

# A splendid biography of a cold artist

## "EDWARD HOPPER: AN INTIMATE BIOGRAPHY"

By Gail Levin  
(678 pages, illustrated)  
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Reviewed by EDWARD J. SOZANSKI

**T**he painter Edward Hopper is regarded as a great American realist, in the tradition of Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer. Yet a close examination of his paintings indicates that in his case, realism refers mostly to his language of description, not to what he described.

Throughout his career, Hopper edited his daily observations and experiences to create visions of America that are primarily expressions of his feelings and enthusiasms rather than commentaries on American life. He was not a social realist like John Sloan. The implied narratives in his paintings are inventions, not transcriptions.



Gail Levin  
*Puritan motif*

Hopper was a painter of light, of silence, of space, of alienation, of repressed erotic tension. He had an eye for architecture, but no interest in ordinary human activity. He lived in cities all his life, but his art rarely conveyed a sense of 20th-century urbanity.

### Collective Self-Portrait

The real subject of Hopper's art is Hopper himself. The body of his work constitutes a collective self-portrait of his obsessions, his personality, his responses to natural phenomena. His paintings confirm that Hopper was a quintessential puritan, as philosopher George Santayana defined the term.

In her splendid new biography of Hopper, Gail Levin offers an observation from Santayana's 1935 novel "The Last Puritan." Describing a character in the book, Santayana writes: "His puritanism was a deep and speculative thing: hatred of all shams, scorn of all the mummeries, a bitter merciless pleasure in the hard facts. And that passion for reality was beautiful in him."

As Levin tells it, Hopper lived his entire life as we expect a puritan might. From 1913 until he died in 1967, two months shy of his 85th birthday, his home



"Self-Portrait" (oil on canvas, c. 1925-30),  
by Edward Hopper.

was a rented fourth-floor walk-up on Washington Square in Greenwich Village. It was 74 steps up from the street. Until 1961, he relied on a coal stove for heat and cooking; coal had to be hauled up from the basement.

In 1934, he built a summer house at Truro on Cape Cod. That house wasn't electrified until 1954. Hopper was a thrifty soul, and apparently he could get along without refrigeration and lights.

His art isn't as straightforward as it appears to be. Levin uncovers its sources and its agenda in the artist's personality and experiences. The genesis of each major painting is noted and explained. After a while, his method of living and working assumes a logical symmetry.

Hopper doesn't waste effort on any activity that isn't related to his art. He was a dour, uncommunicative, undemonstrative person — one might say a misanthrope — who avoided human contact whenever possible. The alienation and loneliness that many see in his paintings came from within.

A recent exhibition of Hopper's paintings at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York advanced the notion that Hopper painted the alienation of 20th-century industrial society. There is evidence in Levin's biography to confirm his antipathy

to progress. His city pictures never show a skyline, or skyscrapers. The views of drugstores, diners and offices could be set in a Midwestern town.

But there is even more evidence that the emotional detachment that characterizes so many of his pictures reflects his own cramped personality. The most convincing proof of this connection lies in his relationship with his devoted but despairing wife, Josephine Nivison.

Hopper didn't marry until he was nearly 42. He doesn't appear to have had much intimate contact with women before marriage, as poor Nivison would discover.

### An Archetype

The female artist who sacrifices her career to her husband's used to be a familiar phenomenon. Nivison was the archetype of this long-suffering type. She had been an artist before she met Hopper, but after their marriage she struggled continually and unsuccessfully to maintain her identity.

As Levin recounts it, it wasn't only that the art establishment ignored women artists, especially the wives of painters. It was that Hopper himself squelched her ambition at every opportunity. He denigrated her work and monopolized whatever studio space they had. Their Truro house, which they built, had only one studio — his.

The story of the Hoppers' tempestuous marriage is the parallel text of Levin's biography. Much of her narrative is drawn from Nivison's diaries. Hopper's progress is always tied to Nivison's struggles to assert herself and gain some respect. Rarely was she successful, even when it came to their car. Hopper wouldn't let her drive.

Women of the '90s will marvel that she put up with his outrageous chauvinism and cruelty for 43 years, not to mention the coal stove, the kerosene lamps and the 74 steps. Nivison's diaristic testimony indicates she believed in her husband's greatness, and after a while came to see herself as his collaborator — she posed for all the women in his paintings.

One has little doubt after reading Levin's account that Hopper was indeed a painter to be ranked with Eakins and Homer. And the reader is gratified to discover that in one of his last major paintings, a picture of a costumed couple taking their bows after a performance, he finally acknowledged her contribution.

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