

***Edward Hopper.* New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, in association with National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1987; pp. 9-20.**

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## INTRODUCTION

### *I. Vision, A Historical Artifact*

**E**DWARD HOPPER mined his uneventful life and found poetry in the prosaics of the modern world. After a few years of study with William Merritt Chase, Kenneth Hayes Miller, and Robert Henri, followed by three trips to Paris in the years 1906–10 and a long stint as a commercial illustrator, Hopper's life settled into the routine of a patient observer of change.

Hopper was born in Nyack, New York, in 1882. In 1913 he moved to 3 Washington Square North, New York City, where he lived until his death in 1967. In the teens and twenties he spent summers in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and Ogunquit and Monhegan Island, Maine—all favorite retreats for vacationing artists. He married the painter Josephine Verstelle Nivison in 1924; the two bought a Dodge in 1927, and over the years they made several cross-country trips. In 1934 they built a summer house in South Truro, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod, where they spent six months out of almost every year for the rest of their lives. Even though Edward Hopper began to enjoy in the mid-1920s a comfortable income from the sales of his art, the Hoppers lived frugally; they wore clothes purchased at Woolworth's and Sears, and their only extravagances were books, films, and plays.

In 1924, when he was forty-two years old, Hopper was given a one-person show at the Frank K.M. Rehn Gallery. All the works in the Rehn Gallery exhibition sold, and Hopper's art became an overnight sensation in the art world. Although success seemed to mean little to him, it permitted him more time to paint because he could now give up his job as a commercial illustrator. Success also meant that Hopper could have his first retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 1933. Nevertheless, Hopper remained distrustful of popularity throughout his life.

Hopper's remarkable following did not encourage him to step up the production of his art. He painted slowly; he waited for inspiration, and he usually completed only one or two paintings a year. He said that a painting was almost completely established in his mind before he began to paint it. His art was the result of a long and painful period of allowing various im-

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#### *Office at Night*

1940. Oil on canvas, 22 1/8 × 25"  
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis  
Gift of the T. B. Walker Foundation,  
Gilbert M. Walker Fund, 1948

*This painting characterizes the repression and vulnerability of the locked-out generation that came to maturity during the Great Depression.*

pressions to form a synthesis, and then it was a patient and equally difficult time of trying to re-create that synthesis, a process of finding painterly equivalents for the vision he held. “I find, in working,” Hopper wrote in *The Museum of Modern Art* catalogue, “. . . the disturbing intrusion of elements not part of my most interested vision, and the inevitable obliteration and replacement of this vision by the work itself as it proceeds. The struggle to prevent this decay is, I think, the common lot of all painters to whom the invention of arbitrary forms has lesser interest.” In 1961 he reaffirmed this idea in a televised interview entitled “Invitation to Art” with the critic Brian O’Doherty when he mentioned that he carried in his billfold the following statement of Goethe:

*The beginning of the end of all literary activity is the reproduction of the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is in me. All things being grasped, related, re-created, loaded, and reconstructed in a personal form, in an original manner.*

Hopper added: “To me that [Goethe quotation] applies to painting fundamentally and I know that there have been so many different opinions on painting. Now, there will be many who protest that this is outmoded, outdated, but I think it’s fundamental.”

If the outward events of Hopper’s life—except for his almost overnight acceptance as an important painter in the mid-1920s—are unremarkable, the inner world chronicled in his art is an intriguing story that parallels in many respects the history of the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. It is a story of an isolated individual dealing with the problems of advanced industrialization: as Hopper wrote in 1927, “It is something if a modicum of the brutal reality can be saved from the erosion of time.” Hopper underscores his own interests in plumbing the ordinary in an article on the painter Charles Burchfield. After citing Emerson’s statement “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts,” he describes Burchfield’s art in a manner apposite to his own:

*From what is to the mediocre artist and unseeing layman the boredom of everyday existence in a provincial community, he has extracted that quality we may call poetic, romantic, lyric, or what you will. By sympathy with the particular he has made it epic and universal. No mood has been so mean as to seem unworthy of interpretation; the look of an asphalt road as it lies in the broiling sun at noon, cars and locomotives lying in God-forsaken railway yards, the streaming summer rain that can fill us with such hopeless boredom, the blank concrete walls and steel constructions of modern industry, mid-summer streets with the acid green of close-cut lawns, the dusty Fords and gilded movies—all the sweltering, tawdry life of the American small town, and*

*behind all, the sad desolation of our suburban landscape. He derives daily stimulus from these, that others flee from or pass with indifference.*

In this article Hopper also makes reference to “our native architecture with its hideous beauty, its fantastic roofs, pseudo-Gothic, French, Mansard, Colonial, mongrel or what not” and to “a sense of vast expanse beyond the limits of the picture” that are also characteristic of many of his own works. Unlike Burchfield who becomes romantic and nostalgic in his realistic landscapes, Hopper approaches these subjects with an understated rigor appropriate to the twentieth century.

Coming to prominence in the 1920s, in the heyday of the flappers and the first widespread use of the radio and the automobile, Hopper presented a new and poignant vision of America. Choosing not to paint the hustle and bustle or to delight in the anecdotal, he remained true to his stoic, calm self by discovering an equivalent of his inner state in the image of America that the automobile helped to produce. His paintings approach the disinterested casual glance of the tourist; they also emphasize streets, telephone lines, signs, intersections, gas stations, tourist homes and motels, as well as the out-of-the-way roads that provide views of run-down farms and deserted, boarded-up houses. The assumed spectator of these scenes may well be the taciturn and shy Hopper himself, but he or she is also one of the new inhabitants of the twentieth century who find themselves aliens in the world and as much a mystery to themselves as the world is a mystery to them.

Hopper merits a special chapter in the history of American art. He follows the art-for-art's-sake attitudes of Tonalism, a refined style that reacts to the closing of the American frontier by accommodating itself to twilight, intimate landscapes, to nostalgia, and to a refined aesthetic that recoils from the vulgarity of the gilded age and that questions the aspirations of a materialistic industrialized world. Hopper also comes after the Eight, a group formed in 1908 and composed mostly of illustrators-turned-painters led by Robert Henri, who reveled in New York City street life, in the influx of immigrants, and in the possibilities they provided for upsetting America's recently formed class structure. Unlike his artistic forebears, Hopper is the poetic distiller of the landscape of late industrialism. He is also the first chronicler of the views of America dictated by the automobile, and, most important, he is the first to understand the ramifications of the automobile, an invention that would serve to isolate people from each other and separate them from the country they hoped to escape to on weekends. At an early date he understood the ways that the automobile would transform America and make it psychologically as decentralized as present-day Los Angeles. This book is about Edward Hop-

per's vision of a changing America, a view that is now so widely accepted that it requires some effort to grasp the truly innovative nature of this art which deemed change worthy of consideration.

The automobile's entry into American life permits a new outlook that differs radically from the point of view of the nineteenth-century American itinerant landscape painters who formed the Hudson River School. The earlier view was epitomized in Thomas Cole's painting *The Oxbow*. Situating himself high on a hill in the foreground of the painting with his easel, paintbox, and palette, Cole affirms the fact that the Oxbow is a picturesque subject that merits careful scrutiny and repeated periods of contemplation. He places himself in the land to suggest to art observers that they emulate his painstaking meditation on nature's wonders. Cole's attitude was enlarged upon by his student Frederic Edwin Church, who traveled several continents to find the quintessential vantage point. Although his grand paintings usually synthesized several scenes, he encouraged the idea that he had found a new and most profound view of nature. His descriptions of his trek to the volcano Cotopaxi in South America include a summary of the trees that were cut down to reveal the breathtaking scene that he immortalized in his art, a view never before witnessed by another human being.

The Hudson River artists' regard for nature as something grand and profound and as a subject worthy of detailed study was overturned by the American painters Theodore Robinson, who endorsed French Impressionism, and James A. McNeill Whistler, a proponent of the art-for-art's sake approach, who wished to capture not so much a view of a specific landscape as an image of the cursory glance that is characteristic of modern life.

Hopper transformed the sweeping glance of late nineteenth-century dandies who strolled along the recently formed grand boulevards of Paris to the strangely suspended gaze of motorists and moviegoers. Motorists simply watch nature as it unfolds before them; they do not note particular flora and fauna; they are more caught up in the continuity of the land than with specific scenes. One scene resembles another; the outing becomes the real adventure, and any single view is subservient to the speed of the car, the narrowness or width of the road, the weather, and the light. This unfeeling look, which Hopper captures in many of his works, is unsettling, for it presents a scene that is memorable by virtue of its commonplace appearance. People may have strong feelings about Hopper's art, but he does not give them clues that allow them to become immersed in the landscape, to view it as sublime, or to feel that it somehow represents a purer, untrammelled world and a higher morality. Nature, in Hopper's art, is surveyed by a disinterested twentieth-century viewer used to the continuum

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### *Seawatchers*

1952. Oil on canvas, 30 × 40"  
Private collection

*Even though the season is summer or early autumn, Hopper makes the sunlight look cold and wintry. The couple's resignation seems to capture the mood of many people in the United States who had gotten over post-World War II euphoria and found themselves caught up in the unresolvable conflict of the Cold War.*

that constitutes both a drive in an automobile and a film; and because it is little understood, nature becomes in the art a mysterious force, a symbol of the other. Hopper is the first artist to recognize that visual images in the twentieth century have become so common that they have also become expendable. He plays on the way individual images become prevalent in the twentieth century, and he memorializes in his art undistinguished scenes available to everyone. Frequently his images pay homage to the ubiquitous victims of progress by picturing abandoned country houses, weeds along railroad tracks, and desolate Victorian mansions.

In his art Hopper stops the narrative that constitutes a drive in an automobile or the montage of a movie to focus on strangely isolated stills. Seen by themselves, these stills are mysterious and haunting. They evoke a desire for the rest of the narrative, and they powerfully convey the break-up of the storyline, the disjunction that is characteristic of modern life. In this manner they awaken in the viewer a desire for the whole, and thus elicit feelings of isolation and loss. The feelings of loneliness experienced by viewers of Hopper's art, who sometimes use the term "desolation" to describe what they see, come from the fact that a continuum has been broken. The machinery of industrialism is no longer operative, and the illusion of progress as a motivating life force is no longer believable. By stripping modern life of its illusions of momentum, Hopper leaves his viewers isolated; he shows the breakdown of traditional spiritual underpinnings in the modern world and reveals the poverty of a society that has forsaken a meditative calm for a frenetic view of progress. The stills communicate a profound disbelief in the positive benefits to be obtained from constant movement. In Hopper's stills there are never enough clues to provide a definitive narrative; his mature paintings always emphasize their fragmentary state: they remain unsolvable question marks that indicate a profound distrust of the entire modern age.

In a letter written in 1948 to Norman A. Geske, who was then at the Walker Art Center, Hopper described the origin of *Office at Night* (1940) and indicated an awareness of his freeze-frame technique:

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### *Second Story Sunlight*

1960. Oil on canvas, 40 × 50"  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City  
60.54

*In his art Hopper played with intimacy and distance: his people look like distinct individuals in spite of the fact that they are representative types. In Second Story Sunlight Hopper contrasts youth and old age. Both people are at a remove from life even though the young girl is eager to get off the balcony and become a part of life while the woman is content to remain a spectator.*

*The picture was probably first suggested by many rides on the 'L' train in New York City after dark and glimpses of office interiors that were so fleeting as to leave fresh and vivid impressions on my mind. My aim was to try to give the sense of an isolated and lonely office interior rather high in the air, with the office furniture which has a very definite meaning for me.*

Later he cryptically referred to the insoluble puzzle his art represented when he told his friend Lloyd Goodrich, then director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, that *Second Story Sunlight* (1960) "is an attempt

to paint sunlight as white, with almost or no yellow pigment in the white. Any psychological idea will have to be supplied by the viewer.” And in response to a question by Brian O’Doherty regarding the content of his art, Hopper responded, “I can’t always agree with what the critics say. You know, it may be true or it may not be true. It’s probably how the viewer looks at the pictures. What he sees in them. . . . That they really are.”

Both Edward and Jo Hopper tried to compensate for the isolation and fragmentation reflected in his art by assigning names and identities to some of the characters in the paintings and by giving nicknames to the paintings themselves. In the ledger books that Jo kept over the years to record paintings leaving the studio, *Office at Night* is called “Confidentially Yours Room 1005” and the woman in the work is referred to as Shirley (Vol. II). When describing *Conference at Night* (1949), Jo notes that “Deborah is blond, a queen in her own right. Heavy table golden oak. Big green ledger with dull red edge. Sammy better looking than here in drawings” (Vol. III). This game of storytelling was probably initiated by Jo, who was as garrulous as Edward was taciturn, but it is clear from the entries here that the artist joined her in trying out roles for his figures:

Sea watchers—*Sheila and Adam, Irish girl, gentle, sweet, large—Yankee clam digger—very fine people—on New England coast for late swim. People inventions of E.H. (Vol. III)*

Second Story Sunlight—1960—A.M. sunlight . . . 2 figures—white haired Gothic and elderly and “Toots”—“good Toots, alert but not obstreperous lamb in wolf’s clothing” the painter quoted. (Vol. III)

A Woman in the Sun—1961—E.H. called her “A wise tramp.” Begun cold, very early Oct. 1. Tragic figure of small woman, blond straight brown hair, grabs cigarette before shimmy skirt—brightest note at R. seen off stage, on curtain of window off stage right easts [sic]. Cigarette and sad face of woman unlit. (Vol. III)

Intermission painted in N.Y. Studio in March & April 1963. E.H. says she is “Nora.” . . . Nora, with strong long hands. She is not the kind to slip feet out of long reasonably high heeled pumps. E. says Nora is on the way of becoming an “egghead.” An efficient secretary or prize chatelaine of big house. (Vol. III)

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### *Conference at Night*

1949. Oil on canvas, 27¼ × 40”  
Courtesy Wichita Art Museum, Kansas  
The Roland P. Murdock Collection

*After his marriage to Jo, Edward used his wife as a model for the women in his paintings, being careful to change her face and hair to reflect a specific type. This painting is significant for the way it characterizes the woman as an equal to the two men. During World War II, women assumed important roles in business and industry, and this painting indicates a new basis for male/female interaction that was soon ended after the war by government propaganda aimed at popularizing the traditional female roles of homemaker, wife, and mother.*

It is possible to write these references off as an innocent game played by a childless couple. But it should also be pointed out that each painting is an abstraction from life, and that many of the works created a disturbing void that affected even the Hoppers. One could try to make the Nora of *Intermission* (1963) a modern-day counterpart to Ibsen's famous Nora, but the woman in the painting could just as easily be a secretary. The lack of specific information about these people is essential to the art and helps to accentuate the mystery of the commonplace.

Hopper's works depend on ellipses, on the missing parts of a narrative, and on the presence of a viewer who is assumed within the fictive realm of the painting and made a reality by the actual people who look at the work of art. These people take note of the absence of a storyline and then face an ambiguous situation. They do not provide the narrative for the picture so much as note the presences and absences on which this art is premised. In Hopper's work the assumed viewer is analogous to a camera in a film: the unseen but essential *modus operandi* of the work of art. The camera analogy is important, for it enabled Hopper to be intimate and distant, to show glimpses of people's everyday lives without seeming to invade their privacy. Frequently the people spied upon are types rather than individuals, and thus the act of looking is made abstract; it becomes more a phenomenon of the modern world rather than an individual's voyeuristic fantasy, although at times Hopper does succumb to the latter. His paintings, watercolors, and prints maneuver us so that our passive looking becomes a means for acting out the alienation of modern life. The observer then becomes an actor, the painting a script, and the play a reading of the script by the actor/viewer.

Although one cannot provide a specific narrative for an individual work, one can look at earlier pieces made in the French and American traditions to which this artist attaches himself and see how he has reoriented these images. He pares away elements of traditional art to establish a significant ellipsis which creates a new, alienated vantage point indicative of the twentieth-century point of view.

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### *Intermission*

1963. Oil on canvas, 40 × 60"  
Private collection

*The woman here appears to be both familiar and anonymous. She could be a suburban housewife, a corporate executive, or a maid. Hopper is frequently concerned with the fact that people in the modern world can look like distinct individuals without revealing any clues as to their vocation or status.*