

An Americana of Tools and Manners Eric Sloane's Nostalgia



The prolific painter and illustrator of early Americana Eric Sloane was born Everard Hinrichs—a name that was reminiscent of a different slice of early America than the New England that he so fervently embraced. Although Sloane's paintings are still actively collected, and enthusiasts of early American culture are familiar with his books, he has been the subject of very little scholarly attention. Yet no visual artist of the second half of the twentieth century had a larger impact on how we envision the material life of early America. His nostalgic representations of the American past are so familiar that few people today know who created them, or why.

Born in New York City in 1905, Sloane studied art and calligraphy, and for a time was a student at the Art Students League of New York, where he met the painter John Sloan, whose name he would later borrow. But his first name he took from the middle letters of what would become his sole object of artistic fascination: AMERICa.

Eric Sloane spent years leaving his mark on the American landscape before he took up his calling to study the traces of others. He traveled as a sign painter first, lettering everything from mailboxes to advertisements to planes at Floyd Bennett Field, New York City's first municipal airport. He painted on

barns and on taverns, intentionally traveling to locales that most needed someone with his outdated calling. He traveled to places, like the Pennsylvania Amish country, that were assertively resisting change, and he grew fond of them. In that region of the country he adopted the German Blackletter style of writing, which even then was seen as old-fashioned. In his book *Recollections in Black and White*, he expressed regret over the generations of folk art collectors who, when they found works signed by "Herr Everard Hinrichs," believed themselves to have stumbled upon an example of true Amish craftsmanship. It was on these sign painting expeditions, as he was scattering his drawings and text from Vermont to Taos, that he first grew fascinated by the structures that would provide fodder for his art and writings for the remainder of his long career: barns, covered bridges, and any building or mode of construction that signaled a connection to a vanished agrarian past. By the end of his life, he had written 38 books, produced over 15,000 paintings, amassed a giant collection of antique tools, built a barn according to instructions he found in the diary of a nineteenth-century boy, and settled by an abandoned pig iron furnace in Connecticut. Although in a number of ways the pervasive nostalgia of Eric Sloane's writings is as problematic as his spurious *fraktur* work, a broad view of his life and art reveals a man who single-handedly invented an entire taxonomy for representing the history and built environment of early America.

Both stylistically and thematically, Sloane's most obvious precursor might be Daniel Carter Beard, one of the founding members of the Boy Scouts of America and the author of such manuals as *The American Boy's Handy Book* (1882) and *The Field and Forest Handy Book* (1906). Both authors exploit the form of the diagram for more than purely instructional purposes. The diagram becomes an illustration of the virtue of making something the old-fashioned way, and thus the right way. Beard helped create a "cult of the pioneer," a form of American nostalgia that many readers found more acceptable than nostalgic images of Native Americans of the "noble savage" school, which tended to offer a history too divorced from the European tradition. Sloane, like Beard, created a generalized pioneer ancestor whose self-sufficient ways he wanted his readers to both admire and emulate. Sloane's target audience, however, was not children, who according to Beard led modern lives that were sorely in need of virtuous outdoor activity, but instead midcentury adults seeking a nostalgic connection to the past. His books—the best known of which include *A Reverence for Wood* (a celebration of hand tools and traditional woodworking, published in 1965), *Once Upon a Time: The Way America Was* (1982), and *Diary of an Early American Boy* (1962)—praised early Americans' expertise and self-sufficiency, but also acted as pleas for the preservation of material culture (and an aesthetic embrace of its pleasing decay). A desire to keep the trappings of this yeoman history close at hand and to appreciate and understand even the most obscure customs permeated all his work.

Following an early series of books that focused on depicting weather, with *Our Vanishing Landscape*, published in 1955, Sloane embarked on a career rooted in a full embrace of early American (and primarily New England) history and material

culture. These publications helped set the stage for many of the celebrations of the U.S. bicentennial in 1976—celebrations that were full of reenactments, historical restorations, and nostalgia (whereas the centennial celebrations a century earlier had been primarily focused on progress). The celebration of the bicentennial in the United States was marked by its disparate nature. Unlike the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the bicentennial had no central fair. Instead, the country exploded with local festivals, many of them emphasizing an antic or “old timey” quaintness. Much of the material culture that accompanied the bicentennial focused on artifacts of the colonial period, stripped of their classical symbolism and replaced with more ephemeral signifiers. The founding fathers were far less likely to be represented as marble busts, as they were on the centennial stock certificate; instead, the visual emphasis of bicentennial depictions often fell on the novelty of their breeches and buckles, and the ruffled cap of Betsy Ross. Popular housewares companies, from Pyrex bakeware to Kay Dee dish towels, featured motifs that were not depictions of colonial events or patriotic symbols, but instead drew from catalogues of antiquated objects. The items that frequently appeared in the “early American” motifs that adorned bicentennial-era consumer goods ranged from weathervanes, to bed warmers, to grinders, to oil lamps, to flame bellows. Patterns like these created graphic “curio cabinets” of early Americana that were heavily indebted to the works of Eric Sloane, and offered ways of displaying the trappings of the picturesque past without being burdened by them. These types of motifs, though, were stripped not just of context, but of text. Here the tendency diverged from Sloane’s intentions, as such objects took on the popular form of ephemera rather than artifact.



1. United States Centennial Exhibition 1776-1876 Certificate of Capital Stock issued by the Centennial Board of Finance, p. 30 of Frank Leslie’s Historical Register of the United States Centennial Exposition, 1876:..., Frank Leslie’s Publishing House (New York, 1877). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

While Sloane did not approve of the vast commercial opportunism of the bicentennial, as he complained in his 1973 text *The Spirits of '76*, he had already spent decades publishing books that claimed that there was greatness to be found in the lost artifacts and attitudes of America's past. Sloane's decoding of American artifacts, of ancestral works and ways, was so deeply rooted in patriotism that, as noted above, he chose the first name Eric because it was contained in the very word America. But Sloane's embrace of the past ran counter to a stream of thought that was prominent from the beginning of European settlement in North America, one that held that the "New World" represented an opportunity to turn away from the past, and from the ruins and relics of Europe in particular. Alexis de Tocqueville praised America for the newness and spirit of reinvention that each new generation possessed. Europe was seen as a collection of societies in decline, while the new nation's ascent was unencumbered by the past. While nostalgia was certainly present, many people were criticized for building their houses in "Old World" styles, even for "embalming the founding fathers in Greek garb." As is by now familiar, early American thinkers like Jefferson and Charles Willson Peale advocated for a transcendent view of the past that could be found in the sublimity of landscape and the enormity of New World natural history.

The centennial celebration in Philadelphia took place without any historical display, and instead focused on the fact that Ulysses Grant's America was "bigger, richer and stronger than Washington's." The refrain of John Greenleaf Whittier's "Centennial Hymn" ended with the lines: "And cast in some diviner mould, / Let the new cycle shame the old." In fact, the centennial celebration was much more another world's fair among a string of world's fairs than it was in any sense a celebration that was local or particular to Philadelphia or even to the United States. In Frank Leslie's *Historical Register of the United States Centennial Exposition*, a contemporary catalogue of the grounds and displays, the first quarter of the text is devoted to a history of fairs throughout the world, followed by detailed entries and engravings describing and depicting all of the nineteenth century's various world's fairs. The United States had plenty of opponents of the centennial celebration—Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts argued that it would not be worth having because no foreign monarch would agree to participate in a celebration of a revolution. In 1871, Congress agreed that the country would hold a celebration to mark the nation's declaration of independence and in the act that they passed referred to it as an "international exhibition of the arts, manufactures and products of the soil and mine." After Congress created the Centennial Board of Finance in 1872 to raise money for the exhibition, even the image on the certificate for the \$10 shares featured at its top people of the world paying homage to the goddess Liberty, while below were smaller figures representing industry and exploration in contemporary America. Figures from early American history play several peripheral roles: some are ghostly essences faint in the background, some take the form of classical busts at the feet of living figures, while the signers of the Declaration of Independence are hemmed into a boxed tableau looking more like a seal or coat of arms than a living history.

The Centennial Exposition's linkage of the Declaration of Independence with material and technological progress ran counter to Sloane's every instinct. In Sloane's 1966 book *The Sound of Bells*, he complained about modern celebrations of Independence Day, and the loss of an old tradition—the ringing of bells to celebrate the Fourth of July. He dedicated his book to the cause of reviving the original Independence Day tradition of ringing bells rather than setting off fireworks. In the postscript, he wrote, “And if the revival of the early American custom of ringing bells on Independence Day will have become established, I would consider this one thing the most important occurrence connected with my life.” This comes from someone who served in the Air Force, illustrated manuals for pilots, and painted the great mural in the foyer of the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum, and had by this point already published more than a dozen books. *The Sound of Bells* was not the only book he wrote that served as a plea for the preservation of past relics. For example, in *Mr. Daniels and the Grange* (1968), Sloane wrote about the state of disrepair into which Alexander Hamilton's house in upper Manhattan had fallen. He described the neighborhood (where he grew up), the house and its history, and the caretaker, who had the power to do little but cohabit with ghosts. A contemporary reviewer in the 1971 issue of *Forest History* complained of Sloane's tendency towards quaintness, not just for reasons of taste but because of its likely inefficiency. The review's author believed that such a presentation would turn off those developers, officials, and preservationists who would be in a position to save the Grange.



2. “Reverence for Wood,” photograph of a display at the Sloane-Stanley Museum. Courtesy of the Eric Sloane Estate and Museum, Kent, Connecticut.



3. “Eric Sloane and Grain Shovels,” photograph of a display at the Sloane-Stanley Museum. Courtesy of the Eric Sloane Estate and Museum, Kent, Connecticut.

In his art and writing, Sloane was unabashedly whimsical, a quality that allows many readers to delight unquestioningly in his praise of the past and twee trivia. Yet Sloane is without doubt also guilty of all of the negative caprice that the term “whimsy” connotes. In a 1984 letter to the editors of the Smithsonian's *Archives of American Art Journal*, Sloane wrote both to compliment an article on John Singer Sargent and to rail against another on Marcel Duchamp. After reminding the editor that he is both an admirer of and a contributor to the Smithsonian's collection, he asserted, “I am sure Sargent would cringe knowing his work was classed within the same pages featuring a man's urinal and bicycle wheel. I feel sad that such bad taste is kept alive by such as the otherwise beautiful Smithsonian and hope history will start honoring sanity by forgetting insanity.” These lines demonstrate not just Sloane's general rejection of the modern, but also his tendency to make himself

a mouthpiece for the people of the past. The books in which Sloane focused more on antique customs and attitudes than on antique structures and tools are perhaps his ugliest pieces of work. In books like *American Yesterday* (1956), *Our Vanishing Landscape* (1955), or *The Do's and Don'ts of Yesteryear* (1972), the shrill tone of his letter to the Smithsonian comes through. In *The Little Red Schoolhouse* (1972), no sooner does he move on from interesting chapters about these buildings and their interiors than readers find him tangled in a series of easy justifications and dismissals: of corporal punishment, creeping liberalism, and separation of church and state.

Much like an ethnographic historian, Sloane relied on the contradictory beliefs that a particular culture was rapidly and inevitably disappearing, and that reliable sources could be gathered about it. Salvage ethnography—or here perhaps rescue archaeology—is a form of whimsy in its own right, in that it requires a suspension of disbelief, a faith in vision or project over method.

Sloane's oeuvre is without question problematic, yet his best work has an undeniable appeal. *A Reverence for Wood* (1965) and *A Museum of Early American Tools* (1964) both have drawn innumerable readers to the study of early Americana. In a recent conversation, Gregory Landrey, a director and furniture expert at Delaware's Winterthur Museum and Library, told me that when he was eleven, *A Reverence for Wood* changed his life. Typography designer Dave Nalle has not only designed a number of fonts around Sloane's book lettering, he also calls *A Reverence for Wood* "remarkable and almost mystical." It is one of those unclassifiable classics with a bit of a cult following among lovers of popular histories, those who work with wood, and those who embrace bygone things, from barns to bells to introspection. Sloane's work is nearly ubiquitous, yet the sum of his legacy remains in many ways unknown and unexplored. He was an artist who was resolutely unfashionable, yet his importance in shaping how generations of readers thought about what early America looked like must be acknowledged—he is the Norman Rockwell of things, of technology and industry. Like Rockwell, he embraced certain specific modes of nostalgia long before the public did. Rockwell might have seen the soda fountain's connection to town squares and meeting houses, but Sloane praised a barn door and fashioned it into his kitchen table long before the current mania for reclaimed woods took hold. Sloane's work is plagued by a too-fixed backwards stare, but it is not clear that this is the same as blind nostalgia. His work is full of material that is clear-sighted and powerful enough to salvage his reputation from sentimentality.



4. Kay Dee dish towel. Photograph courtesy of the author.

One of the most remarkable things about Eric Sloane's work across genres is its consistency of vision. In the Sloane-Stanley Museum in Kent, Connecticut—a

museum featuring Sloane's artwork and his collection of early American hand tools, which is housed in a building built to mark the 125th anniversary of the Stanley Tool company—a visitor is immediately struck by the exactitude with which Sloane's displays resemble his books in layout and presentation. The entryway is a passage full of diagrammatic drawings brought to life with light. Little red bulbs are staggered in their igniting behind a piece of plexiglas that represents a iron furnace. In the section of the museum dedicated to the display of tools, every scrap of text is printed in a font identical to the one that Sloane used for the headings and captions of his books. In clusters where the crowded tools become confusing, little wire arrows carefully point from title to referent, just as sketched arrows do on the page. From book to book, Sloane's style was unchanging. In his late work *Recollections in Black and White* (1974), he expressed regret about the time he devoted to color illustrations; this preference even takes on a moral tone when he writes "the coloured painting is meant to deceive the eye, but black ink cannot." This is no revisionist interpretation of his career, nor is it the rueful realization of an old man. The inspiration for the book lay in his discovery of an old art school project titled "A Manuscript for Shapes in Black and White." He writes that his first venture away from home as a sign painter was an excuse to use up some batches of black ink and white paint that he had mixed but was unable to sell. In this early work he argues against the outlining of sketches, favoring the method of shading basic shapes first to assemble an image. The book became a paean to the pen and ink drawing, to the black and white image. If the well-hewn tool or the efficiently designed barn stood for the lost virtues of an imagined American past, then the simply rendered illustration and its informative captioning were media that he saw as valuable correctives to the changed cultural landscape of mid-century America.

In addition to its visual nostalgia, Sloane's writing also works to create memory of lost bodies of knowledge through what often seems to be brazen repetition of material. While this is a natural product of his prolific writing and the narrow scope of his studies, the number of times specific facts come up across his works is surprising. Because it is stated in at least four of his books, readers are given the impression of great certainty that it was the responsibility of the "snow warden" to sweep and pack fresh snow onto the roadbeds of covered bridges in order to ensure that sleighs could cross the bridges in the winter. This debunking of the snow-shielding purpose of the covered bridge is not the only tidbit that appears multiple times throughout Sloane's work—some of his books are thinly restated versions of each other. His bibliography includes *The Weather Book* (1952), *Look at the Sky and Tell the Weather* (1970), and *The Folklore of American Weather* (1963), all three of which have understandable areas of overlap. His oeuvre includes *American Barns and Covered Bridges*, *An Age of Barns*, and *A Reverence for Wood*, again sharing many of their most interesting pieces of material. Upon broad reading of Sloane's works, such repetition can be frustrating, but these redundancies have a deeper impact. Arcane facts which were at first odd pieces of ephemera to be noted and forgotten become through the sheer act of repetition fixed more permanently in the reader's mind. Previously obscure and trivial rules of life become

established as the foundational and essential knowledge that they were to those who lived by them. While this mnemonic property may not necessarily have been Sloane's intention, it certainly worked to fulfill his vision in the sense that it served to elevate bits of information from the status of obscure and quaint to important evidence of the way people lived in early America. Rather than stripping artifacts of their context, Sloane went to lengths to over-contextualize the things about which he wrote. We see this phenomenon not only in his writing, but in his style of living. When he read an early American diary of a boy building a barn, he not only illustrated it for his *Diary of an Early American Boy*, he followed the directions he found there and built his own barn.

Yet Sloane's better works achieve their transcendence not through detailed descriptions of plows and planes, nor from painstaking recreations of early American work practices, but through their description of natural phenomena: the skies and the weather. When comparing the attitudes of Americans celebrating the bicentennial to those who observed the centennial, David Lowenthal writes, "That Nature is America's greatest architect is perhaps the only proposition with which Americans would still concur." When one takes a step back from Sloane's work as a whole, one finds that in all his writing, he has respect first and foremost for any artifacts or practices that are designed to cooperate with the weather. Even when he does not write directly about the weather, it is a force that is never absent from his descriptions of buildings, travel, or customs. One of the things that he admired most about old barns and old houses was the "air plot" or the "atmospheric acreage" on which they were built, and the expertise with which people chose the sites for their structures. He writes: "the fact that many old barns still stand is a tribute to the pioneers who built them. You can usually remodel an old barn into a pleasant and comfortable home, but not even livestock could live well in some of our modern homes if they were remodeled into barns ... a house is built not so much upon a piece of land as it is built upward into a section of the atmosphere." His oeuvre, for all its cranky rejections of modern life, strives to demonstrate the ongoing interaction between the natural world and the built environment. If Eric Sloane was able to find the timelessness he longed for by looking at the blank slate of the sky, he made it his project to translate that exhilaration into his crisp, clean sketches. There is every reason to believe that his work will endure for us as one very carefully scrubbed bit of bottle-glass window into a bygone era.



5. Early American textile. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Further Reading

For examples of Sloane's narrative archives, see his *A Reverence for Wood* (1965), *A Museum of Early American Tools* (1973), and *The Sound of Bells* (1966), all three of which are re-issued by Dover. For information on his life, the Sloane Stanley Museum in Kent, Connecticut, is a good place to look, along with *Recollections in Black and White* (1974) and *Eighty: An American Souvenir* (1985). For more on the distinctions between the centennial and the bicentennial celebrations, refer to David Lowenthal's "The Bicentennial Landscape: A Mirror Held to the Past," *The Geographical Review* 67.3 (1977) as well as *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985). For more reading on the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, see John Maas' *The Glorious Enterprise: The Centennial Exhibition of 1876 and H. J. Schwarzmann, Architect-in-Chief*. (New York, 1973) as well as the contemporary catalogues *Frank Leslie's Historical Register of the United States Centennial Exposition* (New York, 1877) and James McCabe's *The Illustrated History of the Centennial Exhibition* (Philadelphia, 1876). Finally, for information on Daniel Carter Beard and the creation of a generalized and idealized pioneer ancestor, see Philip Deloria's *Playing Indian* (New Haven, Conn., 1998).

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