Problems in Dating: Putting the Catalogue Raisonné in Order

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Working at the Whitney Museum as the first curator of the Hopper Collection, I not only had to locate all of his art, I had to figure out when he produced all of the undated, often untitled paintings, watercolors, commercial illustrations, drawings, and prints of his formative years. And before his marriage in 1924 at age 42, when his wife, the artist Josephine Verstille Nivison, began keeping his records, he did very little to document his work.

My catalogue raisonné appeared in three volumes and a CD-Rom in 1995. It includes all of Hopper’s oil paintings, watercolors, commercial illustrations, and a selection of the several thousand drawings that exist. Since then, no one has challenged my decisions about either authenticity or dating. And no omitted paintings have yet come to light, although forgeries appear in the marketplace with some frequency.

In addition to the catalogue raisonné, I wrote a critical biography of Hopper that was also published in 1995. Few art historians have tackled both a catalogue raisonné and a biography; fewer still have completed both studies for the same artist. Drawing upon my perspective as author of both a catalogue raisonné and a biography of Edward Hopper, I hope to show in the present paper how each of these two studies affects the other, especially in the dating of previously unrecorded works. Neither the catalogue raisonné nor the biography is a currently fashionable genre for art historians in the academy. They have long scorned biography as too personal, even irrelevant. As a result, biographies of artists are too often written by journalists or scholars from other fields, only perpetuating their low status among art historians.

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with his slightly sunburned skin—freckled and painted an orangish-pink—the image recalls a side of beef hanging in a butcher's shop, yet they are highly intimate portraits of someone he loved. *Sean Two* (fig. 3) presents him from behind with his head and shoulders raised as he looks away from us and beyond. A twisted and blond-streaked ponytail dangles down and we wonder just what it is from afar that has captured his attention.

In addition to the portraits, Cain produced four paintings based on his photographs of Mini-Marts and gas stations in Los Angeles. These landscapes are void of any human presence, he even erased logos and type from the signs, thus instilling them with a haunting emptiness and anonymity—like waking up to find some weird "Twilight Zone" episode come true. These works indicate that Cain was shedding his "car painter" label, expanding the vocabulary of his imagery, and had fully mastered his painterly technique. Indeed, Smith later mused in Cain's obituary that these last works made one think about the kind of painting that the artist might have moved on to had he lived longer. Fortunately, the catalogue raisonné will allow us to productively ponder the work he left behind and the direction it may have taken.

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**fig. 3. Sean Number Two, 1996. Oil on linen, 60"x84"**

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When, for example, the art critic Hilton Kramer enthusiastically praised James E. B. Breslin's 1994 biography of Mark Rothko, he could not resist gloating that its author, a professor of English, "came to his subject from outside the art world," noting "that an academic career in art history—especially as the discipline of art history has lately evolved—may not be the best preparation for achieving distinction in the writing of artists' lives." In his own lengthy review of this same book, art historian Jack Flam made negative comments, such as "a lack of familiarity with other works of art." This elicited an angry response from Breslin; in their published dispute, the two alluded to their separate disciplines, as if each thought the other not truly capable. I have heard journalists claim that scholars cannot write good biographies and scholars find fault with biographies because they are too journalistic.

On the other hand, other art historians in the academy have attacked the catalogue raisonné. Stephen Eisenman, who teaches art history at Northwestern University, has written that the catalogue raisonné is "accurately described as the proper domain of commercial art dealers and auction houses rather than of independent scholars." Other theorists have argued that there are no facts. Obviously, these scholars are not concerned with publishing newly discovered works for the first time, a case where authenticity would have to be demonstrated. The catalogue raisonné, while still respected and considered indispensable as a research tool, is regarded by many, often unfairly, as a tedious collection of data, lacking theoretical perspective. With all of its reference lists, it may seem rather dry to the layman.

Yet the catalogue raisonné has been defined rather differently by its many practitioners. It is true that connoisseurship is still central to producing a catalogue raisonné; the author must determine which works are authentic so that all of them can be arranged and presented in a chronological sequence from the earliest date of execution. Today, however, in addition to mastering all the documentation, the catalogue raisonné scholar must also be prepared (where necessary) to call upon scientific tests of artistic materials such as pigment analysis, radiographs, and infrared reflectography. This is enough for some cataloguers, who intentionally refrain from critical analysis and commentary; others (myself among them) acknowledge and include interpretation, making use of the research behind such understanding to make informed decisions on issues such as the dates of specific art works. Such interpretive discussion often makes the thinking behind the assigning of a date more transparent for the reader.

In my experience, writing a first critical biography and compiling a catalogue raisonné are both arduous, exacting tasks. Still, those who write biographies and catalogues raisonné do not often agree on either the value or the content of the two genres. In recent memory, Eugene Victor Thaw, an art dealer and one of the co-authors of the Jackson Pollock catalogue raisonné, argued against the notion that an artist's private life illuminates his work, asserting that while he was "not opposed to investigating the lives and psychology of creative artists," he found that "this material...is seldom central to the content of art itself." B. H. Friedman, the author of the first biography of Jackson Pollock, took issue with Thaw: "An artist's work takes precedence over biographical detail. However, the work can often be elucidated by such detail; the life can only be understood through the work: the two are inseparably connected. Suppression of detail and exaggeration of the 'dramatic' create myths about artists." A deliberate distortion of facts to manufacture myth
was how most art world professionals—from historians to critics to artists—viewed a later Pollock biography co-authored by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith (the first of whom actually did some graduate work in art history). More than one critic has denounced its claims as "psycho-babble." Hilton Kramer asserted that this book, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1991, "bears a closer resemblance to a television series like "Dallas" with its unrelenting focus on glamorized malevolence, than it does to a serious account of an artist's life and work." There were, of course, no art historians, art critics, or artists on the committee.

In contrast to biography, where the narrative form is expected to offer critical assessment, the place of interpretation in a catalogue raisonné has provoked much discussion. Pollock's widow, the artist Lee Krasner, who initiated the Pollock catalogue raisonné, repeatedly told me that she had insisted upon only a collection of images, documents, and facts. In his review of the Pollock catalogue raisonné, Hilton Kramer insisted "Originality of interpretation has no place in a catalogue raisonné," while in another review, art critic Lawrence Alloway correctly criticized the same work for "avoiding interpretation as if it were mere contestable opinion.... they even refrain from iconographical comment though, after all their labors, who should be better placed to discuss meanings.... The mastery of data is admirable, but the refusal to interpret it disappoints modern expectations of holistic scholarship." Despite such different opinions about the wisdom of simply reporting facts or trying to interpret them, the focus of a biography and of a catalogue raisonné of the same artist share some major concerns, especially chronology. For a biography, we want to know the precise dates of the artist's birth, education, marriage, journeys, and major accomplishments including art works and exhibitions. We also want to know the significance of these particular moments in time and that is, in itself, interpretive. In the catalogue raisonné, when we assign a date to a previously undated work, we are also making an interpretive decision. Even when the work has an exhibition history, but the artist failed to record the work's precise date, we are forced to make an interpretive judgment about when the work was actually made.

Such judgments preoccupied me from 1976, when I began my study of Edward Hopper for a catalogue raisonné at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The Hopper Collection there resulted from a bequest of the couple's artistic estate in 1968 by the artist's widow Josephine Nivison Hopper, who was also a painter. The Whitney Studio Club, the museum's precursor, gave Edward his first one-man exhibition in 1920 and the Whitney Museum organized retrospectives of his work in 1950 and 1964. Jo, who also showed her paintings at the Whitney on occasion, left the museum almost all of her own work, in addition to what remained unsold of her husband's art. Although Jo's paintings would certainly have assisted in the documentation of Edward's life and work, almost all of them were discarded by the museum.

Beginning my project at the museum, I expected to find Hopper's personal papers, including the letters he kept, the photographs, books, and phonograph records that he and his wife owned: in short the evidence of his intellectual and cultural scope. I searched in vain. Soon I learned that no one from the museum had sought to obtain this material, either directly from Jo after Edward's death, or, later, from the executor of her estate. The opportunity had been missed to conserve basic materials for a history of the artist and his production. This, despite the fact that in 1964, at the time the museum was producing the catalogue for the last retrospective exhibition held during Hopper's lifetime, Jo wrote to Margaret McKellar of the Whitney telling her that she and Edward were "pack rats," and had saved everything. Faced with this lack, I attempted to collect copies of all of the correspondence of the artist and his wife as well as copies of all interviews with them. I conducted my own interviews with everyone I could find who had known the Hoppers: other artists, his neighbors, his dealer, even the handyman for his building.

Still in my twenties and possessing an excess of energy when I began work on the catalogue raisonné in 1976, I conceived of the project in the broadest possible terms. A newly received doctorate gave me confidence. I would employ methodical scholarship to gather and digest in systematic form all that could be known of Hopper's work. No detail was too arcane, no publication too obscure for my ambitious venture. My catalogue raisonné would be the definitive work on Hopper: in addition to reproductions of each work of art, I would document every owner (past and present), all exhibitions in which each picture was included, and every publication that ever mentioned or reproduced it. I included all specific discussions of a particular work by the artist or his wife in the entries for each object. I also compiled a comprehensive bibliography that listed any article, exhibition catalogue, or book that even cited the artist or reproduced his work. Additionally, I constructed a detailed chronology of his life and a complete exhibition history which listed all of the reviews. Everything was done by hand, without computers, which were not yet available to me.

By 1984, I had completed all of this for Hopper's oils, watercolors, illustrations, and prints. I had nearly finished dating the thousands of drawings that he produced and I had identified all of the sketches which led to paintings. For individual works of art of particular interest, I had written extensive essays explaining sources of inspiration, related works, and other significant information. I had also produced several introductory essays: the first analyzed Hopper's critical fortunes; the second was a brief biographical sketch; the third traced his artistic development; and the final essay identified and examined the recurrent themes of his work.

At this time, the museum declared the Hopper catalogue raisonné complete. I returned to the teaching career which I had interrupted for this project, but my life as a scholar had changed forever. I was spoiled by the opportunity to study so many original art works closely. In the process of producing the catalogue raisonné, I had organized two major Hopper exhibitions which drew on many other collections: the first, in 1979, presented all...
of the artist’s prints and his commercial illustrations; then a major retrospective of his watercolors, oils, and preparatory drawings took place the next year. The planning of these exhibitions and the shows themselves provided unparalleled opportunities for studying Hopper’s art. My intimate acquaintance with these works grew as I accompanied both exhibitions on extensive itineraries to other museums, monitoring the condition of each object and arranging the presentation of this material in each venue. Working on Hopper at the time when the Whitney stored its collection in the same building as the curatorial offices, I had easy access to examine works of art in the museum’s collection, even on a daily basis.

Towards the end of the eight years that I worked on the catalogue raisonné, I realized that a biography of Hopper was needed. Stimulated by the research that I had already done, I was curious to know more. Having turned up in a private collection Jo’s voluminous, nearly illegible diary that offered an intimate eye-witness report on her husband’s life, I eagerly sought out their documentation not only of Hopper’s process in making a painting, but what also he did with the rest of his time. Under the pressure of the deadline for the catalogue raisonné set by the museum, I had focused on locating comments about Hopper’s paintings. But the more I read, the more I knew that important clues to Hopper’s work were buried there amid the tedious recording of shopping lists and other trivial details. I felt compelled to decipher and interpret this new evidence. I knew that I had to write a biography of Hopper.

Today I would like to share with you some of the processes that I employed for determining the dates of works that arrived unidentified in the bequest in 1968 to the Whitney Museum. One notable example is a monumental canvas, measuring 36 x 72 inches, that had arrived rolled up, having long ago been removed from its stretchers. In 1970, Lloyd Goodrich had exhibited and published it as an undated work that he called Cafe Scene. As I began to sort out Hopper’s development, I sensed that this painting was significant. I had it called back from a so-called “friend” of the museum who had been able to borrow it for the modest payment of $250 a year. I found that the work was covered by a dark coating of smoke, so I arranged to have it cleaned and then hung in my office so that I could contemplate it daily; its mysteries and its importance for Hopper’s career unfolded over time.

I began my search for this picture’s history by combing through archives to locate exhibition checklists at places where Hopper might have been exhibiting during his formative years. These were New York institutions that held non-juried group shows organized by artists, including the MacDowell Club and the Whitney Studio Club. Both had issued small brochure-type catalogues that generally lacked illustrations and did not provide identifying dimensions.

In one of the early group exhibitions held at the MacDowell Club in New York, in February 1915, I found a work called Soir Bleu listed without dimensions or a reproduction. I tracked down reviews for this show (as well as all the other early shows) published in several of the many newspapers that New York then supported. I found that Hopper had shown two canvases in this show: New York Corner, a lively urban street scene, and Soir Bleu, which prompted one critic to comment: “Edward Hopper is not quite successful with his Soir Bleu, a group of hardened Parisian absinthe drinkers, but he is entirely so with his New York Corner.” Another critic wrote: “in Edward Hopper’s New York Corner there is a completeness of expression that is scarcely discoverable in his ambitious fantasy, Soir Bleu.”

I was familiar with New York Corner, also known as Corner Saloon, which was then in the “permanent” collection of the Museum of Modern Art, having been acquired from Hopper’s dealer Frank Rehn, when he exhibited the previously unsold work in 1941. A much smaller canvas than Soir Bleu, New York Corner, measuring just 24 x 29 inches, would certainly have seemed less ambitious to a critic than the much larger Soir Bleu.

Eventually, I was able to satisfy myself that this scene of a heavily made-up woman looming over a Paris cafe at twilight must be the painting recorded as Soir Bleu, first shown in 1915 and not again until the painting arrived in Jo Hopper’s bequest to the Whitney Museum. It expresses fascination with the forbidden Paris discovered by a rather innocent, timid young man during his first and longest trip there from October 1906 through July 1907.

I also found in Jo’s bequest to the Whitney Museum the only surviving drawing related to this work, a sketch for the man on the far left, which is captioned “un Maquereau,” literally, “a mackerel,” exactly the same French slang for a pimp that Picasso used for a sketch he made in 1903. In the first edition of the catalogue for Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist, the exhibition of Hopper that I organized for the Whitney in 1980, I had incorrectly referred to the French title that Hopper wrote on this drawing as “le Maquereau,” using the definite rather than the indefinite article. This was noteworthy, because very soon after publication, another sketch for “le maquereau” appeared for sale in England. For me, this was an early wake-up call to the fact that forgers will not only read books, but they might even repeat your mistakes.

After studying the sketch for “un Maquereau,” I had concluded that the erect woman with the heavily painted face in Soir Bleu depicts a prostitute who seeks clientele in the soldier, the clown, and beret-clad artist in the outdoor tables. But how, you may wonder, was I convinced that this canvas was painted in New York and not in Paris, where Hopper had produced numerous watercolor caricatures of various types of prostitutes?

From the years that Hopper spent painting in Paris, there are only a couple of canvases that feature images of figures. There is one much smaller canvas of a couple seated at a cafe table, which Hopper titled both Le Bistro and The Wine Shop and recorded as having been painted in New York in 1909. One other figurative oil, called Summer Interior, depicts a lone female figure seated on the floor. Hopper also recorded it as having been painted in 1909. But rather than link Soir Bleu to these canvases of 1909, I paid attention to the admission Hopper made near the end of his life: “It seemed awfully crude and raw here when I got back. It
took me ten years to get over Europe."17

Thus, I would argue that Hopper painted Soir Bleu some years later, when he experimented with the large scale of the figures in relationship to their setting, accidently finding a new direction that would represent a major departure in his work. This close focus on the figure only becomes important during the 1920s, after his new wife becomes his regularly available model. Furthermore, the motifs of urban sexuality in Soir Bleu reveal not only Hopper's personal fascination with Paris, but also his awareness of contemporary public controversy in New York.

The term "French macquereaux" was notorious. In New York alone, the French were said to be operating in force: one report claimed four hundred "French macquereaux" who were "known to have women in houses" of prostitution, explained that many of the houses were "run under the guise of massage parlors," and declared that "many of the women in these houses are French."18

My research uncovered warnings that appeared in the popular muckraking magazines and in books such as Reverend Ernest A. Bell's Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls or War on the White Slave Trade published in 1911;19 the theme also engaged the theater, where Little Lost Sister attracted crowds in 1913. The caption on the frontispiece to Bell's book states: "The Lure of the Stage—Answering a Want Ad: Disreputable Theatrical Agents sometimes act as white slave traders, alluring positions on the stage being the net to catch young girls." Movies such as Traffic in Souls also capitalized on the scandal. Between 1908 and 1914, there was a panic over "white slavery," the discussion of which itself produced a frisson even while fueling public discourse on sexuality.20

As a result, movies, restaurants, and even ice-cream parlors were declared to be "dangerous places for young girls to attend unescorted."21 This illustration depicts what Bell called "The First Step: Ice cream parlors of the city...largely run by foreigners, are the places where scores of girls have taken their first step downward. Does mother know the character of the place and the man she is with?"22 Hopper may still have imagined such danger for the solitary young women he depicted in Automat of 1927. But for the popular American mind in the years leading up to the First World War, the Paris depicted in Soir Bleu was "The Modern Babylon," the capital of "debauchery," and the "headquarters of the world-wide white slave trade of the present time."22

The panic was symptomatic of the deeper social change, which was about to transform the sexual values of the American middle class. There was at first an uneasy balance between the old and the new, causing strife between the last of the proper Victorians and the proponents of radically new social behavior. Even the critics who disliked Soir Bleu when it was first shown in 1915 sensed the import of the theme of illicit seduction and threatening sexuality. The critic who presumed that the figures in the cafe were "hardened Parisian absinthe drinkers" was projecting a cultural stereotype that linked prostitution with compulsive drinking, a theme then current in the preaching of reformers such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union, as well as in the 1909 United States Senate report that made foreigners the scapegoats for sexual anxieties, claiming "the vilest practices are brought here from continental Europe."23Another illustration in Bell's book shows a vulnerable "Emigrant girl at the Dock," where "foreign girls are more helpless at the mercy of the white slave traders." In short, it is not surprising that the motifs of Soir Bleu could shock the conservative audience and provoke the critics, compelling them to sit up and take notice of Hopper at last.

Yet another reason to date Soir Bleu to 1914 instead of 1909 or 1910 suggests itself based on a knowledge of his later habits. If Hopper had finished Soir Bleu much earlier than 1914, he certainly waited a long time before showing such an ambitious picture, passing both the 1910 Independents exhibition and the Armory Show in which he participated. He typically took no more than a month or two to complete work on a large painting. And years later, he routinely sent works to his dealer to show as soon as they were finished, even before the paint was dry.

But it was not until Hopper's marriage in 1924 that Jo began to keep records of his paintings whenever they left the studio for exhibition or sale. Although her visual legacy was almost entirely destroyed by the Whitney, which threw out almost all of her oil paintings that she included in her bequest, she also left a substantial written legacy in the form of letters and her diaries, enabling me to redate a number of Hopper's paintings, often even correcting by several months the record books that she kept. In a few cases, evidence that I missed in a cursory reading of the diaries for the catalogue raisonné proved that an atypical painting was not produced when I had originally estimated based upon its subject, style, and materials.

For example, I was able to identify the subject of an untitled painting on a small wood panel of a stairway. It was clearly a depiction of the interior of the artist's boyhood home in Nyack. Because it was painted on panel and represented a scene from his boyhood, I assumed an early date of 1925, just several years after he had painted other wood panels of Monhegan Island (Maine) landscapes. What a surprise, then to find in Jo's diary for April 4, 1949 that Edward, recovering from prostate surgery, had begun to paint a "little picture on a wood panel—a staircase going down to an open door & hall lamp suspended. Said memory of a repeated drawing of levitation, sailing downstairs & out thru door."24 Two days later, Jo noted that Edward heard from his doctor that he required additional surgery. He continued to work on the panel while he waited for a hospital room to become available, but Jo noted that he had "so little heart to [give] the work [while] facing such uncertainty."25 Five days after he had begun this picture, he checked into the hospital. Recuperation and summer on Cape Cod intervened; Hopper never finished or signed this work, nor did he have Jo record it in the record books she kept.

The dates and exhibition history
of other atypical paintings in the bequest were not changed, but explained by the focus on historical events (rather than works of art) occasioned by the biography. The initial context for some works had been long forgotten. Hopper did not exhibit "Railroad Sunset" until the spring of 1937, over seven years after he painted it in the fall of 1929. He and Jo had returned to New York from their summer travels in New England at the end of September, in time to witness the panic associated with the stock market crash on October 24. Both the theme and the unusual palette, with its extreme hyperbolic colors, must reflect the dramatic events taking place in the city. Technology, symbolized by the railroad signal tower and tracks, has failed; the wisdom of its intrusion into the countryside is questioned. No wonder the painting found no buyer and ended up in the bequest; with the stock market collapse, the art market stumbled as well.

Thus, I hope that I have shown the benefits, even a kind of scholarly symbiosis, of writing both a catalogue raisonné and biography. From my point of view, each genre adds to the strength of the other. The best catalogue raisonné will provide at least a summary of the artist's biography in which to place the work; any worthwhile biography of an artist must feature the creation of the work. In order to understand an artist well, one must become familiar with the full scope of the creative work. To avoid drawing conclusions based upon a work of art which turns out to be atypical, or, worse, a forgery, the art historian and the biographer both need the expertise of the catalogue raisonné.

Only fatigue and lack of time for other projects would dissuade me from producing another such duet. I have a nearly completed catalogue raisonné of the painter Marsden Hartley, who was also a poet and essayist. Fortunately, a biography of the artist already exists, written by a literary scholar, as well as several recent monographs, a number from the perspective of gay studies. None duplicates the biography that I would have written, but their existence makes such a task at once less arduous and less necessary.

Notes

1. For a notable exception among American scholars, see John Rewald's work on Cezanne, including a biography and a catalogue raisonné of Cezanne's watercolors.


11. Author's frequent discussions about this issue with Lee Krasner, 1977-1980.


14. From the Josephine Hopper Bequest of 1968, the Whitney gave for small oils to New York University and at least 91 framed works to hospitals, which keep no records of art donations. A cache of her unframed watercolors and four tiny oils on panel escaped being discarded or destroyed along with other works. Since then, the museum has received a group of pachodas from the bequest of Felicia Meyer Marsh. I acquired for the museum Jo's portrait of Edward as a gift from his dealer John Clancy of the Frank K. M. Rehn Gallery; a second oil followed from Clancy's estate. None of Jo Hopper's work has yet been accessioned by the museum for its permanent collection. Some examples have been recently published (one with an incorrect provenance provided by the Whitney) in Elizabeth Thompson Colley, "Josephine Nivison Hopper: Some Newly Discovered Work," *Women's Art Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1, spring/summer 2004, pp. 3-11.


16. The Museum of Modern Art has since sold *Corner Saloon*, which is now in a private collection.


