



Edward Hopper's 'Early Sunday Morning' — art historian Gail Levin says she admires 'the light, space, solitude and dignity of his work'

Spreading the word about Edward Hopper

By Mildred Hamilton
Examiner staff writer

GAIL LEVIN has been hooked on Edward Hopper since she was a college sophomore. He has been the only artist in her life since 1976, when she joined the staff of the Whitney Museum of American Art as associate curator of the Hopper Collection.

The tall, willowy brunette, here for the opening of the major retrospective of his works at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, admitted that their close relationship is not permanent. She will say farewell to him in 1982.

"That's the publication date of the complete Hopper catalogue, 'Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné,' in four volumes, that I have been working on for years. And there are many other artists that appeal to me," said Levin.

"Of course, my interest in Hopper will continue. The light, space, solitude and dignity of his work seem to epitomize the character of much of 20th century art. I was first attracted to him by his use of composition and

light. Now I am more interested in what he has to say."

She never met the artist who has enjoyed so much of her professional energy. He died in 1967 when she was still in Boston's Simmons College, where she painted Cape Cod landscapes during her summer vacations and concentrated in history of art classes on 15th century realism.

"I began then to appreciate Hopper's paintings, but I was studying other artists. I got my master's degree from Tufts University with a thesis on Henry Moore and the influence of the Italian Renaissance. Then I did my doctorate, at Rutgers University, on American and European modernists."

She started a teaching career while she was in graduate school, and was assistant professor of art at Connecticut College when she began to think about the possibilities for an exhibit on "Morgan Russell: Synchronist Studies, 1920-1922."

"I took this idea to the New York Museum of Modern Art, where I was very fortunate. The museum said I could be guest curator for it. The show was well received, and I made the discovery that I liked museum work very much."

When the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation made a grant to the Whitney Museum for the study of the vast collection bequeathed to the museum by Hopper's widow, artist Jo Nivison, Levin was hired. That was three exhibitions and three publications ago.

"A lot of research, a lot of travel," she said. "This is the last stop of this retrospective, which opened at the Whitney in September 1980, and which has been to London, Amsterdam, Dusseldorf and Chicago."

It will be in San Francisco through Feb. 14. It is the largest, most comprehensive Hopper show; many of the 150 oil paintings, 35 watercolors and 100 drawings had not been previously shown.

"We borrowed many paintings from private collectors. One of these, 'Two Comedians,' his last painting, done in 1965, was exhibited in New York, but the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Sinatra, didn't want it to travel. They were generous in letting us show it, but they missed it and wanted it home after the opening exhibit."

Levin described the exhibition as "an enormous success in Europe. It was like a goodwill ambassador for America, and it set an all-time attendance

record in Dusseldorf. Hopper wanted to be known as a great world artist, and I feel he tried to make universal statements. He painted the world around him, filtered through the world within him, to produce realism of a personal nature. For example, he didn't just paint the night; he painted the feel of the night."

She has lectured at the exhibition cities, and has produced these books: "Edward Hopper: The Complete Prints," "Edward Hopper as Illustrator" and "Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist," which also were catalogues for the exhibitions.

"He worked as a commercial artist until 1925, and most of this work had not been published until I began search it out. I have found more than 500 examples that will be included in the complete catalogue. A few watercolors and some isolated drawings have not yet been located, but the catalogue is almost finished."

As her next major project, Levin would like to arrange a large thematic exhibition. She has organized past Whitney shows on "Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years" and "Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925".