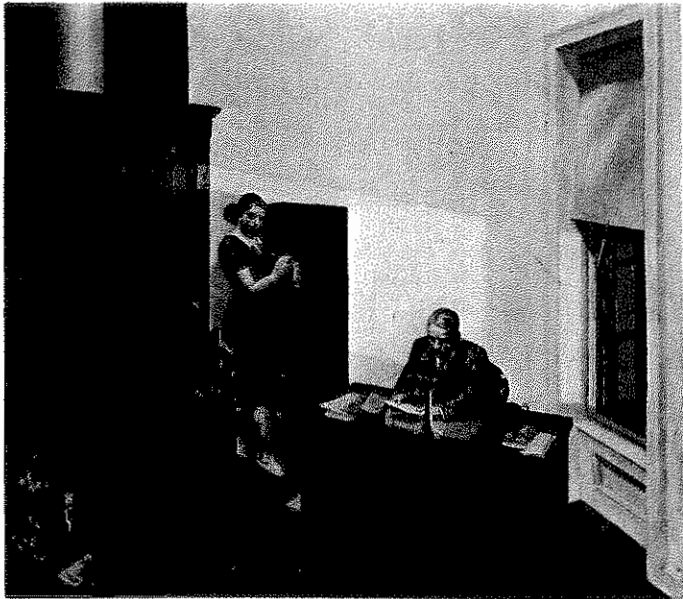


# EDWARD HOPPER'S "OFFICE AT NIGHT"

GAIL LEVIN

Edward Hopper's "Office at Night" entices and holds the spectator in a tense, intimate, stagelike space. Once in the arena where the drama is taking place, the viewer confronts the players' psychic intensity—indeed, is engulfed by it.

Fig. 1. Edward Hopper, Office at Night, 1940. Oil on canvas, 22-1/8 x 25". Courtesy Walker Art Center.



More than eight years after he had completed *Office at Night* (Fig. 1), Edward Hopper wrote an explanation of the painting at the request of the Walker Art Center, which had recently purchased it:

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.<sup>1</sup>

Though he chose to paint the cityscapes and landscapes of America, Hopper did not view his subjects as particularly American. More than once he asserted, "I don't think I ever tried to paint the American scene; I'm trying to paint myself. I don't see why I must have the American scene pinned on me."<sup>2</sup> Hopper may have been inspired to paint *Office at Night* by the city views he observed, but his explanation for the Walker Art Center misleads us about his actual sources for the painting.

The theme of office interiors is not seen as frequently as domestic interiors in the history of art. By 1940 Hopper was already experienced at depicting that theme from a series of illustrations (Figs. 2 and 3) for *System Magazine* dating from 1913.<sup>3</sup> He had begun to earn his living by illustration and commercial art after he returned from his last trip to Europe in July 1910.<sup>4</sup> His harsh self-evaluation, "I was a rotten illustrator—or mediocre, anyway,"<sup>5</sup> gives no clue to the importance that some of his illustrations had for the development of his later work. While it is true that Hopper was not able to choose the subjects he illustrated, some of the illustrations gave him an opportunity to try ideas which he would use in his paintings years, even decades, later. That he saved so many of his illustrations probably indicates that he did not really consider them as "rotten" as he so modestly stated.

The close relationship of several of the *Studies for Office at Night* of 1940 (Figs. 4 and 5) to some of Hopper's illustrations in *System* raises the question of what first inspired the artist in his depictions of offices in 1913. Answers may be seen in his experiences on his three trips to Europe as a young man. In Paris,

Fig. 3. Edward Hopper, Illustration from *System Magazine*, "Living up to your Employment System," p. 23, July 1913.



Fig. 2. Edward Hopper, Illustration from *System Magazine*, "Your Business Tomorrow," p. 235, September 1913.

Hopper first became acquainted with Impressionism through Patrick Henry Bruce, whom he knew from his class with Robert Henri at the New York School of Art, although Henri's students had certainly heard him speak of Degas and Manet as admirable artists.<sup>6</sup> As late as 1962 Hopper was able to say, "I think I'm still an impressionist." When asked which painters from the past he admired, Hopper named "Rembrandt above all, and the etcher Meryon . . . I also like Degas very much."<sup>8</sup> Five years earlier, he had listed Rembrandt, Goya, Degas, Eakins, and Meryon.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly the work of Degas influenced him from his years as a struggling young illustrator throughout his distinguished career. According to Brian O'Doherty, "the only reproduction in either of the Hopper houses [Washington Square in New York City and Truro, Massachusetts on Cape Cod] was a Degas nude in the bedroom at Truro."<sup>10</sup> Hopper's wife, Jo (Josephine Nivison Hopper), who had also been a pupil of Robert Henri, shared his enthusiasm for Degas' work. In 1924, the year they were married, she gave Hopper the major, recently published book *Degas*, by Paul Jamot, which she inscribed "for Edward Hopper from Jo."<sup>11</sup> The Hoppers also owned the catalogue of a Degas exhibition at the Durand-Ruel Galleries in New York in 1928.<sup>12</sup> It is likely that they both would have taken the opportunity to see this exhibition.

Degas' *The Cotton Exchange, New Orleans* (Fig. 6) of 1873 is one of the best-known paintings of an office interior. Hopper would certainly have known it from the reproduction in Jamot's *Degas*.<sup>13</sup> Its relationship to *Office at Night* and to some of the studies, as well as to certain of the illustration, indicates Hopper's debt to Degas' work. In one *Study for Office at Night* (Fig. 5), Hopper focused on the corner formed on one side by a wall composed of a wooden partition containing glass windows and an open door reminiscent of those along the left side in Degas' painting. Hopper depicted the ceiling as did Degas, but that does not appear in the painting. It appears in this drawing that Hopper reworked a structural idea he first dealt with in an illustration for "Your Business Tomorrow" (Fig. 2) in *System* in September 1913. In *Office at Night*, the partition is finally placed on a diagonal axis similar to that in *The Cotton Exchange, New Orleans*. Hopper also retained Degas' bird's-eye view of the



Fig. 4. Edward Hopper, Drawing for *Office at Night*, 1940. Conté and charcoal with touches of white on paper, 15 x 19-5/8". Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper.

oor tilted out toward the picture plane. It is interesting to note that this well-known French Impressionist painting that fascinated Hopper depicts an American scene and was painted during Degas' visit with his family in America.

In several of the studies (Figs. 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9) Hopper included a picture hanging on the wall, a device so typical of Degas' work.<sup>14</sup> Yet in the study (Fig. 10) closest to the painting itself, the picture on the wall has been erased (but is still barely visible) and only a beam of light replaces it. The penultimate study (Fig. 4) includes another reference to *The Cotton Exchange, New Orleans*: a slat-back wooden chair poised with its back to the viewer appears in the lower left of both Hopper's drawing and Degas' painting. Could Hopper have been referring to Degas' chair or to his earlier illustration when he wrote of "the office furniture which has a very definite meaning for me"? One wonders if Hopper decided to erase this chair because it made the relationship to Degas too obvious. His wife Jo felt strongly that he should not reveal influences on his work. When interviewers queried Hopper, she would often interrupt, "I don't think you should answer that."<sup>15</sup>

Hopper's figure of the contemplative man at the desk is somewhat reminiscent of Degas' portrayal of the old man Michel Musson, father-in-law of Degas' brother René, who sits examining a sample of cotton in the foreground of his painting. They have in common a sense of concentration expressed by



Fig. 5. Edward Hopper, Drawing for Office at Night, 1940. Black conté on paper, 8 1/2 x 11". Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper.

Fig. 7. Edward Hopper, Drawing for Office at Night, 1940. Conté on paper, 8 1/2 x 11". Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper.



Fig. 8. Edward Hopper, Drawing for Office at Night, 1940. Black conté on paper, 8 1/2 x 11". Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper.

downcast eyes. Hopper's withdrawn, meditative man is probably in part autobiographical, corresponding to his own quiet aloofness. In his earlier studies (Figs. 4 and 8) this male figure was depicted in profile, recalling other figures in Degas' work such as in *The Bellelli Family* (Fig. 11), also reproduced in the book by Jamot. Again we see correspondences to Degas' emphasis on strong vertical and horizontal accents and the device of a picture-within-a-picture. Like Degas, Hopper placed his figure precisely parallel to the picture plane. Also noteworthy is Degas' use of a vertical banding device on the left side of this painting which Hopper has used both on the left and the right of this composition, as he did so frequently in other works. In an early proof for an illustration (Fig. 12), Hopper depicted in profile a man seated at his desk, including other structural devices

similar to Degas. In another of his illustrations (Fig. 3) for *System* of July 1913, the man in profile faces another man in an arrangement not unlike that between the man and wife in *The Bellelli Family*.

Perhaps what is most intriguing in Hopper's *Office at Night* is the apparent psychic tension between the sensual curvaceous



Fig. 9. Edward Hopper, Drawing for Office at Night, 1940. Black conté and pencil on paper, 8 1/2 x 11". Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper.

woman and the man who ignores her. Hopper's early studies (Figs. 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 13) do not yet deal with the now alluring figure of the woman who, after several trials, remained rather plain and certainly had not yet evolved into the shapely woman in the painting. In the ledger (Fig. 14) where the Hoppers recorded this work, they further captioned the sketch reproducing this painting "Confidentially Yours." "Room 1005" and referred to the woman as "Shirley," noting that she wore a "blue dress, white collar, flesh stockings, black pumps and black hair and plenty of lipstick."<sup>16</sup> Though they named various characters in Hopper's paintings, Jo modeled for all of the female figures.<sup>17</sup>

A likely precedent for a painting with a coquettish woman turning in three-quarter view toward the viewer, while the man turns inward otherwise occupied in thought, is Degas' *Sulking* of 1869-71 (Fig. 15). Theodore Reff has described this painting as wavering between a "kind of narrative episode" and a "kind of modern genre scene" where the "positions and expressions of the two figures, their relation to each other, even the identity of the setting and its significance for them, are at once suggestive and ambiguous."<sup>18</sup> This same description could well be applied to Hopper's painting *Office at Night*. Hopper was certainly familiar with *Sulking* not only from the reproduction in Jamot, but also from his visits to the Metropolitan Museum which acquired the painting in the Havemeyer Bequest in 1929. With his deep admiration for the Impressionists, Hopper would most likely have seen the picture in the first installation of the Havemeyer Collection in 1930 and frequently thereafter in installations of the museum's permanent collection.<sup>19</sup> It is even possible that Hopper first saw the painting as early as 1915 in *Masterpieces by Old and Modern Painters*, an exhibition held at M. Knoedler & Co. in New York.<sup>20</sup>

In *The Bellelli Family* Degas expressed emotional distance between the husband and wife by their physical distance.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 10. Edward Hopper, Drawing for Office at Night, 1940. Conté and charcoal with touches of white on paper, 15-1/8 x 18-3/8". Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art.

Hopper used the same principle to convey psychological interplay in *Office at Night*. At the end of his explanation for the Walker Art Center, which consisted of visual description, he cautioned, "Any more than this, the picture will have to tell, but I hope it will not tell any obvious anecdote, for none is intended."<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the nighttime drama cannot be overlooked. The implied sexual and psychic tension is a source of intrigue for the viewer who becomes a witness to the encounter.



Fig. 6. Edgar Degas, *The Cotton Exchange, New Orleans, 1873*. Oil on canvas, 29-1/8 x 36 1/4". Courtesy Museum of Pau, France.

Hopper's idea of casting the spectator as witness goes back at least to the art of the Netherlands with which he certainly was familiar.<sup>23</sup> He visited Amsterdam in July 1907; there he saw Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* which he described to his mother as "the most wonderful thing of his I have seen. It is past belief in its reality—it almost amounts to deception."<sup>24</sup> Although a subsequent cleaning has shown that the scene Rembrandt depicted was not really a nocturnal one, Hopper was undoubtedly attracted to the dramatic possibilities inherent in representing the contrast of light in a darkened setting. In his explanation of *Office at Night* he detailed his preoccupation with light:

There are three sources of light in the picture—indirect lighting from above, the desk light and the light coming through the window. The light coming from outside and falling on the wall in back made a difficult problem, as it is almost painting white on white, it also made a strong accent of the edge of the filing cabinet which was difficult to subordinate to the figure of the girl.<sup>25</sup>

Hopper's deep interest here in conveying the presence of light recalls his earlier statement that he desired to paint the "sunlight on the side of a house."<sup>26</sup>

Hopper's investigation of the effects of nocturnal artificial illumination may have derived from his interest in the work of Degas who dealt with it in a dramatic way. Degas recorded thoughts in a notebook concerning the nocturnal effects of light: "The smartest is not always to reveal the source of light, but the effect of light."<sup>27</sup> In *Office at Night*, Hopper has shown the viewer only one of the three light sources he enumerated—the desk lamp. The source of lighting from above and coming through the window remains out of view. The small desk lamp and the reflection in the glass of the partition of light entering



Fig. 11. Edgar Degas, *The Bellelli Family, c. 1860*. Oil on canvas, 78 3/4 x 99 5/8". Courtesy Musée du Jeu de Paume.

through the window increase the sense of drama. These devices recall the small table lamp and a reflection in the mirror above the fireplace serving as another source of light in Degas' *The Interior* (Fig. 16), also reproduced in Jamot.<sup>28</sup> Surely the tension of this nocturnal encounter between a man and woman interested Hopper. That he had this composition in mind when he painted *Office at Night* is also indicated by the organization of space and the pose of the usherette in his *New York Movie* of the previous year (Fig. 17). She leans against the wall in a manner similar to the man in *The Interior*. Hopper's dramatic use of shadows is also close to Degas as are the deep narrow space and tilting floor.

In an important essay he wrote in 1924, Hopper compared John Sloan to Degas: "Sloan's design is the simple and unobtrusive tool of his visual reaction. It attempts tenaciously and ever the surprise and unbalance of nature, as did that of Degas."<sup>29</sup> In considering Hopper's discussion of Sloan and the relationship of Hopper's own work to that of Degas, James Thrall Soby concluded:



Fig. 12. Edward Hopper, *Proof for illustration, two men in an office*.

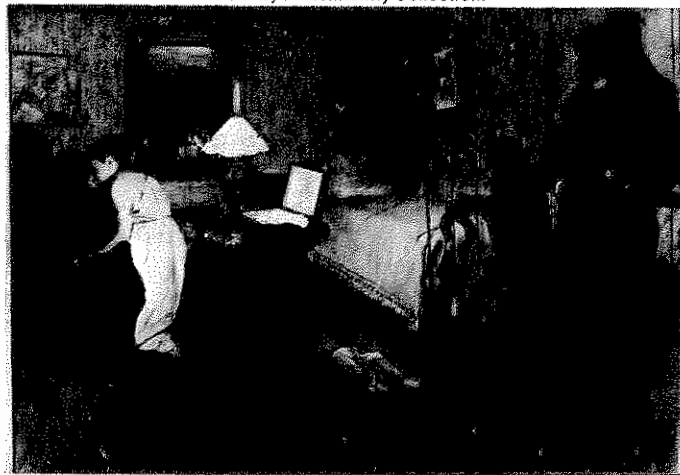
There is, however, a danger in linking Hopper to so cultivated an artist as Degas. For while the Frenchman evolved his art from the great traditions of Italy and France, Hopper is by comparison a self-made painter working from a much narrower cultural heritage. Unlike Charles Demuth, he is not remarkable for the use he has made of divergent sources, but for his relative lack of sources.<sup>30</sup>

Here Soby incorrectly discounted Hopper's intense interest in European—especially French nineteenth-century—art. Hopper's three trips to Europe were significant events which confirmed the lesson he had learned in Henri's classes. In the article on Sloan, Hopper paid tribute to Henri in this regard: "This influence of the French masters of the nineteenth century was also made of vital importance to American painting by Robert Henri, whose courage and energy have done so much to shape the course of art in this country."<sup>31</sup> Critics have persisted in seeing Hopper's work as some kind of homespun American hybrid rather than recognizing its sophistication and originality in its synthesis of some of the best features of both European and American art.

In *Office at Night* the back wall "is on an oblique angle receding to the left side of the picture" due to either an "abuse of parallel perspective" or the room being "a very unusual



trapezoidal shape."<sup>32</sup> Thus there is an illusion for the observer of "being suspended in air . . . unable to determine his own position."<sup>33</sup> In this, Hopper's canvas goes beyond Degas—it entices and holds the spectator in a tense, intimate, stagelike space by three walls instead of the two we find in Degas' *The Cotton Exchange, New Orleans* or *The Interior*. Once there in the arena where the drama is taking place, the viewer confronts the players' psychic intensity—indeed, is engulfed by it. Perhaps this explains, at least in this instance, the identification the public seems to feel with the powerful emotional dimension in Hopper's painting.



10. O'Doherty, *American Masters*, p. 23.  
11. Paul Jamot, *Degas, Editions de la Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Paris, 1924. Unfortunately, except for a few art books, most of the Hoppers' collection of books was lost. Among the extant books are *Atelier Edgar Degas, Catalogue des Tableaux, Pastels et Dessins par Edgar Degas et provenant de son atelier*, 1918, 2me vente, Paris, December 11-13, 1918, inscribed Josephine Nivison, and Henri Dumont, *Degas*, Hyperion, Paris, 1948.  
12. *Catalogue of Paintings & Pastels by Edgar Degas 1834-1917*, Durand-Ruel Galleries, New York, January 31-February 18, 1928.  
13. Hopper must have seen earlier reproductions of this picture in books such as P.-A. Lemoisne, *Degas*, Paris, 1912 and he may have seen the painting in Philadelphia in the Degas exhibition of 1936 at The Pennsylvania Museum of Art.  
14. For examples of this in Degas' work, see Theodore Reff, *Degas: The Artist's Mind*, New York, 1976, Ch. III, "Pictures Within Pictures," pp. 90-146.



Fig. 13. Edward Hopper, Study for Figure of Woman in Office at Night, 1940. Courtesy Kennedy Galleries.

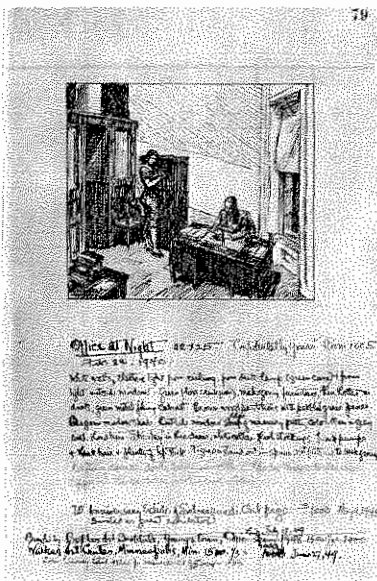


Fig. 14. Edward Hopper, Page from ledger on Office at Night. Collection Lloyd Goodrich.

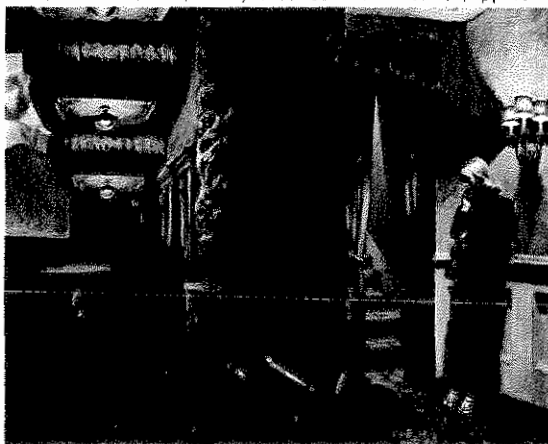


Fig. 17. Edward Hopper, *New York Movie*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 40-1/8. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.

The author, who is compiling a catalogue raisonné of the work of Edward Hopper in all media under a grant from the Andrew Mellon Foundation, would appreciate hearing from owners of the artist's work or from those who possess correspondence from Hopper or his wife or photographs of them. The Whitney Museum of American Art will present an exhibition of Hopper's prints and illustrations in the spring of 1979 and a major retrospective of his work in late 1980. Please send any information to the author, Whitney Museum of American Art, 945 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021.

1. Edward Hopper, "Office at Night" explanatory statement accompanying letter of August 25, 1948, to Norman A. Geske, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
2. Katharine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists*, New York, 1962, p. 135. See also Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth*, New York, 1973, p. 15: "The thing that makes me so mad is the 'American Scene' business. I never tried to do the American scene as Benton and Curry and the



Fig. 15. Edgar Degas, *Sulking*. Oil on canvas, 12 3/4 x 18 1/4. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, The H.O. Havemeyer Collection.

- midwestern painters did. I think the American Scene painters caricatured America. I always wanted to do myself."
3. Hopper illustrated several articles in *System* in 1913 such as "The Man for the Job," April 1913, "The Spur of Pay and Promotion," June 1913, "Living up to your Employment System," July 1913, "Your Business Tomorrow," September 1913, and "How I Sell Life Insurance," November 1913. *System* was published from December 1900 through 1927 by the A. W. Shaw Co. of Chicago. It was superseded by *Magazine of Business* in 1928 which became *Business Week* in 1929.
  4. For a complete listing of Hopper's travels in Europe, see the author's "Edward Hopper: Chronology," in *Edward Hopper at Kennedy Galleries*, New York, May 11-June 8, 1977.
  5. Lloyd Goodrich, *Edward Hopper*, New York, 1971, p. 31.
  6. Goodrich, *Edward Hopper*, p. 20. William Innes Homer with the assistance of Violet Organ, *Robert Henri and His Circle*, Ithaca, N. Y., 1969, p. 163. Henri also stressed Velazquez, Rembrandt, Hals, Goya, Daumier, El Greco, Courbet, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Whistler, Cézanne, and Renoir.
  7. Kuh, *Artist's Voice*, p. 135.
  8. *Ibid.*
  9. Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists*, New York, 1957, p. 199.

15. Rodman, *Conversations*, p. 199.
16. Jo kept most of the records, and Hopper made sketches after his works for the ledgers. Hopper made occasional notes in them, but unless indicated, written comments are in Jo's hand.
17. O'Doherty, *American Masters*, pp. 11-13.
18. Reff, *Degas*, p. 116.
19. *Sulking* was absent from October 26-December 8, 1936, while at the Pennsylvania Museum of Art in Philadelphia and from January 27, 1937-January 4, 1938, while at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris. After its return to the Metropolitan, it was exhibited continuously through April 8, 1941. Thus, this work was on view during the entire period Hopper painted *Office at Night* which was completed, according to his ledger, on February 22, 1940.
20. *Loan Exhibition of Masterpieces by Old and Modern Painters*, M. Knoedler and Co., New York, April 6-24, 1915. *Sulking* was listed, in the catalogue, as *The Dispute*, no. 25.
21. Reff, *Degas*, p. 216.
22. Hopper to Geske, August 25, 1948.
23. Edward Hopper, "John Sloan and the Philadelphians," *The Arts*, XI, April 1927, p. 173. In this article Hopper mentioned "the honest simplicity of early Dutch and Flemish masters . . ." A well known example where the spectator becomes witness is Jan van Eyck's *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride* of 1434 in the National Gallery, London, which Hopper would have seen on his visit there during early July 1907.
24. Edward Hopper to his mother, unpublished letter from Berlin, July 27, 1907.
25. Hopper to Geske, August 25, 1948.
26. Goodrich, *Edward Hopper*, p. 31.
27. Reff, *Degas*, p. 220.
28. Hopper may have seen Degas' *The Interior* when it was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum where it was on extended loan from the Whitmore collection from 1921-1935.
29. Hopper, "John Sloan," p. 173.
30. James Thrall Soby, *Contemporary Painters*, New York, 1948, p. 39. Although a few other writers have noted Hopper's interest in Degas' work, none has paid it the attention it merits. The author intends to treat this in further depth in a forthcoming study of Hopper's interest in French art. To date the most thorough discussion of Degas' influence on Hopper is Jerrold Lanes, "Edward Hopper: French Formalist, Ash Can Realist, Neither or Both?" *Artforum*, VII, October 1968, pp. 44-50.
31. Hopper, "John Sloan," pp. 174-75.
32. Jean Gillies, "The Timeless Space of Edward Hopper," *The Art Journal*, XXXI, Summer 1972, p. 409.
33. *Ibid.*