

Maternal Bonds: Adriaen van Ostade's *The Child and The Doll* and John Sloan's *The Women's Page*



The Child and the Doll, Adriaen van Ostade, 1679, pen and ink and watercolour, 110 x 92 mm, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.



The Women's Page (New York City Life series), John Sloan, 1905, etching, 122 x 171 mm, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham.

Transcript

Hello, and welcome to the second of the online Tuesday Talks given by staff at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Birmingham.

I'm Beth Brankowski. Between September 2019 and February 2020, I was the Collections Intern at the Barber. As part of this 19-week internship, I curated a display of prints and drawings entitled *Maternal Bonds: Images of Motherhood* which opened on 31 January and was planned to end on 24 May, but because of the pandemic lockdown, the Barber has been closed since 20 March. This talk will explain why I chose to explore this theme, before moving on to discuss in more depth two key works from the display.

If you have any questions, or would like to put forward ideas and continue discussions after hearing this short talk, please feel free to email the gallery (info@barber.org.uk) or post to our social media platforms.

So, onto the theme of my print bay display, which featured works on paper from the Barber's own collection.

Whilst considering possible themes for the display, it quickly became evident that the Barber's collection holds a number of works that depict motherhood across history and in different cultures and geographies. Given the universal nature of the mother-child bond, the subject of motherhood has significance and relevance to every single person. As perhaps the most timeless relationship represented in art, it thus provided a rich and pertinent topic to explore. In fact, my sister became a mother at the time I was preparing the display which was a lovely journey to follow.

I was, of course, well aware of the proliferation of the Christian Madonna and Child images in art, dating back to the Renaissance and before – but had never paid much attention to the depiction of mothers and their children more broadly, or their representation in secular works of art. The display offered an exciting opportunity to bring together works that had not been shown together and consider them in new ways, looking at how images of motherhood have changed over time.

Having explained the reasons behind the theme, I would like to draw attention to two of the works exhibited in the display which I found particularly interesting when undertaking research and would like to explore in a little more depth within this talk – not just in terms of what they depict, but how. These are *The Child and the Doll* by Adriaen van Ostade (1679) and *The Women's Page* by John Sloan (1905). These works, when seen in comparison to one another, effectively draw attention to how the representation of motherhood in art has shifted over the course of time.

The Child and the Doll is a drawing by the Dutch Golden Age artist Adriaen van Ostade (1610-1685). In this gentle image set in a street, a child sits on its mother's lap and reaches for a doll while the parents fondly observe. This is no mere incidental detail; dolls were particularly associated with girls as they were thought to gravitate naturally towards their calling as mother and housewife, even in early play. Therefore, what may appear to be a simple illustration of a family scene actually foreshadows the little girl's future as homemaker, wife and mother. In this respect, it can be perceived that the woman is both playing with her daughter and teaching her the skills she will require as an adult. This is echoed in the detailing of the quasi-domestic setting, which includes draped linen and cooking pot; further evidence that the daughter is being prepared for her future from an early age.

Looking at the work today, it is evident that cultural attitudes towards motherhood, and, more broadly, the role and perception of women in society, have greatly changed. In this respect, we can interrogate the meaning of the work – both what it would have meant in 1679, when it was produced, a time when the gendered constraints of society inherently shaped women's lives, and now. Today, at least in most western societies positioning of women is much changed and we are no longer bound by social, political and cultural expectations to become mothers or fulfil certain roles based on our gender.

van Ostade was renowned for his colourful, idealised and often didactic portrayals of peasant life. He came from a middle-class background, but as an artist he chose to depict intimate village scenes, including

representations of taverns, village fairs and country quarters. He focused on positive views of peasant life in 17th-century Holland, portraying poorer families with a dignity and humour that dispels pity. His characters' radiant complexions are a picture of contentment.

The second work I will be talking about is *The Women's Page* by John Sloan (1871-1951). Sloan was an American artist and illustrator, known for his depictions of gritty everyday urban life in New York in the early 20th century. He moved from Pennsylvania to New York the year before this print was made, in 1904, to pursue his career as a commercial illustrator and to follow his calling as an observer of city life in paint, pen and print.

The Women's Page is one of ten prints from Sloan's *New York City Life* series which he produced in 1905. The series represents Sloan's direct and immediate reaction to his new metropolitan surroundings and reflects the experience of his life in Manhattan. The works are divided between images of public life on the street and private moments glimpsed through windows. These glimpses were facilitated by the close and cramped tenement buildings and open windows of lower Manhattan which Sloan could gaze through and see into the homes of his neighbours.

This work in particular depicts just the sort of scene Sloan might have observed from his apartment window, which seems particularly apt as Sloan once described himself as 'a spectator of life'.¹ The viewer intrudes on a woman still in her nightgown or rumpled slip sitting in a rocking chair with her back to us. In the background, a little boy on an unmade bed plays with a cat. The room is littered with domestic objects: a vase, a towel, a pail, and a pair of stockings hanging in the window. The woman's attention is completely absorbed by a newspaper section entitled 'A Page for Women', a section that would have offered tips on fashion and housekeeping. At the centre of the newspaper page, there is a large illustration of a stylishly dressed woman. The irony is that, while the lady of the house pores over fashion and decorating suggestions, she herself is dishevelled, her home is untidy, and her child entertains himself. This is

¹ Quoted by Robert Hughes, in *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, p. 110.

indicated by the fact that the washboard and washtub rest unattended on a table at left.

When it was first exhibited in 1906 the *New York Herald* critic praised the artist's humour in showing, and I quote, 'a slatternly woman seated in an untidy room, with an unkempt child creeping about and a bed that is still unmade. The woman is eagerly devouring the woman's page of a magazine containing hints for beautifying the home.'² The work combines motifs and themes which can be found across the series - including discarded garments, commercial entertainments (such as illustrated newspapers), and intimate glimpses of domestic space.

With laundry washboard, child, unmade beds, and tormented cat all competing for her attention, the woman focuses intently on the newspaper, succumbing to the power of the mass media and demonstrating one way in which modern city dwellers cope with its multi-layered stimuli. As a set, the prints demonstrate Sloan's ability to narrate anecdotal aspects of urban life. This work also showcases Sloan's talent for ambiguity: should viewers judge the protagonist for letting her apartment fall into disarray, or admire her surrender to a moment of stolen leisure?

John Sloan was a friend and contemporary of George Bellows, whose painting, *Nude, Miss Bentham* is part of the in the Barber's collection. Sloan was part of the Ashcan School and his artwork – like that of other artists from the group, including Bellows and Edward Hopper – provides fascinating historical insights into Manhattan life during a period of rapid social change. This rare series of *New York City Life* occupies an important place in the history of fine-art printmaking. The Barber's set, gifted by the Delaware Art Museum and the Helen Farr Sloan Estate in 2017, is the only complete example outside the USA - and is certainly amongst my favourite group of objects in the entire collection.

To conclude, as one of the oldest continuously treated subjects in the history of art, it is especially apparent that the representation of

² Quoted by Katherine Manthorne in 'John Sloan's Moving-Picture Eye' in *American Art*, 18:2 (2004), p. 88.

motherhood has shifted significantly over time. From the customary religious and historical associations of the Virgin Mary in the renaissance works which exist in the Barber's collection, to the playful ambiguity of works like *The Women's Page*, we can see the emergence of 'modern' motherhood. This shift is also apparent in cultural attitudes towards motherhood too, particularly in the last 150 years. In this respect, a woman's identity has emerged as multifaceted and is no longer limited to or defined by her potential or actual role as a mother.

These two works reflect how, in the passage of time between their production, women emerged in their own right in western society. The idea of a multifaceted rather than a binary identity – that it is possible to be both a woman and a mother without one subsuming the other – has thankfully now become widely accepted. But through all these changes, motherhood remains a constant inspiration for artists, whether they are man or woman, childless or parents themselves.

Thank you so much for listening to this audio talk. Please do come back again in a week's time for the next Tuesday Talk, given by Mimi Buchanan, the Learning & Engagement Intern at the Barber, on 'Working Women: Attitudes to Female Labour in 19th-century Art'.

Speaker info

Beth Brankowski joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Collections Intern in September 2019. Prior to the completion of the internship, Beth was a student on the MA History of Art and Curating course at the University of Birmingham and was a co-curator of the 2019 summer exhibition at the Barber Institute, *The Paper Museum: The Curious Eye of Cassiano*.

Music

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.

Select reading list

Fagg, John. 'Chamber Pots and Gibson Girls: Clutter and Matter in John Sloan's Graphic Art' in *American Art*, 29.3 (2015), pp. 28-57.

Hughes, Robert. *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, p. 110.

Hutton, Molly S. 'Walking in the City at the Turn of the Century: John Sloan's Pedestrian Aesthetics', Coyle, Heather Campbell, and Schiller, Joyce K. (eds.), in *John Sloan's New York*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, pp. 82-116.

Lobel, Michael. *John Sloan: Drawing on Illustration*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, pp. 6-229.

Manthorne, Katherine. 'John Sloan's Moving-Picture Eye' in *American Art*, 18:2 (2004), pp.80-95.

Schnackenburg, Bernhard. 'van Ostade family' in *Grove Art Online*. Published online: 2011.

Zurier, Rebecca, 'The Storyteller's Vision: John Sloan and the Limits of Visual Knowledge' in *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School*. Berkley: University of California Press, 2015, pp. 250-298.