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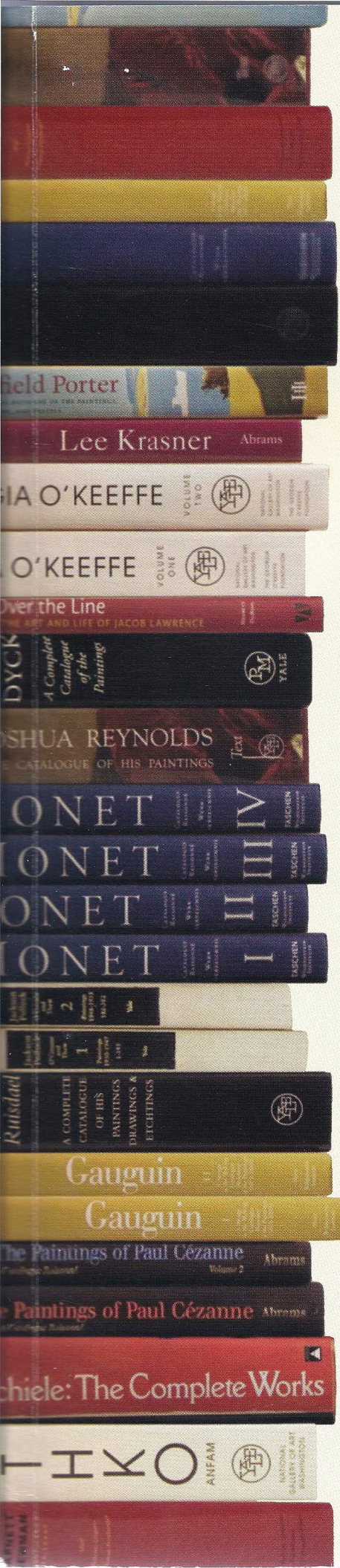
## CATALOGUES, RAISONNÉS

*and the*

## AUTHENTICATION PROCESS

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**WHERE THE  
IVORY TOWER  
MEETS THE  
MARKETPLACE**





## A SCHOLAR'S PERSPECTIVE: THE EDWARD HOPPER CATALOGUE RAISONNÉ

GAIL LEVIN\*



IFAR has asked me to speak about “the scholar’s position vis-à-vis the public once research for the catalogue raisonné is completed.” I have to interpret this charge in the light of my belief that a true scholar, once focused on a project, never completes research, but always maintains an interest in the field and welcomes new discoveries. Thus, I will discuss my post-publication activities as the author of a catalogue raisonné. My catalogue raisonné of Edward Hopper, in three volumes and a CD-Rom, first appeared in 1995, published by W.W. Norton & Co. for the Whitney Museum of American Art.

But then, in February 2001, Norton and the Whitney republished from the catalogue raisonné the two volumes on Hopper’s oils and watercolors. For this occasion, Norton and the Whitney disregarded the scholarly foundation of a catalogue raisonné by diminishing my credit as the author. Any author of a catalogue raisonné bears responsibility for deter-

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mining which works are authentic and therefore included. Yet this republication fails to acknowledge this basic scholarly role. The publishers dropped my introductory essays, to which I hold the copyright; they credit me only for the long essays and brief notes that accompany individual entries. Although six years passed between the two publications and the museum’s director added a new introduction, I received no advance notice of publication and no opportunity to comment or update my original volumes, which now bear the reductive label: “Commentary by Gail Levin.”

This problematic post-publication history has its roots in the history of the project as it developed. In

\*Gail Levin, Ph.D., is Professor of Art History and American Studies, Baruch College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. She is author of *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1995) and Co-Editor and contributor to *Ethics and the Visual Arts* (Allworth, 2006). © Gail Levin





FIGURE 1. The catalogue raisonné entry for Edward Hopper's *Soir Bleu* (1914).

1976, the Whitney Museum of American Art appointed me to be the first curator of the Hopper Collection with the charge of producing a catalogue raisonné and major exhibitions. The catalogue was funded by a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The Whitney had acquired the entire artistic estate of Edward Hopper and his wife, Josephine Nivison Hopper, who was also a painter, by her bequest in 1968, following his death the previous year.

When I began work on the catalogue raisonné, I was still in my twenties. Possessed by an excess of energy, I conceived of the project in the broadest possible terms. A newly minted doctorate gave me confidence. I would employ methodical scholarship to gather and digest in systematic form all that could be known of Hopper's work. No detail was too arcane, no publication too obscure for my venture. My catalogue raisonné would be the definitive work on Hopper: in addition to reproductions of each work of art, I would document every owner (past and present), all exhibitions in which each picture was included, and every publication that ever mentioned or reproduced it. I included all specific discussions of a particular work by the artist or his wife in the entries for each object. I also gathered and compiled a comprehensive bibliography that listed any article,

exhibition catalogue, or book that even cited the artist or reproduced his work. Additionally, I constructed a detailed chronology of his life and a complete exhibition history listing all of the reviews. I was able to match up unidentified early paintings in the bequest, such as *Soir Bleu* (Fig. 1) of 1914 (published by Lloyd Goodrich as an unidentified café scene), with reviews, titles, and other commentaries from Hopper's forgotten formative years, when he languished in obscurity. I did everything by hand, without computers, which were not yet available to me.

Beginning the project at the museum, I expected to find Hopper's personal papers, including the letters he kept, the photographs, books, and phonograph records that he and his wife owned: in short, the evidence of his intellectual and cultural scope. I searched in vain. Soon I learned that no one from the museum had sought to obtain this material, either directly from Jo after Edward's death, or, later, from the executor of her estate. The opportunity had been missed to conserve basic materials for a history of the artist and his production. This, despite the fact that in 1964, when the Museum was producing the catalogue for the last retrospective exhibition held during Hopper's lifetime, Jo wrote to Margaret McKellar of the Whitney telling her that she and Edward were "pack rats," and had saved everything.



Faced with this lack, I created an archive for the museum. I collected copies of articles, reviews, catalogues, all of the correspondence of the artist and his wife, as well as copies of all interviews with them, as well as memoirs, diaries, and letters mentioning them. I conducted my own interviews with everyone I could find who had known the Hoppers: other artists, his neighbors, his dealer, even the handyman for his building.

**B**y 1984, eight years later, I had completed my basic research for Hopper's oils, watercolors, illustrations, and prints. I had nearly finished dating the thousands of drawings that he produced, and I had identified all of the sketches that led to paintings. For individual works of art of particular interest, I had written extensive essays explaining sources of inspiration, related works, and other significant information. I had also produced four introductory essays: the first analyzed Hopper's critical fortunes; the second was a brief biographical sketch; the third traced his artistic development; and the final essay identified and examined the recurrent themes of his work.

At this time, the museum declared the Hopper catalogue raisonné complete. I returned to the teaching career that I had interrupted for this project, but my life as a scholar had changed forever. I now counted on the opportunity for close study of original works of art. In the process of producing the catalogue raisonné, I had organized two major Hopper exhibitions that drew on many other collections: the first, in 1979, presented all of the artist's prints and his commercial illustrations, the latter seen for the first time ever. The second was a major retrospective of his watercolors, oils, and preparatory drawings that took place the next year. The planning of these exhibitions and the shows themselves provided unparalleled opportunities for studying Hopper's art. My intimate acquaintance with these works grew as I accompanied both exhibitions on extensive itineraries to other museums, monitoring the condition of each object and arranging the presentation of this material in each venue.

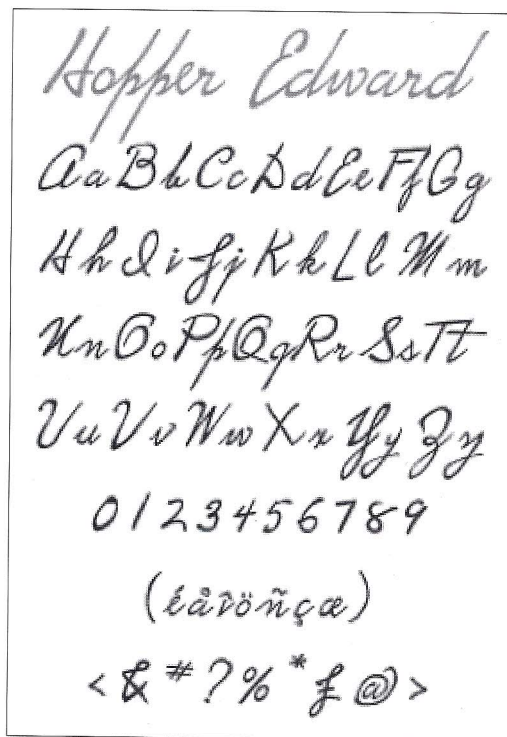


FIGURE 2. The Edward Hopper Font Set.

Towards the end of the eight years that I worked on the catalogue raisonné, I realized that a biography of Hopper needed to be written. Stimulated by the research that I had already done, I was curious to know more. In a private collection, I had turned up voluminous, nearly illegible diaries kept by his wife. Under the pressure of the deadline set by the museum for the catalogue raisonné, I had focused on extracting from the diaries comments about Hopper's paintings. But the more I read, the more I knew that important clues to Hopper's work were buried there amid the tedious recording of shopping lists and other trivial details. I felt compelled to decipher and interpret this new evidence. I knew that I had to write a biography of Hopper. Begun when I left the museum, the biography appeared in 1995, published by Alfred A. Knopf.

**E**xtensive research for the biography enabled me to correct certain errors in the catalogue raisonné manuscript, which remained unpublished for more than a decade. Thus, work on each book added to the strength of the other. The best cata-

logue raisonné will provide at least a summary of the artist's biography in which to place the work; any worthwhile biography of an artist must feature the creation of the work. In order to understand an artist well, one must become familiar with the full scope of the creative work. To avoid drawing conclusions based upon a work of art that turns out to be a forgery, the biographer needs the expertise of the catalogue raisonné.

Regrettably, both catalogue raisonnés and biographies are also useful to forgers. As I produced exhibitions and publications about Hopper's work, it gained a much larger public and prices escalated dramatically. So did the interest of forgers and those

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who would fraudulently add an artist's signature to an anonymous work that turns up in the marketplace. In addition, the more costly an artist's work, the more likely that innocent treasure-hunters will delude themselves into thinking that they have found an unsigned original in a flea market or junk shop. These people, some innocent and some not, had already begun to take up my time while I was still working for the museum. While there, I examined all works without charge as a part of the effort to locate all of Hopper's art for the catalogue raisonné. Despite this, I occasionally encountered anger when I rejected an unsigned sailboat or lighthouse without any provenance and stated that in my opinion this work was not by Hopper. During this period, I was able to identify a few of Hopper's lost works, which had turned up in flea markets or estate sales.

After I left the Whitney in 1984, in addition to research and writing, both on Hopper and on other

subjects, I returned to teaching. I could no longer afford to make myself available to all comers with newly discovered or newly minted works purportedly by Hopper. Yet their numbers continued to grow with his escalating prices and reputation. Since I lived in Manhattan, not far from the Whitney and many commercial art galleries, I was actually subjected to strangers showing up at my home unannounced with art works in tow. They sometimes claimed that they thought I operated a gallery despite the fact that I have never worked in the art market. Others went so far as to ship me originals without contacting me in advance.

**A**lready while at the Whitney, under the guidance of Lloyd Goodrich, I required a signed release form in an effort to protect the museum and myself from lawsuits. I still continue this practice. I have never been sued, although while I worked for the museum, I once served as a witness in a lawsuit against an auction house by the consigner of a fake Hopper. Once working on my own, I began to charge a modest, non-refundable consultation fee for my time and expertise. My fee did not vary whether the art was authentic and worth thousands, even millions, of dollars or fake and worthless.

From 1984 until the publication of the catalogue raisonné, I uncovered a few more authentic works in this way, but the numbers of poor fakes eventually became overwhelming. So was the hostility of a few of the owners when I rejected the authenticity of their find. I was forced to cut down on the numbers of treasure-hunters who would gladly take up my time. Before anyone engages me, I counsel them to conduct their own research at the library, using my books, now especially the catalogue raisonné. Many people, however, do not want to make the effort, and most cannot resist the fantasy of finding an unrecognized treasure. Thus, I have had to continually raise my fees in order to limit the number of preposterous works brought to my attention. I do feel an obligation to keep forgeries off the market, but I also need to protect how I spend my time.



Since publication of the catalogue raisonné and the biography, forgers have become more enterprising. I am convinced that a few have read my biography and invented stories that they imagine I might want to hear. The Whitney Museum gave such people a boost in 1999, when they published the "Edward Hopper Font Set" (Fig. 2). This is a computer program, based on the record books that the artist and his wife kept, which allows one to print out any text in the handwriting of Edward Hopper or that of his wife, Josephine Nivison Hopper. After this, it is a simple matter to trace a note or letter in Hopper's handwriting to go with a story invented by someone who has read the biography.

Not too long ago, I was nearly taken in by one such attempt. The fabricated story was tantalizing, if uncharacteristic, and the art work appeared to be accompanied by an interesting note from Hopper himself. But, fortunately, I came to realize that the painting itself was not at all believable. Hopper's work is not *that* easy to fake.

Perhaps because my research took so long and was so thorough, I have not needed to change any opinions since publication. No one has challenged my authentications or even the dates or identifying titles that I established in the catalogue raisonné. I myself, however, given the mission of this conference, feel com-

pelled to challenge here publicly for the first time not the authenticity but the provenance for a large group of works that appears in the catalogue. The information as printed is both incomplete and misleading. Instead, many indicators point to a major transfer of works without evidence of clear title from the Hopper Bequest before it reached the museum. When, as an employee, I brought this to the attention of the museum's administrators, to the best of my knowledge, nothing was done, despite the immense loss to the institution and the public. Since I was only a "writer for hire," I did not have ultimate control over what was published about this in the catalogue.

I hope that this brief account of my experiences in writing the catalogue raisonné of Edward Hopper will prove useful for other scholars just starting out on their projects. Because of the problem of funding this kind of in-depth research, the individual scholar must often agree to work for or with a museum, gallery, estate, or other entity that might not share all of the scholar's principles and concerns. The potential loss of control over content is far more crucial to the scholar than any other aspect of the endeavor. Scholars, especially younger ones, might not realize what they are taking on when embarking on a catalogue raisonné. Publication does not make such issues go away; it merely extends and enlarges the scholar's responsibility to the field.

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