

Edward Hopper, Illustrator: An Artist's Hidden Roots

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Although as a boy he showed talent, Edward Hopper's ambition to become an artist worried his parents, who advised him to study not fine art but commercial illustration. He began formal training in the fall of 1899 at the New York School of Illustrating, run by Charles Hope Provost, which had just moved to 114 West 34th Street and expanded its offerings, advertised as "Learn to Draw by Mail."¹ Provost, writing on how to illustrate, noted in his 1903 book, "To many students of an extremely artistic temperament all commercial work is distasteful."² He might have been referring to Edward Hopper.

Despite despising the constraints of commercial work, Hopper absorbed a great deal from his study of illustration. If we ask why Hopper's art is so popular today, we might have to give some credit to his early training and practice as an illustrator. That training might have something to do with how well his work looks in reproduction, including on the internet. Yet Hopper was so bitter and discontented at having had to work as an illustrator that he rarely spoke of this experience. When he did so, it was to dismiss this time and his efforts. Yet he saved many of his original studies for illustrations as well as a number of the proofs of the illustrations that he sold and those few originals that he received back from the publishers.³

In 1976, when I first began to research Hopper's work



as an illustrator, I was able to find a few people still alive who had commissioned work from him at the beginning of the century. They confirmed his reluctance to work in illustration. Some of Hopper's published illustrations proved to be so obscure that the Library of Congress had preserved them only on microfilm, after having discarded the originals. I first presented my findings in *Edward Hopper as Illustrator*, which, in 1979,

accompanied an exhibition of his prints and illustrations at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Some agreed with me that studying his illustration work was necessary to understanding the later art, while others, such as the *New York Times* critic, Hilton Kramer, warned that I would confuse the public, which he feared could not distinguish between "high art" and illustration.⁴ I followed up by republishing Hopper's illustrations in *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné* in 1995. By now, decades after 1979, it is a commonplace that many early-twentieth-century artists of note worked as illustrators or designed advertisements – from painters John Sloan, Arthur Dove, Joseph Stella, and Reginald Marsh to the photographer and painter, Edward Steichen.

What encouraged my original research into Hopper's early work in illustration was his statement: "In every artist's development the germ of the later work is always found in the earlier. The nucleus around which the artist's intellect

