In the early 1900s, a group of American artists advocated a “democratic art” in which everyday lives of ordinary people in urban settings were depicted in an honest and straightforward manner. The artists’ philosophy developed in response to the social, political, and artistic climate of the time. By the beginning of the century, half of all Americans were living in cities (versus one in ten Americans in 1830); in addition, the reforms initiated by Theodore Roosevelt in his second term as president (1904 - 08) gave rise to an awareness in the country of the plight of the common man. Finally, the artists rebelled against the light and airy themes of Impressionism, very popular in the early 1900s, as well as the conservative teaching and artistic guidelines of the National Academy of Design. The Academy was established in New York in 1825 as the premier institution for the education and promotion of fine art.

The American group of artists came to be known as “The Eight” or, in reference to their depictions of back-alley life of the working class, the “Ashcan school.” Led by Robert Henri (1865 - 1929), the group included George Luks, William Glackens, Everett Shinn, Maurice Prendergast, Ernest Lawson, Arthur B. Davies, and John Sloan. Sloan,
like many other artists in the group, began his career as a newspaper illustrator. He began painting seriously in 1897, when he and Henri shared a studio in New York. Encouraged by Henri to "make pictures from life", Sloan began in 1904 to observe the everyday drama of the city, strolling the streets endlessly and, in his own words, being an "incorrigible window watcher." He sketched on the spot, as well as kept a diary, using both sources in executing the final works in his studio. Sloan's favorite haunts included New York's lower East Side, the West Side below 14th Street, and the Bowery. He found subjects in people crossing streets, seated in cafes, and, in the case of this etching, sleeping on the roof of an apartment building. *Roof, Summer Night* is at once harsh and charming; the heat of the summer evening and economic hardship are softened by the roof dwellers' resourcefulness and acceptance of the situation. The scene is both commonplace and romantic.

Sloan was the most political of the Ashcan school, joining the Socialist party in 1909 and running as the party's candidate for the New York State Assembly that same year. In 1912, he became the art editor of the left-wing news journal, *The Masses*. Sloan's art, however, reveals little of his convictions; he tried to keep his art and his politics quite separate. What emerges in his work is a humanist vision of democracy, similar in spirit to the poetry of Walt Whitman which Sloan read and admired greatly. Mr
QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

1. In 1905, Sloan etched his *New York City Life* series, ten scenes of middle-class life that are similar in subject and style to *Roof*, *Summer Night*. He could not find a single buyer. In 1906, when he submitted the etchings to an exhibition at the National Academy of Design, four were rejected as “vulgar” and “tainted.”

Have students research the reaction by the American public and art world to work produced by the Ashcan school. How did these paintings differ from the work espoused by the Academy? How long-lived was the school and what was its impact?

2. Etching is described in “Printmaking Processes” in the section of this guide marked “Sample Lessons”. Explain the process to your students and ask them to look at *Roof, Summer Night* with their new knowledge. Do the darkest areas of the print indicate a minimum or a maximum amount of drawing on Sloan’s part? Have them examine the variety of lines and the range of dark and light that are possible with etching.

3. Sloan began his career as a newspaper illustrator and cartoonist. Have students study *Roof, Summer Night*; what evidence do they see of Sloan’s talent and background in this type of work? Discuss.

4. See “Realism and Idealism” and “Sights and Sounds of the City” in “Sample Lessons” section.