

The Hopper Wars

The great American painter strove with all, but chiefly with his equally vigorous wife.

EDWARD HOPPER

An Intimate Biography.
By Gail Levin.
Illustrated. 661 pp. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf. \$35.

By Michael Kammen

READERS of this masterly but chilling book will never again view with quite the same feelings a picture by Edward Hopper, perhaps the most powerful American "realist" painter of the 20th century. Yet this is a study of Hopper's actual work only by indirection, mainly through extensive extracts from the copious journals kept by his wife and sole model, Josephine Nivison.

Gail Levin, a professor of art at Baruch College and the Graduate School of the City University of New York, has already done the *catalogue raisonné* of Hopper's works and five other books on his art. Here she offers his life (1882-1967) along with Jo's, whose candid chronicle of their 43-year marriage provides the most significant source for a nearly flawless account of a remarkable artist scarred by an absolutely dismal temperament.

"Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography" should reach a wide readership for many reasons: it is a compelling and accessible narrative for anyone even remotely interested in modern American art. It is also virtually a clinical case study of a certain kind of marriage — deep mutual dependence hideously marred by Hopper's almost pathological need to repress, abuse and virtually extinguish his wife's blithe spirit and artistic aspirations. (Jo was no saint, however, and James Thurber, were he alive, might script this tragic battle of the sexes into a ghastly but uproarious comedy.) Finally, the book should be read by anyone who loves Cape Cod, where the Hoppers summered, and by people who feel an abiding sense of affection for the physicality of Manhattan. They lived for more than four decades at 3 Washington Square, the historic home of many other famous artists and writers. In 1939 Jo's diary refers to her husband's love of "roving about the city, with the noises of the city, boats tooting, trucks rumbly, etc. E. so crazy about the great beauty of this city."

Despite the temptation to be judgmental, Ms. Levin mainly allows her material to speak for itself — and at times the marital relationship becomes almost unbearable for the reader, as it did for Jo. The temperamental qualities that friends, interviewers and acquaintances used to describe Hopper — he was introverted, laconic, introspective, taciturn, melancholy — were not merely critical in his marriage, they made him barely tolerable. After beginning a portrait of Hopper at age 80, Raphael Soyer wrote in his diary: "There is a loneliness about him, an habitual moroseness, a sadness to the point of anger. His voice breaks the silence loudly and sepulchraly."

Michael Kammen, the president of the Organization of American Historians, is the author of "Meadows of Memory: Images of Time and Tradition in American Art and Culture."

The echoes of Soyer's words in Jo's diaries are numbing. In 1950, after a long summer at the small, inaccessible home they built at Truro on the Cape, Jo inscribed this passage about the puritanical, sexually faithful, nonalcoholic husband she had come to regard as a monster: "Tonight E. said he was a watcher, I a participant. Oh no, no one could keep me from participating. Well 4 months on a remote sand hill with a watcher could explain why I'm the wild cat that I've become. One has to make so much of little — oh not little — the house, the hill, the thrilling sea, sunsets, flights of gulls, winds — but E. so silent, so absorbed & elsewhere & knowing he thinks only of himself, won't give any of his thought, his concern. Said he's a hermit & hermits are never hospitable. He got that all settled, he recognizes no obligations. He accepts himself & upholds his conception. He doesn't want partnership, doesn't want sharing. Each get his own."

Other passages graphically describe the physical abuse that compounded his psychological spite. When he cuffed her repeatedly, she retaliated by scratching, biting and looking for any device that would give her some leverage and equalize the height discrepancy between her (barely five feet tall) and him (almost six feet five). Here is a representative account from their early 60's: "So the dynamite went off — & plenty. . . I kicked, he swatted, I stretched for a weapon to augment the length of my arm reach & he dragged me across studio by my wrists & continued to swat while I struggled & bit, bit hard right into one of the 2 hands that held me tight & bit til he let go. I drew blood before he'd let go, he'd rather to be bitten than let go, so my teeth went right on in & nothing else would convince him of my utter exasperation & determination to uphold a principle. All very exhausting this interruption. So it was with a bandaged hand that he packed the car & I can't see yet how it could have been otherwise. No one who sees him, so saintly so patient could realize what straight he could drive a person like me thru."

The nastiest of these episodes seemed to occur when Hopper underwent a crisis of creativity, which became increasingly frequent during his 50's and 60's. Often he produced only two or three pictures per year, and he spent months brooding about possible subjects. Hopper suffered severely from the artist's equivalent of writer's block. When he did get started on a picture his spirits would lift. He might even become playful; and once, at the age of 70, lustfully affectionate. On the day that he started a new canvas, Jo commented, he "gave me a pinch on the bottom thru my corduroy slacks & said 'You certainly are

some baby.' " She was 69, and relished the unexpected attention.

Between battles — verbal, visual and visceral — they read "Hamlet" aloud together; he read Ernest Renan's "Life of Jesus" to her, as well as songs from Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot's essays, Robert Frost's poetry (which they both loved) and Paul Valéry's poems in French. Jo and Edward were both fluent in French, and sharing French poetry had been a bonding element during their courtship in 1923-24. Is it any wonder, then, that Jo vacillated between bitterness and submissive supportiveness? Here is an absolutely representative sample, taken from her diaries in 1954:

"I never dreamed competition was to enter in our lives. I so deeply grateful for everything vainglorious that came his way & did everything to further his interests. What a blow to have it slowly dawn on me, he couldn't trump up any live interest in anyone but himself. In summing it all up, I realize with much bitterness I've been swindled of all the deeply human values. . . Take[s] me & my efforts in his behalf entirely for granted. And in my own eyes, I'm humiliated. . . The sum total of his success is so without warmth, that the chill is destroying me — the chill of this realization. Some one of the I suppose lesser critics said his light had brilliance — but no warmth. This understanding struck me as psychic. Oh, I should bring him warmth, should I? And why? . . . Such thought of generosity outrages me — why ever breathe into such monster that which he is incapable. He is capable only of taking, other wise the line is dead."

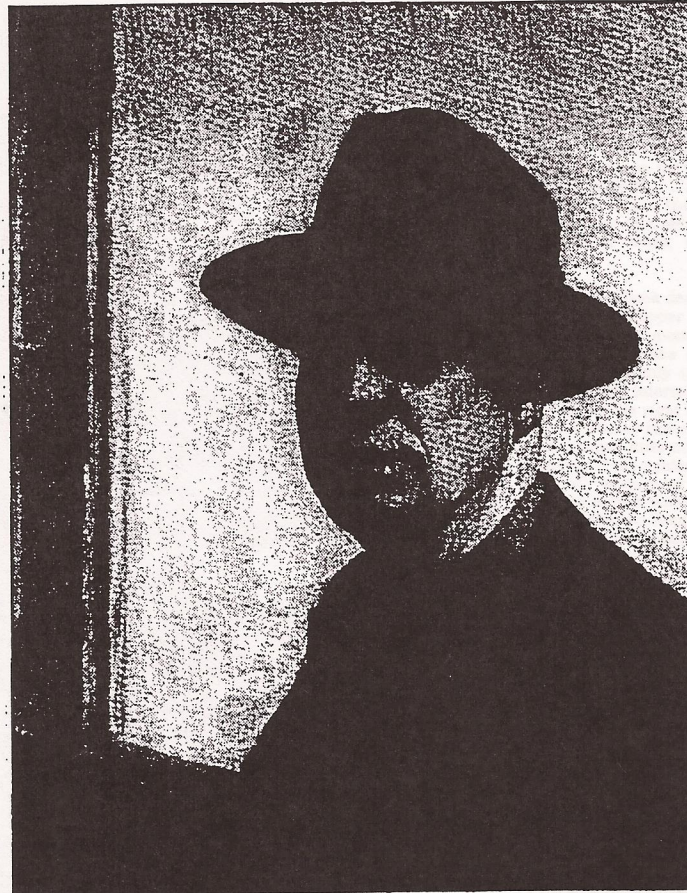
YET after he died she remarked that "what was perfection together is a heart break alone," and (more ambiguously) that life with Hopper had been "perfection (of its own snappy kind)."

Ms. Levin does little to explain Hopper's quirkiness — psychobiography this is not — though she alludes to his overwhelming mother and his browbeaten father, his sadistic teasing of girls when he was growing up in Nyack ("Teasing the beginning of sadism. Egotism, sadism, domination of its own furtive kind. He loves no one."), his incapacity to share his feelings openly with his closest friends, and Jo's occasional doubts about his masculinity: "He isn't male at all," she wrote in 1953. "He couldn't get anywhere on his male qualities, he'd measure well below par. Is that why he must prove to himself he is male, getting back at me that never did have the physical strength of a husky male."

Ms. Levin repeatedly observes that in many scenes by Hopper the viewer is actually a voyeur staring intently at a couple, or more often a woman alone in a room (wearing only a slip). These strangers do not know that they are being observed by a cold yet sensuous eye. Hopper claimed that these were glimpses of common life that anyone might catch while riding on the elevated train at night and peering into an illuminated office, apartment or hotel room. Be that as it may, they are scenes of unconsummated temptation, lust or isolated sexuality.

Much less obvious as a theme in Ms. Levin's book, though a subtext nevertheless, is the frequency with which Hopper painted a man and a woman whose rela-

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Edward Hopper in a self-portrait, painted 1925-30.

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October 8, 1995

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Hopper Wars

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tionship appeared to have deteriorated, catching them perhaps at the defining moment when a romantic relationship was ending — scenes in which the two figures do not even look at each other. Invariably such pictures carried innocuous or innocent titles like "Summer Twilight"; and when queried, Hopper invariably denied that he was making any sort of psychological statement. He insisted that his artistic concern was simply the relationship between light and space. After completing this book the reader will not be disposed to take statements by Hopper about his art at face value.

Ms. Levin also makes it sufficiently clear that Hopper admired many artists, predecessors as well as a few contemporaries — Vermeer, Degas, Pissarro, Caillebotte, Burchfield and, above all, Thomas Eakins — but that his incessant moviegoing and especially his reading also did much to define his art and how he felt about it. Ralph Waldo Emerson was a paramount source of illuminating ideas, but Henry James (who disliked skyscrapers, as did Hopper), André Gide, Paul Valéry, Proust, Ibsen and Thomas Mann's "Magic Mountain" all supplied Hopper with inspiration as an artist. On one occasion he read aloud to Jo about Emily Dickinson because her reclusive personality matched his own and because she transformed ordinary aspects of New England life with her imaginative power: "The familiar objects became portents and symbols," Hopper read. "Here were the hills, the changing seasons, the winter light, the light of spring. . . the lonely houses off the road, the village inn, the lamppost that became, in the play of her fancy, sublime or drill."

THIS book demonstrates that Hopper spent inordinate amounts of time, rather like some inert giant sloth, calmly contemplating, collecting information, waiting for just the right sort of sky, and sometimes sketching — but astonishingly little time actually painting. If his preferred media were oil, watercolor and charcoal, his métier was silence. On one occasion the Hoppers invited James Thomas Flexner to visit their studios because they liked what he had written about Edward in his brief history of American art. Flexner sat with Edward in his studio for more than half an hour without either man saying a word. Nevertheless, Flexner told Ms. Levin in 1991 that he felt a "kind of rapport" with the artist, despite their silence.

Ms. Levin allows Hopper's esthetic to emerge from his own carefully composed words and actions: his hostility to sentimentalism, his desire "to fix the simple natural gestures of people in their daily activities," his insistence (in spite of himself) that he did not

psychologize, and his bitter hostility to abstract expressionism and "action painting."

She recounts a marvelous encounter ending in a put-down that occurred on Dec. 17, 1953, at a party after the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened a new American wing with diverse luminaries present, including Andrew Wyeth, Stuart Davis and Jackson Pollock. After the modernists Davis and Pollock had been arguing about methods and techniques of painting, according to Wyeth's account, Hopper "tapped Davis on the shoulder and pointed from the penthouse to the incredible light of the setting sun on the buildings. 'Can you ignore that?' he asked, going on to say: 'People are starved for content today.'" His query brought the conversation to an abrupt halt.

The strengths of this absorbing book vastly outweigh its minor flaws. In just a few spots, mainly at the start, attempts to supply historical context are clichéd. When young Hopper is taking art classes and then goes to Paris, there are too many lists of the names of classmates and friends. They become a meaningless blur. Although it emerges that Hopper was an ardent Civil War buff, we never get so much as a clue as to why. Having learned early on that Hopper was impressed by the fact that the French Government supported both theater and opera, we are left wondering why he despised the New Deal art projects sponsored by the W.P.A., and why he and Jo felt certain that Government funding would only serve to encourage artistic mediocrity.

These are small cavils about a work that carries an imposing stamp of authority. Ms. Levin is ultimately persuasive when she tells us that the "compelling tension" of Hopper's life was "between the Victorian world of his childhood and the uncertain modern world that intruded on him daily."

Although Hopper harbored a deep mistrust of art critics, most of the time they penetrated his complexity and got him right, regarding him as both realistic and romantic, calling him "uncouthly honest," praising his artistic integrity, and designating him "the poet in paint of loneliness." After he began courting Jo in 1923, his personal loneliness abated for a while, but when the demons returned with savage consequences, she was always there to record them; no one else suffered from them as she did.

In 1954 Hopper rejected the label that had been pinned to him many years before: a painter of the "American Scene." Twenty years earlier he had begun to reject Jo, even though he depended on her for so much, just as he depended on the American scene to provide him with a vision of nocturnal solitude in New York City. The least generous of men, Hopper is now fortunate to have such a generous biography — generous in its amplitude, generous in being judgmentally restrained, generous in its recognition of his artistic achievement. □