



Guy Pène du Bois
American, 1884 - 1958

La Rue de la Santé

1928

oil on canvas

overall: 92 x 73.3 cm (36 1/4 x 28 7/8 in.)

framed: 100.3 x 81.9 cm (39 1/2 x 32 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Guy Pene du Boi[s] / 192[8?]

Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.139

ENTRY

La Rue de la Santé was executed during Pène du Bois's lengthy stay in France from 1924 to 1929. Its dimensions are considerably larger than usual for the artist, a feature shared by many of the works that he painted at his studio in Garnes, a town about 40 kilometers from Paris. Like *Café du Dôme*, the painting represents a characteristic aspect of Parisian street life.

In his monograph on the artist, Royal Cortissoz singled out *La Rue de la Santé* for discussion because he thought it exemplified Pène du Bois's "flair for character." Describing it as "a picture in which a young man and a young woman stand talking together near a street lamp, in inclement weather," he continued:

The issue between the two is not apparent. There is no drama to be surmised. Here is no "painted anecdote." But for the life of me I cannot withhold my interest from whatever the talkers are discussing. The air of Parisian life is about them. What they are doing may be of no serious import whatever but these people are themselves, two significant creatures out of the great human spectacle. They are emphatically not examples of that wearisome phase of modern art, the phase which reduces men and women to the common denominator of still life. The man has personality and so has the woman. Their encounter may not be momentous but neither can it be quite purposeless. [1]

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

Probably for the sake of propriety Cortissoz refrained from saying the obvious, namely that the context of this shadowy evening encounter on a rainy Parisian street is in all likelihood a prostitute negotiating with a potential client.

The heavily made-up, robust woman stands at a street corner in the center of the composition facing the viewer and speaks to a man who stands at her left side. The impression that they are negotiating an illicit transaction is enhanced by the gloomy nocturnal ambience and their position in the shadows cast by the two street lamps at the upper left. Visible in a pentimento, the artist had initially intended to imply a more intimate relationship between the two figures by representing the man with his arm around the woman. The woman's assertive pose, with her hands on her hips, had previously been used by other artists in images of prostitutes. [2] Here it imbues her with a brazen quality that contrasts with the man's slightly bent form. A solitary pedestrian is visible in the distant left background.

The artist set the scene in a bleak neighborhood. Located in the 14th arrondissement on the Left Bank of the Seine in Montparnasse, La Rue de la Santé is named after the Sainte-Anne hospital, which became a psychiatric hospital in 1867. The tall wall in the background of this painting belongs to La Santé prison, one of the most infamous jails in France, which was built in 1867. Public executions by guillotine were held near the prison's main entrance at the intersection of La Rue de la Santé and Boulevard Arago from 1909 until the practice was banned in 1939. [3]

Depicting difficult, taboo subjects was part and parcel of the realistic aesthetic espoused by Pène du Bois's teacher Robert Henri (American, 1865 - 1929) and other members of The Eight. Pène du Bois had dealt with the theme of prostitution at the outset of his journalistic career, when his first assignment as a fledgling reporter for the *New York American* had been to cover the Tenderloin Police Station, located in the center of New York's red-light district. This was the same area that John Sloan (American, 1871 - 1951) had featured in his paintings depicting New York's commercial sex industry, two of which Pène du Bois illustrated in his book on Sloan. [4] In his autobiography Pène du Bois reminisced about a 1906 sketch in which he had "recorded the Tenderloin girls in large plumed hats and bedraggled fineries standing limply or defiantly before the police lieutenant's bar." The artist continued:

These pictures, with a few exceptions, were rarely if ever shown. They gave my mother many unhappy moments. She was very far from being a prude but could believe, when off guard, that beauty, by a curious confusion of issues, must pay heed to proprieties. A canvas of that period, although finished somewhat later, showing two of these girls standing among lawyers or bondsmen in the entrance of the old Jefferson Market Police Court, is now owned by the Newark Museum. Its title, was far more definite originally, has now been disarmingly changed to “Lobby.” I write this in justification of my mother’s qualms. [5]

La Rue de la Santé and Pène du Bois’s other depictions of prostitution present their theme in a matter-of-fact manner devoid of moralizing. Illuminating the nocturnal shadow world of modern urban society, these works are comparable to the photographs of Parisian street life by Eugène Atget (French, 1857 - 1927) from the early 1920s and anticipate slightly later images by Brassai (French, born Transylvania, 1899 - 1984) that were published in *Paris de nuit* (1933). [6]

A confirmed Francophile, Pène du Bois attributed his predilection for such subjects to his affinity for French culture. In his autobiography he equated the American national character with Puritanism and complained how through “the Puritan habit of denying and disguising facts, a people can become blind to the marks that life leaves upon its own kind,” and railed against “the moral and sentimental fictions of a smug or cowardly middle class.” [7] He later digressed on how the Anglo-Saxon American strain of Puritanism “is more at home in a fictitious than in a real world.” He compared the average American to the more urbane Frenchman, who “meets life on its own terms” and for whom “morality is a matter of efficiency.” Pène du Bois agreed with those who called him a “Frenchman living in America,” and admired what he perceived as the more worldly French character:

It may be that I have grown up enough to prefer life to the child’s fairy tale by which one escapes from it. Things should be acceptable, tangible. I am terribly bored by lies told in righteous hypocrisy for the good of the people, by the devices of a civilization which complacently refuses to accept itself, by happy endings and characterless glamour girls and all other fictions invented for the solace of escapist. [8]

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018

NOTES

- [1] Royal Cortissoz, *Guy Pène du Bois* (New York, 1931), 8.
- [2] Suzanne L. Kinser, “Prostitutes in the Art of John Sloan,” *Prospects* 9 (1984): 248, notes the “hand-on-hip pose” in Félicien Rops’s *La Buveuse d’Absinthe* and Sloan’s 1910 etching *Girl and Beggar*.
- [3] Resistance fighters were executed there by guillotine during World War II, although the executions weren’t public.
- [4] *The Haymarket* (1907, The Brooklyn Museum, NY) and *3 A.M.* (1909, Philadelphia Museum of Art, PA); Guy Pène du Bois, *John Sloan* (New York, 1931), 50 and 52. These paintings are also discussed in Suzanne L. Kinser, “Prostitutes in the Art of John Sloan,” *Prospects* 9 (1984): 240–241 and 244–247, respectively. For a general discussion of changing attitudes toward prostitution in early 20th-century New York City and the theme in Ashcan school art, see Rebecca Zurier, Robert W. Snyder, and Virginia M. Mecklenburg, *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York* (Washington, DC, 1995), 48–49 and 187–188; see also Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex* (New York, 1992).
- [5] Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (New York, 1940), 128–129, in reference to *The Corridor* (1914, The Newark Museum, NJ). The artist related that the title of his 1906 sketch *Houseworkers* was derived from the false occupation that prostitutes habitually gave police when they were arraigned.
- [6] See John Szarkowski, *The Work of Atget*, vol. 4, *Modern Times* (New York and Boston, 1985), plates 73–75.
- [7] Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (New York, 1940), 129, 131.
- [8] Guy Pène du Bois, *Artists Say the Silliest Things* (New York, 1940), 197–198.
-

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

The unlined, tightly and finely woven, plain-weave fabric support remains mounted on its original stretcher. [1] The tacking margins are intact, and a selvage edge is present on the left. The artist applied paint thinly in a broad and direct manner over a commercially prepared cream-colored ground. The ground is a single layer and so thin that it barely fills the interstices in the finely woven fabric support. The handling of the paint is loose and sketchy, utilizing the ground color to create highlights around the figures. The figures are more worked, with several layers of paint blended into one another while wet. There are numerous brush bristles caught in the paint. Infrared examination has revealed no evidence of underdrawing. [2] There is an artist's alteration in the area between the two figures, where it seems likely that the man originally had his arm around the woman's shoulders. During a 1960 conservation treatment, areas on the female figure's coat were retouched to conceal mildew or insect damage, but these restorations have now become matte. The surface is coated with a layer of natural resin varnish.

TECHNICAL NOTES

- [1] On the reverse of the central stretcher bar "Ex.P.A.F.A." is stenciled in ink three times. An older label now partly concealed by green tape reads "New York / established 1885 / 'Rue de la Sante' / Painting by / Guy Pene du Bois." Notes in NGA curatorial files indicate the beginning of the label reads "From C. W. Kraushaar / Art Galleries / 680 Fifth Avenue."
- [2] The infrared examination was conducted using the Kodak 310-21x PtSi camera at 1.1 to 1.4 microns.
-

PROVENANCE

The artist; (Kraushaar Galleries, New York); sold 1 April 1930 to Chester Dale [1883-1962], New York; bequest 1963 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1929 Exhibition of American Contemporary Art, Municipal Art Gallery, Atlantic City, June-October 1929, no. 18, repro.

 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

1929 Exhibition of Paintings and Watercolors by Guy Pène du Bois, C.W.
Kraushaar Art Galleries, New York, February 1929, no. 3.

1930 The 125th Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture, Pennsylvania
Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1930, no. 537.

1965 The Chester Dale Bequest, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1965,
unnumbered checklist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1931 Cortisoz, Royal. *Guy Pène du Bois*. New York, 1931: 8.
- 1965 *Paintings other than French in the Chester Dale Collection*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1965: 57, repro.
- 1970 *American Paintings and Sculpture: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1970: 50, repro.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 145, repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 258, repro.
-

To cite: Robert Torchia, "Guy Pène du Bois/*La Rue de la Santé*/1928," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/46614> (accessed April 11, 2025).