



Fig. 1. Edgar Degas, Sulking (Bouderie), 1869-71. Oil on canvas, 12 3/4 x 18 1/4". Metropolitan Museum of Art, The H.O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H.O. Havemeyer, 1929.

THE OFFICE IMAGE IN THE VISUAL ARTS

GAIL LEVIN

The image of the office in the visual arts bespeaks human needs in the white-collar marketplace.

The image of the office is an unusual one in the visual arts. But why have so few artists chosen to depict the office? There are certainly more frequent representations of factories, restaurants, or even cityscapes which include office buildings than there are of of-



Fig. 2. Quentin Metsys, The Banker and his Wife, 1514. Oil on wood, 27 1/4 x 26 1/4". Musée des Beaux-Arts, Paris.



Fig. 3. Edgar Degas, The Cotton Bureau, New Orleans, 1873. Oil on canvas, 29 1/4 x 36 1/4". Musée des Beaux-Arts, Paris.

fice interiors. Perhaps it is not only the artist's unfamiliarity with the office, but something more. The office may symbolize for some artists exactly what they are escaping with their own choice of *la vie bohème*. The office is the establishment: bankers, businessmen, lawyers, publishers, and doctors. The office, as the locus of power and money, may be viewed as distasteful by most artists, evoking feelings of alienation.

Among those few artists who have chosen to portray offices, a large proportion have dealt with such negative feelings. Others have simply employed the office as a setting for a portrait. In this sense the office has simply evolved from the domestic interior—the scholar or writer in his study or the artist in his studio. The office has also been utilized as a backdrop for a drama in process much as it would appear in the theater or on film. In contrast, illustrators have represented the office with a lighter touch, more humorously or anecdotally. Such commissioned slice-of-life illustrations are inevitably less biting than the artist's personal impression of the office interior specifically chosen for its symbolic value as a setting.

The first important depictions of the modern office are by Edgar Degas, the Impressionist painter who captured so vividly much of the life around him: cafés, horse races, the theater, dancers, domestic interiors, and even museums. In Degas' *Bouderie* of about 1869-71 (Fig. 1), we see a man and woman alone in an office. He is certainly sulking, his arms folded, his forehead wrinkled, his head downcast. The woman bends over toward him but her gaze is more open, as she looks out to the artist and the spectator. They are placed before an 1847 color engraving of horsereading entitled *Steeple Chase* by the English artist J.F. Herring which, possibly implying anxiety over gambling losses, may hint of the reasons for his sulking.¹ The framed work of art which encloses both figures serves to connect these two individuals as a couple. The unadorned desk's top is cluttered with papers, and the slots of the open cabinet on the wall contain ledgers. The windowed door with its utilitarian shelf implies that business of some sort is conducted here; it is typical of banks, post offices, or ticket offices.

Bouderie has also been called *The Banker*. While this painting may represent a small private banker's office, this interpretation also suggests an antecedent for such a theme that Degas may have known. Quentin Metsys' *The Banker and his Wife* (1514) is an earlier precedent for a man and woman shown at work in an interior setting (Fig. 2). Degas certainly knew the early Netherlandish paintings in the Louvre, and, about 1860, for example, he had even copied Roger Van der Weyden's *Head of the Virgin*.² It has been pointed out that the female figure in *Bouderie* who turns out toward us in a challenging posture appears to have been adapted from a similar male figure in Rembrandt's *Syndics of the Drapers' Guild* which also depicts a business meeting momentarily interrupted.³ In Metsys' composition, the wife also gazes out toward the viewer while her husband looks away, concentrating on his work. Metsys' view of the desk top with its business clutter prominently visible, as well as the utilitarian shelves in the background, also anticipates Degas' *Bouderie*.

On his trip to visit his relatives in America, Degas painted portraits of several of them.⁴ His painting of 1873, *Le Bureau de Coton, Nouvelle Orleans* (Fig. 3), is actually a kind of group portrait of some of his male relatives, probably painted in his uncle's house after direct study of the location. In a sense, Degas' *Bureau* is in the tradition of the "informal" group portraits of seventeenth-century Dutch painting, even Rembrandt's *Nightwatch*. In Degas' painting we see a realistic depiction of the cotton market in full activity. His brother René's father-in-law, Michel Musson, is seated in the foreground, examining a sample of cotton, while René (who with a third brother, Achille, is visiting Musson's office) reads the market quotations in a newspaper. Achille idly leans against the wall. Degas had written to Henri Rouart from New Orleans: "One does nothing here. It lies in the climate. Nothing but cotton. One lives for cotton and from cotton."⁵ Through the long row of windows, we look into yet another office. Many of the individuals Degas portrayed seem bored, totally self-involved, lost in their own private thoughts, like Achille, isolated in the group, alienated from the tasks at hand. It is significant that Degas chose to paint his relatives in a commercial setting which he must have considered characteristically American.

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The American realist, Thomas Eakins' *Portrait of Professor William D. Marks* (1886; Fig. 4) exemplifies the tradition of the more intimate portrait of the scholar in his study. This American example does show an actual office with the engineering professor's technical equipment and his extensive library, but it is not very distant from Edouard Manet's *Portrait of Zola* (1868) with examples from his collection of Japanese prints and old master reproductions in the background. An even closer precedent is Degas' portrait of the writer *Edmond Duranty* (1879) who posed at his cluttered desktop before his crowded bookshelves (Fig. 5).

In Félix Vallotton's painting, *Félix Fénéon in the Offices of the "Revue blanche"* of 1896, we find an office setting not so different from Degas' *Boudoir*. The vertical paneling, the framed picture hanging on the wall, and the papers piled up on the desk all evoke a similar ambience. But the editor, Fénéon doesn't sulk; he concentrates intently, reading by the desk lamp's harsh glare. Because we view him in profile, his concentration is even more apparent; he neither looks out at us (or the artist) nor looks away, as if unaware of the artist's presence.

Vallotton understood well the potential of the office as a backdrop for drama. His *Intimacy: Interior with Lovers and a Screen* (1898; Fig. 6) employs the startling contrast of presenting a couple in such a passionate embrace before a desk laden with books: work and pleasure together in the same space. Whatever the screen was meant to separate out, it seems clear that more than business has invaded this work arena. The flowers in a vase, beyond the lovers and next to the screen, also allude to sensuality and pleasure of the couple, while the desk with its volumes stacked on a shelf below has been momentarily forgotten. Framed pictures or photographs and the overstuffed chair also help to humanize this office interior.

In Vallotton's *Interior: Red Armchair and Figures* (1899; Fig. 7), essentially the same composition is repeated, showing a similar office space with a vastly different decorative theme and psychological interaction between the two figures. The woman in this painting appears to be depressed, sulking with her downcast head supported by her hand. Her thoughts are heavy and the mood somber. Her male companion has tensely backed up to lean against his desk, as if to achieve some distance from her melancholy. Contrasted to the passionate lovers in *Intimacy: Interior with Lovers and a Screen* of the previous year, it is as if Vallotton changed the cast of characters in his office drama just as radically as he changed his interior decoration. The office for Vallotton has returned to Degas' sullen mood and become the setting for a more intense confrontation.

Comparing Pierre Bonnard's *The Brothers Jean and Gaston Bernheim* (Fig. 8) and H.M. Davringhausen's *The Profiteer* (Fig. 9), both from about 1920, demonstrates the diversity of style and mood of that era. The art dealers Bernheim are shown in their sumptuous traditional office with an upholstered sofa against the wall, curtained window, rich paneling, wall paper, and framed paintings. Their desks are placed back-to-back so that they face each other across a vast sea of papers in a congenial arrangement that suggests camaraderie and sympathy. Even the view out of the window, visible above the curtained lower half, appears to be of sunlight and a tree in a garden. The effect is that of a comfortable domestic interior. In sharp contrast, H.M. Davringhausen has placed his *Profiteer* in a sterile environment, stripped bare of any warmth. Recorded with the visual sobriety characteristic of the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* style, this bleak office interior seems especially suitable for the aggressive inhumanity of the profiteer. This intense man has had to turn to artificial warmth—wine and cigars. Even the views out of his windows are blocked by repetitive facades of the new geometric International Style skyscrapers, cutting out most sunlight and any more pastoral landscape. Functionalism has replaced the textures and colors of the world of the Bernheims with standardized surfaces and shapes. There is no longer any link to the domestic interior with its more comfortable ambience. Individuality has gone the way of cushioned chairs, elaborate picture frames, and patterned wall paper.

Numerous illustrations of offices from the 1910s and 1920s by Edward Hopper reveal the inspiration for his later paintings of offices.⁶ His office illustrations, produced as commissions for both a business magazine and to accompany popular fiction, demonstrate a thorough



Fig. 4. Thomas Eakins, *Portrait of Professor William D. Marks*, 1886. Oil on canvas, 76 1/2 x 54 1/2". Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis.

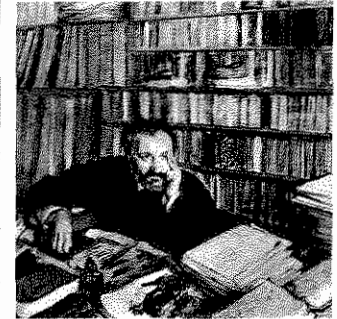


Fig. 5. Edgar Degas, *Edmond Duranty*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 76 1/2 x 54 1/2". Glasgow Museum and Art Galleries, The Burrell Collection.

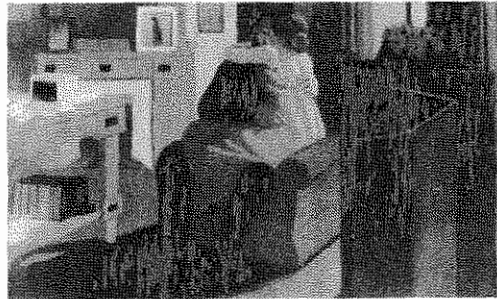


Fig. 6. Félix Vallotton, *Intimacy: Interior with Lovers and a Screen*, 1898. Oil on canvas. Private Collection, Lausanne, Switzerland.



Fig. 7. Félix Vallotton, *Interior: Red Armchair and Figures*, 1899. Oil on canvas. Kunsthhaus, Zurich.

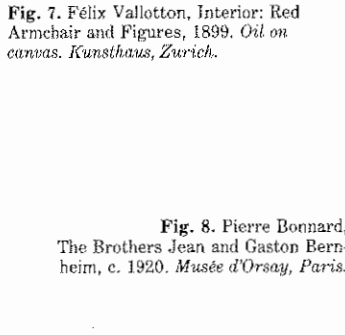
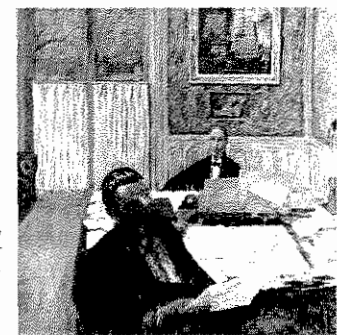


Fig. 8. Pierre Bonnard, *The Brothers Jean and Gaston Bernheim*, c. 1920. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



matter-of-fact recording of what he observed: reception areas, counters, inner offices, windowed dividing walls, telephones, switchboards, ink stands, lamps, wall maps, waste paper baskets, coat racks, desks, file cabinets, and desk chairs. Like Degas, Hopper usually included a framed picture hanging on the office wall. Hopper's most extensive work on offices was an entire series of illustrations produced from 1912-1916 for *System the Magazine of Business*, a forerunner of *Business Week*.

A look at several of Hopper's illustrations of offices and shops in *System* hints that his office interiors were based not only on his observations but also on Degas' *Le Bureau de Coton*, one of the best known paintings of an office interior. In an illustration of May 1913



Fig. 9. H.-M. Davringhausen, *The Profiteer*, c. 1920. Oil on canvas, 47 1/4 x 47 1/4. Landschaftsverband Rheinland, Dusseldorf.

Fig. 10. Norman Rockwell, *Daydreamer*, 1924. *Saturday Evening Post*, June 7, 1924.



Fig. 11. Norman Rockwell, *Rationing Office*, 1944. *Saturday Evening Post*, July 15, 1944.



Fig. 12. Edward Hopper, *Office at Night*, 1940. Oil on canvas. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Gift of T.B. Walker Foundation.



for *System*, Hopper utilized a spatial device of windows receding into the picture's depth on a diagonal along the left side. As in *Le Bureau de Coton*, Hopper used the strong vertical and horizontal accents and the rectangular shapes of the windows to frame the posturing figures of businessmen. In an illustration for *System* of March 1913, the positions of the female clerk leaning forward on a counter and the manager with whom she speaks are comparable to the stances of the two male figures negotiating over a table laden with cotton. Not only is the placement of these two figures close to Degas, but so is the picture's overall spatial arrangement, including the diagonal angle of the counter, the doorway, and cabinet, as well as the floor tilted forward. In several office interiors, such as one for "The Spur of Pay and Promotion" in the June 1913 issue of *System*, Hopper used a similar type of curved slat-back wooden office chair seen in *Le Bureau de Coton*.

Unlike Hopper, who reluctantly illustrated to earn his living when he wanted to paint, Norman Rockwell preferred to produce work on assignment, insisting that he was not a "fine arts" man.⁷ From the 1910s Rockwell illustrated for the *Saturday Evening Post* and other magazines, and from the 1920s to the 1960s he depicted a variety of different offices. Rockwell's office images, like so many of his illustrations, often have touches of humor or sentiment. His people are the antithesis of the tough *Neue Sächlichkeit* profiteer; they are frequently warm, friendly types who amuse us by their ordinariness. Rockwell's *Post* cover for June 7, 1924, the *Daydreamer* (Fig. 10), showed a bored worker, seated on an uncomfortable, adjustable stool at a simple slant-top desk with his pencil in hand, pausing to contemplate something else—probably the distant travels hinted at by the word "Adventure" above the illustration of a sailing vessel on the wall directly behind him. His desk is covered with a ledger, rubber ink stamps, and various papers. The wastepaper basket visible just below it perhaps symbolizes the time he is wasting or how futile he considers his tedious job to be. Rockwell's *Post* cover for May 16, 1925 shows a worker who has found an answer for boredom—*Spring Song* played on a flute no doubt stored in one the cubbyholes of his desk. This old man's clutter is amusing—from his hat, jacket, and umbrella to his coffee cup. His desk and swivel chair seem very personalized, humanized by his belongings.

Rockwell's *Rationing Office* (July 15, 1944) and his office of a country editor (May 25, 1946) are not only filled with detail but with a crowd of figures (Fig. 11). There is both action and interaction among the figures. A boy flirts with a secretary, a man looks over the shoulder of a typist, or a woman hands over a file. The lively incidents are emphasized by a wealth of details which suggest even further activity: an umbrella drying on the wood floor, trash which just missed the wastepaper basket, photographs stuck on the wall. Newspaper copy is read, as portfolios are brought in; the chairs are casually placed at angles. All is in flux, changing, dynamic. In his illustrations, Rockwell showed a range of typical American office interiors from the small town to the big city. We find roll-top desks and potbellied stoves as well as the sleek modern angular furniture of the 1950s, wall calendars and potted plants, paned and picture windows.

When Hopper first came to depict an office as the setting for a painting, he had not illustrated for over fifteen years. When asked for an explanation of *Office at Night* (1940; Fig. 12), Hopper wrote:

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.⁸

Hopper must have been referring to the lean years when he illustrated offices for *System* and work for the magazine was a major factor in earning his living. He may have been inspired to paint *Office at Night* by the city views he observed, but, as his studies reveal, Hopper turned to Degas' representation of the cotton market and back to his own illustrations for *System*. Hopper's drawings also reveal how he chose to reduce detail, eliminating unnecessary objects—a chair in the foreground, the picture hanging on the wall in the background. Hopper's art consists of only the essentials; this sensibility reflects his reaction to having had to illustrate for a living when the

editors could insist on the inclusion of anecdotal details. This office has no decoration, just functional furniture, desks, chairs, file cabinet, lamp, and window shade.

Hopper's debt to Degas' *Le Bureau de Coton, Nouvelle Orleans* is evident in *Office at Night* and in the preparatory sketches for the painting. In one study, 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 this 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" in *System* in September 1913 (Fig. 13). In *Office at Night*, the partition is finally placed on a diagonal axis similar to that in Degas' composition. Hopper also retained Degas' bird's-eye view of the floor tilted out toward the picture plane. In several of the studies Hopper included a picture hanging on the wall, the pictorial device so typical in Degas' work. Yet in the study closest to the painting itself, the picture on the wall has been erased (but is still barely visible) and only a beam of light has replaced it. The penultimate study includes another reference to Degas' *Le Bureau de Coton*: a slat-back wooden chair posed with its back to the viewer appears in the lower left of both Hopper's drawing and Degas' painting. 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."⁹ It is interesting to note that this well-known French Impressionist painting that so fascinated Hopper depicts an American scene and that two of the best "office" paintings in existence are so closely related.

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.¹⁰

Hopper's investigation of the effects of nocturnal artificial illumination may also have derived from his interest in the work of Degas who dealt with it in such a dramatic way. Degas recorded thoughts in a notebook concerning the nocturnal effects of light: "The smartest thing is not always to reveal the source of light, but the effect of light."¹¹ 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 through the window increase the sense of drama.

Perhaps what is most intriguing in Hopper's *Office at Night* is the apparent sexual and psychic tension between the sensual curvaceous woman and the man who ignores her. Hopper's early studies 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. On February 1, 1940, Jo noted in her diary: "I'm to pose for the same (female fishing in a filing cabinet) tonight in a tight skirt short to show legs—Nice I have good legs and up and coming stockings." In his record book, kept by Jo with Hopper's participation, the sketch reproducing this painting is captioned "Confidentially Yours." "Room 1005" and it 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."

Hopper used the setting of the office as a background to imply drama. The image falls somewhere between a specific narrative which it is not and a modern genre scene. While *Office at Night* is extremely suggestive, Hopper does not reveal the exact relationship between the figures. He has rejected the directness of Félix Vallotton's *Intimacy: Interior with Lovers and a Screen* to stage a more ambiguous



Fig. 13. Edward Hopper, Illustration for "Your Business Tomorrow," 1913. *System*, September 1913.

Fig. 14. Norman Rockwell, *The Window Washer*, 1960. *Saturday Evening Post*, September 17, 1960.



Fig. 15. Edward Hopper, *Conference at Night*, 1949. Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 40". Wichita Art Museum, Kansas, Roland P. Murdock Collection.

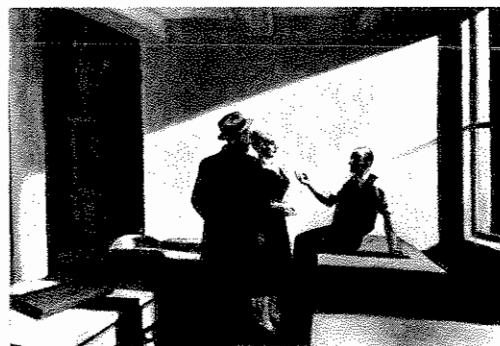
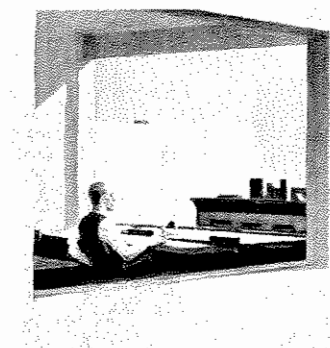


Fig. 16. Edward Hopper, *Office in a Small City*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 28 x 40". Metropolitan Museum of Art, George A. Hearn Fund, 1953.



nocturnal encounter with its subtle theme of provocation. One could contrast the overt humorous flirtation in Rockwell's *The Window Washer* (1960; Fig. 14) where an attractive young secretary, who has caught the eye of an interested young man standing in the window, ignores her boss.

Nine years later, Hopper painted another office scene, *Conference at Night* (Fig. 15), about which he explained:

The idea of a loft or business building with the artificial light of the street coming into the room at night had been in my mind for some years before I attempted it. And had been suggested by things I had seen on Broadway in walking there at night.¹²

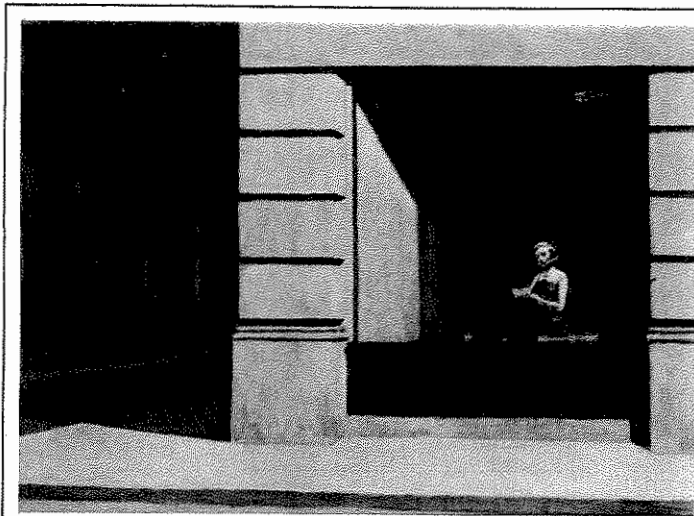


Fig. 17. Edward Hopper, *New York Office*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 40 x 55". Private Collection.

Fig. 18. George Tooker, *Government Bureau*, 1956. Egg tempera on gesso panel, 19 1/2 x 29 1/2". Metropolitan Museum of Art, George A. Hearn Fund, 1956.



Fig. 19. Konrad Klapheck, *Will zur Macht*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 39 1/2". Collection of the artist.

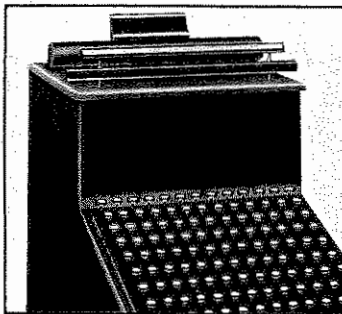


Fig. 20. Claes Oldenburg, *Soft Typewriter (Ghost Version)*, 1963. Frankfurt.



But he also admitted: "The attempt to give concrete expression to a very amorphous impression is the insurmountable difficulty in painting. The result was obtained by improvisation, and from no known fact or scene."¹³ In attempting to realize the scene he imagined, Hopper did not go out and visit offices, but rather he turned to seventeenth-century Dutch painting where groups of figures in interior settings are commonplace. The beamed ceiling is unusual for a modern office and instead recalls typical Dutch interiors like that in two of Pieter de Hooch's paintings in the Metropolitan Museum, *The Visit* and *The Maidservant*. Even Hopper's figures, reminiscent of those in many Dutch genre scenes, particularly resemble the group

in *The Visit* where a man and woman stand illuminated by light pouring in the window. In *The Maidservant*, de Hooch's beam of light suggests the kind of evocation Hopper would adapt for *Conference at Night*. Hopper's larger concentrated beam of light which pours in from the window and spreads across the bare wall is Rembrandt-esque, powerfully dramatizing the scene much like the effect of light in Rembrandt's *Scholar in His Study*. This bleak office setting probably expresses Hopper's alienation from modern business as well as his fondness for detective movies where such dramatic nighttime meetings often take place.

If there were any doubt that Hopper felt intensely the alienation of twentieth-century city life, his painting *Office in a Small City* (1953; Fig. 16) would make this quite clear. This solitary man seated at his desk stares out of the large plate-glass window onto rooftops and the side of another office building. His sleeves are rolled up and his jacket is off as he basks in the window's sunlight. There is a sense of both resignation and boredom, for he seems frozen at his large, plain desk. He appears cut off from the rest of the world and his co-workers; the visible wall is bare and no telephone is evident on his desk. Perhaps in the painting, Hopper was inspired by the office in the dramatic opening scene from *Dodsworth*, a 1936 film by William Wyler based on the novel by Sinclair Lewis.

Hopper's last office painting, *New York Office* (1962; Fig. 17), also shows a worker gazing out of a plate-glass window. This worker, however, is shown to be a female seductress, clad in a sundress, standing behind her desk exposed in the street-level window. The telephone and the paper she holds perhaps indicate that her thoughts are elsewhere. As she is observed from outside, her co-workers appear to ignore her. In juxtaposing this corner office, visible through its large window, with the anonymous rows of small windows in the undistinguished building across the street, perhaps Hopper meant to comment on the impersonality of the office. The ceiling light fixtures further institutionalize this setting and the sidewalk serves as a barrier further distancing this woman and the spectator.

George Tooker, another American realist, who during the 1950s, like Hopper, worked outside the Abstract-Expressionist mainstream, painted *Government Bureau* (1956; Fig. 18), a potent condemnation of the isolation, anonymity, and alienation of modern society. When asked if *Government Bureau* and certain other paintings represented his social views, Tooker replied:

These were all paintings of protest. I think the rebellion in everyone is at its apex during one's younger years. I painted the world as I saw it, and in many cases I didn't like what I saw.¹⁴

Tooker was inspired to paint *Government Bureau* by his own frustrating experience in having to work with the local government in order to obtain a building permit to convert an old house (he had purchased) from a boarding house into just two apartments.¹⁵ His efforts made him confront the anonymous bureaucrats hiding behind their waffled glass windows, reluctant to act without specific approval from still higher authorities. They are all essentially identical, just frozen eyes, ears, and hands that fail to respond or act in any way. This office appears to be in some basement location without natural lighting. The construction design is monotonous. This sameness is echoed in the repeated figure of the bland protagonist who can only face resignation, being himself too passive to demand any real action. The entire effect is like a recurrent nightmare where nothing ever happens. This is an office which resounds with tedium and the discomfiting constant oppression of unfathomable bureaucracy.

While Degas, Hopper, Tooker, and others depicted the entire office interior, several artists have chosen to represent only objects extracted from the office: the typewriter, adding machine, telephone, or other office machines. One artist to concentrate most intensely on this imagery is the German painter Konrad Klapheck. He paints hard-edge images of such items cleanly and neutrally rendered (Fig. 19). In his matter-of-fact precise style he recalls the earlier German artists of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* epoch. His subjects, however, are carefully focused closeups of these mechanical objects. In his attention to machinery and his focus on these specific objects, Klapheck recalls Dada images by Picabia or Duchamp from the 1910s or 1920s, but he also anticipated some of the emblematic qualities of

Pop Art. His machines have a powerful presence in their analytical coolness which suggests the ambiance of modern offices. There is also the possibility of the direct association of the machine with human activity.

The sculptor Claes Oldenburg has also been drawn to machines associated with the office—typewriters, telephones, adding machines, and even fans. Oldenburg, an artist who first became known as a part of the Pop Art movement, usually conceived of these machines as soft sculpture. The imaginative working drawings for these sculptures make the initial translation of the objects from reality to the soft textures of vinyl or canvas. The final soft typewriter (1963; Fig. 20) seems as if it needs to be inflated—like an automobile tire. The drawing *Study for Soft Typewriter* also links its origins to comic strip art by the notation in the lower right corner of the word “Busch,” referring to the cartoonist Wilhelm Busch who drew the Katzenjammer Kids. Oldenburg’s response to comics, a major inspiration for American Pop artists who became interested in such imagery during the 1960s, places his interest in office machinery in just such a humorous context. Rather than alienation, Oldenburg achieves a celebration of the mundane and the ordinary aspects of the office by conveying such images in a new and unexpected form.

Perhaps the contemporary artist who has best captured the atmosphere of the modern office is Richard Artschwager. After studying during 1949-50 at the New York studio school of Purist Amedée Oz-enfant, Artschwager eventually worked as a cabinet maker and finally produced Formica sculpture in the mode of furniture including abstract versions of a table and chair. One was entitled *Executive Table and Chair*. This reflected Artschwager’s preoccupation with space which continued into his paintings of offices. His concern with furniture logically led to an interest in its context. He began with rather ordinary, easily available photographs which he enlarged through the use of a grid and painted in grisaille on Cellotex, a cheap building material with a gritty texture.

Artschwager’s *Office Scene* of 1966 reminds one of a photograph printed in the newspaper. Its fuzzy texture creates a dreamlike ambience. This communal office is empty, as if we visit it secretly during non-working hours. The oppressive qualities are perhaps even more apparent in the absence of human presence. The plain desks, all alike, are crowded together without dividers so that the noise of typing and talking must add up to a terrible deafening sound. Artschwager’s decision not to show the entire office and to omit the side walls suggests that these desks and typewriters extend indefinitely. The space and the desks are extremely impersonal, anonymous, unrelieved by any decorative touches or luxury. There is not even any clutter; nothing is out of place. This is a biting comment on how Artschwager must see this aspect of contemporary life: static with unrelied boredom and no individuality.

When Artschwager painted the interior of the *Johnson Wax Building* in 1974 (Fig. 21), he dealt with a notable architectural monument designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1934-39. Again he worked from a photograph from which he transferred the image onto Cellotex. This office has beautiful organically shaped desks and chairs as well as the distinctive lily-pad concrete columns rising between some of the desks. Artschwager has faithfully recorded the kind of dramatic space created by Wright. This space contrasts to that in *Office Scene* because of Wright’s unusual innovations. There is visual excitement instead of boredom. The desks are together in a central hall, but the ambience is pleasantly evocative of something other than an office. Thus Wright appears to have struggled to get beyond the potentially oppressive qualities of the modern communal office to a liveable space offering an atmosphere conducive to warm and cheerful participation.

The office as a symbol of alienation, bureaucratic double-talk, power, or lack of it, and anonymity continues today. Perhaps Saul Steinberg best expressed this attitude in a *New Yorker* cartoon of 1961.¹⁶ The desk is plain and impersonal as one man requests something of the other more powerful figure seated behind the desk. The negative response he receives is shown to resound emphatically throughout the office space: a great big “NO” fills the air. The effect is to show the suffocating space of this office as well as the impotency of the supplicant worker who complacently sits frozen in his role.

The negativism and alienation of office life were also poignantly

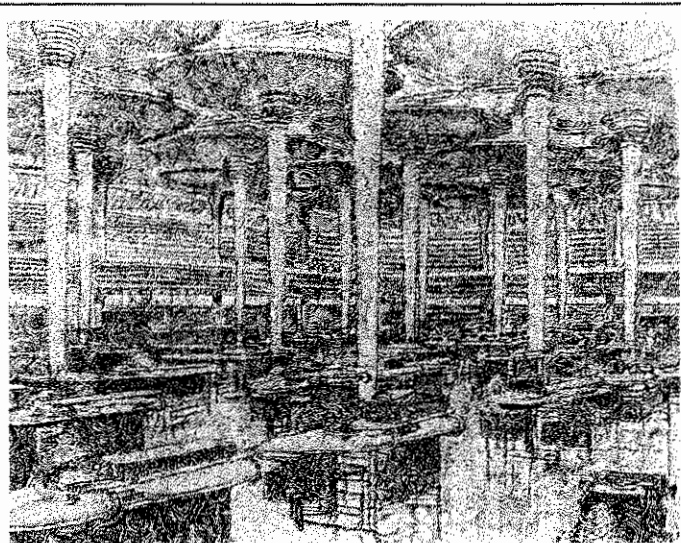


Fig. 21. Richard Artschwager, *Johnson Wax Building*, 1974. Acrylic on Cellotex, 47 1/2 x 59 1/2". Courtesy Texas Gallery, Houston.

expressed by poet David Ignatow who was a businessman in New York during the 1930s when he first began to write poetry:

The businessman is a traitor to himself first
of all and then no one else matters,
hardened, sick of himself.

I once knew
some one like that and he died in a chair.
It was sad for the chair, sold
and nobody knows now who has it.¹⁷

Ignatow personalized the office chair and made it feel. If only offices could be designed with such feelings. Perhaps more humane surroundings would serve to facilitate better attitudes in the workplace. The artists who have depicted offices in their work have been overwhelmingly concerned with negative views of office life. When they did not directly criticize the world of the office, they usually made fun of it. Perhaps they have something important to tell us about ourselves. The images they chose may reveal something of our human needs in the white-collar workplace.

1. P. Lafond, *Degas*, II (1919), p. 5, concluded from the picture on the wall that the man was a bookmaker or habitué of the track. Theodore Reff, *Degas: The Artist's Mind* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 117 and p. 135, notes 77 and 78, doubts this specific interpretation.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

4. See John Rewald, "Degas and His Family in New Orleans," *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, August 1946, pp. 103-128, reprinted in *Edgar Degas, his family and friends in New Orleans*, Isaac Delgado Museum of Art, New Orleans, May 2-June 16, 1965.

5. Edgar Degas, letter to Henri Rouart, New Orleans, December 5, 1872, *Degas Letters*, trans. by Marguerite Kay (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), no. 5.

6. For additional reproductions of Hopper's illustrations and office studies, see Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper as Illustrator* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979) and Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: The Artist and the Artist* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1980).

7. Norman Rockwell, *Norman Rockwell, My Adventures as an Illustrator, As Told to Thomas Rockwell* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 349.

8. Edward Hopper to Norman Geske, explanatory statement of *Office at Night* accompanying letter of August 25, 1948, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota. See also Gail Levin, "Edward Hopper's 'Office at Night,'" *Arts Magazine*, 52, January 1978, pp. 134-137, which reproduces all of Hopper's sketches for this work.

9. Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Devin-Adair Co., 1957), p. 199.

10. Hopper, explanatory statement, August 25, 1948.

11. Reff, *Degas*, p. 220.

12. Edward Hopper to Elizabeth Navas, letter of June 28, 1952, Archives of American Art, Roll D251.

13. *Ibid.*

14. George Tooker, quoted in interview by David Tunkl, *George Tooker* (Los Angeles: David Tunkl Gallery, n.d.), n.p.

15. Thomas H. Garver, *George Tooker: Paintings 1947-1973* (The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1974), n.p.

16. This cartoon appeared in the *New Yorker* on November 25, 1961.

17. David Ignatow, *Selected Poems*, chosen with Introductory Notes and Afterword by Robert Bly (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), p. 84; this poem is entitled "The businessman is a traitor to himself first."