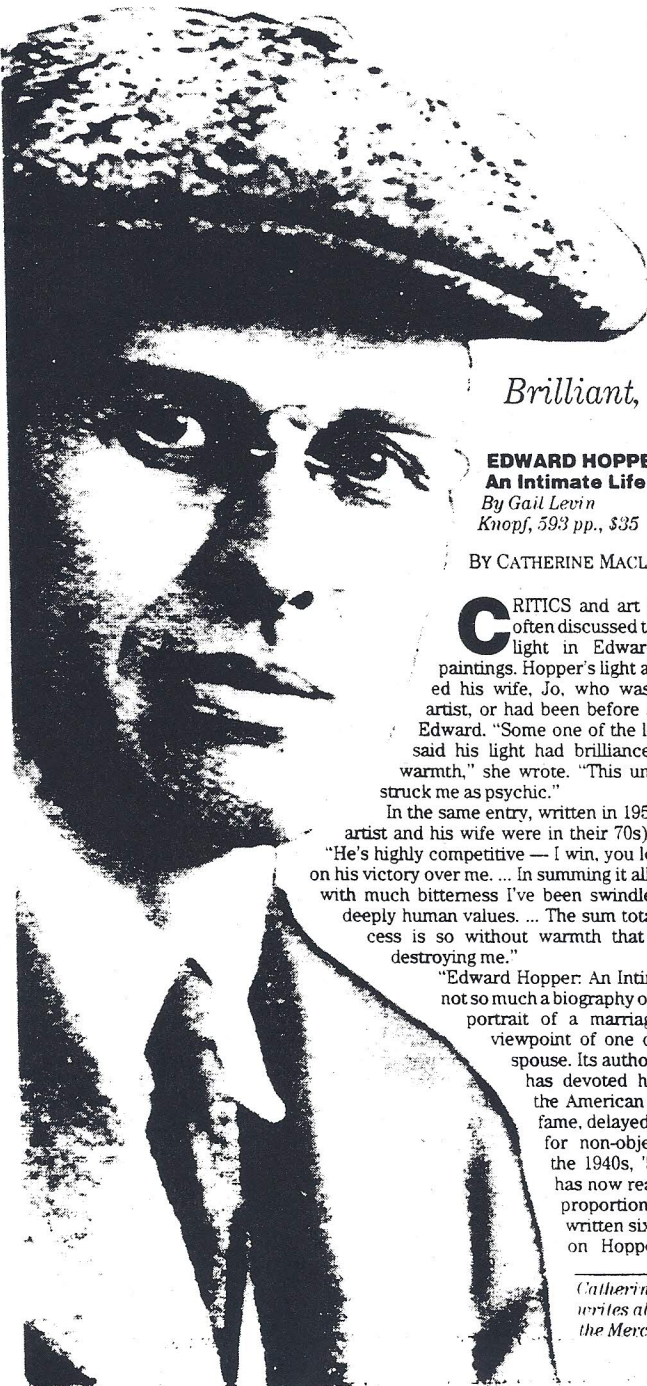


Books

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Seeing the light

Brilliant, not warm: Hopper's art — and himself

**EDWARD HOPPER:
An Intimate Life**
By Gail Levin
Knopf, 593 pp., \$35

BY CATHERINE MACLAY

CRITICS and art lovers have often discussed the quality of light in Edward Hopper's paintings. Hopper's light also interested his wife, Jo, who was herself an artist, or had been before she married Edward. "Some one of the lesser critics said his light had brilliance — but no warmth," she wrote. "This understanding struck me as psychic."

In the same entry, written in 1954 (when the artist and his wife were in their 70s), she added, "He's highly competitive — I win, you lose. He's fed on his victory over me. ... In summing it all up, I realize with much bitterness I've been swindled of all the deeply human values. ... The sum total of his success is so without warmth that the chill is destroying me."

"Edward Hopper: An Intimate Life" is not so much a biography of Hopper as a portrait of a marriage from the viewpoint of one disenchanted spouse. Its author, Gail Levin, has devoted her career to the American artist whose fame, delayed by the mode for non-objective art of the 1940s, '50s and '60s, has now reached mythic proportions. Levin has written six other books on Hopper, including

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the recently published catalog raisonné of his work, an extensive piece of scholarship that is the main occasion for "Edward Hopper and the American Imagination," an exhibit on view at the Whitney through Oct. 15.

Levin's life of the artist takes up where the catalog leaves off. It is based on a variety of well-documented sources and provides an extensive and detailed account of Hopper's boyhood and early art training, his working habits, his relationships with other artists, and his successes and failures in the public eye. The author provides a vivid sense of his various domiciles, including the 74-step walkup in Greenwich Village where he lived most of his adult life, and where he died, sitting in his studio, at age 84.

But the vivid and passionate diaries kept by Jo Hopper during their 43-year union (her death followed his by 10 months) form the core of this book, and eclipse all else, creating a poignant, maddening and inadvertently comical record of how pernicious the bonds of marriage can be. The biography truly comes to life with the arrival of Jo, and Hopper himself becomes almost a background figure against which his wife hurls her devotion and hatred.

Things started out promisingly enough, especially if you subscribe to the theory that opposites attract. Hopper, who grew up in a conventional middle-class home in Nyack, a small town just up the Hudson from New York, was tall (at least 6-foot-4), laconic, poker-faced and anti-social. Josephine Verstelle Nivison, born and raised in Manhattan, came from an artistic and unstable household.

She was tiny, high-strung, talkative and outgoing. Both were members of a group of struggling young artists who studied under Robert Henri and Kenneth Hayes Miller at the New York School of Art and summered in cheap boardinghouses on Cape Cod and the coast of Maine. Neither had been able to make a living through art. Hopper supported himself with commercial illustration, which he despised, while the independent and enterprising Nivison worked as an elementary school teacher and an actress in the Greenwich Village theatrical company, the Washington Square Players.

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Scenes from a tormented marriage

■ HOPPER

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In the summer of 1923, when both were 40, they happened to share a boardinghouse in Gloucester, Mass., and soon became outdoor painting partners. Both were francophiles, and when Edward quoted a poem by Verlaine one day he was amazed to hear her start up where he left off.

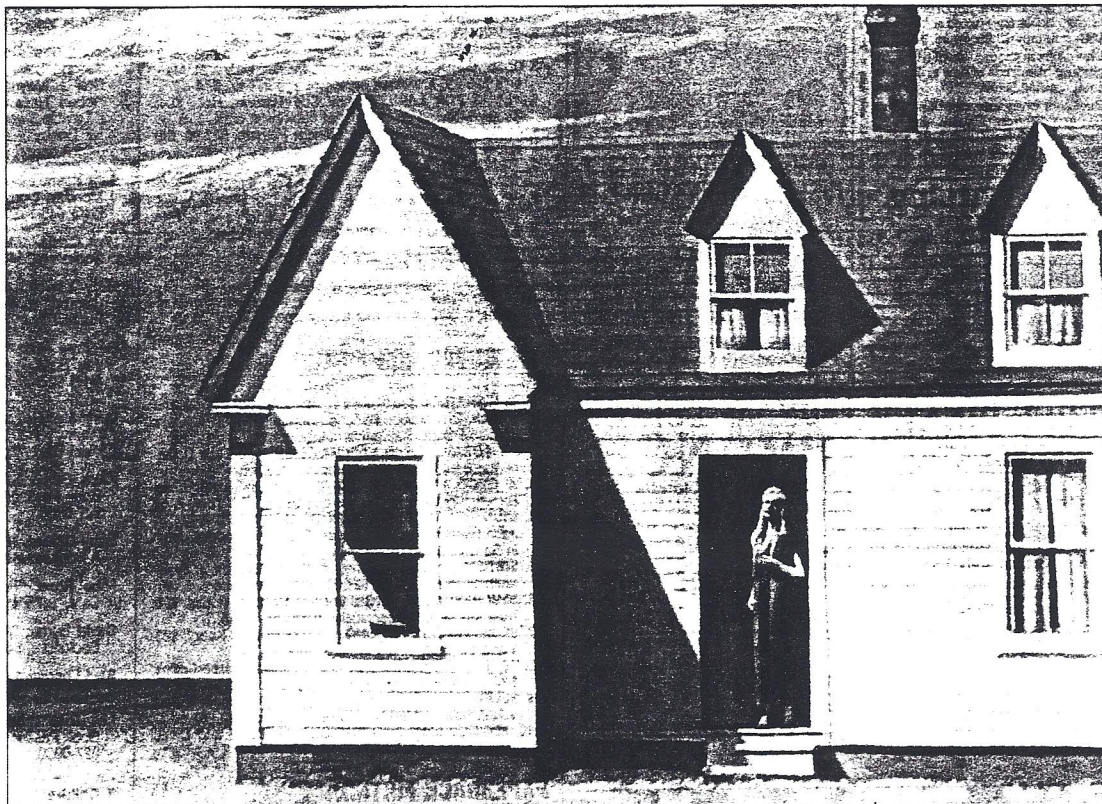
Later they went to together to a local puppet show based on the folk song "Froggie went a-courtin'" about a frog wooing a mouse, and realized they were falling in love. Hopper, Levin writes, was the tall lanky froggie to Nivison's little mouse.

They married the next year, and the relationship was a turning point for both — in opposite directions. Hopper had suffered through a decade with little success. Shifting from oils to etchings and from a French emphasis to an American one and back again, he had been unable to find his focus. Under Nivison's influence, he turned to watercolors and to the local American scene that would become his signature subject matter. When the Brooklyn Museum invited her to show six of her watercolors in a group exhibit, she suggested they look at Hopper's work as well. It was included, and the critics raved about him while her work was almost ignored. That same year Hopper began a relationship with the Manhattan dealer Frank Rehn that marked the beginning of his commercial success and the end of his tested career as an illustrator.

One-career couple

Levin demonstrates that as far as Hopper was concerned there could be only one serious artist in the family, and while his career took off, hers withered. Even when their relationship was at its worst, she never lost interest in his work, while he actively squelched hers, telling her again and again that no one liked her paintings. He was obstinate and controlling and careful to exclude her from any sphere that he wished to claim for himself. When the couple acquired an automobile, he wouldn't allow her to drive it, and the car became a new battleground, joining such charged territory as the museums (his), the studio (his) and the kitchen (hers — and she hated to cook).

While Edward painted seriously, Jo dab-



Edward Hopper's "High Noon," 1949. His artistic stature grew as his wife's career withered, leaving her ranting bitterly into her diaries.

bled at her art, but spent much of her time making rag rugs out of her old clothes and pouring her furies into her diaries. Her entries often sound like the rantings of an enraged adolescent. When, in 1941, Edward introduced her to a museum director merely as his wife, not as an artist, she exploded (in her diary) at "his vile meanness directed against my work and me as an artist, accounting for my inhibitions now." She recorded their combat over the slight as "dreadful. And E. never yielding one foot. E's English to my Irish, his Grant to my Lee, he dominating male to me female. I got cuffed & could I have but reached, he'd have been bitten."

Their spats, which often erupted into hitting and scratching, read like slapstick comedies. During an automobile trip through Yellowstone Park, Jo wanted to stop and pet the bears. Edward refused. Jo put her feet up on the windshield in protest. Edward "swatted" her, "But swatting isn't as bad as meanness," she wrote. In other entries and letters, she describes conflicts in which she insisted on driving and would plant herself in the driver's seat, only to have Edward drag her out of the car by her ankles while she tried to hang on to the steering wheel.

They were in their late 50s by then, and they did not gain much wisdom with the passing years. In her 60s, Jo resorted to hunger strikes and sitting up all night in the unheated room that served as her studio. The result, no doubt intended, was that Edward would wrap her in a blanket, carry her to bed, and bring her tempting morsels of food.

"Edward Hopper" will make even the

most shameless reader feel like a voyeur at times. It is difficult to determine how much of their discord was an elaborate and perverse mating ritual they both enjoyed and how much was true bitterness and despair. She later described one of their strife-ridden trips as a "perfect vacation with my darling Eddie." For Christmas in 1951 he gave her a book of poetry by Rimbaud, inscribed to "la petite chatte qui découvre ses griffes presque tous les jours" ("the little cat who bares her claws almost every day").

Their tormented romance endured. When they were in their late 60s Jo wrote in her diary, "E. Hopper pinched my bottom through my corduroy pants today and said 'you sure are some baby!'" The Hoppers may not have been happily married, but they were married — deeply — to each other, and to the conflict and excitement of their relationship, which became ever more symbiotic over time.

Jo Hopper's achievements

Levin never fully addresses the nagging question of whether Jo Hopper's talent was substantial enough for its near-extinction by her husband to be viewed as a tragedy. The book's 100 photographs and drawings include several examples of Jo's work, so the reader may be the judge — though most of her paintings have been lost. The few that survive are not in the same league as Hopper's mature work by any gauge, but these comparisons may be unfair, since Edward's genius emerged after their marriage, fed, Jo claims, by the death of her own aspirations.

Another unanswerable question is how much of the blame for their difficulties can be placed on Edward's domineering personality, how much on Jo's erratic and masochistic responses to him, and how much on accepted gender roles of the times. A woman with less temper and more nerve might have carved out some sort of productive niche for herself within the marriage. (As Georgia O'Keeffe did in her marriage to the tyrannical Alfred Stieglitz.) Yet while this account of their long love-hate relationship is a fascinating psychological study, except for the fact that Hopper is now considered one of America's greatest artists, their story is probably not so unusual.

Hopper's pain was projected onto the landscape and transformed into his stark and moody tableaux. Jo, who traded her identity as artist for that of artist's model (in fact, she insisted that he paint no other nudes) turned her sense of betrayal (and self-betrayal) at the bargain into the raw narrative of her diaries. Together, her words and his art bear powerful witness to the little hell they created together.

During his lifetime Edward Hopper often was embarrassed by his wife's overwrought loquacity. One can only imagine — not without a certain pleasure — his mortification at the publication of a biography of himself based on her intimate record of their life together. Jo does indeed have the last word in this account, and the stern and disapproving Edward would not have been at all pleased. ■

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