



Fig. 1. Edward Hopper, *Room in New York*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 29 x 36". University of Nebraska Art Galleries, Lincoln, Nebraska, F.M. Hall Collection.

SYMBOL AND REALITY IN EDWARD HOPPER'S "ROOM IN NEW YORK"

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In Edward Hopper's oeuvre, "Room in New York" is a watershed painting with respect to both composition and content. It links his mature work to his earlier experience as an illustrator and suggests the direction of his subsequent exploration into the interpersonal relationships of couples.

Room in New York of 1932 (Fig. 1) seems to many to be the quintessential painting by Edward Hopper. It is the earliest of the kind of painting which inspired James Stevenson's cartoon (Fig. 2) published in *The New Yorker* during the Hopper retrospective held at the Whitney Museum in 1980.¹ In this Hopperesque cartoon, the man and woman look away from one another out their separate windows onto urban vistas blocked by

eur. The couple, resembling those in Hopper's compositions, appears bored, burdened with time's passage. They wait without knowing why.

In Hopper's oeuvre, *Room in New York* is a watershed painting with respect to both composition and content. It links his mature work to his earlier experience as an illustrator and suggests the direction of his subsequent exploration into the interpersonal relationships of couples. We are reminded of Hopper's

tic—like a close-up shot, a camera penetrating beyond a building's exterior walls to reveal some particular drama already in progress.² *Room in New York* also suggests Hopper's deep interest in both Dutch painting and French Impressionism which often provided inspiration for him.

The germ of *Room in New York* can be found in one of Hopper's illustrations for Carroll D. Murphy's "What Makes Men Buy?" published in *System, the Magazine of Business* (a forerunner to *Business Week*) in September 1912 (Fig. 3).³ In this illustration, we find the prototype for the man lost in reading his newspaper, ignoring his female companion. The composition of Hopper's illustration is skillfully organized by the rectangular shapes of the architecture echoed by the framed picture which hangs on the wall behind the couple, a device Hopper probably learned from the work of Edgar Degas.⁴ Twenty years later, in painting *Room in New York*, Hopper again utilized the rectangles of architecture to articulate an interior space, but he dramatically separated the viewer from the interior through the device of the window ledge which extends across his composition. He repeated the centrally placed round table, but shifted the woman from behind it to its side, directly across from the man, thereby achieving a more intense feeling of alienation.

The left side of *Room in New York* suggests the influence of Degas, particularly a work like *Uncle and Niece* (Fig. 4). Hopper's composition is related to Degas' not only in its depiction of a man seated at a circular table with his newspaper and its internal structure organized by rectangular architectural shapes, but also in its quiet theme and pensive atmosphere. Degas' *Absinthe* (Fig. 5), with its more melancholy mood and alienated couple who look away from one another, may also have prompted Hopper to develop this theme.⁵

If, however, we consider the right side of *Room in New York*, Hopper seems to have turned to Dutch seventeenth-century genre painting which he had first admired in his student days.⁶ Specifically, the woman at the piano bears a strong resemblance to the woman in Jan Steen's *The Harpsichord Lesson* (Fig. 6) which Hopper saw in June 1907 when he visited the Wallace Collection in London.⁷ In both paintings, a woman is depicted in profile, head bowed down toward the keys. Above and behind each woman, a framed picture hanging on the wall and a doorway define the space. Just five years after *Room in New York* was painted, the critic Ernest Brace pointed out Hopper's relationship to seventeenth-century Dutch painting: "Hopper's painting is first and foremost an experience in understanding and interpretation. It is scrupulously honest and it is as sensitive to the aspects of daily living as were seventeenth-century Dutch painters."⁸

The palette of *Room in New York* is an unusually bright and dissonant one for Hopper. The record books his wife Jo kept include her elaborate description of this nocturnal picture "painted in N.Y. studio" and completed February 24, 1932:

Outside night. Inside bright green walls, oak woodwork door, oak table. Girl in bright red, sitting front, head & shoulders twisted sideways to face piano, picking at keys with one finger. Arms & neck bares very white flesh, dark hair, profile in shadow but light on cheek & neck. Blond man in shirt sleeves reading newspaper. Pink apologetic [sic] chair. Dark red lamp shade showing sticking out from piano at top of girl's head. 4 blocks of masonry outside at left & pillar (side left) in reflected light. Under window black.

Jo's care in describing the details, color, and lighting of this canvas undoubtedly reflects Hopper's own great concern with these elements. In this record book entry, however, almost nothing is revealed of the painting's content.

In response to an inquiry about *Room in New York*, Hopper responded:

The idea had been in my mind a long time before I painted it. It was suggested by glimpses of lighted interiors seen as I walked along city streets at night, probably near the district where I live (Washington Square) although it's no particular street or house but is really a synthesis of many impressions.⁹

Just four years earlier Hopper had painted *Night Windows* (Fig. 7), his view of another harshly lit interior observed from the street. There the viewer is clearly cast in the role of voyeur look-

ing in at a woman undressing. Yet the erotic tension portrayed in *Night Windows* is between the observer and the observed, while in *Room in New York*, Hopper makes the observer witness an uncomfortable situation—an absence of communication between a man and a woman painfully contrasted to the intimate domesticity of their surroundings.¹⁰

When *Room in New York* was exhibited in 1932 in the First Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting at the Whitney Museum of American Art, critic Royal Cortissoz remarked: "The theme is pure banality and what the artist wreaks himself upon is simply the exact registration of fact."¹¹ By the 1950s, however, critics perceived much deeper meaning in *Room in New York* and credited Hopper with more complex intentions. Margaret Breuning noted that "the isolation seems to immobilize the figures," while Loring Holmes Dodd described the two people as "so palpably in want of something to do, the man listlessly bent over a newspaper, the woman idly fingering the keys of a piano."¹² J.G. Smith went even further in describing the painting's somber mood:

Room in New York is more than an excuse for delightful pattern—it is a pointed comment on the shallowness of

Fig. 2. "Say, why don't we go see the Hopper show at the Whitney?" Drawing by Stevenson; © 1980 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc., October 20, 1980.

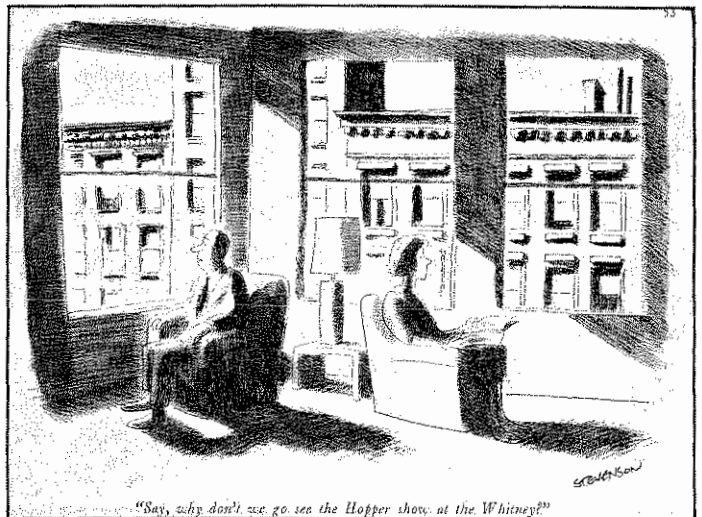


Fig. 3. Edward Hopper, Illustration for Carroll D. Murphy, "What Makes Men Buy?," 1912. *System, The Magazine of Business*, 22 (September 1912), p. 231.





Fig. 4. Edgar Degas, *Uncle and Niece*, c. 1876. Oil on canvas, 39 1/4 x 47". The Art Institute of Chicago, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis L. Coburn Memorial Collection.

Edgar Degas, *Absinthe*, 1876. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 30 1/4". Musée du Louvre, Paris.

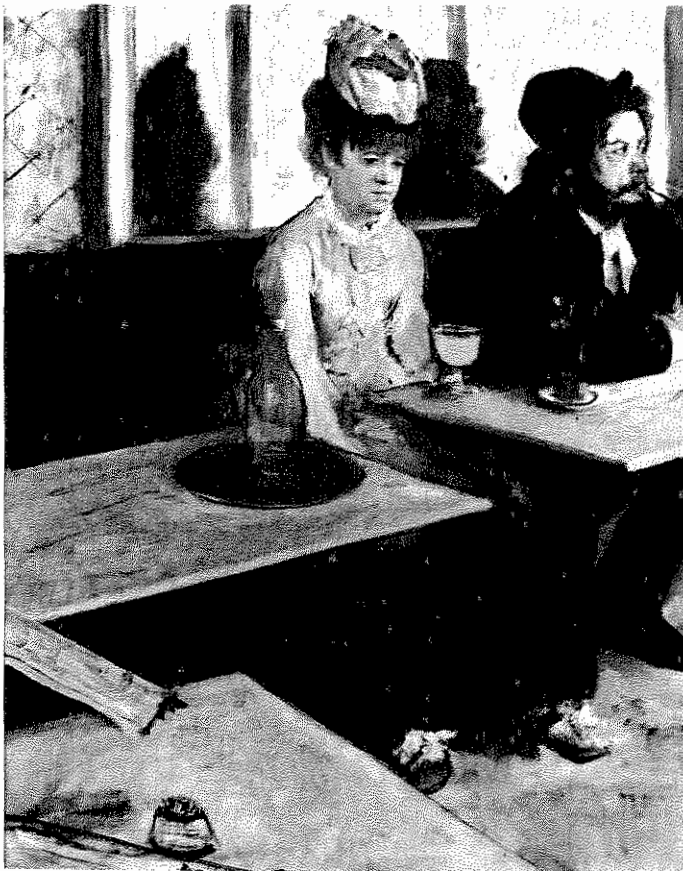


Fig. 5.

unanchored living. A shirt-sleeved man bends listlessly over his newspaper as the girl toys apathetically with the piano keys. The dull interior, bare table, monotonous door paneling, all bathed in an irritating light, combine to create as depressing a setting as one can find in this era that boasts its special refinements.¹³

Perhaps the most insightful comment on this painting was made by Hopper's friend and fellow painter Charles Burchfield who wrote: "The element of silence that seems to pervade every one of his [Hopper's] major works. . . it can almost be deadly, as in *Room in New York*. . ."¹⁴ How strange that Burchfield remarked on the almost deadly *silence* in a picture where a woman is clearly shown striking a piano key, making music. The piano becomes a substitute for spoken communication.¹⁵ In this encounter the substitution seems necessary, for the man, lost in his newspaper, even appears to desire escape from his female companion. In 1971, James Mellow referred to the couple as "bored young marrieds."¹⁶ As the man ignores her, the woman seems resigned and melancholy.

Hopper's painting sets up a pronounced, if stereotyped male-female dichotomy: he sits on the left reading a newspaper, emphasizing his intellect and pragmatic character, while she, seated opposite him, turns to make music, revealing her artistic, more emotional, feminine nature. She is showing disturbing the deadly silence, interjecting her presence, demanding his attention. He is introspective, withdrawn, unresponsive. This situation appears to mirror Hopper's own withdrawn personality and his relationship with his gregarious wife Jo, but it is also consistent with his earlier aloof attitude toward women.

A narrative drawing on two sheets of paper (Fig. 8) which survives from Hopper's boyhood probably dates from about 1896, during his awkward adolescence; it seems to express his own deep-seated fears of intimacy.¹⁷ Captioned "Act I," "Act II 'Neck,'" and "The Escape," this drawing depicts a man warding off an approaching woman, repulsing her embrace with his chagrined expression, and his fleeing, with the woman eagerly pursuing, her arms extended toward him.

Brian O'Doherty has recalled that the vivacious Jo often surrounded Hopper's "inertia with a dazzling series of provocations," explaining:

He and she were so opposed to each other in temperament they were a continual source of life and dismay to each other. Opinions are much divided as to her role. One view holds that Mrs. Hopper persecuted her husband. Another claims that she stung him to life.¹⁸

In this sense, we can link Jo to the woman who, by playing the piano, disturbs her companion's quiet, disrupting his reading the newspaper. Her role in Hopper's life as female provocateur, spoiler of man's peace, is even more pronounced in a later work, *Four Lane Road* of 1956 (Fig. 9), in which the woman yells out of a window at the placid man seated in the sun.

The Hoppers' relationship was complicated by Jo's own ambitions as a painter. She came to resent the fact that, after their marriage, her own work commanded less attention.¹⁹ Most of the critics, curators, and dealers who championed Hopper ignored Jo's work and her time was increasingly consumed as his sole model and archivist, although she continued to paint. In a 1958 letter to Rosalind Irvine of the Whitney Museum, Jo admitted that she had taken out "the whole gamut of tragic frustration" on Edward, but claimed: "And richly he deserved it! These male animals."²⁰

Hopper may have captured Jo's frustration and his own desire to avoid her wrath in *Summer in the City* of 1950 (Fig. 10) where the sunlight brightens the room but does not touch the woman's gloomy mood. Her companion, whose arms look too tense to suggest peaceful sleep, has turned away, burying his head in a pillow for escape. Since *Room in New York* painted seventeen years earlier, Hopper's sense of estrangement seems to have heightened considerably. He shows a woman, even more obviously restless and depressed, seated on the edge of a narrow, unforgiving bed in a spartan interior. Hopper's concern with this overwhelming sense of malaise, of romance gone stale, was expressed once again in his 1959 *Excursion into Philosophy* (Fig. 11). There a man bends under the weight of

While, as noted earlier, some critics like Royal Cortissoz have narrowly maintained that Hopper painted only "the exact registration of fact" or just what he observed, Hopper's realism often allowed, even consciously intended, for the expression of other less obvious themes.²¹ Occasionally, Hopper gave a clue to his meaning in his titles (*Excursion into Philosophy*, *Nighthawks*, *Solitude*, *Summer Twilight*),²² but, usually, he chose to remain elusive with statements such as "Any psychological idea will have to be supplied by the viewer. . . ."²³

Yet Hopper was fascinated by Symbolist poetry and even quoted Paul Verlaine in French on several occasions.²⁴ He was first interested in Symbolist literature during his years of study with Robert Henri at the New School of Art where it was much discussed, but continued to refer to Symbolist poetry during his later years, even giving Jo a volume of poetry by Arthur Rimbaud for Christmas in 1951.²⁵ It is the melancholy spirit of this poetry Hopper loved that we find in *Room in New York* and its successors; all are comments on the frustrations of human relationships. Poet John Hollander has even suggested that *Room in New York* is "the earliest of Hopper's many muted versions of Verlaine's *Colloque sentimental*."²⁶ Indeed, this poem poignantly recalls old ecstasies, now distant memories, for those who have lost all feeling: "Leurs yeux sont morts. . . ." The last lines demonstrate how close *Room in New York* is to the mood of Verlaine's "Sentimental Conversation":

Ah! Les beaux jours de bonheur indicible
Où nous joignons nos bouches!—C'est possible.
Qu'il était bleu, le ciel, et grand l'espoir!
—L'espoir a fui, vaincu, vers le ciel noir.
Tels ils marchaient dans les avoines folles,
Et la nuit seule entendit leurs paroles.²⁷

Recent interpretations of *Room in New York* have even stressed the specific symbolism of details in Hopper's setting:

By closing the door, the artist negates its penetrative potential. No longer a transmitter between the world within and the world without but rather a barrier between the two, the closed door metaphorically establishes the disposition of the couple. It underscores their non-interaction, the utter separation of their realities. . . .The pictures on



Fig. 6. Jan Steen, *The Harpsichord Lesson*. Oil on canvas, 14-5/8 x 18-7/8". The Wallace Collection, London.



Fig. 7. Edward Hopper, *Night Windows*, 1928. Oil on canvas, 29 x 34". The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of John Hay Whitney.

the wall behind and around each figure seem to further enframe the divergent realities of their private worlds.²⁸ The "private worlds" mentioned here have since been described in another commentary:

The painting is crowded with rectangles: Those of the framed pictures behind the man and the woman are no longer the emblematic images in a Victorian narrative painting but more softly expressive images of outwardness and inner withdrawal. A wide landscape is behind the man, who is reading of the world of light outside the room; the woman, pushed up by the painting's format against the dark upright, is commented on by the unreadable, dark, vertical print.²⁹

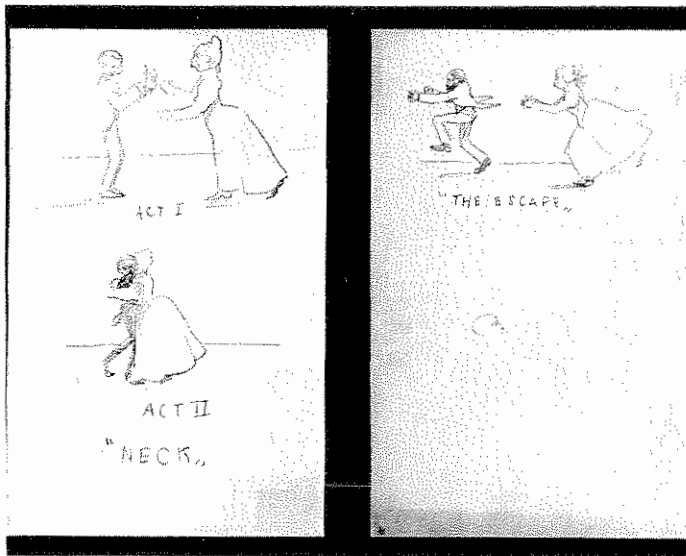


Fig. 8. Edward Hopper, Neck and The Escape, c. 1896. Pencil on paper. Private Collection.

Convincing as these interpretations seem, we must ask how much of such specific symbolism Hopper intended. Mahonri Sharp Young has recently insisted: "All his life Hopper intended that his paintings should be descriptive and topical; now he is not only the realist that he intended to be, but the painter of visions which he never saw."³⁰

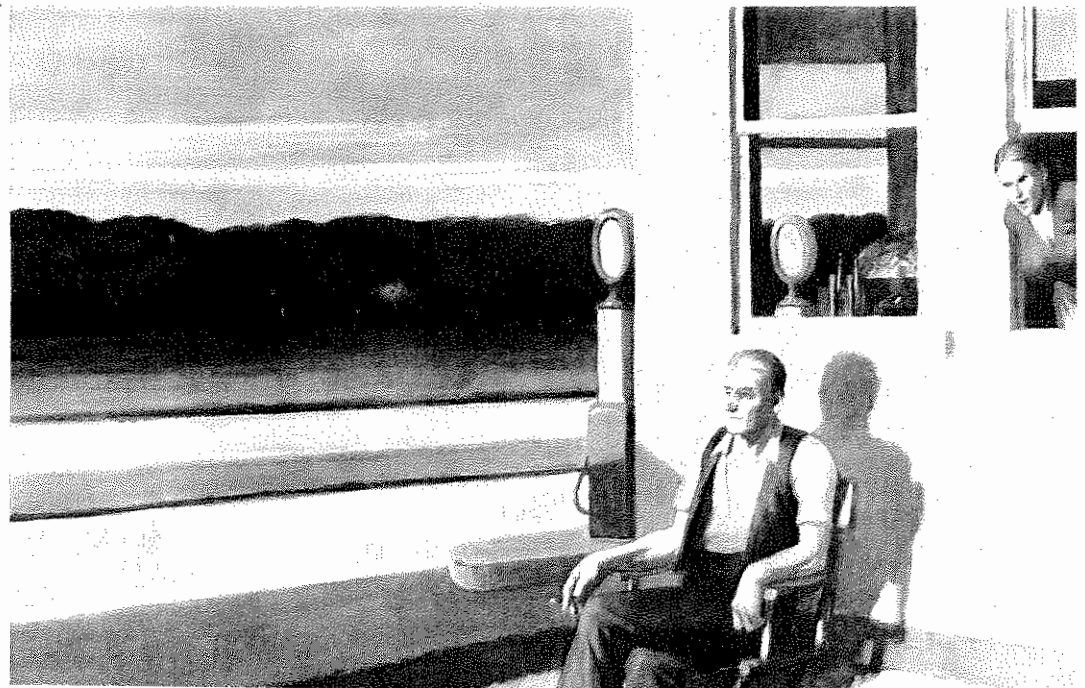
Hopper was steeped in Symbolist poetry, but surely he never programmatically produced a painting to illustrate a verse. He was in no sense a narrative painter and by 1932 had transcended his own early work in illustration. Nonetheless, many of his canvases were improvisations produced in his studio, combining his imagination with sketches made in many locations.³¹ Thus, *Room in New York* and most of Hopper's mature oils are not simply records of what he saw around him. What they are is best expressed by the quotation from Goethe that Hopper carried around in his wallet and cited for its relevance to artistic endeavor:

The beginning and end of all literary activity is the reproduction of the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is in me, all things being grasped, related, recreated, moulded and reconstructed in a personal form and an original manner.³²

To insist that Hopper's work was only descriptive of what he saw is to miss the many levels of meaning in these paintings—for Hopper transformed observation into poetry.

1. *Room in New York* was recently on view in the retrospective exhibition, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist*, sponsored by Philip Morris Incorporated and the National Endowment for the Arts. Organized by the author for the Whitney Museum of American Art, this exhibition can be seen through February 14, 1982 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. For further information, see Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980). The author is preparing a catalogue raisonné of the works of Edward Hopper and would welcome notification of works in all mediums as well as any of the artist's letters.
2. For a discussion of Hopper's interest in cinema, see Gail Levin, "Edward Hopper: The Influence of Theater and Film," *Arts Magazine*, 55, October 1980, pp. 123-127.
3. For a discussion of Hopper's career in illustration, see Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper as Illustrator* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1980).
4. For examples of Degas' use of this device, see Theodore Reff, *Degas: The Artist's Mind* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), Ch. III, "Pictures within Pictures," pp. 90-146.
5. In 1924, the year of their marriage, Jo gave Hopper the major, recently published book *Degas* by Paul Jamot (Paris: Editions de la Gazette des Beaux-Arts, 1924) which reproduces *L'Absinthe* as plate 42. They also owned the catalogue of Degas' exhibition at the Durand-Ruel Galleries in New York in 1928. Hopper may have known Degas' *Uncle and Niece* as a result of its exhibition in *French Painting of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, March 6-April 6, 1929, at the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts. *Uncle and Niece*, no. 34, was reproduced in the catalogue. Hopper showed three of his own works in "An Exhibition of American Art," at the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, 1400 Massachusetts

Fig. 9. Edward Hopper, *Four Lane Road*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 27½ x 41½". Private Collection.



Avenue, Cambridge, Massachusetts, from February 19-March 15, 1929. *Uncle and Niece* was also reproduced in *Art News* of October 1926 and in James Bolivar Manson, *The Life and Work of Edgar Degas* (London: The Studio Ltd., 1927), pl. 5.

6. As a student at the New York School of Art, Hopper made a sketch after Frans Hals' *Malle Babbe*. Traveling to Holland in July 1907, he visited Haarlem where he saw the collection of works by Hals and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, where he described Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* as "the most wonderful thing of his I have seen, it is past belief in its reality—it almost amounts to deception." (Edward Hopper to his mother, letter of July 18, 1907.)

In his article, "John Sloan and the Philadelphians," *The Arts*, XI, April 1927, p. 173, Hopper mentioned "the honest simplicity of the early Dutch and Flemish masters. . . ." The author is preparing a study of the influence of Dutch painting on Hopper.

7. Edward Hopper to his mother, letter of July 4, 1907. Hopper may have subsequently seen this painting reproduced in one of the many publications on the Wallace Collection.

8. Ernest Brace, "Edward Hopper," *Magazine of Art*, 30, May 1937, p. 274.

9. Edward Hopper, quoted in "Such is Life," *Life*, 102, August 1935, p. 48, and "Artist Edward Hopper Tells Story of 'Room in New York,'" *Lincoln* [Nebraska] *Journal & Star*, March 29, 1936, Section C-D, p. 7.

10. Robert M. Coates, "Edward Hopper," *The New Yorker*, February 26, 1950, p. 78, found fault in Hopper's voyeurism: "There are times, too, when his penchant for portraying a scene from without, as if seen through a window, lends a touch of Paul Pry to the composition, and such pieces as 'Room in New York' and 'Night Windows' suffer for this reason.

11. Royal Cortissoz, "Some Modern Paintings from American and French Hands," *The New York Herald Tribune*, Nov. 27, 1932, Section VII, p. 10.

12. Margaret Breuning, "The Whitney Hails Edward Hopper," *Art Digest*, 24, February 15, 1950, p. 10; Loring Holmes Dodd, "Hopper Show Proves Him Stark Realist," *Worcester Evening Gazette*, May 31, 1950.

13. J.G. Smith, "Edward Hopper," *American Artist*, 20, January 1956, p. 25.

14. Charles Burchfield, "Hopper: Career of Silent Poetry," *Art News*, 49, March 1950, p. 17.

15. "Deadly silence" here also suggests the musician as a symbol of fascination with death as in the well-known folk tale, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, and in Robert Browning's poem of that title.

16. James R. Mellow, "The World of Edward Hopper," *The New York Times Magazine*, September 5, 1971, p. 18.

17. Evidently Hopper was already reclusive as an adolescent and read constantly, prompting his father to encourage him to build a sailboat. At about the age of twelve, Hopper had suddenly grown to 6 feet in height, weakening him physically and setting him apart from his contemporaries.

18. Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth* (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 17.

19. For an account of Jo's career as an actress and as a painter, see Gail Levin, "Josephine Verstelle Nivison Hopper," *Woman's Art Journal*, I, Spring/Summer 1980, pp. 28-32.

20. Jo Hopper to Rosalind Irvine, unpublished letter of April 1958.

21. In a rare admission, Hopper revealed his intention in painting *New York Restaurant* of about 1922: "In a specific and concrete sense the idea was to attempt to make visual the crowded glamour of a New York Restaurant during the noon hour. I am hoping that ideas less easy to define have, perhaps, crept in also." (Edward Hopper to Maynard Walker, January 9, 1937, quoted in J. Gray Sweeney, *Themes in American Painting* [The Grand Rapids Art Museum, October-November 1977], p. 150.)

22. For discussion of the significance of titles, see Gail Levin, "Edward Hopper's Evening," *The Connoisseur*, 205, September 1980, pp. 56-63, and Gail Levin, "Edward Hopper's Nighthawks," *Arts Magazine*, 55, May 1981, pp. 154-161.

23. Edward Hopper, quoted in Katherine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice. Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 135.

24. See Gail Levin, "Edward Hopper, Francophile," *Arts Magazine*, 53, June 1979, pp. 114-121.

25. The volume was Arthur Rimbaud, *Poésies* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1950).

26. John Hollander, "Hopper and the Figure of Room," *Art Journal*, 41, Summer 1981, p. 158. Hollander was correct in assuming that Hopper knew "Colloque sentimental," for it was in the volume by Paul Verlaine, *Choix de Poésies* (Paris:

Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1922), which Hopper was given that same year and kept all his life, often quoting from "La lune blanche."

27. *Paul Verlaine Selected Poems*, Translated by C.F. MacIntyre, Berkeley: University of California, pp. 86-87: "—Ah, the Good days of joy unspeakable when our lips mingled! —That is possible. —How blue the sky was then, and hope beat high! —But Hope fled, vanquished, down the gloomy sky. Even so they walked through the wild oats, these dead, and only the night heard the words they said."

28. Susan Alyson Stein, "Edward Hopper: The Uncrossed Threshold," *Arts Magazine*, 54, March 1980, pp. 158-159.

29. Hollander, "Hopper and the Figure of Room," p. 158.

30. Mahonri Sharp Young, "Edward Hopper: The Ultimate Realist," *Apollo*, CXIII, March 1981, p. 185.

31. For example, for *New York Movie* of 1939, Hopper made many sketches at the Strand, Palace, Republic, and Globe theaters; for the usherette he had Jo assume a Degas-like pose in the hallway of their apartment building. *New York Movie* is not then any one cinema, but Hopper's vision of the usherette's experience at the theater. It is a combination of his observations and his imagination. For a discussion of the influence of Degas' *Interior* on *New York Movie*, see Levin, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist*, pp. 53-54.

32. Hopper read this quotation aloud during "Invitation to Art," a television interview with Brian O'Doherty, WGBH-TV, Boston, April 10, 1961.

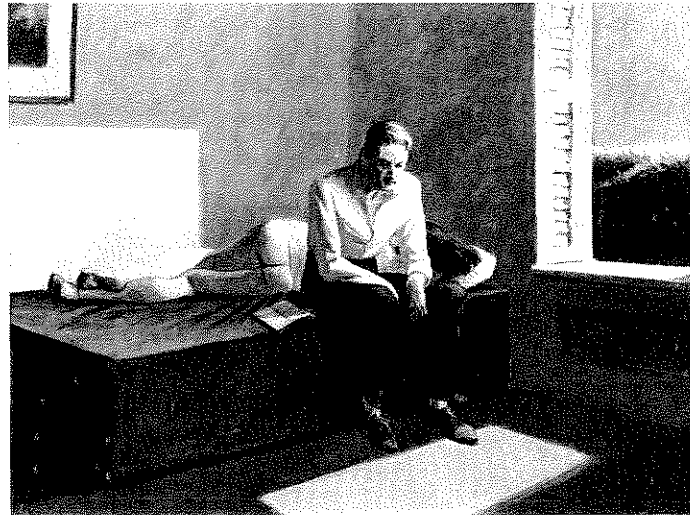


Fig. 11. Edward Hopper, *Excursion into Philosophy*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40". Private Collection.

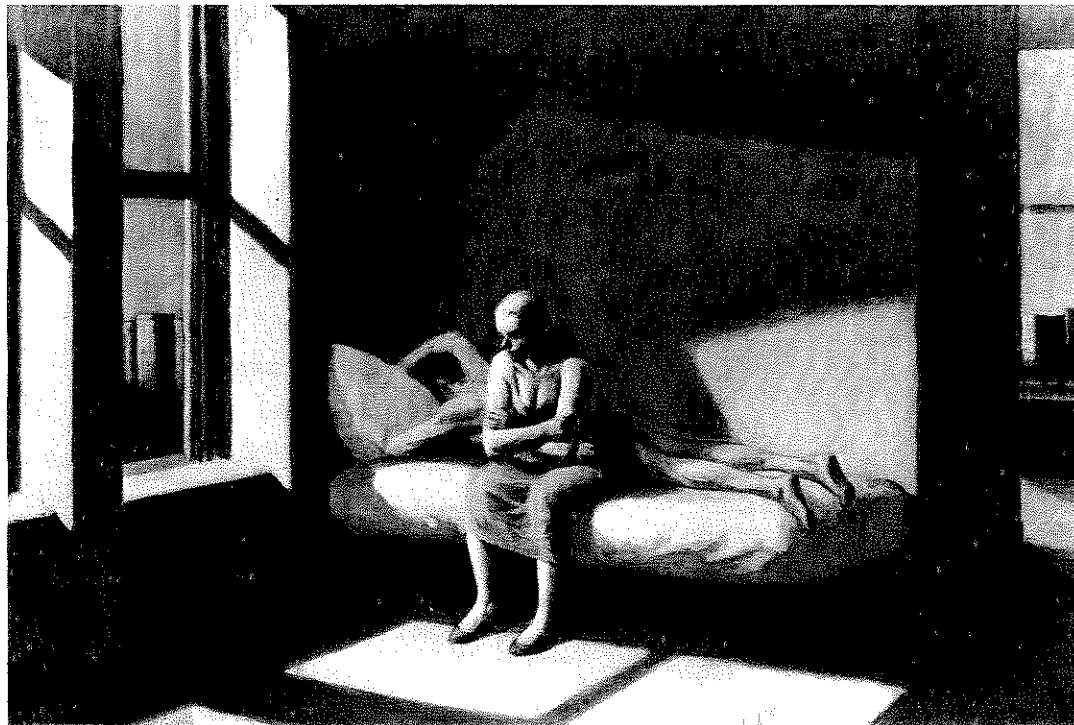


Fig. 10. Edward Hopper, *Summer in the City*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 20 x 30". Private Collection.