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A Short Guide to the Art of Dining, Slumming, Touring, Wildlife, and Women for Hire in New York's Chinatown and Chinese Restaurants

John X. Christ

New York's Chinatown was renowned at the turn of the twentieth century as a significant site of urban tourism. It evoked a complex set of written and pictorial responses from those who chose to engage the delights and desires aroused by this burgeoning enclave of production. What many of these reactions had in common was a drive to provide an interpretation, a reading, of the dynamic and unstable social relations of the urban metropolis, of the '*new* New York'.

In this essay, I offer a brief exploration of representations of New York's Chinatown and Chinese restaurants in the first decades of the twentieth century. I sketch recurrent themes and issues through the investigation of a limited but eclectic set of images ranging in formal language from the Ashcan realism of John Sloan and the early Stuart Davis to the Cubo-Futurism of Max Weber and Joseph Stella. Through comparative analysis, I explore both the differences and similarities between these modes of representation. This goal requires a treatment of these images as manifestations of both élite cultural production and an interest in the spectacle of urban life evoked by Chinatown and the Chinese restaurant.[1]

Dining

My initial exploration of this material was sparked by two images: both are called *Chinese Restaurant* – one by John Sloan (Fig. 1) and the other by Max Weber (Fig. 2), produced in 1909 and 1915 respectively. I wondered what compelled these two very different artists both to produce an image of the interior of a Chinese restaurant, and just six years apart. In proceeding with my research for a projected paper on these paintings, I was struck by the abundance of verbal and visual representations of Chinatown and Chinese restaurants at this time.[2]

The differences between the formal languages employed by Sloan and Weber are no more striking than the similarities in their subjects. One recognises, among other things, that both images include a black and yellow tile floor and a red wall. In studying other representations and descriptions of Chinese restaurants from the period (Fig. 3, for example) one begins to recognise certain recurring characteristics from which one can begin to establish the restaurant as a type or at least an aggregation of motifs. To be sure, the differences between these images abound. While Sloan, through realist conventions, delineates a pictorial space that one must assume the artist intended to be relatively logical and perceptually inhabitable by the viewer, Weber, in employing a pictorial language indebted to Synthetic Cubism and Futurism, fractures any sense of spatial continuity. Before delving into the history of Chinatown and the Chinese restaurant, I offer a brief description of each painting.

Sloan, in his *Chinese Restaurant*, depicts four figures seated two to a table.

1. Robert W. Snyder and Rebecca Zurier use a similar model in investigating the work of the Ashcan School artists by placing their art in the context of contemporary magazine articles, guidebooks, and other popular forms of entertainment. Their work serves as a valuable model for this essay. See 'Picturing the City', in Rebecca Zurier, Robert W. Snyder, and Virginia M. Mecklenburg, *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York* (National Museum of American Art in Association with W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 1995). In contrast, Anthony Lee's discussion of the representation of San Francisco's Chinatown in *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2001), despite its historical rigour and sensitivity to urban development, fails to draw out the connections between popular media, urban culture, and elite artistic production.

2. I first began research on a comparison of these paintings in a course given by Michael Leja on turn-of-the-century New York City at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His insights, along with class discussions, have been of tremendous value in working through my thoughts on this essay.

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The leftmost figure is a man wearing a hat, eagerly and with exertion slurping noodles from a large blue and white bowl. Across from him, at the centre of attention, sits a woman before a small plate. She too wears a hat, although a considerably more flamboyant one with its striking red plume serving almost as a beacon within the more muted tones of the picture. Her attention is directed toward a cat obediently seated on the floor by the table, attentively awaiting its next morsel seen dangling from her fingers. With her other hand, she makes a pinching gesture leaving only her finger outstretched. This hand's uncanny resemblance to a feline head tantalises and teases in its manifold visual connections. The two male figures seated to the right at the other table, neither wearing a hat, appear more restrained, actively consuming the scene as passive spectators. The man on the left, casually holding his cigarette, turns in his chair with amusement to observe the goings-on at the other table. His well-groomed companion dangles a utensil into his large bowl as he also attentively takes in the ensuing drama.

The destabilising impact of Weber's *Chinese Restaurant* results from its use of colour and its off-balance, Cubist composition. Two pictorial logics struggle



Fig. 1. John Sloan, *Chinese Restaurant*, 1909, oil on canvas, 66 × 81.3 cm. Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York.

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against one another; one takes shape on the surface of the picture, while the other unfolds in pictorially inhabitable space as the representation of surfaces. A yellow and black checkered pattern signifies a floor, but this brief moment of identification between painted mark and experiential world does not remain stable. The lack of perspective with which the checkered pattern is painted continuously reasserts the materiality of the picture plane. In what might be called the middle-ground, there is at least one table with thick legs and a decorative motif running along its edges that is similar to those in Sloan's painting. To the left of the table, there is a chair and an elusive suggestion of a patron eating his meal. To the right, figures depicted in a Futurist idiom dash about. Further right, a pink awning indicates the boundary between inside and outside with the repetitive grey forms indicating a modern city street. Many forms do not ultimately attach to any clear referent in the viewer's experience. They continually disrupt legibility and remind the viewer that the experience of the Chinese restaurant is an exotic one full of surprises.

It may seem that I have devoted far more effort to character development

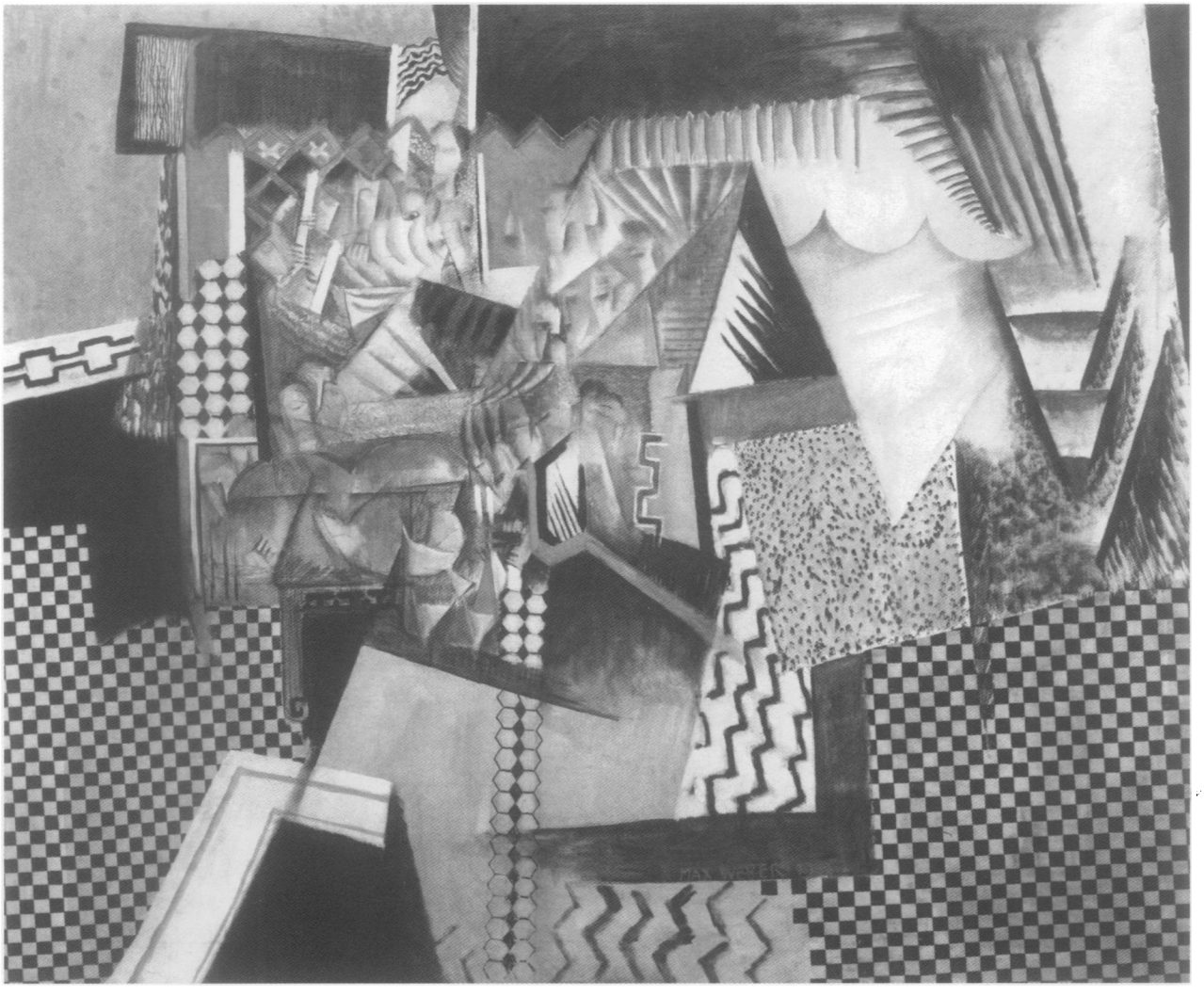

Fig. 2. Max Weber, *Chinese Restaurant*, 1915, oil on canvas, 101.6 × 121.92 cm. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. (Photo: Geoffrey Clements.)

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Fig. 3. H. Y. Mayer, *Chinatown*, in Rupert Hughes, *The Real New York* (Smart Set Publishing Company: New York, 1904).

and the allusion to possible narrative content in my description of Sloan's painting whereas I have devoted most of my description of Weber's painting to the understanding of space and form. This is not a flaw or inconsistency in my reading of these paintings but is rather inherent to the images themselves, to the artists' contrasting artistic interests. I will show that this difference results from divergent but overlapping interests in coming to terms with the experience of modern urban life, here explored through the lens of the visual and social aspects of tourism and the enticement of the exotic represented by Chinese restaurants in turn-of-the-century New York City.

Tourism

Chinatown was rapidly establishing itself around the turn of the century as a major site of urban tourism, and, perhaps more to the point, as a locale in which to go 'slumming'.[3] Although Chinatown's tourist trade had already started growing by the turn of the century, the second decade of the century saw its real boom, just about the time that these images of Chinatown by America's leading modern painters began to appear.[4]

A photograph taken of Max Weber in Chinese costume from the middle of the decade illustrates the extent to which these artists participated in this pastime (Fig. 4). Evidently he did not only depict the urban scene associated with the interest in slumming, but partook of it himself, donning the costume of those he was observing as a memento, one must assume, of his forays into this exotic world.

It was no accident that the popularity of Chinatown and Chinese restaurants rose simultaneously with the growth of Chinatown's tourist industry of souvenir shops and entertainment. Writing about the history of Chinatown, Arthur Bonner has described this process: 'A generation of Sunday Schools and festivals and picnics had taught the Chinese about American tastes and

3. Slumming was a form of entertainment in which usually middle-class, white tourists would visit tenements and other economically impoverished neighbourhoods and ethnic ghettos, in a word 'slums', to experience what seemed another world.

4. It should be noted that although the Chinatown tourist trade was growing rapidly at this time, this was not a moment in US history of great Chinese immigration. It was preceded by a large influx from the 1860s until the 1880s (ended by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) and was proceeded by the immigration boom starting in the 1960s. For a good discussion of the Chinese Exclusion Act and its relation to Chinese-American labour and the formation of New York's Chinatown, see the first chapter of Peter Kwong, *Chinatown, N.Y.: Labor and Politics, 1930–1950* (New Press: New York, 1979).



Fig. 4. Anonymous, *Portrait of Max Weber in Chinese Costume*, c.1914–16, platinum print. Collection of Joy S. Weber.

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manners. When slumming disclosed a profitable niche, entrepreneurs were ready and able to exploit it.'[5] That is, residents of Chinatown recognised a means of bringing outside capital into their marginal economy. This capital literally arrived by the busload (Fig. 5). Although one must assume this trend met with resistance, enough embraced this opportunity to effect a transformation of Chinatown's economy and self-presentation. Chinatown needed to develop an image of itself for outsiders, one enticing to bourgeois tourists eager for excitement and a taste of the exotic.

The subject of Chinatown in visual representations needs to be understood beyond the theoretical limitations of historical models focusing on Western constructions of the Oriental other in favour of an interpretive framework in which the objectified subject is also an active participant in this process, with capital playing a central role as motivating agent in cultural and identity production. That is to say, these representations need to be understood as constructed by the artists' objectifying curiosity about the exotic other, but also as a process of self-objectification by a population given the 'opportunity' to capitalise on its own marginal status and unfamiliar cultural background. In so doing, the public is offered access to possibilities of assimilating new experiences and cultures, even if always already disfigured by the machinations of capital.[6]

Slumming, as a tourist diversion, contained within itself elements of adventure and risk even as it was becoming an industry. The picturesque intricately entwined itself with the dangerous to construct an alluring offer for aspiring pleasure-seekers. 'But then, the sinister itself', as Bonner has explained, 'or rather, the manufactured image of sin and lurking evil – became a prime lure.'[7] In attempting to understand the attraction of such a form of leisure activity one may note a degree of correspondence between it and the rise at the turn of the century of such entertainment opportunities as the amusement park, exemplified by Coney Island with its fantastic design schemes and its thrilling but, for the most part, safe rides. At Coney Island, one could experience the thrills of wild rides and the excitement of carnivalesque inversions of sexual mores in which mechanical contraptions often put participants into situations where skirts would rise and visitors would be thrown atop one another. It was an environment of often bizarre and fantastic decoration. Danger always presented itself as lurking around the corner even as visitors knew themselves to be safe.[8]

A 1909 essay from *Munsey's Magazine*, 'Slumming in New York's Chinatown: A Glimpse Into the Sordid Underworld of the Mott Street Quarter, Where Elsie Sigel Formed Her Fatal Associations', describes the spectacle of Chinatown's dangers:

> Here is a typical party of slummers going into the quarter. None is a New Yorker, except the Semitic-faced youth in the lead, whose flaunting banners and 'spieling' netted them along upper Broadway and in the hotel districts. They are people who belong beyond the city's gates – eager, curious, prurient even, to know the worst that lies hidden within. Let us follow them.
>
> Listen! The guide is talking; but see, few of his followers are listening to him. They are bewildered, uncertain. They feel they are on the threshold of a mystery. The women are clinging timidly to their escorts, or holding one another's hands. The men are trying to look unconcerned and as if it were an old story to them. The guide says:
>
> 'Ladies and gents, on th' spot wher-r-re ye're standin' at this instant, a short time ago th' warr-rin' highbinder tongs got busy, an' when th' smoke cleared away th' street on which ye're standin' wuz runnin' r-red with b-l-lood. There was ten dead men layin' all around here!'

5. Arthur Bonner, *Alas! What Brought Thee Hither?: The Chinese in New York, 1800–1950* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: Madison, 1997), p. 97. Gwen Kinkead, *Chinatown: A Portrait of a Closed Society* (Harper Collins: New York, 1992), p. 47, suggests a similar pattern of development. The Chinese could not break out of their ghettoed existence, he suggests, so they instead brought outside capital in.

6. James S. Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (University of Iowa Press: Iowa City, 1993), offers a similar argument, explaining how a stereotyped Asian-American identity was constructed by white Americans, but also how the Chinese in the United States came to be complicit with this process through their own cultural presentation to outsiders. Moy, however, does not fall into the trap of seeking to establish a more authentic Asian identity, a quest that he sees among many Asian-Americans and of which he is strongly critical.

7. Bonner, *What Brought Thee Hither?*, p. 107. While I agree with Bonner, as is clear, I would emphasise that Chinatown's dangerous image was not wholly constructed. Pre-existing tendencies toward crime, often violent, were also being played upon by the growing tourist industry.

8. For a compelling history of Coney Island, see John Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island*

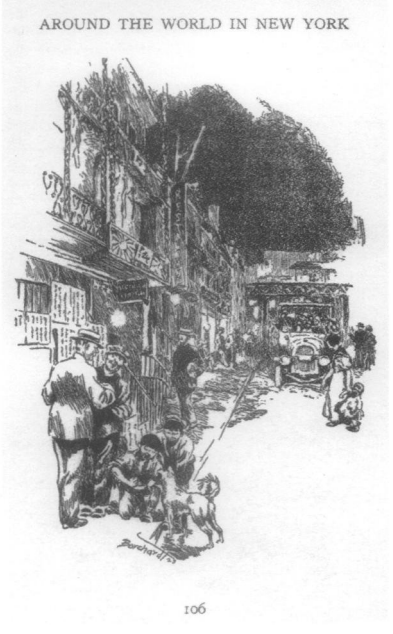

Fig. 5. Norman Borchardt, untitled illustration of a tourist bus in Chinatown, 1923, in Konrad Bercovici, *Around the World in New York* (The Century Co.: New York, 1924).

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> His sanguinary tale is designed to catch the interest of just such people as are following him for a dollar or two dollars a head. It is successful.[9]

Chinatown was not Coney Island. Chinatown could offer to visitors the belief that what they were seeing was real, that danger might really be lurking around the corner, and its sexual opportunities were less about carnival than commerce. In depictions of Chinatown, as in other paintings, films, and representations of urban life from this period, the police officer often makes an appearance, as one finds in a rather picturesque 1902 illustration of a Chinatown street (Fig. 6). One must assume that the inclusion of a police officer within a representation of Chinatown signifies institutional safety and reassurance in an otherwise daunting environment. Chinatown required the image of a safe and controlled arena in which to experience the thrills, shocks, and disorientation of modern urban life without fear of ultimate and debilitating loss. Stories of the dangers of Chinatown were simultaneously promulgated and denied; the perception of danger remained as a necessary attraction, while the tourists were reassured that they would nevertheless be safe.[10]

The story, however, is not this simple. Many visitors were aware that their experiences in Chinatown, just as at Coney, were constructed for their entertainment, that the scenes that confronted them were not wholly authentic. While it is true that some of the dangers were real, many of the gritty details with which they were presented were part of an illusion; they were staged. The ever-present story of the Chinatown opium den offers a poignant example. I quote again from *Munsey's Magazine*:

> Something moves on the platform. Some of the more timid slummers hesitate, but the guide's 'spiel' on the horrors of opium-smoking reassures them. As he goes on, their eyes adjust themselves to the dim light and the fumeladen atmosphere. . . .
>
> The pair go through the motions of opium-smoking – twisting of a wire in a tiny box made of horn, the twirling of the molasses-like stuff, which the wire catches on its point, over the flame at their side until it sputters greasily. . . .

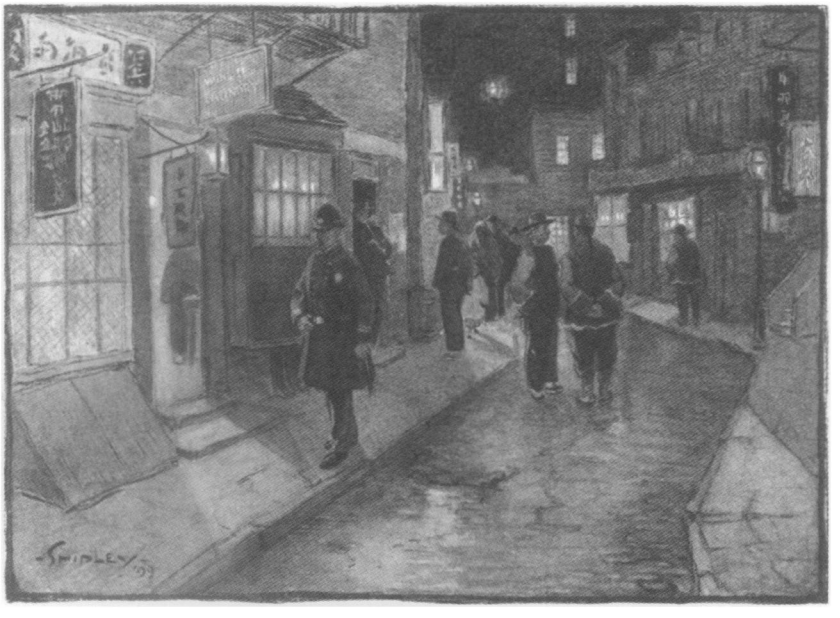

Fig. 6. *Chinatown*, in Jesse Lynch Williams, *New York Sketches* (Scribners: New York, 1902). (Photo: Courtesy President and Fellows of Harvard College.)

at the Turn of the Century (Hill and Wang: New York, 1978).

9. William Brown Meloney, *Munsey's Magazine*, 1909, pp. 231–2; as reprinted in Frank Oppel, *Tales of Gaslight New York* (Castle Books: Edison, NJ, 1985), pp. 229–41.

10. Part of the perceived danger of Chinatown was the result of the local tongs, associations that controlled much of the activities in Chinatown. Killings and wars between tongs were not uncommon in contesting territorial rule. Tong wars remained common at least until the early 1930s, when the US Attorney in Manhattan stepped in. Tongs were part of the danger, but also, and for that reason, part of the attraction. Sightseers would hire guides to see, among other things such as opium dens and slave girls, sites of tong murders. See, for example, Kinkead, *Portrait of a Closed Society*, p. 47.

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> The two go through this performance anywhere from ten to twenty times a night, for pay. It is their 'turn' on the slummers' stage. They were players on a real stage once. The Chinaman was a member of a theatrical troupe; his wife had a place in polite vaudeville under a name which has been forgotten.[11]

Chinatown, or at least that part of Chinatown which has been offered up for public display, for consumption as yet another commodity in this new leisure economy, is a 'stage'. The inhabitants have taken to being actors in a realist drama in which they play their type-cast roles, playing out an identity partly their own and partly written by the expectations of their Caucasian audience.[12]

A brief excerpt from a contemporary guidebook will prove helpful as an illustration of some of the issues that have already been raised as well as others that have yet to come up. Rupert Hughes' *The Real New York* abounds in anecdotal stories and fascinating details about, amongst other things, the experience of slumming in Chinatown. Following a description of the gambling habits of Chinatown's dwellers, he goes on, using the character A. J. Joyce, to lend personality to his descriptions:

> Meanwhile, A. J. Joyce was also hunting experience. He was bitterly disappointed at being unable to find any opium hells, though he came near being thrown neck and crop out of a number of private apartments where his intrusion was received with the same indignation it would have met had he tried to go slumming on Madison Avenue. There is no lack of places where, in low bunks, hollow-cheeked Chinamen are stretched in gaunt stupidity smoking the mystic pellet that gives them visions of strange Edens of delight, strange aphrodisiac raptures, strange sensations of infinite wealth and power, followed by reactions into unutterable torments of fear and racking pain. . . . Failing to discover an opium joint, Joyce found the restaurants more hospitable. . . . The place was called the Chinese Delmonico's and the room pleased the Chicagoan mightily, with its strange ceilings, its walls decorated with Chinese art, arches with their dragons coiling slimily amid ornate figurations of gilded wood, and graceful, bare tables surrounded by quaint stools. The room was clean, as are all things Chinese, and the kitchen lay in full view with a reassuring neatness.[13]

For A. J. Joyce, as for many visitors to Chinatown, the Chinese restaurant became a definitive locus of the Chinatown experience. With their exotic décor, unfamiliar aromas, and safer environment they became an essential part of the growing tourist industry. Many of the details of this account, although seemingly offered in passing as mere transcription, are ones that upon perusal of period guides become all too familiar. The reference, for example, to the placement of the kitchen in full view of the patrons is a common one. Many contemporaries noted the prominent location of kitchens in view of the dining area and sometimes even as a space through which to pass in order to enter the dining area. This reassured the clients of the cleanliness of the restaurant and that nothing foul was being hidden from sight.[14] Also, in order to attract tourists and other non-Chinese, proprietors of Chinese restaurants often served Americanised dishes that were believed to be more palatable to Western tastes. Chop suey was one of these popular dishes invented in the West that helped facilitate the tourist trade. In 1896, a *Leslie's Illustrated* reporter noted:

> Chow chop sui calls Americans to Chinatown. An American who once falls under the spell of chop sui may forget all about things Chinese for a while, and suddenly a strange craving that almost defies will power arises; as though under a magnetic influence he finds that his feet are carrying him to Mott Street.[15]

The author from *Munsey's Magazine* takes note of the lure of chop suey and goes on to describe the restaurant's interior decorations, which by now should seem fairly typical:

11. Meloney, 'Slumming in New York's Chinatown', p. 233. Konrad Bercovici, *Around the World in New York* (The Century Co.: New York, 1924), pp. 107–8, also describes the 'numerous places especially conducted for the benefit of a sight-seer'.

12. An interesting depiction of the staging of an image of Chinatown, one not unlike Fig. 6, is A. B. Shults, 'A Strolling Photographer in Chinatown, New York', *Harper's Weekly*, vol. 27, no. 1392, 25 August 1883, p. 532. A photographer is shown taking a staged photograph of a police officer standing in front of a number of Chinese. The non-Chinese depicted in this image are clearly out of the camera's frame.

13. Rupert Hughes, *The Real New York* (The Smart Set Publishing Company: London and New York, 1904), pp. 156–7.

14. For example, see Grace M. Mayer, *Once Upon a City: New York from 1890 to 1910 as Photographed by Byron and Described by Grace M. Mayor* (Macmillan Company in association with the Museum of the City of New York: New York, 1958), p. 418.

15. Quoted in Bonner, *What Brought Thee Hither?*, p. 97.

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> Let us leave the slummers in the Port Arthur, eating chop suey. . . . The women are in ecstasies over the heavily carved ebony tables, with their inset tops of dull onyx marble; the carved unbacked stools, the dainty tea-cups and brewing-pots, the rice-bowls and the dinner-plates. The banners of rich embroideries, with always a dragon rampant dominating the scheme of decoration, hold their eyes. They do not notice the floor, covered with linoleum or sawdust; the cheap wall-paper, against which the embroideries are hanging; the thinness and tawdriness and staginess of it all.[16]

This is the same author who discussed the theatrical aspect of the opium den now referring to the 'staginess' of the Chinese restaurant. Clearly the extent to which Chinatown was a representation offered for consumption lingered not far below the surface and in fact did not detract from the enjoyment felt by tourists.

These and other recurrent motifs establish a typology of the environment and its inhabitants based both on observation of actual conditions, whether traditional or part of the growing tourist industry, and on stereotyped constructions of the other in trying to make sense of this unfamiliar culture. This is the context in which any consideration of these paintings must begin, for it is this growing tourist trade that conditioned the production of these images.

Urban Spectacle

In my discussion of Chinatown and Chinese restaurants, I have alluded to the interest they evoked through their participation in the broader development of New York's tourism and leisure-time industry as sites of exhibition and spectacle. The same artists that painted window displays, shoppers, Coney Island, the El train, the Brooklyn Bridge, and other new sights and thrills were searching for a visual representation of Chinatown. Joseph Pennell, for example, illustrated a 1909 book by John C. Van Dyke describing the urban scene of New York. Two of his illustrations offer an interesting comparison. *Chinatown* (Fig. 7) represents a Chinatown street in all of its vibrant colours. Another equally effervescent image, *Coney Island – On the Beach* (Fig. 8), represents the throngs of people and spectacular architecture of Coney Island including a building constructed to resemble the 'exotic' architecture found in China. The similarities between the lights and spectacle of Chinatown and those of the White Way were noted in *Munsey's*:

> The three-storied building, with its iron porticoes and fanciful awnings, is blazing from sidewalk to roof with electric lights and fish-bladder lanterns. 'Port Arthur' is lettered in incandescents as large as a Broadway star's in the zenith of a successful season. But the bulbs do not shine with the brilliancy that they have up-town. A bluish haze enshrouds them. It is the same everywhere in Chinatown. Its lights, like its life, must be seen through this haze of punk and opium, and the noisome outpourings of its greasy chop-suey joints and its swarming tenements. That sickening, dominating peanut odor is the smell of opium.[17]

These comparisons bring me back to the tumultuous scene of Max Weber's *Chinese Restaurant*. I begin by examining the details of the genesis of his painting. It was Weber's friend, the photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn, who encouraged him to make a Chinatown picture. In a letter of 6 April 1915, he wrote to Weber:

> You speak of China-Town. How fine it would be to foregather and have fine steaming 'noodles' together, all the friendly bunch of us. Has it ever occurred to you to make a 'Memory Picture of the essence of China-Town'? It seems to me that this would be a splendid thing to do. There is something quaintly romantic in the sounds and smells of it, its shops and pots and chop sticks of it, and I have a sort of intuition that you will do an exquisite blending of it all one day in honor of many nights (Happy ones) that we have spent there.[18]

16. Meloney, 'Slumming in New York's Chinatown', pp. 235–7. For more information on the invention of chop suey and chow mein as well as a good general history of the Chinese in the United States see B. L. Sung, *The Story of the Chinese in America: Their struggle for survival, acceptance, and full participation in American life – from the Gold Rush to the Present* (Collier Books: New York, 1967). Kinkead, *Portrait of a Closed Society*, p. 47, also describes the invention of chow mein for an American public. The Cantonese, he claims, were revolted by it, saying it consisted of 'tea leaves and leftovers'.

17. Meloney, 'Slumming in New York's Chinatown', p. 232.

18. Coburn quoted in Percy North, *Max Weber: The Cubist Decade, 1910–1920* (High Museum of Art: Atlanta, 1991), pp. 36–7.

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Coburn is not only encouraging Weber to produce an image of Chinatown in which the Chinese restaurant is emblematic of the Chinatown experience, but also suggests that it be a 'memory picture' rather than a more direct visual response to a particular place. This encouragement by Coburn was appropriate, for it was in keeping with Weber's own dictum on painting of 1915: 'My sole desire is to express myself: to paint what I see not with my eye, but with my consciousness.'[19] Was a distrust of direct visual experience growing in the era of spectacular entertainment, in which one willingly walked into fantasy-lands overtly constructed in opposition to the real world, where 'reality' could only be found behind the façades, through the invasive practices of slumming or documentation – as in the work of Jacob Riis? Or, is this, as Weber himself says, a means toward self-expression, emphasising the inner world of consciousness rather than the outer world of visual experience, something akin to his own spiritualised notion of the fourth-dimension?[20] Both

19. Weber quoted in North, *Max Weber*, p. 40.

20. See Weber's essay, 'The Fourth Dimension From a Plastic Point of View', in North, *Max Weber*, p. 95. Weber's interest in synesthesia further complicates his relationship to the visual realm – 'To hear is to see, to see is to touch, . . . ' as he once remarked (Weber quoted in North, *Max Weber*, p. 28).

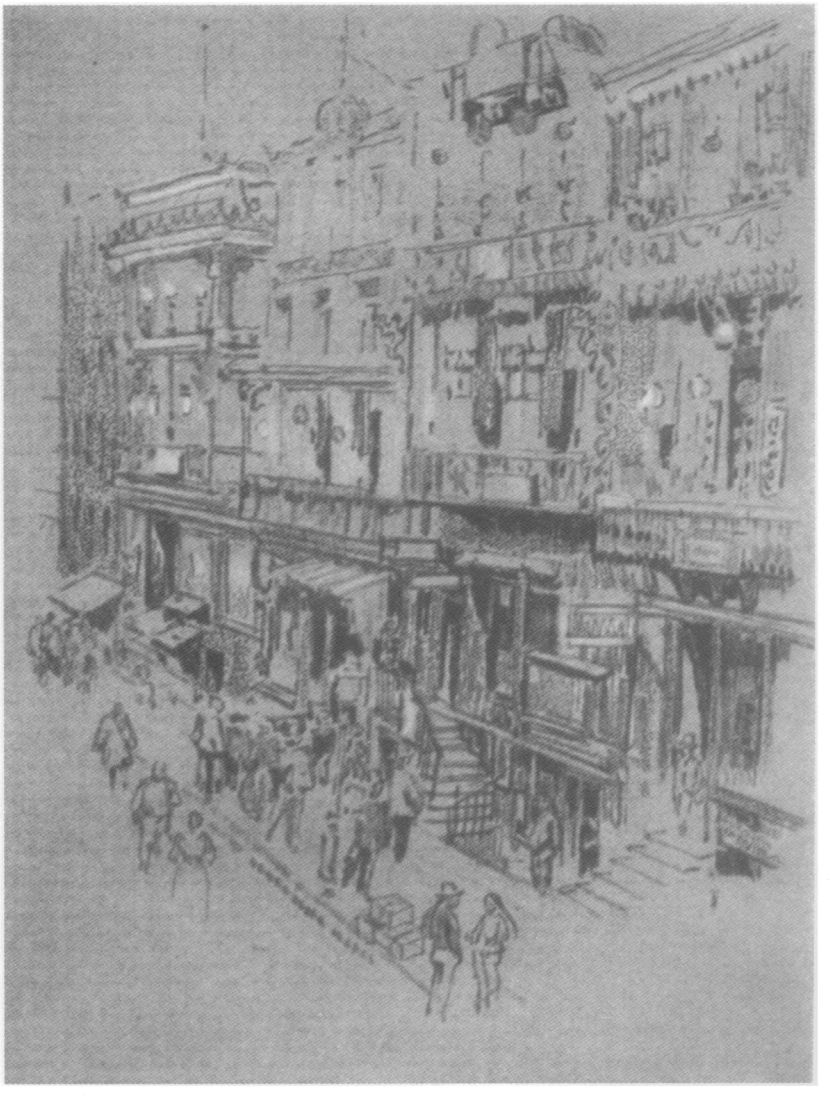

Fig. 7. Joseph Pennell, *Chinatown*, 1909, in John C. Van Dyke, *The New New York: A Commentary on the Place and the People* (The Macmillan Company: New York, 1909).

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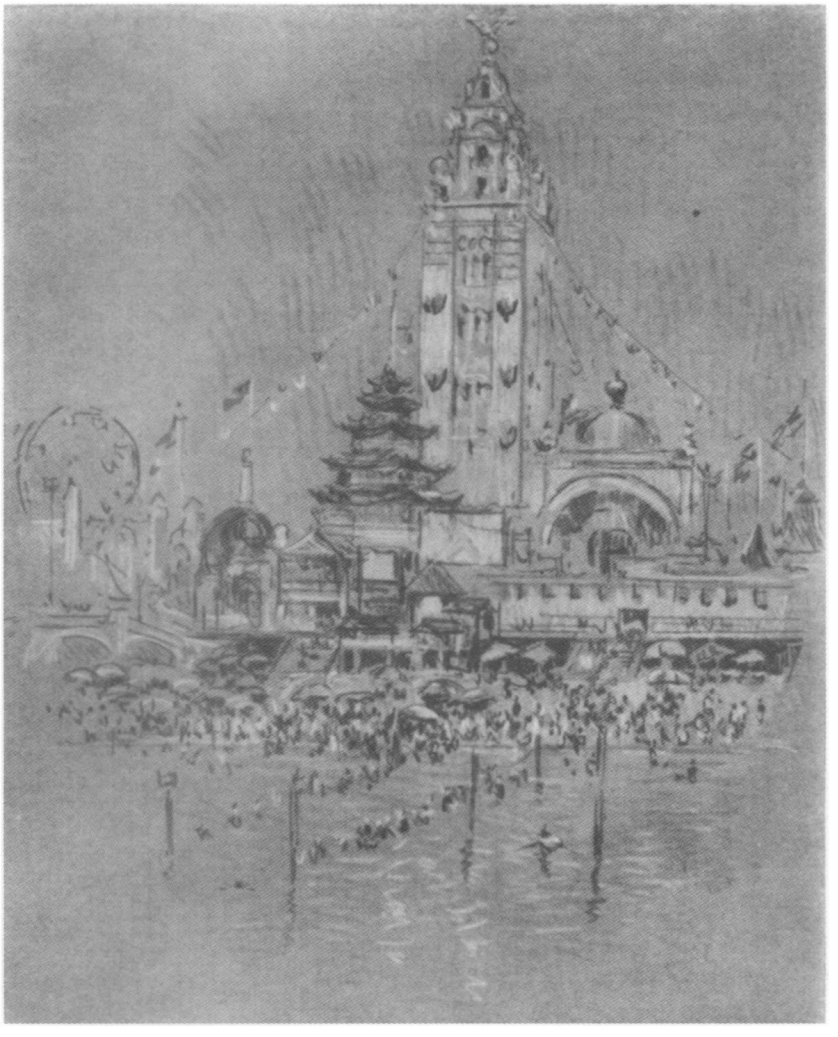

Fig. 8. Joseph Pennell, *Coney Island—On the Beach*, 1909, in John C. Van Dyke, *The New New York: A Commentary on the Place and the People* (The Macmillan Company: New York, 1909).

of these questions, with certain reservations, could be answered affirmatively. In fact, trust in the self-expression of one's inner consciousness – as holding a higher verity, as it were – could quite readily be linked to a distrust of the superficiality of modern urban life. Weber, by stressing representation's linkage to memory and consciousness, produced an image in which the overwhelming sensations of immediate experience were channelled and reconfigured retrospectively into an intelligible work of art without losing the spark of astonishment and unintelligibility that gives the Chinese restaurant its appeal.[21]

The initial description of Weber's painting I offered as well as my discussion of this painting as a representation of urban spectacle might seem to run counter to the emphasis I am placing on vision's contestation. Coburn not only romanticises the scene, but he avoids the visual realm itself in describing his experience of eating at a Chinese restaurant. It is arguable that he needed to remove the experience from the surfaces of the visual realm in order to retain the scene's picturesque quality, however counterintuitive a move this may at first appear.[22] In fact, the Chinatown experience seems to be defined by these

21. Eric Rosenberg, 'In Place of Hand and Eye and Drooping Head: Max Weber's Pictures of New York, 1913–1916', chapter in *All Within Reach of Human Sense: Moments in a History of Art in America, 1492–1942* (University of California Press: forthcoming), makes similar claims for Weber's relationship to visual experience, that vision 'must be fabricated . . . rather than trusted to material encounter'. Rosenberg's essay stands as one of the few critical assessments of Weber's artistic production that I have encountered. Although he approaches his subject matter from a different perspective, many of the interpretations of Weber's *Chinese Restaurant* that I offer parallel the account of the representational instabilities, the slippages of identity, and the 'evisceration' of the body that Rosenberg finds in Weber's artistic production.

22. Rosenberg's essay, 'In Place of Hand and Eye and Drooping Head', has been of particular help to me in puzzling through Coburn's retention of the picturesque through the evasion of 'the politics of vision'.

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very contradictions. The dangerous commingled with the picturesque, disorienting shock with pre-packaged romanticism, even if not always within the same representation. In this situation, the artist intent on finding a representation of Chinatown faced a difficult task. Coburn's romanticising of the experience and Weber's spectacularisation of it are just two sides of the workings of an increasingly institutionalised and commercialised enterprise of cultural exchange and urban recreation.

Weber, in his own description of the scene, heads relatively headlong into the representational upheaval that the Chinese restaurant presented:

> On entering a Chinese Restaurant from the darkness of the night outside, a maze and blaze of light seemed to split into fragments the interior and its contents, the human and inanimate. For the time being the static became transient and fugitive – oblique planes and contours took vertical and horizontal positions, and the horizontal and vertical became oblique, the light so piercing and so luminous, the color so liquid and the life and movement so enchanting! To express this, kaleidoscopic means had to be chosen. The memory of bits of pattern were less obvious than the spirit and festive loveliness and gaiety – almost exotic movement. Therefore, the glow, the charm, the poetry of geometry was stressed. The whole picture is made even more significant by the distribution of flickers here and there in fitting place of a hand, an eye, or drooping head.[23]

This passage is infused with evocations of visual instabilities, but also, as if in the same breath, with descriptions of the restaurant's 'charm' and 'poetry'. It is the startling visual sensations, however, that triumph in Weber's account. Weber stresses the blurring of the animate and inanimate through the shattering of form. The human figure is disassembled; subjectivity – or perhaps one should say, what is left of it – is pictured less through human figuration than 'through flickers here and there in fitting place of a hand, an eye, or drooping head'. Weber's choice of the Cubo-Futurist visual language is not merely linked to his interest in artistic Modernism but is, for him, the most accurate means of representing the experience of modern life. Weber, like others at the time, such as writers of guides, describes the 'kaleidoscopic' form of vision amidst a 'blaze of light'.[24] Weber characterises his experience of colour as 'liquid', materiality seeming to have dissolved. The checked pattern representing the floor shifts before the viewer's eyes, the slight tonal variations of the squares producing an optical effect of warping. This throws the stability of the picture plane itself off balance, bending an already 'kaleidoscopic' image. There is a connection, albeit complex and mediated, between commerce, tourism, and the pictorial structure of Weber's paintings.

Max Weber was not the only artist working in the Cubo-Futurist idiom to represent the visual cornucopia of Chinatown. In 1917, Joseph Stella, a painter known today mostly for his depictions of Brooklyn Bridge, painted a picture called *Chinatown* (Fig. 9) as one of a series of paintings done on glass.[25] It is in many ways comparable to other paintings he produced of the urban scene, such as those of Brooklyn Bridge, of the White Way (Broadway), or of Coney Island. While Stella's *Chinatown* is largely a non-representational painting, references are made to the built environment. The calligraphic forms running down the centre of the glass can be read as analogous to Chinese writing, such as that found on the vertically oriented signage and postings on Chinatown streets.[26] Geometric forms on a red ground, also evocative of writing, appear in the vertical band running down the right of the composition and serve to echo the aforementioned calligraphic marks. The figure generated within the circular central form and winding out and up resembles the tail of a dragon – 'dragons coiling slimily amid ornate figurations of gilded wood', as Hughes so described the decorations in the Chinese 'Delmonico's'.[27] The radiant blue

23. Weber quoted in North, *Max Weber*, p. 17.

24. Bonner, *What Brought Thee Hither?*, p. 105, quotes a period guidebook in which the author describes Chinatown as follows: 'At all times the streets are kaleidoscopic.'

25. Incidentally, one of the other paintings he did on glass is *Prestidigitator*, 1916. The trickery and sleight of hand of a prestidigitator might be tellingly related to the urban spectacles such as Coney Island, the White Way, and Chinatown that Stella also painted.

26. These postings erroneously came to be known as the 'Chinese newspaper'.

27. The inference that the curved form may be a reference to a dragon is Francis Naumann's, *New York Dada: 1915–23* (Harry N. Abrams: New York, 1994), p. 145. Although I think this may slightly overliteralise the image, I think it is a good assumption nonetheless.

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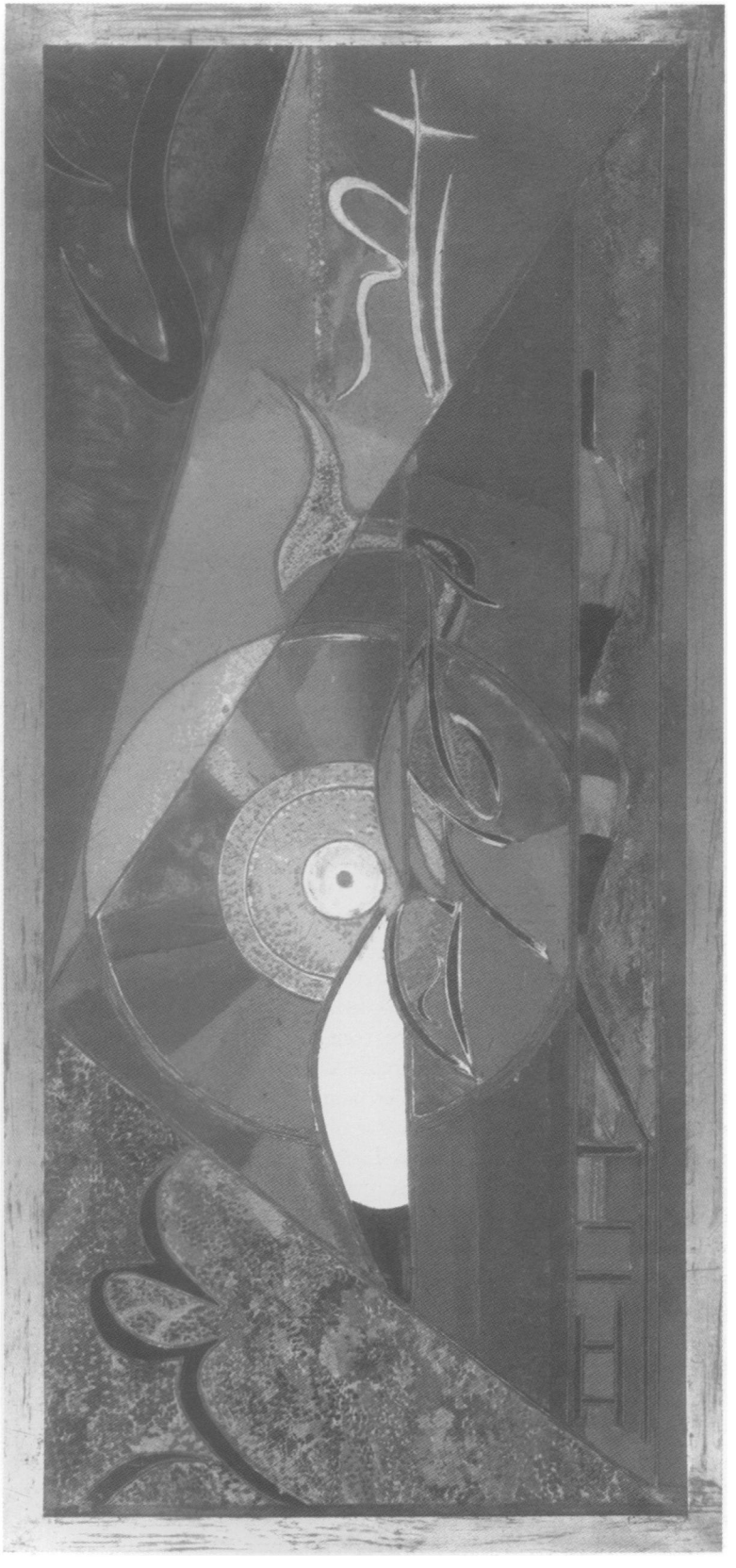

Fig. 9. Joseph Stella, *Chinatown*, *c.*1917, oil on glass, 50.8 × 22.1 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950.

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oblique triangle may be read as a ray of light, as the prismatic colours within the central disk might be read as relating to the abundant and luminous visual sensations of Chinatown. It is probably not productive to over-literalise abstract forms into relations to the built environment. More properly, the arrays of abstract shapes and colours represented in Stella's painting in ways reminiscent of material referents are comparable to his reactions to Coney Island and the White Way, and to Weber's reactions to the shattering of form and the fractured visual experience that he had in the Chinese restaurant.

Women for Hire

If for Weber, the Chinese restaurant could serve as a site for the representation of the spectacle of modern urban life, one must ask if a similar argument could be constructed for Sloan. Or, is Sloan's image resistant to this form of reading with its consistent pictorial space and seemingly legible human characterisations? To begin to explore these issues, it is instructive to examine Sloan's own reactions to the environment as best one can. We are fortunate to have some record of the conception of this painting in his diaries:

> After a nice stew dinner . . . home to New York, but felt restless so went to the Chinese restaurant and was glad I did for I saw a strikingly gotten up girl with dashing red feathers in her hat playing with the restaurant's fat cat. It would be a good thing to paint. I may make a go at it. (23 February 1909)
>
> In the afternoon, I started a memory painting of the Chinese Restaurant girl I saw some four weeks ago. (15 March 1909)
>
> Painted on my 'Chinese Restaurant' picture girl with red feather – and went to the restaurant for my dinner to refresh my memory of the place. Just in time, for tomorrow they move to the corner below (29th St.). (18 March 1909)
>
> Buffalo-St. Louis six month exhibition, asked Lichtenstein to have a picture sent by each of the 'Eight'. They already have a Davies. I promised him the 'Chinese Restaurant – Sixth Ave.' just about finished. (12 April 1909)[28]

It is noteworthy that Sloan did not represent a restaurant in Chinatown, but instead chose to represent one of the countless Chinese restaurants springing up around New York at this time, this one on Thirtieth Street. While one could argue that Sloan did not represent the 'authentic' and 'exotic' experience of a Chinese restaurant because the restaurant was not located in Chinatown, this argument does justice neither to the complexity of the discourse on the Chinese restaurant nor to the particulars of this case.[29] The location of the restaurant that Sloan has depicted, Broadway at the intersection of Sixth Avenue and Thirtieth Street, was well known at the turn of the century and Sloan was surely familiar with it.[30] This neighbourhood housed diversions of all sorts, some respectable and some not. It was notorious for, among other things, its streetwalkers. It was known as the Tenderloin.[31]

There is evidence to suggest that this 'strikingly gotten up girl', as Sloan referred to her, is, in fact, a prostitute. Chinese restaurants were often associated with the additional commerce that the sex trade could offer. The *Report of the Massachusetts Commission for the Investigation of White Slavery So-called 1914* cited restaurants run by 'Chinamen' as 'favorite resorts of professional prostitutes' and went on to explain the reasons why this would be the case. According to the report, prostitutes would wait in saloons and restaurants for a man to signal. The inexpensive but good food found in these venues, it was thought, attracted men, particularly during the dinner hours. Those restaurant owners willing to capitalise on this opportunity would

28. *John Sloan's New York Scene: From the Diaries, Notes and Correspondence, 1906–1913* (Harper and Row: New York, 1965), pp. 292, 299, 300, and 305.

29. Bonner, *What Brought Thee Hither?*, p. 112, contends: 'no one felt it was a real Chinese meal if it was not consumed in Chinatown. It wasn't just the food. The lure of the exotic and the repetitive tong wars added spice'. While I do not want to completely refute his claim, I do believe that there are cases in which other factors come into play, which contribute their own unique and tantalising elements.

30. One can assert this claim on the basis of Sloan's diary entries.

31. For a discussion of this neighbourhood see Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790–1920* (W. W. Norton & Company: New York, 1992). A section on the Tenderloin begins on page 203. See also Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (Vintage Books: New York, 1991), p. 17. He states that as opposed to the Bowery, which was frequented by the poor, in the Tenderloin could be found many slummers partaking of all sorts of 'vice'. For a discussion more specifically of the importance of this neighbourhood in Sloan's artistic production see Suzanne L. Kinser, 'Prostitutes in the Art of John Sloan', *Prospects*, vol. 9, 1984, p. 234.

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develop a sort of symbiotic relationship in which women would have a site to meet prospective customers and the restaurant would in turn assume more business for itself.[32]

Furthermore, prostitution, it can be argued, is a recurring motif within Sloan's artistic production, as a brief survey of a few of his paintings and illustrations should confirm. In *Women's Night Court: Before Her Maker and Her Judge* (*The Masses*, 1913) Sloan depicts a prostitute before a judge and a courtroom full of men; she wears a dress and a hat with significant plumage. In *Putting the Best Foot Forward* (*The Masses*, 1915), Sloan depicts a woman lifting her dress to reveal part of her leg, and presumably to bait a customer; alongside her is depicted a destitute man with a peg-leg; they both exist as evidence of the same system of injustice. *Sixth Avenue and Thirtieth Street* (1907), representing the intersection at which the Chinese restaurant was located, is a busy street scene in which Sloan depicts amongst the crowd two lavishly dressed women that are often identified by historians as prostitutes. In *Three A.M.* (1909), Sloan depicts two women in a kitchen; a conspicuous feathered hat – by now a recurring motif – has been placed on a stool; it is about that time of morning that one might assume a prostitute to be returning from work.[33]

It is my contention, however, that a more fruitful understanding of the issue of prostitution in these images can be found in an interpretation in which identity loses fixity. Prostitution remains a central issue, but the associations are slippery; identity is unstable in the *new* New York with its modern woman. Through the reading of social ambiguity into the subjects of these images, I seek to destabilise what has seemed a relatively legible form of realism. To be sure, in particular images, Sloan does appear to be dealing directly with the representation of prostitution, at least in so far as the law defines it. But, could the seated working-class woman in *3 A.M.* not also have just returned from a night on the town, sharing coffee and a cigarette with her roommate? Similarly, could the two women in *Sixth Avenue and Thirtieth Street,* rather than being prostitutes, be seeking attention and the provocation of staid principles of decorum through their flamboyant and suggestive dress? A simple answer does not present itself. The issue of whether or not the many women in Sloan's images that have been described as prostitutes were intended as such is decentred – although certainly not forgotten, and in its place is considered the difficulty of clearly defining a prostitute within turn-of-the-century working-class culture.[34]

John Sloan's own comments regarding *Chinese Restaurant* reveal little if one is in search of interpretive certainty. In a statement made in reference to this painting in 1938 for an exhibition catalogue, Sloan describes the 'gotten up girl' as follows: 'She is feeding her boyfriend before taking him home.'[35] How literally one is to understand this comment is open to debate. It may be the very ambiguity of this statement that is most revealing. There is little doubt what 'taking him home' refers to. What is meant by 'her boyfriend', however, is not entirely clear. She could be a prostitute, of course, in which case her 'boyfriend' is her 'John'. But, then again, perhaps he really is the boyfriend of this girl, decked out, as she is, for a night of festivity. The possibility also exists that she is an independent woman dressing in such a way as to muddle the social codes and explore modern and unconventional forms of sexuality.[36] Her identity remains elusive.

Kathy Peiss, in her book *Cheap Amusements*, has offered a compelling study of working-class sexuality. According to Peiss, 'It was in leisure that women played with identity, trying on new images and roles, appropriating the

32. Kinser, 'Prostitutes', pp. 242–3. Although it is a Massachusetts-based study, I agree with Kinser that it sheds light on the kind of relationship that could develop between prostitutes and Chinese restaurants in a broader context.

33. See Kinser, 'Prostitutes', for a relatively convincing and thorough argument for a reading of the women in these paintings as prostitutes. Gilfoyle too, in *City of Eros*, offers a good account of prostitution in the paintings and prints of the Ashcan School.

34. Rebecca Zurier and Robert Snyder, *Metropolitan Lives*, p. 187, have already made a step in this direction: 'The titles of some of Sloan's pictures identify prostitutes with particular locales (*Sixth Avenue and Thirtieth Street*; *Chinese Restaurant*), but such activity could not be isolated geographically; the fear was that prostitutes could no longer be differentiated from respectable people'.

35. Sloan quoted in Kinser, 'Prostitutes', p. 243.

36. This possibility of her being a modern woman playing with class and sexual codes is quite conceivable. The redefinition of gender roles, the questioning of sexual boundaries, the calling into question of monogamy and other of what seemed to be bourgeois ideals, and the attempted shifting of women's status in relation to that of their male peers were issues that Sloan was surely aware of, as they were among those being discussed by Sloan's circle of friends, including the staff of *The Masses* and his wife, Dolly Sloan.

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cultural forms around them – clothing, music, language – to push at the boundaries of immigrant, working-class life.'[37] She goes on to describe how a woman, in playing with her class identity, would make the visual signs of the prostitute her own. 'Working women's identification with the rich', she explains:

> seems to have been more playful and mediated than direct and calculated, as much a commentary on the rigors of working-class life as a plan for the future. . . . Indeed, imitation of 'ladies of leisure' might involve admiring the style of prostitutes as well as socialites. . . . In the promiscuous spaces of the streets, theaters, and dance halls, prostitutes provided a cultural model both fascinating and forbidden to other young working-class women. Tantalized by the fine dress, easy life, sexual expressiveness, and apparent independence, while carefully marking the boundary between the fallen and respectable, a working woman might appropriate parts of the prostitute's style as her own.[38]

Although Peiss claims that these women would still mark 'the boundary between the fallen and respectable', the issue of the appropriation and mixing of identities remains central. In addition to dress, in action, too, there were degrees to which a woman could be considered fallen. 'Charity girls', for example, did not accept money for sex and were officially, therefore, not prostitutes. What they did was known as 'treating', the offering of sexual favours and companionship in exchange for gifts such as food, clothing, rent, or a night out. Further muddling the lines between 'fallen and respectable' were the 'occasional prostitutes'. These women usually turned to the more lucrative business of prostitution only when wanting of money, because unemployed or otherwise.[39] Working-class women did not have a substantial income; it quite often just allowed for a subsistence life.[40] Therefore, if a woman who was between jobs fancied to spend an evening out or wished to purchase distinctive clothing, she had limited options: among them were penny-pinching, prostitution, and 'treating'. For these and other reasons, working-class sexuality often could not be limited to bourgeois moral standards. Working women, faced with normative sexual roles that did not seem to relate to their own lives, attempted to renegotiate their lifestyles and identities in a manner more befitting their circumstances.

The woman represented by Sloan in *Chinese Restaurant* must be understood in this context. The viewer cannot be certain of the identity of this woman with the extravagant hat and of her exact relation to her companion. She is obviously trying to be seen, making a display of herself by manipulating her appearances. She has put herself on the market as available and has been taken. But, has she been taken as a prostitute, as a commodity on display in a Chinese restaurant? Or, is she this man's easily distracted and socially promiscuous girlfriend playing with the restaurant's friendly cat and our cultural expectations? She *is* taking him home, but a fuller reconstruction of the narrative eludes our grasp even as its suggestiveness taunts us. Sloan's declarative realism, slyly turning on itself to bite its own tail, interrogates the new social realm with unanswerable but persistent questions.

Where one could assert that Weber has constructed a representation of a phenomenological freefall in which the stable materiality of the environment slips and shatters revealing not the hidden or deeper logic of the world but rather only its own broken image, one could argue that Sloan has left this image intact not because of its greater verity but rather because he seeks to explore slippages and discontinuities on the glistening surfaces of a realism in which the world still retains the semblance of identity, even if that identity is revoked at every turn by new and unstable social relations.[41]

37. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1986), pp. 62–3.

38. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, pp. 65–6.

39. Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, p. 110.

40. For more information on the specific working-class origins of prostitutes and a discussion of wages, see Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, p. 290.

41. This assertion is made in contradistinction to the discussion of the Ashcan School offered by H. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Park Curry, *American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885–1915* (Metropolitan Museum of Art: New York, 1994). These authors, for the most part, view the paintings of the Ashcan School as 'euphemistic' and not in any significant way distinctive from the paintings of the American impressionists.

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Felines: The Wildlife of Chinatown

Stuart Davis is best known as an artist who forged an American vernacular from the languages of European Modernism. He began, however, as a follower of Sloan and Robert Henri, as an Ashcan School realist and contributor to the Socialist journal *The Masses.* Amongst his representations during this period of jazz dives, performers, street scenes, and saloons, Davis produced images of Chinatown and the exteriors of Chinese restaurants including *Chinatown* of 1912 (Fig. 10), which will serve as the final case study.

In *Chinatown,* Davis depicts a solitary woman on a Chinatown street. Dark values predominate but are broken up by patches of vibrant colour. The building's façade, flat to the picture plane, facilitates Davis' production of a strongly organised composition stressing the constructive and geometric qualities of pictorial representation. Turning to the urban iconography of this image, one recognises many of the common motifs that we have already begun to associate with Chinatown. Davis depicts signage hung and pasted on the façade, as we saw more abstractly evoked in Stella's painting. Writing in a window reads 'PLEASU', a fragment of the word 'pleasure', but also possibly a verbal pun, a device Davis was fond of throughout his career, on 'please you'. Yet this pleasure, as we have come to expect of Chinatown, is one gained through slumming, through engagement with an unfamiliar, exotic, and not entirely safe environment, a site full of dark corners and niches and what must seem like exotic hieroglyphs scrawled on the walls. Scanning upward, one finds a prowling cat stealthily exploring the streets evoking the suspicion of omnipresent surveillance, but also the possibility of lurid pleasures.

It is no coincidence that a cat makes an appearance in Davis' *Chinatown.* Cats are a recurring motif in descriptions of Chinatown. We have already seen in Sloan's *Chinese Restaurant* a woman feeding table scraps to an attentive cat with one hand as her other hand is painted so as to resemble a cat's head with the outstretched finger serving as both an ear and as a visual signal to her companion. She feeds the cat, possibly as she will 'feed' her companion later. The roles become ambiguous as she too can be read as feline with her cat-like hand serving as a sign for herself as she taunts the man to 'feed' her. Or, perhaps her hand is being put forth for her companion, as her finger points out to us, thereby naming him the next cat to be fed. The relationship is complex, hard to fix, and possibly never intended to be stable. It *is* clear that a relationship is set up between the cat, the woman, and her companion, all orchestrated through the gestures of her hands. She has undoubtedly claimed a degree of social power for herself. This power is rendered formally through her placement within the most luminous part of the canvas below the complementary juxtaposition of red and green. Distinguished by her flamboyant red plume – rendered in the most conspicuous of tones – she almost looks as if enthroned, having for a moment overthrown patriarchal social relations to threaten the male viewer through the wielding of her sex. But, her challenge has already been objectified; her orchestration of the social space has in turn been pictorially orchestrated and rendered by a voyeuristic male painter who retains the ultimate power to fix social relations.

Returning to Davis' *Chinatown*, one is similarly struck by the puzzling relationship set up between a cat and, in this case, a woman standing on a sidewalk. As in Sloan's painting, the visual clues are highly suggestive but inconclusive. The woman, while on the sidewalk, does not appear to be in motion or engaged in any activity. She has perhaps paused along an evening stroll intrigued by something in the viewer's space. Or, more likely, she is a

Fig. 10. Stuart Davis, *Chinatown*, 1912, oil on canvas, 94 × 76.8 cm. Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

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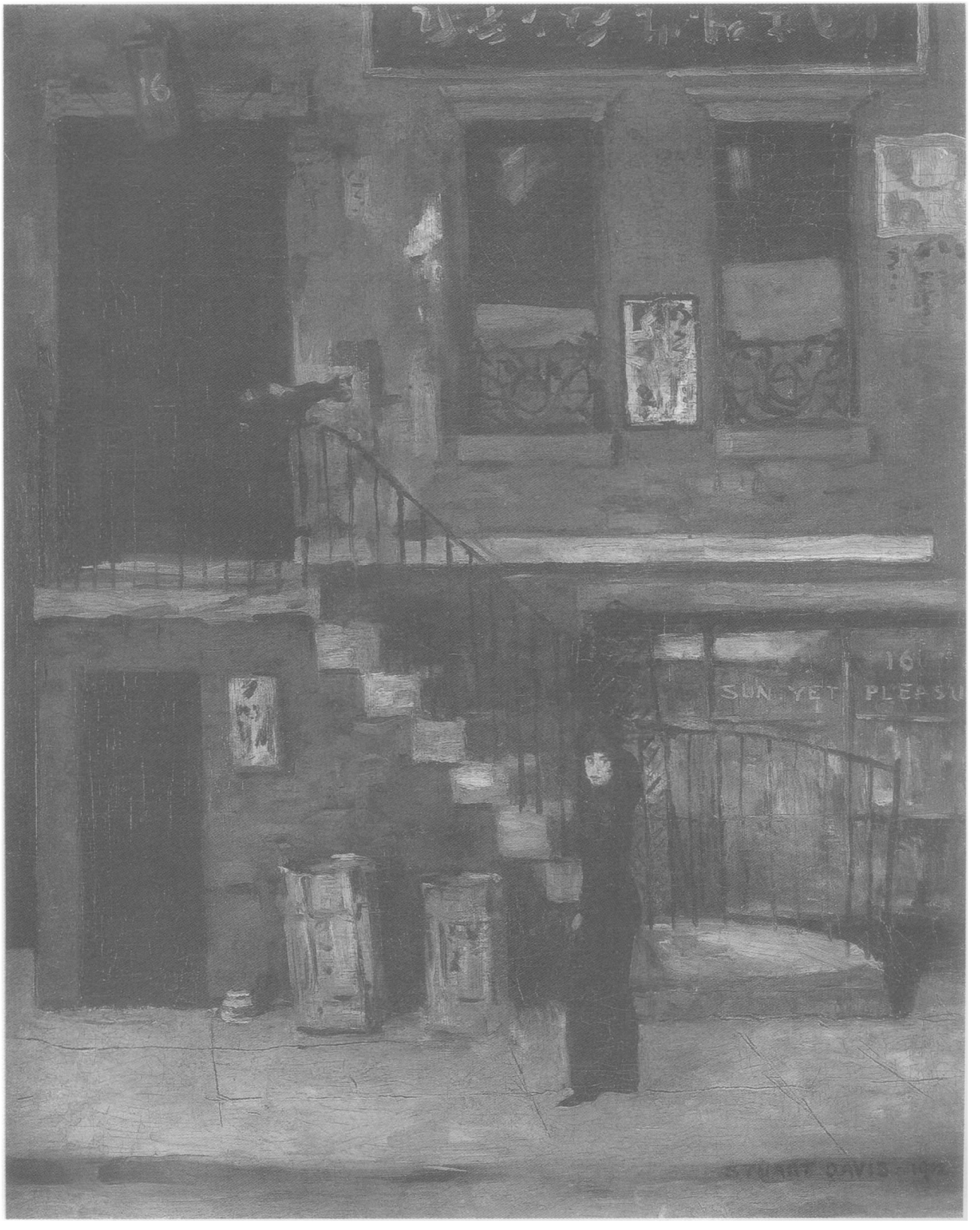

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prostitute waiting for a 'John' near the edge of the stairs, up which she will eventually lead him, into the forbiddingly dark doorway.[42] In this latter case, the presumed male viewer is the 'John', as her outward gaze indicates. The prostitute will give him 'pleasure' as Davis indicates through the well-placed fragment of the word in a window. Following the diagonal of the stairs, the strongest compositional element in the painting, particularly in light of the symbolic and psychological relationship it transcribes, one is led to ponder the connection between the cat at the top of the stairs and the woman at the bottom. Does the cat serve as a symbolic reflection of the woman, her slender black feline figure subtly rhyming the watchful sleek cat with its arched back? The answer is yes. But still, one cannot help but wonder if it is really that simple. Could the cat not also be standing in for her madam or pimp, possibly a member of a local tong? Or, perhaps the cat represents the absent male viewer/buyer. Again, as in Sloan's painting, multiple and sometimes conflicting readings of the cat's sexually symbolic role are available.

The stress I am placing on the importance of the feline presence in these paintings is not without contextual evidence. References to cats and to the feline characteristics of the Chinese people were common. As is still the case today, reference was already being made to cats, along with dogs and rats, as suspected of being eaten by the Chinese and served in their restaurants.[43] Furthermore, cats, as in John Sloan's painting and Mayer's illustration from *The Real New York*, were a commonly noted sight in Chinese restaurants. John Hubert Greusel in an 1893 article, 'Some Oddities of Chinatown', described such a cat: 'The odor of fuming cigarettes fills the air; an incessant babble prevails; every few moments you will see a Chinese pick up a bone or a bit of refuse food and deliberately send it flying under the table to the dirty floor! A greedy cat munches away under one of the tables.'[44] Some associations were subtler. A nineteenth-century illustration of Chinese immigrants taking English lessons depicts a standing woman holding a book and teaching a small group of Chinese men seated in front of her. On the blackboard are written the words 'cat' and 'rat'. Although these words are simple and easily learned, and therefore likely words to be found in an English lesson, the coincidence is too curious to write off as mere happenstance.[45]

Cats were not only associated with Chinatown and Chinese restaurants as having inhabited their spaces or being on the menu, but the Chinese people themselves were often rendered feline. Even in Weber's painting, in which so much detail has been obfuscated, some of the figures, however formally indebted to a Futurist language, may have elements of caricature assimilated into their form. With the rounded cheeks, the oddly shaped eyes, and the geometric forms above its head almost doubling as ears, the uppermost figure could be read as feline even if the suggestiveness of this caricature is subtle and easily lost within the Cubo-Futurist procession of lines.[46] An 1890s advertisement for rat poison (Fig. 11) portrays a Chinese man eating rats. In this case, feline associations may be implied about the Chinese man not because he looks feline but because, like a cat, he hunts and eats rats and other rodents. Furthermore, there exist cartoons from the late nineteenth century drawn in support of the Chinese Exclusion Act that embody the Chinese immigrant population by a creature that is a cross between a flying serpent and a feline (Fig. 12).

Hughes, in *The Real New York,* is quite clear in his use of this feline caricature:

42. Chinatown was notorious at this time as one of New York's neighbourhoods rampant with prostitutes. The population of Chinatown was predominantly male, due in large part to the Chinese Exclusion Act, which went into effect in 1882 and was not lifted until 1942. As such, Chinatown was an obvious place for prostitutes to find business. For the Chinese men, however, this was often a risky matter, as it could ruin one's reputation and business if caught. See Kinkead, *Portrait of a Closed Society*, p. 47; Bonner, *What Brought Thee Hither?*, p. 70; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, pp. 218–19.

43. Bonner, *What Brought Thee Hither?*, p. 56.

44. Mayer, *Once Upon a City*, p. 417.

45. This illustration is reproduced in Bonner, *What Brought Thee Hither?* Unfortunately, due to an incorrect reference, I have not been able to locate the original site of publication.

46. A colleague, Emily Gephart, first suggested this reading to me as a remote possibility during a visit to the Whitney Museum of American Art, where the painting now hangs.

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Fig. 11. *Rough on Rats*. Warshaw Collection of Business Americana—Insecticides, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

> Chinatown is a different world; the very silence of it has a foreign sound to one coming out of the boiler factory of Chatham Square. In Chinatown the citizens move tacitly on felt-soled shoes. And they have a foreign way of walking in the streets, which are almost as narrow as the narrow sidewalks, and go with such crooks and turns that one of them – Pell Street – describes a semicircle, and, with true Oriental politeness, eventually leads you right back to the street you just left.
>
> In Chinatown something sinister in the stealthy tread and prowling manner of these Celestial immigrants. Harmless soever as they may be, they suggest melodramas of opium dens and highbinders. You happen on them in dark hallways, or find them looking at you from strange crannies of ramshackle structures like night-blooming felines.[47]

Although direct reference to the feline character of the Chinese people is made only at the end of this passage, one cannot help but recognise the infusion of the entire passage with feline allusions. There is an uncanny resemblance between the 'stealthy tread and prowling' Chinese people's 'foreign way of walking' on felt-soled shoes and the carefully placed movements of a prowling cat. When he describes how they look at one from out of the dark one cannot help but visualise the hauntingly glowing eyes of a cat in the evening light, a cat about to pounce on an unsuspecting rat. Hughes further alludes to the felinity of the Chinese people in describing a Chinese theatre performance. He attempts to transcribe some of the words as he hears them: 'Kung! meow! sqawawak! gung dummilung yung! wow! brek-ek-ek-ex! coax! hullabaloo! skookum! meow! fstt! yung dummilung yung! wow!'.[48] Besides the obvious interest taken in the exotic sounds of a foreign language, it is significant that the feline 'meow' appears twice within this transcription.[49]

Jacob Riis too, in *How the Other Half Lives*, makes reference to the feline characteristics of the inhabitants of Chinatown. In this 'scientific' investigation of tenement life, Riis characterises the Chinese as feline not only in terms of their appearance, but also their personal character and habits. He states: 'Stealth and secretiveness are as much part of the Chinaman in New York as the cat-like tread of his felt shoes. His business, as his domestic life, shuns the

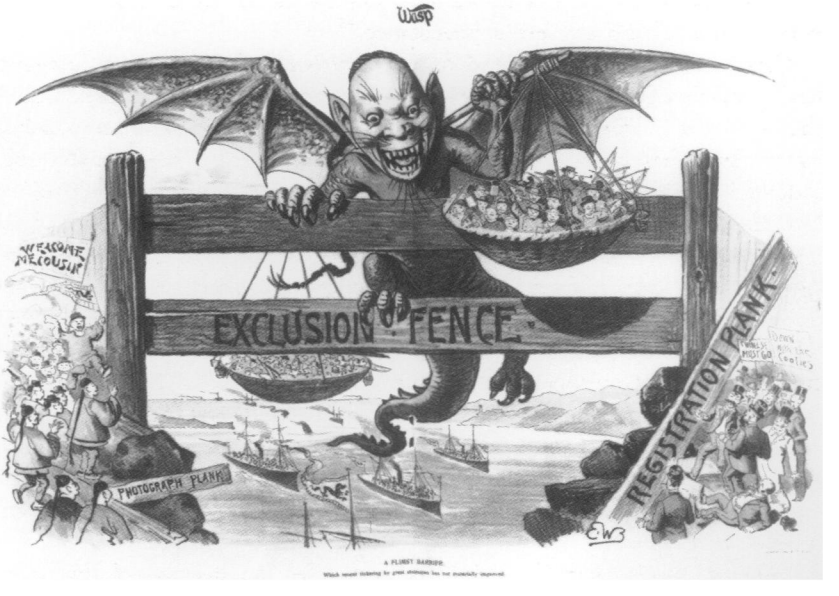

Fig. 12. *Exclusion Fence*, in *The Wasp*, 13 May 1893. (Photo: Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento.)

47. Hughes, *Real New York*, pp. 147–8.

48. Hughes, *Real New York*, p. 163.

49. According to Bonner, *What Brought Thee Hither?*, p. 91, tourists were not welcome to the theatres in the beginning. He describes one instance in which the actors left the stage and the orchestra continued to play alone as the audience shouted. A guide told the tourists that the audience was simply applauding the 'musical solo', although the truth was that the audience was angry; a notice was posted that the rest of the scene would be performed offstage because of the presence of tourists. One solution to this problem that theatres came up with was to have the orchestra hammer gongs and cymbals until the tourists were seated and then proceed to stage a violent and loud fight as actors 'emitted squeals of hate and whirled and fenced', until finally one character would die. I mention this description of events in order to suggest the character of the experience that may have been had by tourists and the extent to which it may have been staged particularly for – or, in this case, against – them.

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light, less because there is anything to conceal than because that is the way of the man.'[50] He continues:

> One thing about them was conspicuous: their scrupulous neatness. It is the distinguishing mark of Chinatown, outwardly and physically. It is not altogether by chance the Chinaman has chosen the laundry as his distinctive field. He is by nature as clean as the cat, which he resembles in his traits of cruel cunning and savage fury when aroused.[51]

Central to my discussion of the paintings of Sloan and Davis is gender. The reader may be wondering whether this issue has somehow been lost sight of in my discussion of cats. Within the history of art, associations between cats and female sexuality – 'pussy' – is not uncommon; Manet's *Olympia* immediately comes to mind. Davis and Sloan were surely aware of these associations. However, the previous discussion of the ways in which Chinese were rendered feline must be kept in mind, particularly in so far as the overwhelming majority of Chinese in Chinatown were men; it was known as a 'bachelors' ghetto'. Indeed, it is Chinese *men* who are rendered feline, as a perusal of the previous references makes clear. If my previous discussions of Sloan's *Chinese Restaurant* and Davis' *Chinatown* seemed unnecessarily conflicted, that I had over-emphasised the difficulty in coming to a reading of these images, I believe that the ambivalently gendered role of the cat at the confluence of ethnic caricature and the history of art begins to shed light on this lack of resolution. The cat must be read as feminine, even as it is read as a caricature of Chinese men.[52] Through their associations with cats, and hence femininity, Chinese men suffered identity loss and emasculation. They lost social power, yielded their status in a society dominated by white males. Chinese men were caught in a series of gendered binary oppositions in which they had no place.[53] The representation of cats, therefore, is just one of the ways in which these artists symbolically reproduced power relations and ethnic typologies which may not immediately be apparent to today's viewer.

By placing these images in the broad cultural context of tourism and urban spectacle, I gain not only greater interpretive grounding, but also a perspective from which to discover the ways in which these artists participated in the touristic construction of Chinatown and the cultural transformation of New York into a region of entertainment and visual pleasure. Chinatown and the Chinese restaurant offer an avenue into the intersection of artistic production and cultural identity in an emerging consumer economy. Tourism and leisure activities were becoming important arenas not only of passive diversion, but also of active struggles over representation, over how one understood increasingly unstable social relations. Identity, gender, the body, vision: these are all contested and reconfigured in this context. Fixity is lost. Signification itself becomes increasingly defined by the absence of a stable referent. The artists discussed in this essay represented the modern urban experience through multiple pictorial strategies in which they not only attempted to affix meaning, but also to represent, in varying degrees, the elusiveness of cultural signification manifested in both painting and urban culture.

50. Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890; Dover Publications; New York, 1971), p. 78.

51. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, p. 80.

52. Lending further support to this thesis is Konrad Bercovici's description in *Around the World in New York*, p. 109, of the way that the Chinese walk on felt slippers. Instead of comparing their walk to feline prowling, as did the authors cited above, he refers to it as an 'effeminate gait'.

53. James Moy, *Marginal Sights*, p. 36, describes the roles open to Chinese Americans as 'the sexually available Asian woman and the sexually neutralized male'. He notes that Asian men had been erased from the photographic history of heroic male activities such as the completion of the transcontinental railroad, something he understands as related to their perceived threat to white labour (p. 49). Furthermore, their androgyny was played upon in popular culture. Chinese men were still being used at the turn of the century to play female theatre parts. Westerners picked up on this tradition as an easy target, using it to illustrate what they perceived as a lack of differentiation between the sexes (p. 59).

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