Gail Levin

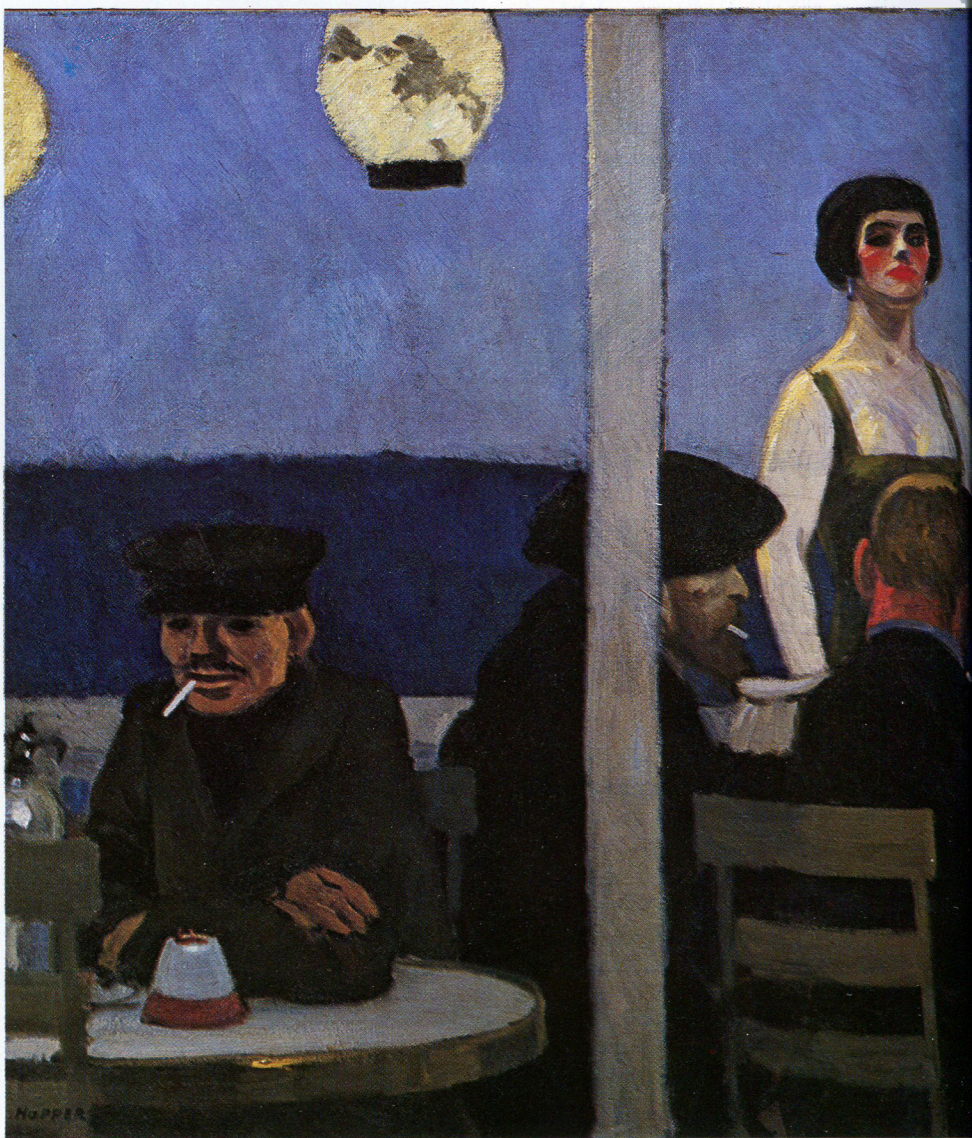
EDWARD HOPPER'S EVENING

The American Edward Hopper, influenced by his travels in Europe and especially by Verlain's poem 'La Lune blanche', created a series of paintings on the theme of evening, often with a symbolic and melancholy content. Major exhibitions on Hopper, now in New York and California will be travelling throughout Europe during 1980 and 1981.

Great art, wrote Edward Hopper in 1953, *is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world.* This is how Hopper endowed his art with emotional content, though he may not have intended that content to be clearly interpretable. And while the meaning of Hopper's paintings may not always be immediately accessible to us, his open search for personal expression makes us look into aspects of his personality and intellect that illuminate his art.

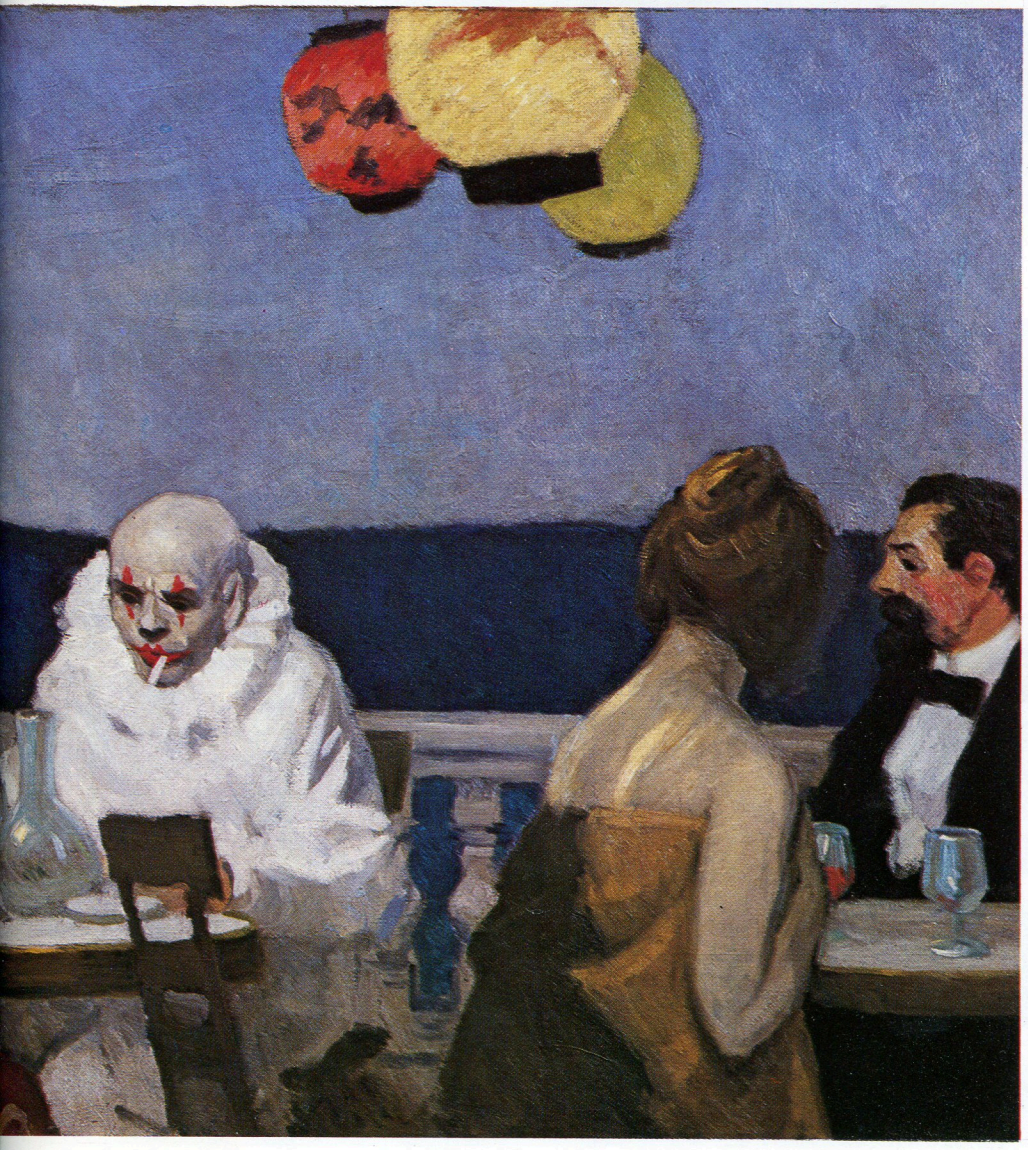
From 1900 to 1906, Hopper went to the New York School of Art on West Fifty-seventh Street, commuting from his native Nyack, New York. He studied with William Merritt Chase, Kenneth Hayes Miller, and Robert Henri. Henri, he felt, was *a magnetic teacher . . . the most influential teacher I had.* According to Hopper's classmate Rockwell Kent, Henri's students often talked of literature; they discussed Eugene Sue, Verlaine, Baudelaire, and *the French Decadents in general* discussions which Kent described as *in keeping with the slightly morbid overtone of Henri's influence.*

Henri's effect on his students' art was less a matter of style than philosophy. *The great artist,* he wrote, *has not reproduced nature, but has expressed by his extract the most choice sensation it has produced upon him.* Hopper always managed to extract an authentic sense of mood. On this subject, Robert Henri offered more specific advice: *Low art is just telling things, as, 'there is the night'. High art gives the feel of night. The latter is nearer reality, although the former is a copy.* Here we are reminded of Hopper's subsequent fascination with *the feel of night* in his etchings *Night on the*



(Left)
1: Edward Hopper. Le Bistro (The Wine Shop), *1909, 23⅜ × 28½ inches.*
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper, 70.1187.
Hopper painted Le Bistro *in 1909, in America, just after he returned from his second stay in Paris. Although his last trip to Europe was in 1910, French themes occurred in his work as late as 1923, indicating the profound influence of this experience.*

(Below)
2: Edward Hopper. Soir Bleu (Blue Evening), *1914, 36 × 72 inches.*
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper, 70.1208.
When he exhibited Soir Bleu *in New York in February 1915, Hopper's work was first singled out by the critics who described this painting as an* ambitious French fantasy *and pronounced it* not quite successful.



El Train (1918), *Night in the Park* and *Night Shadows* (both of 1921), and in his paintings *Night Windows* (1928), *Office at Night* (1940), and *Nighthawks* (1942).

In the decade after Hopper left Henri's class, he painted mostly out-of-doors, recording what he observed around him. By 1909, he had already begun to experiment: he composed some of his oils in the studio through a process of improvisation often loosely based on memories and sketches, but, in the end, imaginary. The roots of this method, this combination of observation and imagination, date back to his early training with Henri.

By 1906, Hopper, like so many Henri students, began to feel that he should travel to Europe to see the works of the great masters in the original. With his parents' help, he left for Paris that October, and did not come home until August. Hopper went back to Paris only twice more, in 1909 and 1910, yet he never forgot his experience there. The period following his last trip to Europe was an economic and aesthetic struggle for Hopper. In New York, he went on painting reminiscences of Paris (1). Years later he said: *It seemed awfully crude and raw here when I got back. It took me ten years to get over Europe.*

Hopper's close friend and classmate, Guy Pené du Bois, more than any other writer, perceived the depth of Hopper's intellectual sophistication – and recognised his friend's knowledge and admiration of French culture. *Something about the French appeals to him. He has studied their language and knows their literature to an extent exceedingly rare among Americans. He has painted Paris with love in a series of pictures.*

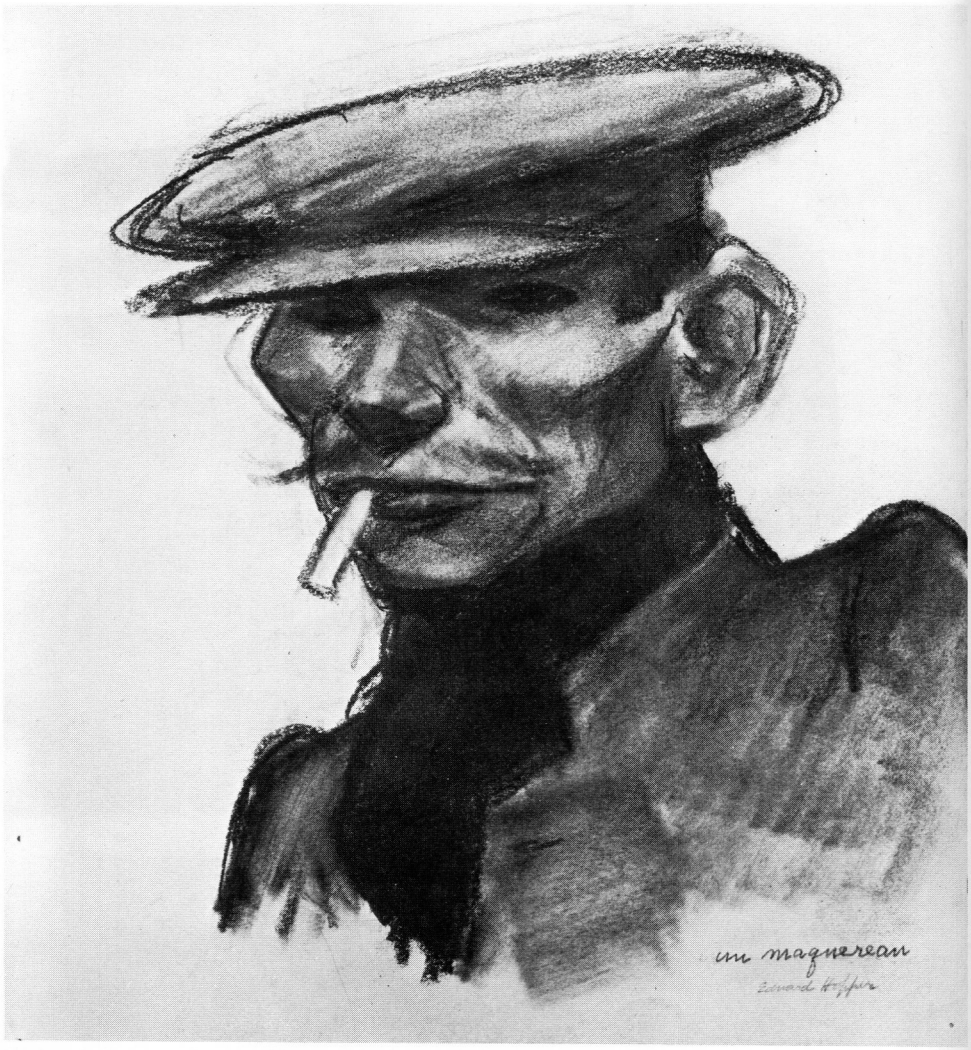
Hopper's French experience made him consider subject matter other than the American surroundings in which he found himself after 1910. His most ambitious French scene, *Soir Bleu* (Blue Evening), *c.* 1914, is also his first depiction of evening. The painting was exhibited in a group show at the MacDowell Club of New York in February 1915 (2). One of the largest canvases he ever painted, *Soir Bleu* represented a major commitment for Hopper and, at the same time, revealed his continuing involvement with France. Although xenophobic critics dismissed it as only an *ambitious fantasy*, *Soir Bleu* reflects Hopper's sentimental recollections of a French world of intrigue and romance. True, he had only known this world as an observer on the periphery, but it had captured his imagination forever.

In May of 1907, Hopper had written to his mother from Paris of the Mid-Lenten *carnival*, which he described as one of the year's most important festivals where *Everyone goes to the 'Grand Boulevards' and lets himself loose.* He reported seeing *a clown with a big nose . . . girls, with bare necks and short skirts* and remarked of the women that *the broad sun displays their defects – perhaps a neck too thin or a painted face which shows ghastly white in the sunlight.*

Hopper's letter helps to explain the eerie appearance of the standing woman with her painted face and long thin neck . . . the presence of the clown . . . and the thin attire worn by the women. The café appears to be located on the outskirts of the city along the fortifications, those old ramparts encircling Paris where people met to talk and drink and eat. Hopper entitled his sketch for the man on the far left *'un maquereau'* ('a mackerel') – French slang for procurer (3). Thus, Hopper's painting shows a prostitute approaching potential clients, a scene of decadence that he witnessed with fascination as a young man in Paris.

In *Soir Bleu*, Hopper had already begun to explore the psychological subtleties of human nature. Without reverting to an overt story, he explored the individual's alienation from society and the anguish of human existence. No one of the seven figures looks at any other: each is aloof, lost in a world of sombre personal thoughts. These are the figures that populate the pictures of Hopper's maturity. It is as if he endowed his painted characters with his own introspective nature.

In *Soir Bleu* we also see the influence of the Symbolist poetry Hopper first came to know as a student in the Henri class. From these works, Hopper seems to have developed very definite associations with evening, so much that he ascribed to evening a symbolic content. Over the years, he expressed his fondness for certain poems on evening. He quoted often in French from Verlaine's poem 'La Lune blanche' about the exquisite evening sky:



Un vaste et tendre
Apaisement
Semble descendre
Du firmament
Que l'astre irise
C'est l'heure exquise.

Verlaine composed this poem about evening's calm for his fiancée, and Hopper quoted it for Jo on a Christmas card in 1923 before their own marriage the following summer. But Hopper's conception of evening was less romantic than Verlaines. As Hopper grew more pessimistic with age, *his* evening came to signify despair – a sense of loss at what might have been.

The alienated characters of *Soir Bleu* seem to embody other Symbolist poems like Rimbaud's 'Sensation' which begins *'Par les soirs bleus d'ete . . .'* ('in the blue summer evenings . . .'). Hopper has the mood of the poem – even to the silent people staring, staring – as if frozen in a trance, with blank minds: *'Je ne parlerai pas, je ne penserai rien . . .'* ('I will not speak, I will have no thoughts'). Hopper's own vision of Paris is decadent, underlined and coloured by the images of the Symbolist poets. Edward Hopper never lost his love of French Symbolist poetry. As late as 1951, he gave his wife a volume of Rimbaud's poetry for Christmas, complete with his own inscription to her, in French.

For Hopper, evening appears a melancholy moment. His 1920 etching, *Summer Twilight*, presents a man standing before a woman seated in a rocker, a sleeping dog lying by her side (4). The man seems tense, his hands in his jacket pockets, although the woman's fan implies it is hot. The twilight of the title not only suggests the soft, diffused light of the evening sky when the sun is just below the horizon, but also the end of something. For twilight is not only a time of day, but the impending termination bringing with it uncertainty and gloom. With characteristic pessimism, Hopper captured a summer romance in its waning hours; the couple's idyllic summer setting will inevitably yield to the harsh realities of winter.

In *Evening Wind*, an etching of 1921, Hopper focused on another aspect of nightfall: eros (5). This intimate scene presents a nude female posed on a bed ready to move, her face turned toward the window where a breeze stirs the curtain. The motion and the feeling of the breeze at the window hold the woman's attention. She pauses, sensuously posed, mesmerised by the sudden gust of air. The curtain, highlighted against shadowy walls, echoes the soft lines of her long hair. Unaware, she is observed by the viewer-voyeur for whom she is always unobtainable – the object of unfulfilled desire.

Railroad Sunset of 1929 is unusual in Hopper's *oeuvre* not for its setting or format, but for its intensely bright colours (6). The mysterious, intoxicating sky of this canvas must have been conceived by an artist who had savoured Baudelaire's 'Harmonie du Soir': *The sky like an altar, is sad and magnificent; drowning in curdled blood, the sun sinks lower . . .*

Along with the brilliance of sunset itself, Hopper also recorded the moment of dusk with its last waning light. In 1935, he painted both *House at Dusk* and *Shakespeare at Dusk* (7 and 8). The setting of *House at Dusk* suggests the dramatic intrusion of man-made urban architecture into nature. Night has nearly fallen – it is darkest among the trees – and the lights have been turned on in the adjacent apartment house where a woman looks out from her window. Hopper painted the natural soft light of the sky at dusk, in contrast to the harsh glare of the electric light below. He saw the trees as both menacing and beckoning: they are an escape from worldly cares, longed-for solitude, yet represent danger and the unknown.

Shakespeare at Dusk portrays the statue of the Bard on the Mall in New York's Central Park, where skyscrapers loom around it. The sky is dramatically lit and our eye wanders into the depth of the park space. The statue of Shakespeare the poet, lyrically silhouetted against the light of dusk, makes a fitting subject for this time of day which Hopper found so poetic, so engaging.

Hopper's taste in poetry also encompassed Robert Frost, and he quoted his poem 'Come In', which so effectively evoked dusk:

As I came to the edge of the woods,
Thrush music – hark!
Now if it was dusk outside,
Inside it was dark.

(Left, above)
3: Edward Hopper. Le Maquereau, *drawing for painting,* Soir Bleu, *1914, conté on paper, 10 × 8⅜ inches.*
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper, 70.318.
Hopper entitled his drawing for the man on the far left of Soir Bleu, Un Maquereau (a mackerel), *French slang for procurer.*

(Left, below)
4: Edward Hopper. Summer Twilight, *1920, etching, 8½ × 10 inches.*
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper, 70.1055.
The twilight of the title not only suggests the soft, diffused light of the evening sky, but also the impending termination of the couple's idyllic summer romance.

(Below)
5: Edward Hopper. Evening Wind, *1921, etching, 7 × 8⅜ inches.*
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper, 70.1022.
Hopper's vision of evening enabled him to involve the viewer as a voyeur observing a sensuously posed nude as an object of unobtainable desire.

eft, above)
Edward Hopper. Railroad Sunset, *1929,*
½ × 47¾ inches.
hitney Museum of American Art, New York;
equest of Josephine N. Hopper, 70.1170.
opper's unusually intense palette in
ailroad Sunset *of 1929 renders a mysterious*
toxicating sky of extraordinary drama.

eft, below)
Edward Hopper. House at Dusk, *1935,*
× 50 inches. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts,
ichmond, Virginia.
House at Dusk *of 1935, Hopper contrasted*
an-made urban architecture with nature, and
e waning light of dusk with the harsh glare of
ectric lamps.

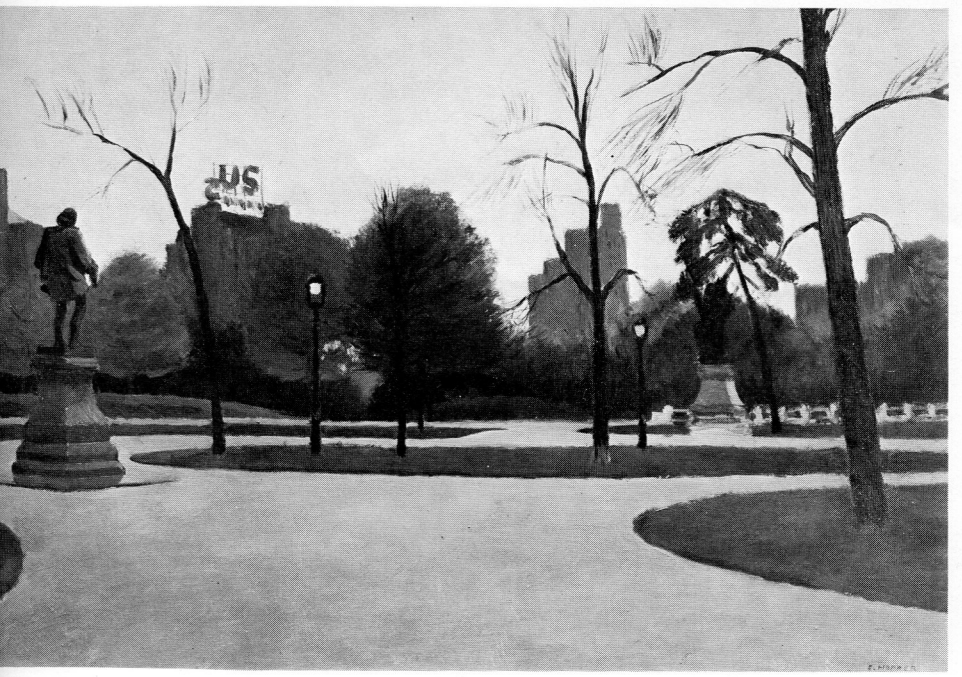
elow)
Edward Hopper. Shakespeare at Dusk,
35, 17 × 25 inches. John Astor Collection.
Shakespeare at Dusk *of 1935, Hopper*
corded the poetry of twilight in Central Park
th a statue of Shakespeare at the focus of his
ricism.

In Hopper's *Cape Cod Evening* of 1939 – as in Frost's poetry – the woods are *lovely, dark and deep* and enigmatic; the waning sunlight of the evening sky is juxtaposed with the dense woods where, in the thickening shadows, night has already arrived (10). Hopper's comment on the painting confirms that it was a personal concept which, like the poems he loved, evoked his *own* reflections on evening: *It is no exact transcription of a place but pieced together from sketches and mental impressions of things in the vicinity. The grove of locust trees was done from sketches of trees nearby. The doorway of the house comes from Orleans about twenty miles from here. The figures were done almost entirely without models, and the dry, blowing grass can be seen from my studio window in late summer or autumn . . . the dog is listening to something, probably a whippoorwill or some evening sound.*

Hopper's working sketches for *Cape Cod Evening* reveal that the painting evolved through several stages. Initially, he considered having only one figure: a woman seated on the doorstep with the dog standing close by, facing her (9). Then he tried the woman standing in the blowing grass with the dog (11). His resolution – a man beckoning to the distracted dog from the doorstep with an unhappy woman standing before the bay window – changed the entire content of the painting. We now confront a disenchanted couple: she detached, in a world of her own thoughts and dreams; he trying to communicate with the dog instead of with her. The evening here once again alludes to the twilight of a relationship; Hopper's famous pessimism here is fully formed. Communication does not work, and, as Hopper commented, even the dog only listens to a distant whippoorwill. Because the dog, traditional symbol of fidelity and devotion, appears with a couple both here and in the etching *Summer Twilight*, we must inquire if on some level Hopper has not relied on this familiar symbol to make his ironic comment on the couple's deteriorating relationship. Certainly, he knew and admired what he called *the honest simplicity of early Dutch and Flemish masters* – where such symbolism was common.

In his 1947 painting *Summer Evening*, Hopper again comments on the time of day, and on the stage of a couple's relationship (12). This attractive young couple seem engrossed in an unpleasant discussion while they lean uncomfortably against the wall of a porch with only the overly bright electric light – no romantic moonlight for them. The anguished woman's face is twisted into a grimace, while her shoulders arch defensively – like the back of a provoked cat. The man, the reason for her discontent, holds his left hand on his chest as if protesting his guilt. Hopper poignantly expressed the torment of a passion gone sour: the fresh excitement of spring about to turn into the disillusion of autumn. Evening, as in *Summer Twilight* and *Cape Cod Evening*, here symbolises the melancholy of lost desire, opportunity surrendering to inevitable decay.

Hopper was in no sense a narrative painter and had long since transcended his own work in illustration. His canvases are much more than the mere representations of reality for which they have been praised. They do not intend to be just descriptive or topical, but aspire to the universal. By refusing to be narrative, and aiming instead at suggestive symbolic content, Hopper at his best created paintings which express the psychological pulse of their time and yet speak for all time.



The exhibition 'Edward Hopper: The Formative Years' is currently at the San José Museum of Art, San José, California, from 16 October–30 November 1980 and then travels to: Welsh Arts Council, Newport Museum and Art Gallery, from 10 January–14 February 1981; Scottish Arts Council, Fruit Market Gallery, Edinburgh, from 28 February–5 April 1981; Westfalische Landesmuseum fur Kunst under Kulturgeschichte Münster, Germany, from 19 April–31 May 1981; Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea Milan, Italy, from mid-June–mid-July 1981; Welsh Arts Council, Mostyn Gallery, Llandudno, from 14 August–30 September 1981.

(Right)
9: Edward Hopper. Drawing for Cape Cod Evening, *1939, conté on paper, 8½ × 11 inches.*
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper, 70.180.
In this study drawing for Cape Cod Evening *of 1939, Hopper considered having a single figure, a woman, seated on the doorstep facing the dog standing beside her.*

(Below)
0: Edward Hopper. Cape Cod Evening, *1939, 30 × 40 inches.*
Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney Collection.
In Cape Cod Evening *of 1939, Hopper alludes to the time of day and to the twilight of this disenchanted couple's relationship.*

(Left)
11: Edward Hopper. *Drawing for* Cape Cod Evening, *1939, conté on paper, 8½ × 11 inches.*
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper, 70.181.
In another study drawing for Cape Cod Evening, *Hopper considered having the woman stand in the blowing grass with the dog rather than alone beside the house.*

(Below)
12: Edward Hopper. Summer Evening, *1947, 30 × 42 inches.*
Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert H. Kinney Collection.
In Summer Evening *of 1947, Hopper portrayed a young couple engrossed in a tense discussion in the harsh glare of electric light, revealing his association of evening with the melancholy of lost desire.*