



Edward Hopper is commonly viewed as a scrupulous realist who meticulously recorded the appearance of his everyday surroundings. From the 1910s to the 1960s, he captured the look of big-city and small-town America: the vernacular architecture of urban streets and rooftops, Victorian houses in New York and Massachusetts, summer views of coastal New England. He chose commonplace subjects yet rendered them so vividly they came to seem archetypal. The places Hopper painted often look familiar, prompting observers to feel that they have been there, that they know the very spot.

But Hopper's was a selective vision of reality, one that reflected his own temperament in the places he chose to paint. His work demonstrates that realism is not merely a literal or photographic copying of what we see but an interpretive rendering. Though he often recorded scenes directly as he observed them, the paintings are imbued with a sense of loneliness, with Hopper's strong preference for solitude. The drab, quiet, empty locations are deliberately unpicturesque. Whether in Paris, Gloucester, New York or Mexico, Hopper was drawn to similar kinds of structures, choosing rooftops and gables rather than gardens.

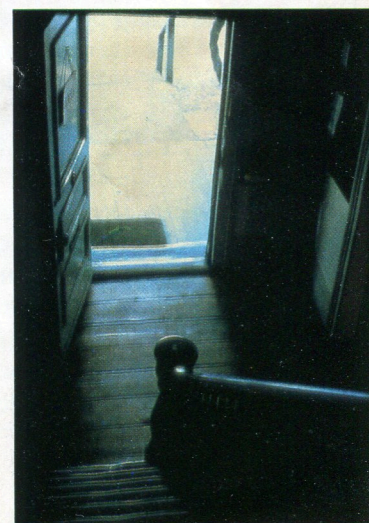
When I came to the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1976 as curator of its vast Hopper collection, I set out to learn

EDWARD HOPPER'S

Selective Vision of Reality

by GAIL LEVIN

The American realist wrought subtle changes in the scenes he painted, as in this view of the foyer in his childhood home in Nyack, New York (painting above, actual scene at right).



as much as I could about this artist whom I had never met. Besides organizing exhibitions and caring for the collection, which was bequeathed to the museum in 1968 by the artist's widow, Josephine Nivison Hopper, I had the awesome assignment of producing a *catalogue raisonné*, a complete reference book comprising several volumes documenting every work the artist ever produced. This meant not only researching Hopper's acknowledged masterpieces but also identifying and dating the more than 3,000 paintings, drawings, prints and illustrations in the Hopper bequest, including works that went back to the artist's boyhood.

My search could be compared to that of a detective looking for a missing person. My journeys took me to Nyack, New York; Gloucester and Cape Cod, Massachusetts; Monhegan Island, Rockland and Cape Elizabeth in Maine; Santa Fe, New Mexico; Paris; and Monterrey, Saltillo and Oaxaca in Mexico. Every known clue had to be assembled and examined. I collected the correspondence of the artist and his wife as well as his published essays. I interviewed their friends and even many people who had come into only brief contact with them. I gathered the catalogs of all the exhibitions at which Hopper had shown work and all the known reviews and articles about him.

In the catalog of his retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1933, Hopper stated: "My aim in painting has always been the most exact transcription possible of my most intimate impressions of nature." This was true of his early oil paintings and of all his watercolors, which were painted on location as pictorial records of what he saw. Many of his later oil paintings, however, suggest several levels of meaning, as if the artist had infused his subjects with elements of absence or aloneness. Hopper himself

once admitted that a particular painting was "no exact transcription of a place but [had been] pieced together from sketches and mental impressions of things in the vicinity."

Only by following in Hopper's footsteps, even allowing for the years gone by, is it possible to reveal the extent of his fidelity to the reality of appearances. The photographs on these pages represent just a few examples of the Hopper locales that I found on my various journeys during the past several years. By comparing these photographs with Hopper's paintings, we can learn much about his choice of subjects and his creative process.

Born in Nyack, New York, in 1882, Hopper attended a commercial art school for a year, then enrolled at the age of 19 in the New York School of Art, where he eventually studied painting with the renowned artist-teacher Robert Henri. Henri stressed the vital importance of the 19th-century French masters, but he also promoted a native American art, encouraging his students to paint the life they saw around them. In the fall of 1906, partly at Henri's urging, Hopper traveled to Paris; he spent nearly a year there, painting and seeing firsthand the work of the old and the modern masters.

In my quest for Hopper's Parisian motifs, I began by visiting 48 rue de Lille, where he had lived with a French family on his first trip to Paris. The Left Bank building was owned—and still is—by the Église Évangélique Baptiste. Hopper's parents had arranged the situation through the family's Baptist church in Nyack. At the rue de Lille address, I recognized that one of the small wood panels Hopper had painted was of the stairway of the building and that another panel depicted a corner of the small interior courtyard. His panel is a faithful rendering of the courtyard's structure, even to the pipe in the corner, but Hopper had already begun to eliminate unnecessary detail

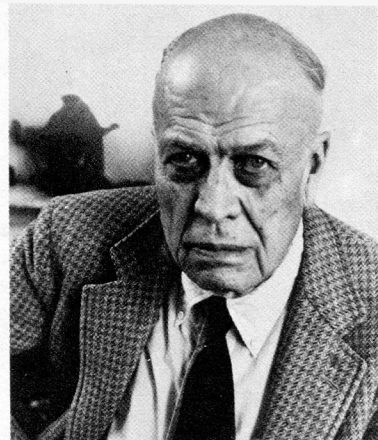
from his recording of reality. He saw no need to delineate every cobblestone, although he carefully caught the sloping angles along the pavement's periphery.

Hopper did not enroll in any of the Paris art schools, preferring instead to visit exhibitions on his own and to paint outdoors. His first four months in Paris were cold and rainy. As a result, his initial city scenes were painted close to his home and are somber in tone, matching his impression of his surroundings.

Just around the corner from 48 rue de Lille, I found the same quais along the Seine where Hopper painted so frequently in the spring. It was at this time that he began to respond to the famous Parisian light, the city's various bridges and the Pavillon de Flore of the Louvre, which he eventually depicted in different light and weather conditions. Hopper was enchanted by Paris, calling it "a most paintable city." He wrote to his sister that on overcast days the "same blue-grey permeates everything." His awareness of the effects of light and shadow on architectural structure, already apparent in his Paris work, continued to affect his choice and treatment of subject matter throughout his long career. Hopper returned to Europe twice—in 1909 and in 1910—then never went there again. After his three trips to Paris, America struck him as "awfully crude and raw," and in later years he admitted, "It took me ten years to get over Europe."

Success was slow in coming to Hopper. In 1910 he began to support himself by doing magazine and advertising illustration. But he refused to work more than three days a week at that, reserving the rest of his time for painting. He recalled, "I was always interested in architecture, but the editors wanted people waving their arms."

Even during these struggling formative years, Hopper managed to escape the demands of



Edward Hopper

commercial work and life in New York City during the summer. He fled to the serenity of seashore retreats on Cape Ann, Massachusetts, or to Maine, where he was able to focus on painting. These summertime excursions became a lifelong practice, as did the depiction of local subject matter.

Except for his commercial illustrations and caricatures of Frenchmen, Hopper had not worked in watercolor since his student days. He took up this medium again, however, during the summer of 1923, which he spent in Gloucester, Massachusetts, a summer colony popular among artists such as John Sloan, Leon Kroll, Stuart Davis and Marsden Hartley. Hopper was probably encouraged to consider watercolor by his artist friend Jo Nivison, who was already exhibiting her own watercolors. When she was invited to participate in a group watercolor show at the Brooklyn Museum that autumn, she suggested that Hopper's work also be included. As a result, the museum purchased Hopper's *The Mansard Roof* for \$100; this was his first sale of a painting in a decade.

In 1924 Hopper married Jo Nivison, and that summer's painting excursion in Gloucester became their honeymoon. Nivison accompanied Hopper on all of his journeys, often painting by his side. Throughout their life together they lived modestly, preferring bare, unembellished surroundings and splurging only on theater, movies and books. They visited Gloucester again in 1926 and in 1928.

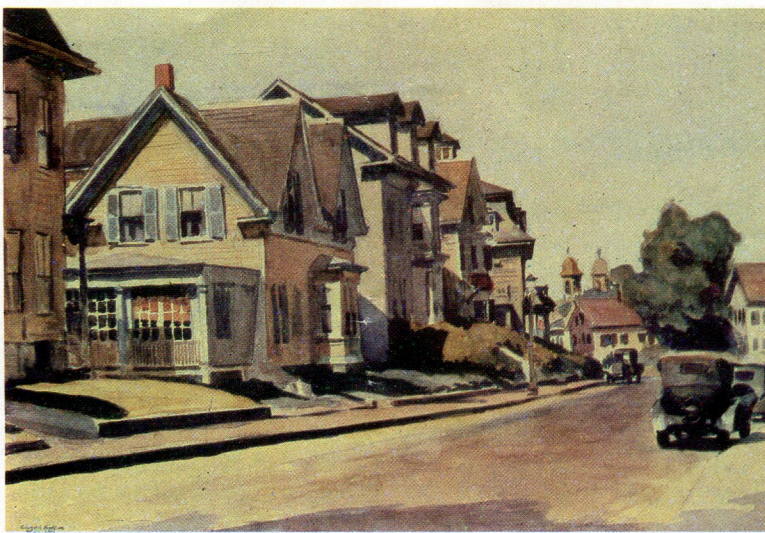
Hopper's repeated trips to Gloucester resulted in many

paintings of the local architecture and the coastline, mostly in watercolor. He recalled: "At Gloucester when everyone else would be painting ships and the waterfront, I'd just go looking at houses. It was a very solid-looking town. The roofs are very bold, the cornices bolder. The dormers cast very positive shadows. The sea captain influence, I guess—the boldness of ships."

Hopper used watercolor with confidence, improvising as he went along. He would apply the pigments after making a faint pencil sketch outlining the structures he intended to paint. What interested him was not the creation of textures but the recording of light. Light was the language through which Hopper expressed the forms and views before him.

Locating Hopper's many Gloucester subjects ranged from easy to impossible. Prospect Street still looks much as it did in 1928, when Hopper painted it with the towers of the Portuguese church in the distance. The porch of the house in the foreground is now an enclosed room, and other houses on this street and elsewhere have new roofs or have been painted different colors, but the appearance of many of Gloucester's houses remains essentially as Hopper captured it. After so many decades, trees and shrubs have changed, altering many vistas; and in some areas, urban growth has radically transformed the character of the town, leaving houses nearly unrecognizable. Some natives are able to identify locales from reproductions of Hopper's paintings; one fireman I asked quickly pointed out his mother's house.

The house in *The Mansard Roof* is beautifully preserved in the Rocky Neck area, which is still an artists' colony. The surrounding foliage, however, now obscures much of Hopper's view except in winter and early spring. Hopper later remarked of *The Mansard Roof* that he had painted it "in the residential district where the old sea



Prospect Street in Gloucester, Massachusetts, has hardly changed since Hopper painted it in 1928.

captains had their houses. . . . It interested me because of the variety of roofs and windows." Hopper must have appreciated the characteristic form of the mansard roof, both because of the way it dramatically caught the light and because of its association with his beloved Paris, where it is so prevalent.

In 1934, after having spent four summers in South Truro on Cape Cod, the Hoppers built a simple home there with a studio space to enable them to paint indoors. They also continued to travel, often in search of inspiration. They bought only used cars, but Hopper always insisted on replacing the tinted windshield with clear glass, for the car became his mobile studio; many of the locations he painted are those visible from a parked car.

Hopper's oil painting of the stairs in his boyhood home in Nyack (*Stairway*), which probably dates from around 1925, reveals how he had begun to combine observation and imagination. The architecture

portrayed looks much as the house (now the Edward Hopper Landmark Preservation Foundation) does today. If one doesn't recognize this, it is because the view shown through the front door is not the Hoppers' small front yard on North Broadway but verdant rolling hills mysteriously suspended beneath an ambiguous field of blue that indicates either sky or sea. In this strange perspective, we look sharply down the stairs, out the door and back up again. Hopper, who had not yet fully resolved this familiar view with his fantasy of it, eventually created a masterpiece on this theme in his summer home on Cape Cod: *Rooms by the Sea* of 1951, a painting in which reality yields to the imagined drama of the sea seen through the doorway.

As early as his student period, Hopper's love of the sea drew him to the dramatically stark architecture of New England lighthouses. Although his paintings of the 1910s and early 1920s from Cape Ann and

Monhegan Island include lighthouses, his most accomplished works on the subject were done on Cape Elizabeth, Maine, during the late 1920s. *The Lighthouse at Two Lights*, which Hopper painted in oil in 1927 and 1929, was the first Hopper location I visited. I was taken there during my undergraduate days while visiting a classmate from nearby Portland, Maine. "Here is the famous lighthouse painted by Edward Hopper," my friend informed me, both of us unsuspecting of my future involvement with the artist's work. In *Lighthouse Hill* of 1927 (see front cover), Hopper worked outdoors on location, capturing the stark forms of architecture set sharply against the blue sky. The buildings are bathed in sunlight, which animates the otherwise static images and creates a lively contrast to the cast shadows. Perhaps Hopper, nearly two meters tall, identified with the solitary lighthouse: Like him it stood apart, detached from the rest of the world.

Except for his summers in rural New England, Hopper lived all his adult life in New York City on the top floor of a simple walk-up apartment building at 3 Washington Square North. He moved in at the end of 1913 and remained there for 54 years, until his death in 1967. Gradually, as his financial situation permitted and his marriage necessitated, Hopper occupied three rooms plus a tiny kitchenette. Perhaps for a change of pace or for fresh air, he sometimes climbed the last flight of stairs to a door leading to the roof, where a marvelous view could be had in several directions. He liked to sketch up there and produced several watercolors and one oil, *City Roofs* (1932), of his view. The skylights, doorways and chimneys that punctuate the space, as well as a more distant skyscraper, caught Hopper's attention. The rooftop is a private world of shapes that Hopper may have seen as a microcosm of the city. The slabs of closely spaced chimneys para-



In 1906 Hopper lived on the rue de Lille in Paris. More than 70 years later, the author photographed the window he had painted.

course, but the El Palacio cinema sign and the odd assortment of chimneys, cornices and other structures were also remarkably intact. I could see just how deliberately Hopper had set himself up to paint on this roof terrace in Saltillo. The watercolors he produced there were less spontaneous and more carefully planned than his earlier watercolors had been.

Tracking Hopper's footsteps, finding the very places he painted, has helped illuminate the process by which he transformed his subjects. What has emerged from my search is a picture of a remarkably consistent artist with an individual vision that he pursued steadfastly despite the inevitable changing fashions of the times. His way of seeing was strikingly reductivist, omitting any excess detail or exaggerated emotions; and it was also intense, laying bare a kind of profound alienation. A shy, reserved man, Hopper created paintings that are masterpieces of understatement. He was not attracted to subject matter that was overly sentimental or involved with fantasy, preferring instead to depict what he observed in the most matter-of-fact manner. Hopper himself once declared, "The only quality that endures in art is a personal vision of the world." □

About the Author: Gail Levin is the author of three books on Edward Hopper, including *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist*.

phrase the towering skyscrapers that had begun to close in on Hopper's home.

In 1943, during World War II, the Hoppers were unable to obtain gas to drive to their summer home on Cape Cod. This prompted them to make their first trip to Mexico by train. Hopper did not find Mexico City to his liking but eventually found his way to two small towns in the north, Saltillo and Monterrey, where he produced a number of watercolors. Although Hopper did not find the kind of visual sti-

mulation he had found in Paris, he liked what he saw in Mexico and returned there in 1946 and again in the early 1950s.

He once explained why he had made several trips to Mexico but had never returned to Paris after 1910: "The thing is that to get to Mexico all you have to do is put your luggage in your car at the door and drive until you get there—as easy as that! Getting back into the States is somewhat more bothersome because of the United States Customs, but one can put up with it and one does

not get seasick on the way."

On their second visit to Mexico, in 1946, the Hoppers stayed at Saltillo's Hotel Arizpe Sainz, where their room opened onto a large roof terrace. From here Hopper saw views that he painted in several watercolors, including *El Palacio*. Visiting Saltillo for the first time in search of Hopper's locales, I was delighted to find that this small Mexican town seemed to have changed even less than Gloucester. The dramatic mountain peaks were still in their original place, of