

Observations from Nature and History

Subject: Visual Arts / History

Grade Level: Grades 6-12

Guided Instruction (To be self-directed, or with teacher, parent, caregiver, older sibling, etc.)

The last large global health pandemic was the Spanish Flu, which spread across the world in waves in 1918, just over 100 years ago. Recently, medical experts have begun looking back at what happened during that pandemic to help us figure out how best to manage this outbreak. Artists and art historians have also been looking at work created during this era, for knowledge about how people responded to what was happening in their world.

View the painting *Roses and Rock* painted in the summer of 1918 by the American artist John Sloan on page 2 or online here: <https://bit.ly/3dkwBdW>.

This painting is one of a few works of art in the Nasher Museum of Art's collection from 1918. The artist, John Sloan, was a founding member of the Ashcan School, which was a group of artists known for making paintings of gritty urban scenes in New York City. *Roses and Rock* was painted while he was visiting the small coastal town of Gloucester Massachusetts, perhaps to distance himself from the outbreak of Spanish Flu occurring in New York City.

Discuss:

- What is going on in this painting?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- Why might the Spanish Flu have influenced John Sloan to make this painting?

Practice

Spend some time outside observing nature, away from people, and look for elements of nature that grab your attention. Look carefully, and ask yourself what makes this particular element (rock, tree, flower, bird, etc.) stand out from all of the other things you can see.

1. If you have art making materials available to you, consider making a sketch, drawing, or painting of the scene. Do you notice more details the longer you look at the scene?
2. You might also consider taking a series of photographs of the scene using a smart phone or tablet computer. Try to take images from different angles, up close, far away, in black and white and in color. How do these changes affect the way the scene looks?
3. Is there anything about the nature scene that speaks to our current situation? Why or why not?
4. Was there anything in John Sloan's painting that seems to address the Spanish Flu of 1918?



John Sloan, *Roses and Rock*, 1918. Oil on canvas, 15 5/8 x 19 1/2 inches (39.7 x 49.5 cm): Frame: 20 3/8 x 24 1/4 x 1 5/8 inches (51.8 x 61.6 x 4.1cm). Collection of the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, USA. Gift of Mary and Harry L. Dalton. 1975.51.1

Label Text:

This work was painted in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where John Sloan spent his summers and was known to have concentrated on landscapes. It represents a shift in Sloan's painting, from a focus on gritty urban scenes to compositions focused on formal elements like line, color, shape and balance. In this work, as in his other landscapes of Gloucester from 1914 to 1918, Sloan was experimenting with the color theory of Hardesty Maratta (1864-1924). Maratta, an artist and paint manufacturer, produced sets of pigments termed the "Maratta Scales": twenty-four hues based on primary, secondary, and tertiary colors that corresponded to the twenty-four chords of a piano.