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# Josephine Verstelle Nivison Hopper

GAIL LEVIN

For some women artists of Josephine Verstelle Nivison's generation—for instance, Sonia Delaunay-Terk, Sophie Taüber-Arp, or Marguerite Thompson Zorach—marriage to an artist resulted in creative exchange, career encouragement, and even collaboration.<sup>1</sup> Yet for Josephine Nivison, marriage to Edward Hopper in 1924 marked the end of her professional advancement, as much of her energy was soon channeled into promoting his career. She kept precise records of all of his work as it left the studio, took care of correspondence with collectors and museums, and saw herself as his protector from over-zealous critics and reporters.

At the time of her marriage, Nivison was already established as an artist and had also acted with the Washington Square Players in New York. Like Hopper, she had studied at the New York School of Art under both Robert Henri and Kenneth Hayes Miller. She admitted that she met Hopper “under Robert Henri’s wing,” though she later pretended that she was much younger than Hopper.<sup>2</sup> Actually Nivison was born on March 18, 1883—less than a year after Hopper’s birth on July 22, 1882. Henri’s 1906 portrait of her as *The Art Student* documents that she, like Hopper, was then a student at the New York School of Art.

Nivison, a native New Yorker, once remarked: “It was my great good fortune to grow up in New York and not have to move mountains and lakes and hencoops and relations in an effort to get there.”<sup>3</sup> Her father, a musician, permitted her to study dance, French and art. She praised Henri, who was her favorite teacher: “His teaching was so broad. It amounted to a philosophy of life, a religion, and was never confined merely to putting paint on canvas. The search for character was a dominating interest in the treatment of a subject . . . the student . . . was left pretty much to himself to carve out his own technique.”<sup>4</sup> She traveled to Europe in 1907, visiting Haarlem in Holland where Henri was conducting summer classes.<sup>5</sup> During that same trip, she visited Italy, which Hopper never saw, and admitted seeing

“the more modern painters in Paris” of whom Hopper claimed he remained unaware.<sup>6</sup>

Nivison’s early associations with artists of the American avant-garde also contrasted with Hopper’s more conservative background. Among her friends was the poet Alfred Kreymborg, editor of the little magazine *The Glebe*. In 1914, she showed in a group exhibition of “Modern Painters” at the Daniel Gallery in New York with such vanguard artists as Man Ray, Stuart Davis, Preston Dickinson, Samuel Halpert, William Zorach, and Charles Demuth.<sup>7</sup> In July 1914, one of her works appeared as an illustration to John Reed’s “Happy Valley” in *The Masses*, a Socialist-oriented magazine for which John Sloan was then art editor (Fig. 1). Like Sloan, she probably became disillusioned with the magazine’s more doctrinaire propaganda after the outbreak of World War I. In any case, she ceased to contribute her work to *The Masses*, but continued to publish her drawings, mostly on humanitarian themes, in newspapers such as the Chicago *Herald Examiner*, *The Evening Post*, and the New York *Tribune*.<sup>8</sup> Around 1915, Nivison became a member of the Washington Square Players, appearing



FIG. 1. Josephine N. Hopper, Illustration for John Reed, “Happy Valley,” in *The Masses* (1914). Photo: Lee Brian, Palm Beach, Florida.

in some of their productions at the Band Box Theatre. These included Percy Mackaye's *The Antick, Another Interior* (an anonymous gastronomic allegory), Holland Hudson's *Shepherd in the Distance*, Leonid Andreyev's *Love of One's Neighbor*, and Maeterlinck's *Miracle of St. Anthony*. She also performed with Yvette Guilbert in 1919 at The Neighborhood Playhouse in *Guibour*, a 14th century French miracle play adapted by Anne Sprague Macdonald.<sup>9</sup>

Both *The Masses* and the Washington Square Players were important enterprises for the many feminists active in Greenwich Village at this time. It is clear that Nivison, then living on West Ninth Street, was in sympathy with many feminist issues, but it is not certain how actively she participated in specific political activities. She chose a lifestyle for herself quite opposite to that of the traditional child-bearing, housekeeping woman. She was 41 when she married, never had children, and adamantly refused to do much in the way of housekeeping or cooking.

Most of Jo Nivison's summers were spent in New England—in Provincetown (1908, 1914, 1917, and 1922), on Martha's Vineyard (1910), on Monhegan Island (1915 and 1918), in Ogunquit (1916 and 1919), and in Gloucester (1923). The watercolors she painted during the summers of 1922 and 1923 were exhibited at the New Gallery's "The Hundred Dollar Holiday Exhibition" (December 12, 1922 through January 2, 1923). Also represented were her friends Bertram Hartman and Carl Sprinchorn, as well as artists as diverse as Marsden Hartley, Moise Kisling, Amedeo Modigliani, Pablo Picasso, Abraham Walkowitz, Katherine Schmidt, and William and Marguerite Zorach. About the same time, Nivison was included in another group show at the Bel-maison Gallery at Wanamaker's department store in New York, along with Charles Sheeler, Samuel Halpert, Lyman Sayen, Abraham Walkowitz, Marguerite Zorach, William Glackens, Edward Hopper, and others.

On her summer trips, Nivison had frequently run into Hopper, then an illustrator and struggling artist best known for his etchings. Years later she recalled the circumstances of their early friendship:

We knew some of the same people in New York and used to see each other at exhibitions. Then we were seated at the same table at Ma Perkins' boarding house at Ogunquit. Then another summer we were both at Monhegan and he said "Hi" to me on the wharf. But he was shy. He had good dancing legs but he wouldn't dance. Then the next year we were both at Gloucester, and he said "Hey, I saw your cat yesterday," then he sat on a fence and drew a map of Gloucester for me. The girl I was rooming with didn't like Eddie; so he would come around early in the morning and throw pebbles against my window to wake me up for a sketching trip.<sup>10</sup>

In Gloucester during the summer of 1923, Nivison encouraged Hopper to paint watercolors, a medium he had then been using only for illustration and caricatures. He began to record the architectural surroundings of this

picturesque village. That fall, when they returned to New York, to the same Greenwich Village neighborhood, Hopper and Nivison began to see a lot of each other. They frequently ate in a favorite Chinese restaurant at Columbus Circle and made occasional excursions to the theater,<sup>11</sup> Hopper courting her with romantic sketches, poetry and notes in French.<sup>12</sup>

When Jo was invited to show her watercolors at the Brooklyn Museum in "A Group Exhibition of Water Color Paintings, Pastels, Drawings and Sculpture by American and European Artists" (November 19-December 20, 1923), she suggested they include Edward's work. As she recounted years later in a joint interview:

I got over there and they liked the stuff and I started writing and talking about Edward Hopper, my neighbor . . . they knew him as an etcher, but they didn't know he did watercolors. "Oh, well then have him bring some of his things over for the show." So I go back and oh, well, you [Hopper] did go and bring stuff, and they go and buy one! And they had put up separate . . . compartments and he had a little show of his own and right next to it I had my show, my watercolors too, and I remember you [Hopper] dragged, you carried my stuff back when the time came, you didn't have me hauling them through the subway, what a sorry sight I'd have made!<sup>13</sup>

Nivison and Hopper each showed six watercolors in this exhibition.<sup>14</sup> She sold nothing, but the Brooklyn Museum purchased Hopper's *The Mansard Roof* (painted the previous summer in Gloucester) for \$100. This was the second painting Hopper sold, and his first since the 1913 Armory Show. The critics ignored Nivison's work, but praised Hopper's as "exhilarating," "one of the high spots of the exhibition," and even compared him to Winslow Homer.<sup>15</sup> When Jo recalled the circumstances of his inclusion in the Brooklyn exhibition, he denied any memory of it, provoking her to add: "But I remember that you've never said boo for me, never lifted a finger about shows, you know, since."<sup>16</sup>

On July 9, 1924 at the Eglise Evangélique on West Sixteenth Street, Jo and Edward were married. Guy Pène du Bois was the best man and joined the Hoppers in Gloucester on Cape Ann, where they spent their honeymoon. Jo had wanted to go to Cape Cod, but Edward insisted on Cape Ann.<sup>17</sup> Although of contrasting personalities, they shared many interests: both were well-read, had traveled in Europe, loved the theater, poetry, and were romantic. Jo later reminisced that Hopper once "started quoting Verlaine on Bass Rock in Gloucester" and that she surprised him by continuing the poem when he stopped.<sup>18</sup> She was gregarious, out-going, talkative, while he was shy, quiet, solitary, and introspective.

Not many people came to know Hopper intimately. To Jo he revealed his romantic nature, his wit, and his intellectual sophistication during their 43-year marriage. Jo was the object of his wit and his full partner in intellectual and literary pursuits. Nevertheless, the Hoppers' relationship was complicated by Jo's own ambitions as an artist. She came to resent the fact that her painting

did not command much attention. She was also possessive, insisting that she model for all of the female figures he painted. If this responsibility took away from her time to paint, she made it up by avoiding domestic duties.

When they married, Jo moved into Edward's Washington Square studio. But she did not have her own studio there until 1938, when they were able to acquire adjacent space. Hopper, who had first moved there in 1913, was never willing to relocate, although he gladly spent his summers in New England or elsewhere. Jo commented on their home:

My husband has lived in this famous old building on Washington Square, built in the 1830s for more than 40 years and marrying me did not uproot him. I just joined him there. Living there requires Spartan endurance . . . but the rewards are great indeed to the artist. There is a fine daylight from its skylights, large white marble fireplaces, and two big studios.<sup>19</sup>

Marriage not only changed her residence, but also the subject matter she chose to paint. Previously, as seen in her drawing published in *The Masses*, she made many sketches and pastels of children. Edward, however, was impatient with children, so that she rarely portrayed them. She confided:

One certainly could not expect him to put up with all that goes on with children posing in the workshop. Most certainly not! The only times I've done children since we've been married have been when he's been painting outdoors in the country and children have gathered about to watch him. At those times I've thought it was a good idea to start a counter-attraction in order to relieve him by getting the disturbers to pose for me.<sup>20</sup>

The Hoppers traveled frequently, with Jo ready to pack their bags whenever Edward needed inspiration or had to go off to jury an exhibition. Edward liked to drive, and their car (always purchased used) served as a mobile studio for painting watercolors. The adaptable



FIG. 2. Josephine N. Hopper, *Cape Cod Bedroom* (c. 1944-46). 29" x 36". Private collection.

Jo was always in the front seat: "With the front seat pushed up, there's room for my husband's long legs in the back. I share the front seat with the steering wheel. But fortunately I don't take up a lot of room. . . ."<sup>21</sup> When working alongside Edward, Jo often painted landscapes and architectural views similar to his. However, her most interesting pictures are interiors, which have a rather naive quality about them, often demonstrating strange multiple perspectives. For example, in *Blue Rocker* or *Power of the Press (Chez Hopper III)* of about 1953-54, we look down on the seat of an upholstered rocking chair and below to a pile of newspapers and magazines that seem to almost leap off the tilted floor. In a framed mirror hanging on the wall in the background is a reflection of the marble fireplace and woodburning stove in their Washington Square apartment. Among the magazines is a copy of *Reality*, which Hopper, Raphael Soyer, Isabel Bishop, and other representational painters published in order to take a stand against Abstract Expressionism.

Another painting of an intimate interior, *Cape Cod Bedroom* (Fig. 2), depicts the Hoppers' bedroom in the simple clapboard house that Edward designed in 1934 in South Truro, Massachusetts. The view from the windows is mostly sea and sky, for their home was located high on a sandy bluff overlooking Cape Cod Bay. Once again, the floor tilts sharply out toward the viewer, giving the illusion that the furniture might slide out through the picture plane.

Jo also painted still lifes—a genre Edward abandoned after his student years. In some of these, such as *Jewels for the Madonna (Homage to Illa)*, she was able to express her fondness for beads, baubles, trinkets, and even flowers (Fig. 3). (The feminine objects she chose



FIG. 3. Josephine N. Hopper, *Jewels for the Madonna (Homage to Illa)* (c. 1935-45). 30" x 25". Private collection. Photo: Geoffrey Clements, New York.

remind one of those in Audrey Flack's recent "Vanitas" series.) Jo may have been reacting to what she regarded as Hopper's typical male disdain for flowers; he only included them in one of his paintings—*Room in Brooklyn* of 1932—and then just to add to the type of interior environment he sought. Yet she too had a bias against flowers born of their feminine associations: "Although intrigued, I fought shy of them. That is what is expected of a lady artist: to do flowers."<sup>22</sup>

*Jewels for the Madonna* is painted like a votive altarpiece. Flanked by candles and flowers and overlooking offerings of beads, jewels, a shell, an alligator and other bric-a-brac is a mother cat embracing a kitten cheek-to-cheek, like a Byzantine Madonna and Child. Their eyes, open wide, stare out at the viewer. This must be Jo's ironic comment on maternity, for she arranged the still-life homage on the top of a wooden paint box. In her childless life, her love for her cat, Arthur, provided an outlet for her maternal feelings: "I was taking out a maternity complex on a big warrior alley cat. . . . Think of all a child has been spared by all that went to the cat instead."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Edward seems to have been jealous of the attention she showered on her cat. This he expressed with a dry wit in some of the many caricatures he made to tease her or to make a point in an argument. One, produced in the early years of their marriage and captioned "Status Quo," depicts Jo seated at the dinner table across from Arthur while Edward crouches cat-like on the floor begging for something to eat. Once, for New Year's Day, Edward made Jo a card of a Madonna with a cat in a cradle. Thus, it would seem that *Jewels for the Madonna* embodies part of the mythology of the Hopper household.

According to Brian O'Doherty, Jo "reserved for herself the privilege of attacking her husband as energetically as she defended him, often surrounding his inertia with a dazzling series of provocations" and perhaps, he suggested, she even "stung him to life."<sup>24</sup> John Clancy, of the Frank K.M. Rehn Gallery, where Edward showed for over 40 years, also recalled the Hoppers' arguments. He noted that when Jo was really angry, the only way Edward could appease her would be by offering to sit for a portrait.<sup>25</sup> His reluctance, of course, was in sharp contrast to her constant willingness to pose for him.

Despite his protestations, Jo painted several portraits of Edward in which she captured his melancholy, introspective personality. In *Edward Hopper Reading Robert Frost* (Fig. 4), she depicted him seated in a simple wooden beach chair in their Cape Cod studio-living room. His long legs stretch out near one of the hooked rugs she made from old clothes she collected. The rug tilts out toward the picture plane inexplicably, drawing our attention to it. Holding the open book of Frost's poetry, Edward seems immobilized, his face frozen in a glum expression. His intellectual nature is symbolized by a stack of books visible in the background behind his head, his silent, somber mood broken only by the animation of the curtains waving slightly in the sea breeze.

Painting side by side, Edward and Jo were bound to influence each other. Through their contrasting personalities and the different ways they perceived the world, each offered the other an alternative viewpoint. Occasionally they painted the same scene. One instance is *Dauphinée House*, his version dated 1932, hers undated. Although she kept precise records of her husband's work, she did not record her own. (A year earlier, Edward had painted a similar view of the house in a watercolor, named *Captain Kelly's House* for the man who originally built it.) While Jo's version of *Dauphinée House* is closely related to Edward's she included more details and painted with less control. Her building lacks the solidity of his and she misses the drama he achieved through the silhouette of a tall tree against the sky—hers fades into the background of the hillside. Architecture was clearly Edward's subject more than it was hers.

Jo was at her best when she found her own subjects—as in the intimate interiors she painted, or even the "female" subject of flowers:

One day when at a loss for subject matter my skirt brushed against some lovely petunias, zinnias—most arresting creatures, really—and I felt I must apologize . . . they seemed to have their own design on me. They were so enchanting. So I sat down beside them and soon found myself at work.<sup>26</sup>

Most of the critics, curators, and dealers who dealt with Edward ignored Jo's work. They saw her merely as his helpmate, archivist, and a collector who could lend to his retrospectives. She occasionally showed in group exhibitions such as those at the Whitney Studio Club (1927, 1928), the Art Institute of Chicago (1924, 1943), and the Pennsylvania Academy (1938). In 1958,

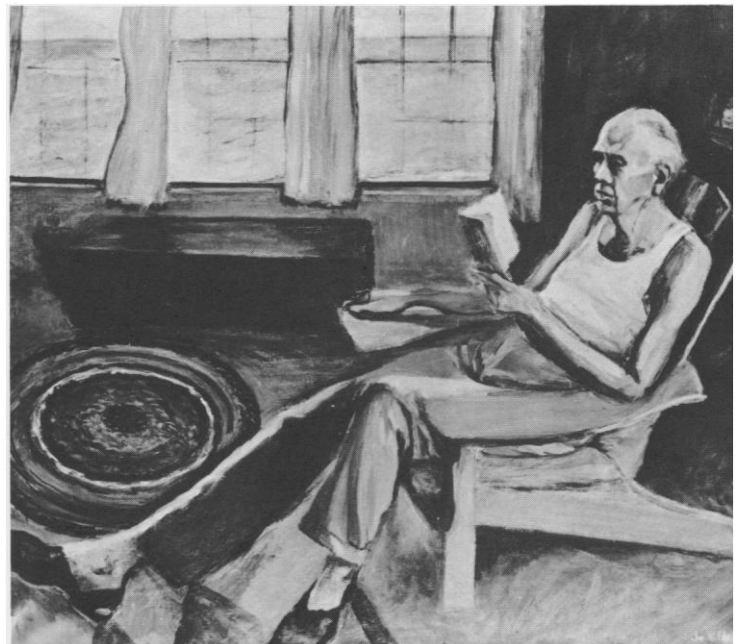


FIG. 4. Josephine N. Hopper, *Edward Hopper Reading Robert Frost* (c. 1955), 25" x 30". Private collection.

she even had a wall to herself at the Greenwich Gallery in New York, but she usually resorted to showing her work in her studio.

She always put Edward's career first, however, expending enormous energies to catalogue, promote, and defend his work. In 1933, when his first retrospective was to travel from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to the Arts Club of Chicago, it was Jo who worried about loans, catalogue text, insurance, mats, lighting, and installation. She explained: "I do hope you won't resent my talking about these pictures like young children, telling about their diet, etc. But I honestly do feel that way about them."<sup>27</sup>

Jo also joined Edward in naming and fantasizing about the characters in his paintings.<sup>28</sup> Thus she, too, played a crucial role in the rich drama of his imagination.

When Jo showed her work at the Greenwich Gallery, she wrote to her friend Rosalind Irvine at the Whitney Museum, poignantly explaining that if everyone who could have liked her pictures had not died or gone away "I'd be vindicated for feeling so agonized that my work was always left out and despised, sight unseen."<sup>29</sup> She admitted that she had taken out "the whole gamut of tragic frustration" on Edward, but claimed: "And richly he deserved it! These male animals!"<sup>30</sup> For many reasons, Josephine Verstelle Nivison Hopper merits more than the obscurity to which she has been relegated. In her youth, she moved among the avant-garde artists and thinkers of her day, while in later years her exemplary determination and energy enabled her to make essential contributions to her husband's career. •

1. For a discussion of such artist couples, see Joan M. Marter, "Three Women Artists Married to Early Modernists: Sonia Delaunay-Terk, Sophie Taüber-Arp, and Marguerite Thompson Zorach," *Arts Magazine*, 54 (September 1979), 88-95.
2. Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Random House), 18.
3. Frank Crotty, "Sharing Emotion with Others," *Worcester Sunday Telegram*, February 1, 1959, 21.
4. *Ibid.*
5. In the Municipal Archives in Haarlem, The Netherlands, is the register Josephine Nivison signed to view the Frans Hals collection on July 3, 1907.
6. Crotty, "Sharing Emotion with Others," 21.
7. "Modern Painters," through December 1914, also included Maurice Prendergast, Paul D'Albert, Gus Mager, Lucy Wallace, Jerome Myers, Max Kuhne, Harry Berlin, and Middleton Manigault. I wish to thank Judith K. Zilczer for help in locating information on this exhibition.
8. See, for example, the Fine Arts Supplement of the *Chicago Herald Examiner*, Thursday, July 11, 1918, "Children of the Ghetto, by Josephine Nivison; *Saturday Magazine of The Evening Post*, August 1, 1916, sketch of four girls swinging by

Josephine Nivison to accompany a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson; and the *New York Tribune* of Sunday, December 3, 1916, "At The Yellow Jacket," Josephine Nivison's sketch of "Henry Buckler as the Purveyor of Tea."

9. Nivison's name was listed Josephine Nivesson in the programs. She played supporting roles rather than the leading characters. In *The Antick*, she played "a boy"; in *Another Interior*, she played one of the "Passers-by in the Flesh"; in *The Shepherd in the Distance*, she played one of the slaves of the princess; in *Love of One's Neighbor*, she played the role of "Katie, His Daughter." Although she is not listed in the program of *Guibor*, she vividly recalled this role in a televised interview with Brian O'Doherty, Boston, 1961.
10. William Johnson, unpublished interview with Edward and Jo Hopper, October 30, 1956.
11. This is perhaps the inspiration for Hopper's painting *Chop Suey* of 1929. For a discussion of the theater as a theme for Hopper, see Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist*, (New York: W. W. Norton in Association with the Whitney Museum of American Art), 1980, 52-8.
12. See Gail Levin, "Edward Hopper, Francophile," *Arts Magazine* 53 (June 1979), 114-21, for examples of his use of French poetry and notes in wooing Jo both before and after their marriage.
13. Edward and Jo Hopper interviewed by Arlene Jacobowitz, The Brooklyn Museum, April 29, 1966, transcript of tape, 4.
14. Nivison showed *Jane and John, Margaret Brown, Arthur of 9th Street, Provincetown Roofs, Provincetown Waterfront, and Hill, Woodstock*. Hopper showed *Deck of a Beam-Trawler, House with a Bay Window, The Mansard Roof, Beam-Trawler Seal, Shacks at Lanesville, and Italian Quarter, Gloucester*.
15. Royal Cortissoz, "Charming Water Colors and Drawings," *New York Tribune*, November 25, 1923, 8. Helen Appleton Read, "Brooklyn Museum Emphasizes New Talent in Initial Exhibition," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 18, 1923, 2B.
16. Jacobowitz interview, 4.
17. O'Doherty, *American Masters*, 18.
18. *Ibid.*, 42.
19. Crotty, "Sharing Emotion with Others," 22.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, 21.
23. O'Doherty, *American Masters*, 18.
24. *Ibid.*, 17.
25. John Clancy, in conversation with the author.
26. Crotty, "Sharing Emotions with Others," 21.
27. Jo Hopper to Alice F. Roullier of the Arts Club of Chicago, unpublished letter of November 25-26, 1933.
28. See, for example, O'Doherty, *American Masters*, 13-14. These fantasies are also evident in the ledgers that Jo kept of Edward's paintings.
29. Jo Hopper to Rosalind Irvine, unpublished letter of April 1958.
30. *Ibid.*

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