

People

Interview with Gail Levin

"The Preeminent Edward Hopper Scholar"

By David Arsenault



Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942, oil on canvas; 33-1/8" x 60". The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of the American Art Collection.

Gail Levin, recognized world-wide as "the preeminent Hopper scholar," is a professor of art history at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She has been studying the work of the revered American realist painter Edward Hopper for over twenty-five years. Her scholarship includes a stint as the first curator of the Hopper Collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Ms. Levin has authored a number of books, including *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* and *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Her publication, *Silent Places: A Tribute to Edward Hopper* (Universe), features excerpts from fiction writings around the world that reference or pay homage to the artist. (For a detailed list of her credentials see the right column.)

David Arsenault, contributing editor to *Manhattan Arts International*, had the opportunity to ask Ms. Levin some questions about her thoughts and experiences regarding this quarter century exploration.



Gail Levin with Edward Hopper. " I set out to learn anything I could about Edward Hopper and his work and life. I have to say there wasn't that much that was known; not very much had been written at that time. "

DA : What initially inspired your investigation into the life and work of Edward Hopper?

GL : I had been working on Hopper since 1976 when I was called to the Whitney Museum to become the first Curator of the Edward Hopper collection, with the job to write the Catalog Raisonne (W.W. Norton, 1995) and also to organize exhibitions.

DA : Was there a connection for you with his work prior to that which would have led to that opportunity?

GL : There was. I had just completed a dissertation on Kandinsky and American Art from 1912-1950, which were the main years in which he (Hopper) was working. However, he wasn't the topic of my dissertation.



Edward Hopper, **Railroad Sunset** , 1929, oil on canvas, 29 1/4" x 48". Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Josephine N. Hopper Bequest. Photograph by Bill Jacobson.

Going back to my undergraduate period, I arrived in Boston from the South. Hopper had a very strong tie to New England. I saw his work in the collection of the Boston Museum. I also traveled for the first time to Cape Cod where he had a home. Although I never made it all the way to Truro, I discovered the very special Cape light. I was actually studying painting in those days, and I would make my own Cape Cod landscapes, which were representational.

DA : Had you known that he had spent so many summers of his life there (1930-1966)?

GL : I doubt that I did. However, I went up to Portland, Maine one Thanksgiving when I was an undergraduate to visit a classmate. She drove me to see the Lighthouse at Two Lights, and said to me "Edward Hopper painted this," and I said, "Oh, I'd better take a photograph of it." And I got out my camera and photographed the site, never dreaming that in 1985, which was almost twenty years later, I would publish a book of photographs of sites which Edward Hopper painted. I re-photographed that site for the book (Hopper's Places, Alfred A. Knopf, 2nd edition, University of California, 1998). There was that early connection.

THE WATERCOLORS OF
Edward Hopper



ALL OF HOPPER'S WATERCOLORS
WITH COMMENTARIES BY GAIL LEVIN

Watercolors of Edward Hopper: All of Hopper's Watercolors, with commentaries by Gail Levin.

DA : It seems like a whole series of events led you in that direction.

GL : Right. And my undergraduate thesis was on realism—but it was on Jan van Eyck.

DA : Quite a bit different than Edward Hopper.

GL : Yes, although Hopper liked early Netherlandish painting.

DA : Obviously, things have changed over time. How would you say your study of his work has evolved over twenty-five years?

GL : I set out to learn anything I could about Edward Hopper and his work and life. I have to say there wasn't that much that was known; not very much had been written at that time. There was a large monograph on Hopper by Lloyd Goodrich, but he made the mistake that, if Hopper didn't tell him something, he didn't really ask or explore. Goodrich never knew Hopper's commercial work — never saw it. Edward Hopper wanted to suppress that part of his life; he didn't like it. Also, Goodrich never knew that Hopper studied with William Merritt Chase, who was then out of fashion, and Hopper hadn't liked Chase and so did not mention him to Goodrich.

DA : Hopper certainly needed to be provoked into telling anyone anything, didn't he?

GL : He was not loquacious, that's true. So, there was a great deal to be uncovered, and I would say that my decision to write a biography of Edward Hopper (*Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1995) really opened up a lot of doors that I could not have imagined when I began.

DA : What effect has your study had on the way you teach and look at art...maybe even the way you think and live?

GL : Looking at so much Hopper definitely affected the way I look at art and see the world. I think that maybe Hopper's greatest lesson for me is that, like Hopper's art, I would like my own writing to be accessible to a large public. I have no interest in writing only for a narrow, specialized audience. Hopper's art speaks to many people on many different levels; I think

that's a good model for writing as well.

DA : So even though he could not speak to people comfortably one-on-one or in a group setting, he used his art as his means of expression?

GL : Absolutely. Even in his personal life with his wife, he couldn't express his emotions very well. He drew caricatures for her, so his personal communication was also a silent image. He didn't say very much.

DA : Would you say the silence, the sense of solitude — is that something specific that perhaps you've been able to relate to and that you're attracted by in his work? Or is there something different, something more?

GL : What I think that is most appealing about Edward Hopper's art is how it operates on so many levels, how complex it is. You can get deeper and deeper into the meaning of his work. His art is very rich in significance. Much of it is so much more than just a recording of what he saw; and I think that's what makes his art so important to so many people. I'm not sure that everyone always realizes the extent of Hopper's reach, to so many different people in many different cultures on many different levels. Hopper's art has even come for many Europeans to represent what they think about America.

DA : There are a lot of ways we'd prefer for them not to think of us. I think that this is one of them that perhaps is a very positive expression of what America can be all about or what it may be.

GL : I don't know if it's positive. For example, some people say Hopper's depressing, and I suppose some Europeans might think that his art epitomizes American culture.

DA: Let's look at that. From a personal perspective, if it were something depressing for me, I wouldn't be intrigued or compelled by it.

GL : I don't find his art at all depressing. However, he was a depressed person. I know that from being his biographer. In many ways he was a Victorian man, born in 1882, who lived most of his life in the twentieth century, and really never adjusted to a lot of the major societal and technological changes that took place. The changing role of women was very difficult for him. He expected women to behave like his mother had in the nineteenth century. He was afraid to fly on airplanes. He did it once; he hated to fly. He didn't like skyscrapers. When you see them in his paintings, they're always cropped, as opposed to Georgia O'Keeffe, who celebrates them, or Charles Sheeler, with his soaring skyscrapers.

DA : Figures became a very important part of his work. He portrayed them alone or together yet looking away from each other (seemingly in psychological isolation). Still, none were ever "lurking in the shadows." Might he have intended for the light to represent a force (God? Nature?) that brought them together and united them?

GL : In fact, it's pretty clear; I discussed this in the biography. Mrs. Hopper in her diary records that there was a handyman they used in Truro named Tommy Gray. When he died, Edward Hopper said "Poor Tommy Gray. He can't see the sunlight anymore." And I think he said something like that on more than one occasion. I think that sunlight really represented a life force; I don't think it was a religious feeling. Simply, light celebrated life.

DA : In *Silent Places* (Universe, 2000), you mention that detective and mystery writers most frequently refer to Hopper. Do you think it's the elusive nature of his work? We talked

earlier about the many levels you feel his paintings operate on.

GL : They're obviously projecting their imagination and story onto Hopper. That's particularly true with his image "Nighthawks," which has become a cultural icon. Writers of thrillers occasionally refer to other images by Hopper. Perhaps because Hopper's work is so accessible and because it has become a kind of common currency. I think that "Nighthawks" has that sense of mystery, unease; of something happening in the night (the early morning hours, or the late night hours). And it's not only detective writers and fiction, but also moviemakers and playwrights.



Edward Hopper, Nighthawks, 1942, oil on canvas; 33-1/8" x 60". The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of the American Art Collection.

I wrote an article a long time ago in which I suggested that "Nighthawks" was inspired by Hemingway's short story "The Killers," which Hopper read in Scribner's magazine and liked so much when it first came out, that he wrote a fan letter to Scribner's. He said that this writer was so much better than the rest and it was unusual that it wasn't sentimental or saccharin like so many stories. But that short story has the sense of something about to happen, and it never does. In a sense, Hopper's paintings are just like that. So that enables writers and filmmakers—fiction writers and poets, and other artists, perhaps too—to project their own imagination...and the viewer in general.

So Hopper doesn't give you the last word. He sort of gives you the scenario and you have to imagine the conclusion, I suppose.

DA : He didn't necessarily concur with many of the assessments and critical opinions of his work, or even the general public's, for that matter.

GL : But I don't think he had a set story that he wanted people to get from his painting. I think he wanted to provoke the imagination.

DA : What would you say to artists like me who feel profoundly drawn to examine and re-examine the works of another artist? What benefits may result, and are there any cautions to watch for?

GL : First of all, I think it's been going on for centuries. I think Hopper definitely looked at Courbet for example, but Courbet looked at Frans Hals; even painted a direct copy of Hals' "Malle Babbe." Hopper himself made drawings after Manet. This tends to happen most when artists are young and in school. Yet all his life Hopper looked at the works of other

artists, particularly Degas and Rembrandt, and so it would be only natural that other artists would now look at Hopper. I don't really see any danger in it, but I think every artist has to find his or her own voice.

DA : What do you feel is the overall perception of Edward Hopper's images today, in the twenty-first century?

GL : It's a different perception in different parts of the world. In Japan, for example, I don't think they understand Hopper in quite the same way we do. The esthetic sensibility of Japan and Japanese art is very different than Western art. The exposure there (to Hopper) has been much more limited. There have been two exhibitions now in Japan.

The original book on Hopper, which was Lloyd Goodrich's, is translated in a series there. I actually wrote about this on ArtNet.com: a whole article on Hopper in Japan. I was just there in January, and I wrote about it in response to that. I had also just contributed an essay to the catalog of this last exhibition.

Basically, Hopper came out in an American nostalgia series — this book by Lloyd Goodrich on Hopper, way back in the '70's. The series included people like Maxfield Parrish and Norman Rockwell. The Japanese didn't make a great distinction between American illustration and American art. They saw Hopper as nostalgia; there is an element of nostalgia in Hopper. But I would put him in a very different category than Norman Rockwell. And I think he would agree with me.

On the other hand, what makes Hopper so popular to Europeans has something to do with, I think, his identification with and admiration for the cinema, because a lot of Europeans' image of America is formed by watching Hollywood movies. So the cinematic aspect of Hopper, on which I have written for twenty years, has a very large appeal: sometimes it's conscious, sometimes subliminal to the Europeans. I think Hopper seems to give them this image of what America must be; what it is for them. Perhaps his sort of depressing, lonely mood — alienated would be the better word — is what Europeans want to think about when they think about Americans.

DA : That's something Americans themselves identify with, to a certain degree.

GL : In America, I think it's slightly different. In the 21st century, I think there is a sense of alienation, which I think is highly tied-up with technology. As much as we love technology. For example, so many Americans now live in cities. Urban life is very alienating: the sense of being powerless in the face of the city, sort of this large machine. I think of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, and in a sense, it's kind of come true.

DA : And Hopper sensed that himself.

GL : I think Hopper was very sensitive to some of the technological innovations of modern life. He was repelled by things like the airplane, the skyscraper, urban crowding. So, in a sense, you get the skyscraper in his painting cropped, the cities emptied of most people.

He never celebrated, never painted, an airplane. He was afraid to fly. On the other hand, the cinema, which is also totally modern, was a totally contemporary product that he embraced. There is a paradox there.

DA : Let's presume for a moment that Mr. Hopper is alive and able to respond to the discovery that people in the year 2001 are still looking at his paintings and writing and talking about him. At one time he said that most artists are forgotten as soon as they're dead.

GL : 90% of all artists are forgotten ten minutes after they're dead.

DA : Right. Do you think he'd be surprised to find he had not been forgotten?

GL : You know, I don't think he would be that surprised. I think he was being cynical when he made that comment. He had a great belief in the worth of what he was doing. When asked about abstraction, which he really deplored, he thought that realist painting would reassert itself. He really had faith that it would come back into fashion.

I think he would be very shocked by the direction that contemporary art has taken today. I don't think he would know what to make of installation, for example. Although there have been installations that even are about Edward Hopper's work, or supposedly homages to it.

DA : Like George Segal's work, for example?

GL : Well, George Segal's sculpture, I think, Hopper would be very complemented by. It's very representational and it does parallel the mood and setting of so many of his paintings. But I would think that someone like Jack Pierson, who had a show at the Whitney — that's quite a bit removed from Hopper. But even more, other kinds of installations I think would baffle him. And certainly all other kinds of changes in the art world — the greater attention paid to women artists — would confound him.

DA : That was something that was a personal challenge to him in his own relationship. I don't imagine we'd find Mr. Hopper with his own website?

GL : I don't think we would. But we might find him very annoyed with his biographer (Ms. Levin herself).

DA : (laughs) Why do you say that?

GL : I don't really think he'd be very appreciative of my allowing his wife to have a voice. He kept trying to muffle her.

DA : That brings up one final question. How has your knowledge of Hopper's feelings about women affected your continued desire to study him/his work? Was he simply a product of his times, and thereby can he be forgiven his myopic perspective?

GL : I'm sure that I will continue to study and write about Hopper's work, which I admire greatly. His unkind behavior toward his wife and his negative attitudes toward women artists in general can certainly be understood in terms of the times in which he lived and the psychological depression that he suffered. Creative genius is not necessarily linked to good behavior or kindness. Yet Hopper was probably nicer to women than Picasso was. I don't think that his behavior should affect our estimate of his art. Even his wife thought he was a great artist. But his attitude toward women artists does reflect the times in which he lived and that attitude deserves to be examined and changed.

David Arsenault is an artist living in upstate New York. His work has been favorably compared to Edward Hopper's in the Wall Street Journal . To see his work online, visit www.artofdavid.com