

# The Work of Art

by Patricia Flaherty



**I BELIEVE THAT IF YOU WANT TO DO SOMETHING ENOUGH, YOU CAN DO ANYTHING YOU WANT, BUT YOU MUST PERSEVERE.**

At a relatively young age, Gail Levin, '69, has achieved an impressive record of success and credibility in the field of art history. Curator for the Hopper Collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, she has recently mounted a special exhibition entitled "Edward Hopper: Prints and Illustrations," which primarily focuses on the artist's formative years, including prints, their preparatory drawings, and original illustrations done when he was a commercial illustrator. The exhibition visits Boston's Museum of Fine Arts from February 5 through March 16, 1980, as the first stop of a tour which includes the Georgia Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Milwaukee Art Center, and the Seattle Art Museum.

Ms. Levin has made a name for herself in the art world through determination and belief in herself. She says, "Throughout my pursuit of higher education, I have always tried to be an independent woman. I felt I had to prove myself, and I believe that if you want to do something enough, you can do anything you want, but you must persevere."

Ms. Levin has always had an interest in art. While an undergraduate at Simmons, she originally minored in English and art along

with her major in education. She also spent one summer at home in 1966 taking a studio art course at the Atlanta School of Art, and the next summer at Harvard University studying three-dimensional design with Hugh Townley. Her interest in art intensified during her Junior year. "I was taking the Shakespeare course with Wylie Sypher, and one day in class I sat next to a girl who told me she was going to the Sorbonne for a semester. I thought it was a great idea. I convinced my parents to let me go, and off I went to Paris during the second semester of my Junior year. I found Europe to be very inspirational, and when I came back I knew I wanted to major in art history, go on to graduate school, and then become a professor. I had been interested in art history, but I was really just finding myself. I was a late bloomer and didn't find a direction until my Senior year."

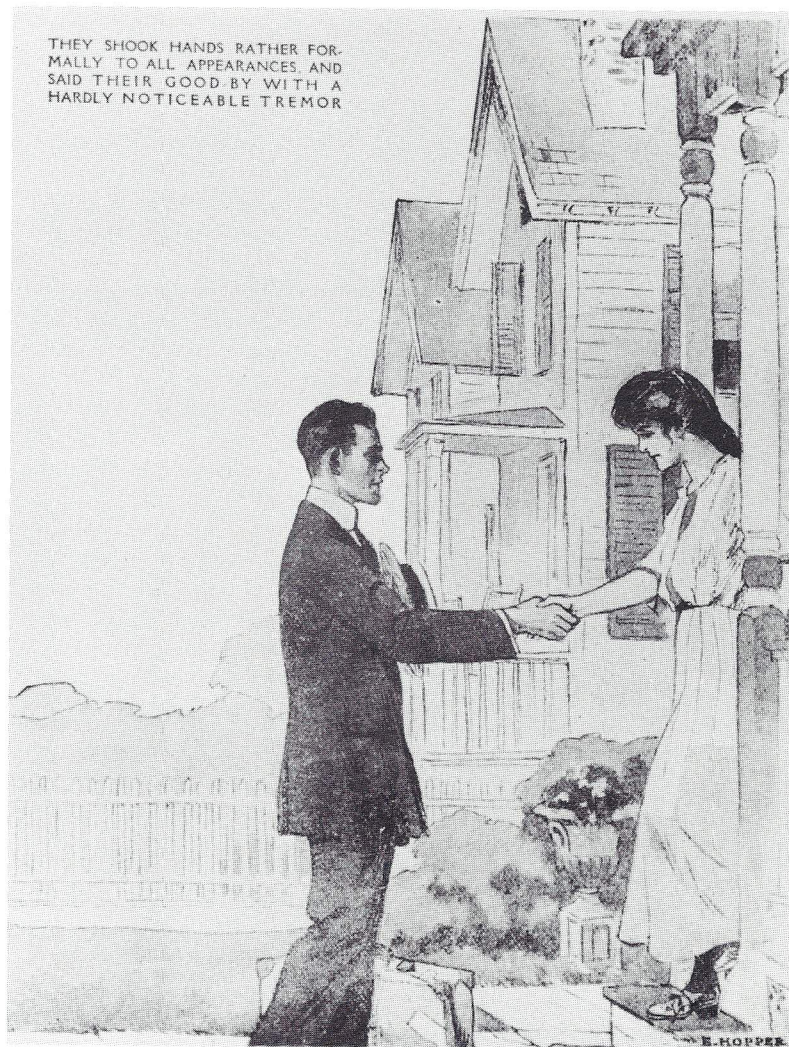
When she returned to Simmons for her Senior year, Ms. Levin ran into a problem because she was still an education major and was required to do a semester of student teaching. At that time, Ms. Levin was not interested in continuing as an education major, or in doing the internship. "The head of the education department thought I had cold feet. He told me to try teaching, but said I could quit if I didn't

like it. I quit after one week. I was told I was making a big mistake, and that I would regret my actions. I really felt I was being coerced into following a traditional women's profession."

The encouragement to pursue her field of interest came from Wylie Sypher, when Ms. Levin took his course "Criticism of the Arts." Doing well for Mr. Sypher gave her the confidence to go ahead with the career she wanted to pursue. "Mr. Sypher is an exceptional man. He exuded warmth and brilliance, and he encouraged me by telling me I could be a professor if I wanted to be. I wanted to be like him." Mr. Sypher's early guidance has not been forgotten; Ms. Levin has dedicated her article, "Wassily Kandinsky and the American Literary Avant-Garde," soon to be published in *Criticism*, to him.

By the time Ms. Levin was to graduate, Simmons was reorganizing its nine schools of majors into eighteen areas of concentration. Hers was the first Class whose students could choose to graduate with a Bachelor of Arts degree in a liberal arts field. Ms. Levin wrote a Senior thesis and graduated in the honors program with her concentration of art history.

Although her parents thought art history was a rather impractical field to pursue, Ms. Levin went on to graduate school at Tufts University, where she was awarded a full scholarship. After earning her Master of Fine Arts degree in one year, she attended Rutgers Univer-



THEY SHOOK HANDS RATHER FORMALLY TO ALL APPEARANCES, AND SAID THEIR GOOD-BY WITH A HARDLY NOTICEABLE TREMOR

Illustration for Philip Prescott Frost, "The Knock of Opportunity" appearing in *The Metropolitan Magazine*, March 1913, by Edward Hopper. Whitney Museum of American Art Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper.

sity and received a Ph.D in art history in the spring of 1976. During her years at graduate school she taught survey courses, which led to part-time teaching jobs at colleges in the New York and New Jersey area from 1972 to 1975. Ms. Levin adds, "When I left Rutgers, I taught whenever and wherever I could while I was researching and writing my dissertation. Sometimes I was teaching at two or three colleges at the same time." In the spring of 1975, she was hired to start the following fall in a full-time position as an assistant professor at Connecticut College.

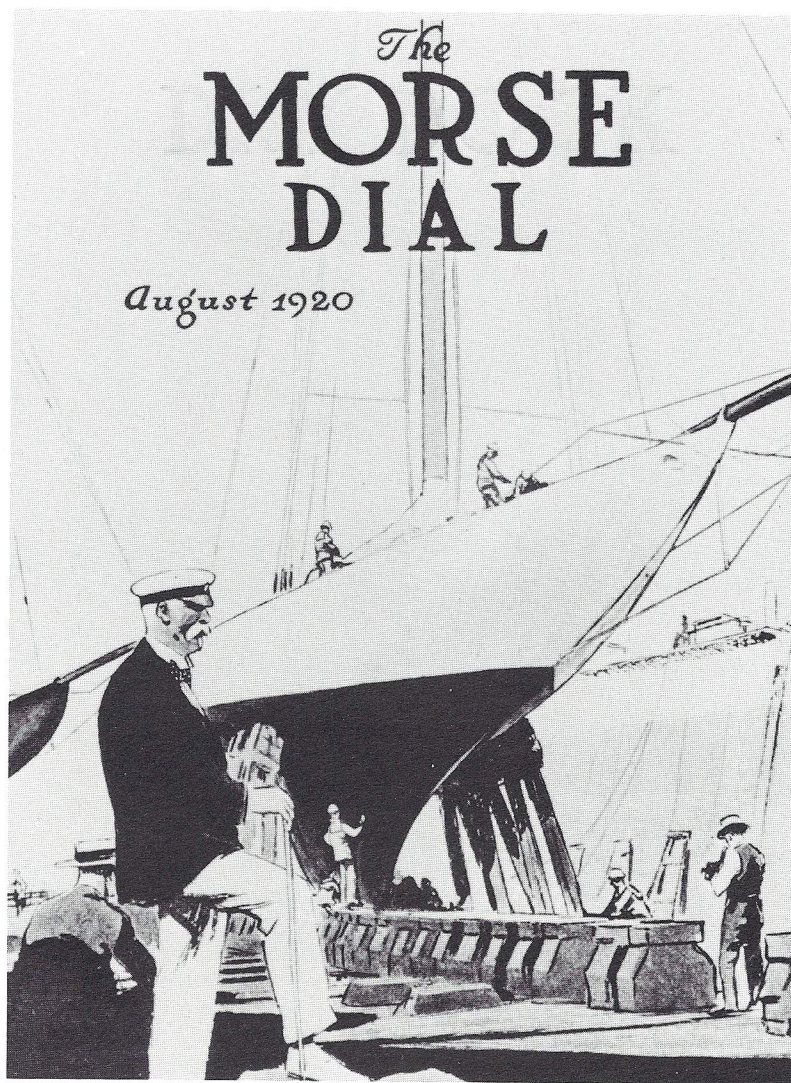
At the same time, Ms. Levin was pursuing the last details of research for her dissertation, when she came upon a new and interesting challenge. "I met a collector in New Jersey who had a large group of notebooks, sketches, and paintings of an obscure American artist named Morgan Russell. I had heard about the artist, and was overwhelmed by this substantial collection. I asked why the material had not been published or exhibited, and was told that I was the only one who had expressed an interest."

She prepared an exhibition proposal and submitted it to the Museum of Modern Art. She was invited to organize an exhibition to be shown in the spring of 1976: a selection from the artist's notebooks, drawings, and paintings. The exhibition was entitled "Morgan Russell: Synchronist Studies, 1910-1922." Ms. Levin was sub-

sequently offered the position of curator for the Hopper Collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art. A book, *Synchromism and American Color Abstraction*, and a larger exhibition grew from her original research project for the Museum of Modern Art. In the introduction of her book, she describes Morgan Russell as “an avant-garde painter whose art was one of the earliest attempts to create paintings of abstract shapes and colors.” In 1978, the larger exhibition of Morgan Russell and his contemporaries, which she organized for the Whitney Museum, was shown there and at museums in Houston, Des Moines, San Francisco, Syracuse (New York), and Columbus (Ohio).

Ms. Levin describes Edward Hopper as “one of America’s greatest representational painters. He was a realist who painted his surroundings, depicting scenes from his home in New York City and in New England, where he summered. The authenticity of feeling, the emotion conveyed through his settings, and his extraordinary sense of composition and light have contributed to his greatness as a painter.”

When Hopper’s widow, Josephine, died in 1968, one year after her husband’s death, she bequeathed the entire collection of his works to the Whitney Museum. A lifetime’s work—over 2,000 oils, watercolors, drawings, and prints—needed to be studied and made



Cover illustration for *The Morse Dial*, August 1920, by Edward Hopper. Whitney Museum of American Art. Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper.



Watercolor "Walking Man With Cape and Cane," c. 1917-20, by Edward Hopper.  
Whitney Museum of American Art  
Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper.

available through publication and exhibition. The museum had received a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to fund a curator for the project, and when, in July 1976, Gail Levin was hired to study, research, and write about the artist, she left her teaching job at Connecticut College, which she described as "a wonderful experience," to work full-time for the Whitney Museum.

"The fruits of my efforts have culminated in two books, *Edward Hopper: The Complete Prints*, and *Edward Hopper as Illustrator*, with a major retrospective in the making; the accompanying book, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist*, will be published in September 1980. A four-volume definitive study, *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*, is in progress, and will be published in 1982.

"My books receive wonderful support from the Whitney Museum. I receive no royalties from them, as it is considered a part of my job to publish. I spend a lot of my free time writing; sometimes I spend a day away from the museum to work at home."

Along with her books for the Whitney Museum, Ms. Levin has published many articles in art journals. "Getting a start was hard, but now my work is recognized, and it seems that I can't write enough. My only problem now is trying to meet deadlines. Everytime I'm published, I'm thrilled.

"My favorite art is that of the twentieth century. I have done a

great deal of study in the field of European art, and am also interested in the interaction of European and American art. I find it very challenging to write about American artists because they haven't received their due, although they are beginning to gain more attention."

In addition to her work with the Hopper collection, there are many other responsibilities involved in her curatorial position; some include on-going research projects, deciding the contents of an exhibition, designing the installation, and assisting the public relations department in writing press releases to accompany an exhibition. Occasionally, during exhibitions she has arranged, Ms. Levin gives lectures at the museum.

Her next project, sometime in 1982 or 1983, will be to produce a detailed study of the notebooks and sketches of the artist Morgan Russell. The Morgan Russell papers, including many works of art, have been given to the Whitney Museum, and she is scheduled to research them, produce a book, and to set up an exhibition of those works.

In the fall of 1979, Ms. Levin taught at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. As a professor of art history, she enjoys "seeing others enjoy art, and encouraging younger scholars to pursue their interest in the arts."

In her free time, Ms. Levin enjoys sailing in the summer, cooking when she has the time, and attend-

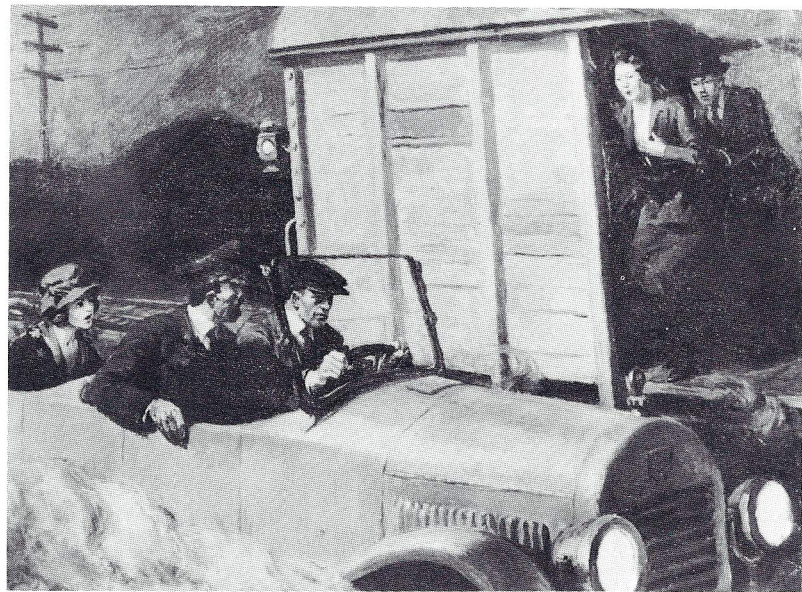


Illustration for Walter de Leon, "Everything Save Honor" appearing in *Everybody's*, May 1922, by Edward Hopper. Whitney Museum of American Art Bequest of Josephine N. Hopper.

ing plays and concerts in New York City, where she now lives. She travels extensively, often in conjunction with her research projects for the museum. Most recently she has gone to Japan and China. She considers the art world "as a social life in itself, with colleagues and friends in the field who live throughout the United States and Europe."

Commenting on her feelings about the field of art history, Gail

Levin "feels fortunate to be able to work in her chosen profession," and considers herself "terribly lucky. I'm never bored with art, and I get a tremendous amount of satisfaction from my work."

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