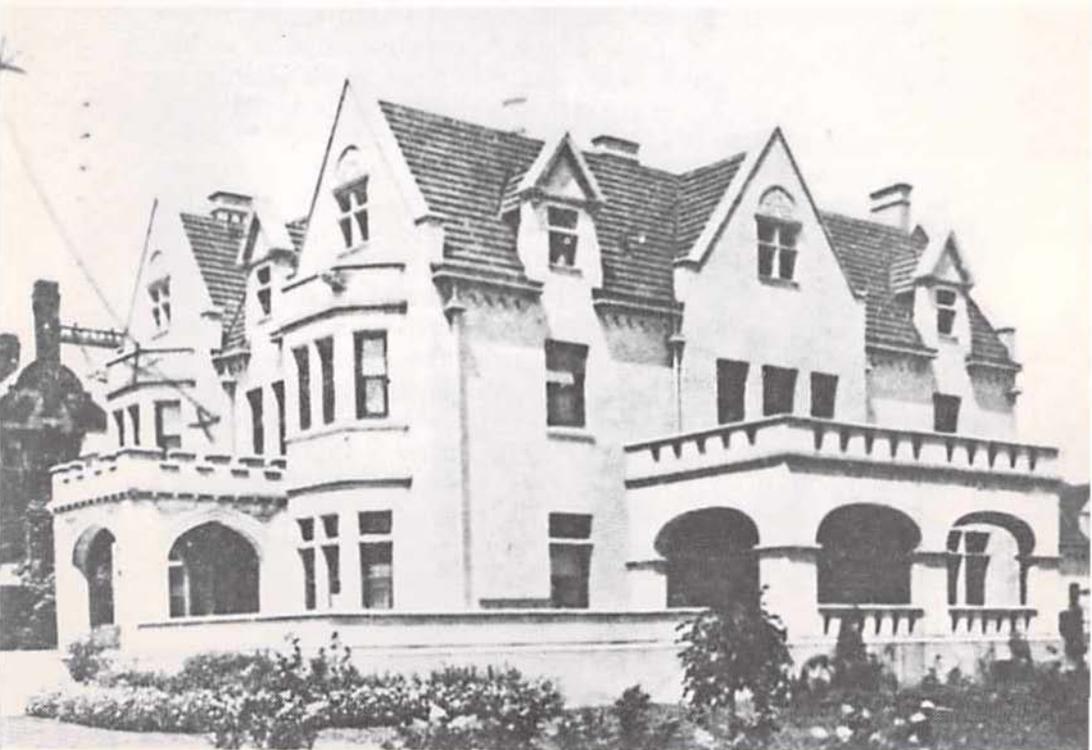
Sloan's "debut," then, as a portrait painter did not come until 1911 when he received his first portrait commission. Jessica Finch, founder of the Finch School (later Finch College) in New York, wrote Sloan in November of that year stating that she had recommended him to paint the portrait of Gottlieb Storz, a wealthy Omaha brewer whose daughter attended the Finch School.³ At first, the idea of a portrait commission was staggering to Sloan: "I'm stage struck about it, feel as if I'd been told to stand up and walk."⁴ Though he admitted feeling "quite bashful at the idea of making my debut as Portrait painter,"⁵ he proposed his terms to Mr. Storz and within two weeks found himself heading west, by train, for Omaha, Nebraska.⁶ He had already faced the technical problems involved in portrait painting, but now for the first time in his career, he confronted a major problem of the commissioned portrait painter—the demands of the client.

Sloan apparently arrived in Omaha on December 11. He stayed at the Hotel Rome (located at 16th and Jackson Streets) and arranged to paint Mr. Storz at his Victorian Gothic residence on Farnam Street (Figure 3). As no room in the house provided north light, Storz' own room, which had a strong south light, became Sloan's Omaha studio. Sloan found the Storz family a most congenial group, the "best sort to paint," he claimed.⁷ He described Mr. Storz as a "calm collected man gray hair moustache and a touch of goatee under lip," who resembled the artist's friend and fellow painter Ernest Lawson.⁸ Sloan soon developed a sincere liking for his client. "There is not one speck of snobbery about him," he wrote, "I admire him very much."⁹

Sloan began the portrait of Gottlieb Storz (Figure 4) on December 12, the day after he arrived in the city. The initial efforts were disappointing: "First day's work today—Two hours of the sitter's time and all mine good for nothing, perfect



Figure 1—John Sloan, *Hairdresser's Window*, 1907, oil on canvas, 32x26." *The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection. . . .* Figure 2—John Sloan, *Daisy with a Duster*, 1905, oil on canvas, 32x26." *Private collection. . . .* Figure 3—*The Gottlieb Storz residence, 3708 Farnam, Omaha. Sloan has marked the room in which he painted the two portraits. The John Sloan Archives.*



botch!"¹⁰ Sloan's letters home to his wife Dolly, and his diary notations for the week beginning December 12, indicate his continual struggles and frustrations with the portrait, as well as his earnest hopes for success. On December 17 he wrote:

Today the old gentleman posed about four hours for me—I think I told you how very well he sits, he's a man of great determination of character. . . . Honestly he's great. It was the chance of a lifetime to do a wonderful thing but I have missed that—not that I'm at all in the blues about it and something may yet happen but he has posed six times for me and he is a very busy man—I can't begin over as I'd like but I'll try to make this a good 'job'.¹¹

As this letter indicates, Sloan had wanted to scrape out his efforts and start over on several occasions. But his time in Omaha was limited, as was the time that Mr. Storz could devote to posing.

All in all, Sloan was never satisfied with the portrait of Gottlieb Storz. It did progress, however, from the "perfect botch" of the first sitting to a relatively successful state within six days for on December 18, Sloan noted: "I have the portrait under full control."¹² Shortly thereafter, the Storz family, pleased with the finished portrait, accepted Sloan's offer to paint a companion portrait of Mrs. Storz (Figure 5). "She is fine," exclaimed the artist, "some forty-six years, she claims, but she is fresh as a daisy."¹³

Sloan began the portrait of Mrs. Gottlieb Storz on December 21 and discovered that she was as cooperative a sitter as her husband. At the outset Sloan was frustrated in his attempt to capture a satisfactory image but within six days he appeared to be content with the head he had placed on the canvas: "Today I think I have a 'head' of Mrs. Storz that's fit to stay—it may not look so to me in the morning."¹⁴ Sloan's reservation about the ultimate success of the portrait head proved correct for by January 1, 1912, he observed: "I am further from the portrait than when I started it."¹⁵ Dolly tried to buoy his spirits in her letters, and even his close friend Robert Henri wrote words of encouragement and advice to Sloan in Omaha.¹⁶ A bronchial infection and a bothersome case of what Sloan termed as the "hives" only aggravated matters for the artist. He continued to paint approximately seven hours a day but was unable to attack vigorously the portrait of Mrs. Storz. The singular problems of a portrait painter trying to satisfy the taste of his sitters, Sloan's illnesses, and an increasing sense of homesickness seem to have been responsible for the one bleak episode that marred an

otherwise interesting and pleasant trip. Sloan explained the event in a letter to his wife:

I got cross today and scolded the millionaire's wife! The reason was that when I got to my work room this morning someone had evidently upset my palette table and the canvas which I had scraped off the head of had been moved out and looked at—I was getting a little tired of their well-meaning criticism and this with the disorder of the palette riled me so I let loose the vials of my wrath. The poor lady had tears in her eyes posing afterward and while we worked without much talk afterward, after lunch when she came back, she forgave me, I think. I was right and wrong too.¹⁷

The disturbance was quickly forgotten, and Sloan began to see his "way out of the job," as he described it.¹⁸ His dejection was soon replaced with a renewed confidence. Three days after his confrontation with Mrs. Storz he exclaimed: "Today's work was a 'good one.' I have the likeness now satisfactory to everyone—as for myself I feel good over this."¹⁹

In the end the portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Gottlieb Storz presented difficult problems for an artist who was accustomed to selecting his own sitters and painting them as his vision dictated. Though he had painted a number of portraits before he traveled to Omaha, Sloan was never required, by the terms of a commission, to "get the likeness" which, for the most part, meant presenting on canvas what the sitter thought he or she looked like. His freedom of expression in his earlier paintings was now hampered by the desires of paying sitters. Sloan felt he was unable to "copy features" in this manner. "I don't really know how to draw in that way at all," he wrote, "The consequence is that when I don't feel a face right I'm 'up in the air' till I get hold of it."²⁰

Gottlieb Storz accepted Sloan's portrayal without any objection or interference. However, problems arose when Sloan began painting the millionaire's wife. Apparently, she was upset with the way in which Sloan rendered specific features, especially her hands.

According to a pupil of Sloan's who had heard about the episode from the artist himself, Sloan claimed he "smoothed the knuckles down and gave her a pair of aristocratic hands as become one of high birth."²¹ Though cooperative, Sloan felt inadequate as a painter of idealized portraits. "I'm really too unskilled to do portraits professionally," he wrote. "I'm sure if Mrs. S. were a poor woman looking for a job and I painted her paying the usual rate I'd do a good thing of her."²² Sloan

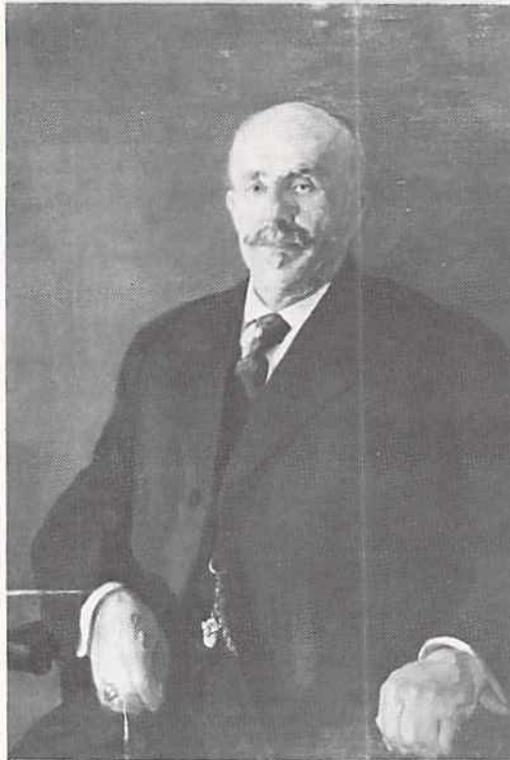


Figure 4—John Sloan, Mr. Gottlieb Storz, 1912, oil on canvas, 41x33." Robert H. Storz, Omaha, on loan to the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha. . . . Figure 5—John Sloan, Mrs. Gottlieb Storz, 1912, oil on canvas, 41x33." Robert H. Storz, Omaha; on loan to Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha. Extensive cracking of the paint is found in the portrait of Mrs. Storz; this is because the painting had been removed from its stretchers and rolled. Also, varnish has darkened both portraits; only the lower corner in the portrait of Mr. Storz has been cleaned.

eventually concluded that Mrs. Storz "was greatly satisfied with the portrait . . . but I wasn't.²³

The portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Storz are similar in composition and technique and indicate that Sloan painted them as companion pictures. Both figures are sitting in what appear to be identical chairs. Their heads are placed high on the canvas, with the head of Mrs. Storz placed to the left of center while that of Mr. Storz is placed to the right of center. It would appear that Sloan intended the protrait of Mrs. Storz to hang to the left of the portrait of Mr. Storz. This assumption is given further credence by the slight angle at which the figures and chairs are placed; if hung one beside the other (with Mrs. Storz on the left and Mr. Storz on the right), the two compositions together could be considered a unified whole. In addition to compositional similarities, both paintings are based on a color scheme of blue with neutrals of gray, brown, and ochre.

Sloan presented Mr. and Mrs. Gottlieb Storz as successful

citizens of Omaha. Unlike his earlier portraits he gave special attention to such accoutrements as a bracelet, brooch, fan, earrings, diamond tie pin, watch fob, and two large rings. All are objects which denote material success. Furthermore, the two sitters face the viewer directly and seem to possess a confidence in who and what they are.

The Storz portraits are, by no means, outstanding examples of Sloan's ability as a portrait painter. The anxieties of painting his first portrait commission, in addition to the limited amount of time and the various illnesses, prevented Sloan from creating anything more than portraits which were satisfactory to the sitters and their family. Though these portraits are not representative of his finest work, they help document the joys and sorrows of an artist painting his first portrait commission.

NOTES

1. See Bruce St. John, editor, *John Sloan's New York Scene* (New York: 1965).
2. Lloyd Goodrich, *John Sloan* (New York: 1952), 27.
3. Gottlieb Storz was born in Wuerttemberg, Germany in 1852. He came to America, with his wife Emma Buck Storz, around 1872 and settled in Omaha shortly thereafter. I am indebted to Mrs. Berneal V. Anderson, registrar at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, for bringing this information to my attention.
4. St. John, *New York Scene*, 578.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Sloan noted in his diary: "Told him that I could possibly finish work in two weeks though of course painting was an uncertain 'trade.' That expenses would comprise hotel expense and if his house had no proper room to paint in, hire of temporary studio." (*Ibid.*, 584)
7. John Sloan to Dolly Sloan, December, 1911. John Sloan Archives, on deposit in the Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.
8. *Ibid.*
9. St. John, *New York Scene*, 589.
10. John Sloan to Dolly Sloan, December, 1911. John Sloan Archives.
11. John Sloan to Dolly Sloan, December 17, 1911. John Sloan Archives.
12. John Sloan to Dolly Sloan, December 18, 1911. John Sloan Archives.
13. St. John, *New York Scene*, 590.
14. John Sloan to Dolly Sloan, December 27, 1911. John Sloan Archives.
15. John Sloan to Dolly Sloan, January 1, 1912. John Sloan Archives.
16. Henri, who had attained a reputation as a portrait painter as well as a leader of the New York Realists, suggested that Sloan "might do a good thing by laying off your sitter for a day—and have a private go—taking up a new canvas and laying it in just like the old with whatever composition changes you might think advisable—virtually a fresh copy of the one in hand." (Robert Henri to John Sloan, December 29, 1911. John Sloan Archives.)
17. John Sloan to Dolly Sloan, January 6, 1912. John Sloan Archives.
18. *Ibid.*
19. John Sloan to Dolly Sloan, January 9, 1912. John Sloan Archives.
20. John Sloan to Dolly Sloan, January 6, 1912. John Sloan Archives.
21. Easoni Martino to Helen Farr Sloan, September 10, 1952. John Sloan Archives.
22. John Sloan to Dolly Sloan, December 22, 1911. John Sloan Archives.
23. Easoni Martino to Helen Farr Sloan, September 10, 1952. John Sloan Archives.