Drawn to Satire

John Sloan’s Illustrations for the Novels of Charles Paul de Kock

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The Susan and Stephen Chandler Wing of the Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
A remarque is a small sketch made anywhere in the margins of an etching plate and originally served as a way for artists to test the sharpness of their etching needles. By the late 19th century, print dealers promoted “remarque proofs” as more valuable and exclusive than impressions without them. Sloan’s remarques, included on etchings found in the most deluxe editions of the de Kock novels, are often clever puns on the illustrations and enhance their meaning.

The dual cause of *The Misplaced Kiss*—alcohol and ardor—can be found in the remarque of a blindfolded, tipsy cupid next to an overturned champagne bottle and glass. Although illustrating only a moment in the narrative, Sloan infuses the remarque with the essence of the scene.
From 1902 to 1905, American artist John Sloan (1871–1951) created 53 etchings to illustrate novels by French author Charles Paul de Kock (1793–1871), whose satires of early 19th-century Parisian society were popular in the United States around the turn of the century. While Sloan is best known for his gritty depictions of life in the streets, taverns, and tenements of New York City, the de Kock commission gave him the opportunity to refine his etching technique and hone his ability to convey anecdotal incidents with wry humor.

"Drawn to Satire: John Sloan’s Illustrations for the Novels of Charles Paul de Kock" presents a selection of etchings, drawings, and books mainly from the extensive John Sloan collection of Gary, Brenda, and Harrison Ruttenberg. The collection, a promised gift to The Huntington, includes a wealth of material relating to the de Kock commission, including preliminary drawings and books in which the etchings appear. It provides a comprehensive view of Sloan’s development as an artist and printmaker.

**Luxurious Volumes of Slapstick and Satire**

The Boston publishing firm Frederick J. Quinby Co. hired Sloan and fellow Ashcan School artists William Glackens and George Luks to contribute illustrations to limited and luxurious editions of de Kock novels. One of the finest sets Quinby produced, the "Bibliomania" edition, features Morocco leather bindings, vellum pages, etchings signed by the artists, and hand-drawn illustrations. A single set of 100 volumes cost $50,000, a princely sum at the turn of the century. Less
expensive editions were printed in greater numbers, with lower quality impressions of the etchings and less extravagant paper and binding.

To produce the novels, the Quinby Co. founded the Harcourt Bindery in Boston, which subscribed to the handcrafted techniques and philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement, as it still does today.

De Kock’s stories are comedies, featuring slapstick antics, mistaken identities, and reversals of gender and class roles. In *The Misplaced Kiss*, for example, the roguish character Cherami drunkenly attempts to plant a kiss on the object of his affection but gets the waiter instead, not realizing in his intoxicated state that his beloved has just left the room.

SLOAN’S TECHNIQUE

Sloan strove to represent the setting of de Kock’s novels with great authenticity, writing, “I studied the life and customs of France and Paris so thoroughly that I know every street in Paris.” In Sloan’s illustrations, costume details such as silhouette, pattern, trim, and accessories accurately capture the fashions of 19th-century France. In *The Misplaced Kiss*, Cherami crashes a society wedding looking for a good meal, drinks too much champagne, and causes upheaval by accosting the bride. De Kock writes that Cherami has sold his formal clothes to pay gambling debts; the plaid pants Sloan depicts him wearing would have been inappropriate for evening wear in the

19th century and help indicate Cherami’s boorish nature. Illustrating subtle costume references such as this reveals Sloan’s skill as an interpreter of de Kock’s humor.

When Sloan began working for Quinby he had made few etchings, and none with the complexity of the de Kock narratives. Creating 53 illustrations in a three-year period induced Sloan to improve his etching technique and refine his artistic ideas. In early prints, such as The Branding of Edouard, he outlined his figures with curved contour lines rather than the expressive cross-hatching prominent in later illustrations, including The Misplaced Kiss. By the end of the commission, his compositions had become more powerful as Sloan reduced extraneous background detail and made the figures larger within the plate.

Sloan incorporated the techniques and style of the de Kock illustrations in his New York City Life etchings from 1905–06, four of which are included in the exhibition. The series consists of witty vignettes of metropolitan life drawn from Sloan’s observations. Turning Out the Light and Fifth Avenue Critics share with later de Kock illustrations, such as The Silent Pie, attention to details of setting and costume, as well as a straightforward approach and energetic use of line. Sloan exhibited etchings from the de Kock novels with prints from New York City Life in 1910 at the American Watercolor Society and Exhibition of Independent Artists, suggesting that both projects comprised his larger artistic ambition of depicting incidents of human life—from the quotidian to the tragic—whether in 19th-century France or the streets of early 20th-century New York. In addition to painting and lithography, etching also became a major part of Sloan’s work; he made almost 300 during his life. For Sloan, the de Kock commission formed a crucible where he mastered a medium and a mode of expression that he would carry throughout his career.

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*Fifth Avenue Critics*, 1905, etching, state 10 of 11, 5 x 7 in. From the New York City Life series. Partial and promised gift of Gary, Brenda, and Harrison Ruttenberg.

**MORE TO SEE…**  
John Sloan’s painting *McSorley’s Cats* (1929) and works by other artists of the Ashcan School, including George Bellows, William Glackens, Robert Henri, and George Luks, are on view in Rooms 2 and 4 of the Virginia Steele Scott Galleries of American Art.