

# EDWARD HOPPER'S PROCESS OF SELF-ANALYSIS

Shy and reserved, Hopper preferred to hide behind a controlled public image of an uncultivated painter working in the realist tradition. But his paintings reveal the artist's own emotional world

by GAIL LEVIN



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Hopper's *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1904-06 (left), is one of many the artist produced in his formative years. One oil *Self-Portrait*, 1925-30 (right), and two self-portrait sketches remain from Hopper's mature years.

Painting was too private an experience for Edward Hopper to allow it to be described in terms of political, social or other extra-esthetic critical concerns. Hopper saw his art primarily as a reflection of his own psyche: "So much of every art is an expression of the subconscious, that it seems to me most of all of the important qualities are put there unconsciously, and little of importance by the conscious intellect. But these are things for the psychologist to untangle." When asked

what he was after in his 1963 painting *Sun in an Empty Room*, he replied: "I'm after ME." During his formative years he painted, sketched and etched his self-portrait repeatedly, a process of self-analysis not entirely motivated by the lack of another model. One *Self-Portrait*, in oil, remains from his mature years, as well as two rather intense *Self-Portrait* sketches. Hopper's identification of his art with his internal feelings is emphasized by a quotation from Goethe that he carried in his wallet and cited for its relevance to artistic endeavor: "The beginning and end of all literary activity is the reproduction of the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is in me, all things being grasped, related, recreated, moulded and constructed in a personal form and an original manner."

When asked why he selected certain subjects over others, Hopper replied: "I do not exactly know, unless it is that I believe them to be the best mediums for a synthesis of my inner experience." "Great art," he also wrote, "is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world . . . . The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm."

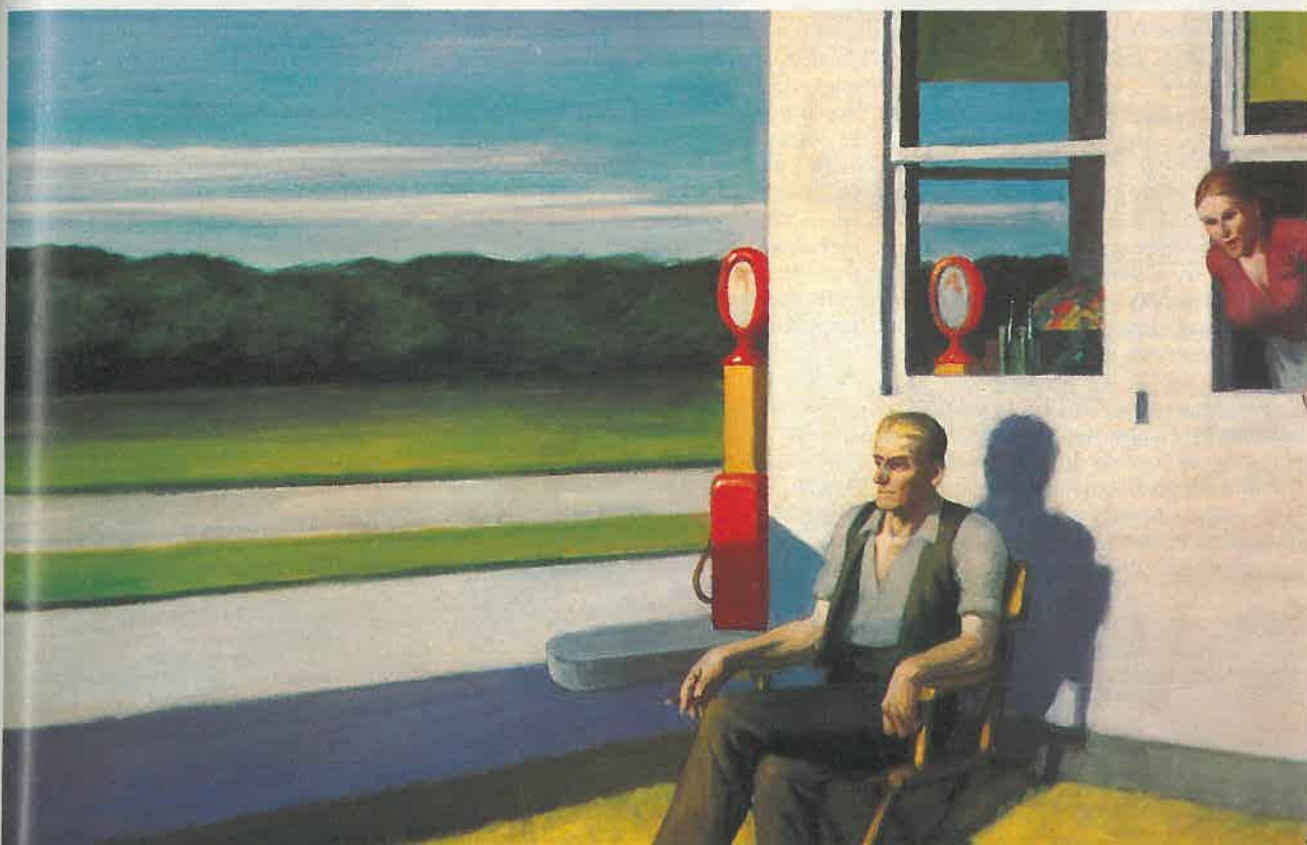
Yet over the years, Hopper attempted to limit access to his personal life. Shy and reserved, he usually preferred to hide behind the controlled public image of an uncultivated, self-made painter, working in the narrow bounds of the American realist tradition, without imposing on his art any intellectual or private content.

To his wife, Jo, Hopper revealed himself

Gail Levin, curator of the Hopper Collection in the Whitney Museum of American Art, organized the exhibition "Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist" and is the author of a book of the same title to be published in conjunction with the exhibition.



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Hopper liked driving through rural New England (his wife, Jo, used to complain that he would not let her take the wheel). The woman shouting at the attendant in *Four Lane Road*, 1956, was probably inspired by Jo's garrulous nature.

during their courtship and 43 years of marriage. Their relationship was complicated by Jo's own ambitions as an artist. While she faithfully encouraged him, keeping precise records of his work and protecting him from curious journalists, she resented the fact that her own painting did not command much attention. She was possessive, insist-

ing that she model for all the female figures he painted.

Jo became the object of Hopper's rather dry wit. Over the years he often communicated with her—even argued with her—through caricatures he sketched. In *The sacrament of sex (female version)*, for example, Hopper depicted himself, in a

nightshirt and sporting a halo, taking a deep bow before Jo, who is shown dressed in ruffles, ceremoniously sitting up in bed before a candelabrum. In *Meal time*, Hopper portrayed himself as a skeleton kneeling before Jo to beg for food and attention while she is shown seated in the clouds, reading and ignoring him.





Contrasting the two women in the painting, the critic James Thomas Flexner praised *Second Story Sunlight*, 1960, as an allegory of “winter and spring, life and death.”

This dialogue between the sexes also pervaded Hopper’s painting. As early as 1914, in *Soir Bleu*, he was fascinated by the intrigue of romance. *Un Maquereau* (French slang for “procurer”) was the title Hopper gave to his sketch of the man on the far left of *Soir Bleu*, suggesting that the woman with the heavily painted face is a prostitute approaching prospective clients. Hopper seems to have identified with the bald, gloomy clown; by the time he painted *Soir Bleu*, he had already lost most of his hair and resembled this introspective, downcast figure.

With his marriage in 1924 to the lively, talkative Jo, Hopper was provided with not only a model but daily dramas to inspire his painting. Hopper’s growing sense of people’s estrangement, of psychic isolation and discontent, appears to have heightened over the years. His 1949 *Summer in the City*

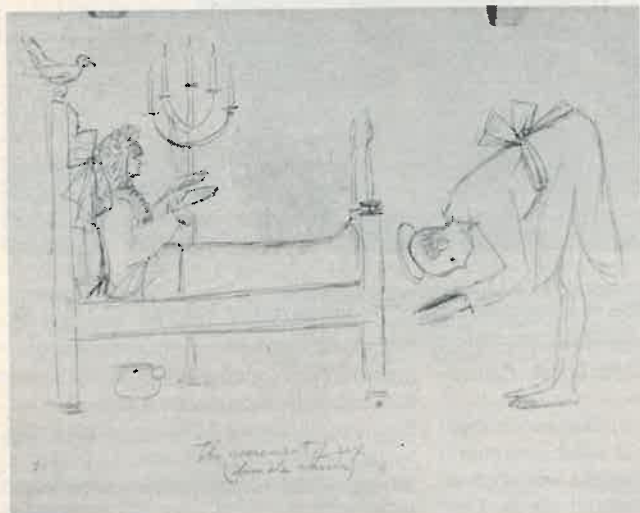
shows a woman, rather restless or depressed, with her arms tensely folded, sitting on the edge of a narrow bed, on which a man is asleep—oblivious to her discomfort. In works like *Sunlight on Brownstones* (1956) or *People in the Sun* (1960), the characters look away from each other with bored, disheartened stares. Hopper has perceived and expressed an overriding and pervasive sense of malaise.

For inspiration, Hopper liked to drive, particularly in rural New England (Jo used to complain that he would not let her take the wheel). The solitude of the quiet country roads, highways and filling stations became subjects for his paintings. The woman shouting intrusively at the gas-station attendant in *Four Lane Road* of 1956 was probably inspired by Jo’s garrulous nature. The man sits as if frozen in the sun, refusing to respond to the woman’s voice. Again bore-

dom and failure to communicate set the somber mood of this painting.

A comparison of Hopper’s 1943 painting *Hotel Lobby* with several of the preparatory drawings documents the artist’s keen observation of interpersonal relationships. In the painting an old man, standing near a seated woman who is presumably his wife, does not look or turn toward her, but rather casts his gaze blankly ahead. Across the room, an attractive young woman sits, relaxed and absorbed in her reading. There is very little communication in the picture; only the older woman regards the old man, but he does not respond to her glance. In one of the preparatory drawings, however, a man sits in the place of the young woman. Instead of reading, he stares blankly across the room. He sees the woman engrossed in conversation with the older man, who turns toward her and rests his arm on the back of her chair. Still another female figure sits in the chair adjacent to the couple, which in the painting is unoccupied. In the evolution from drawings to the final painting, Hopper apparently tried to accentuate the sense of noncommunication, to reveal a poignant lack of emotional interaction. It is likely that the drawings reflect the figures he actually observed in the lobby, while the painting demonstrates the changes he made to create drama.

When, late in life, Hopper was asked if he was a pessimist, he responded: “A pessimist? I guess so. I’m not proud of it. At my age don’t you get to be?” Hopper claimed his *Second Story Sunlight* of 1960 was only “an attempt to paint sunlight as white with almost no yellow pigment in the white. Any psychological idea will have to be supplied by the viewer. . . . There is a sort of elation about sunlight on the upper part of a house. You know, there are many thoughts, many impulses that go into a picture.” Although he occasionally denied the existence of meaning in his paintings, Hopper once sent Lloyd Goodrich a letter he had received from the critic James Thomas Flexner praising *Second Story Sunlight* and interpreting it as an allegory of “winter and spring, life



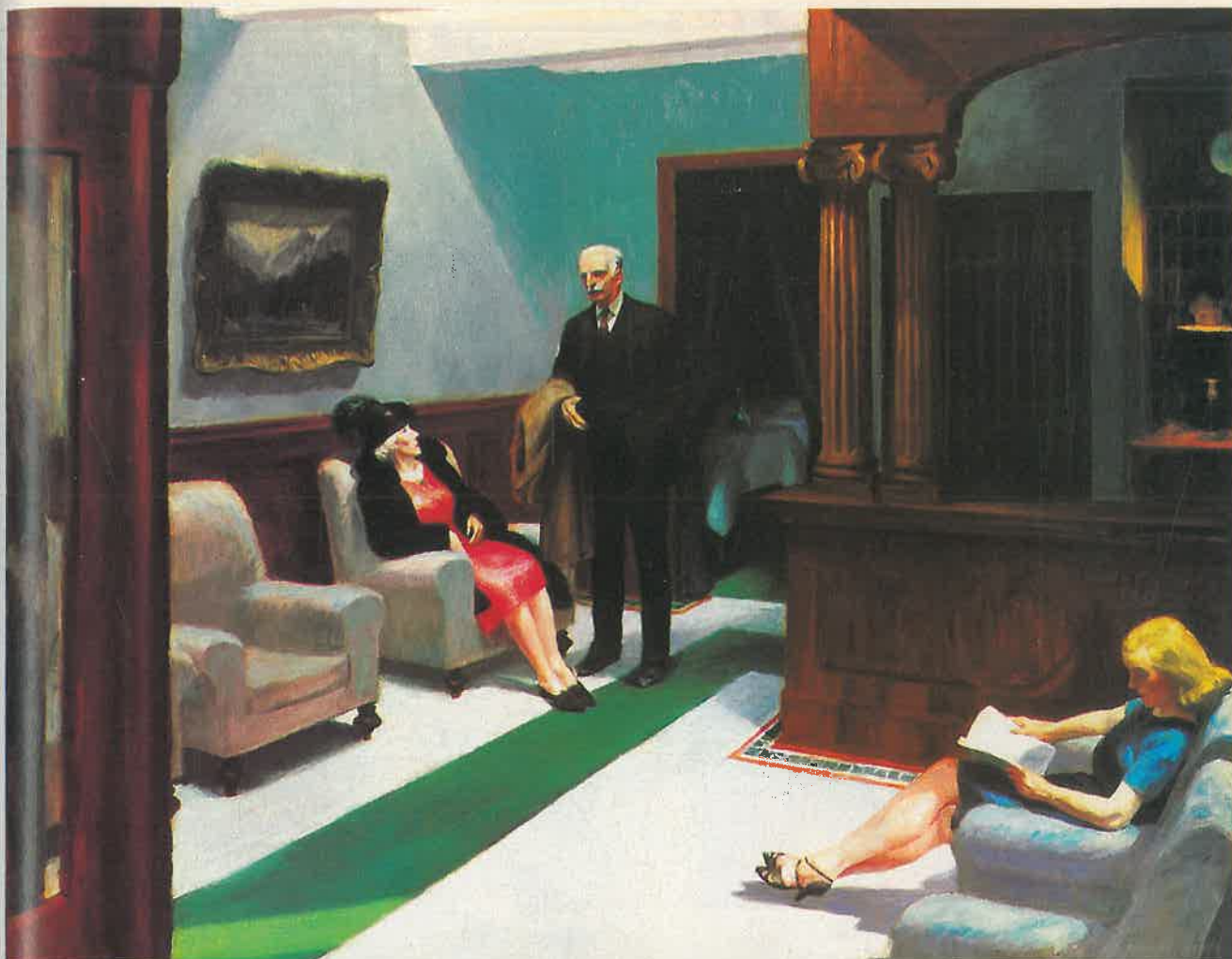
PRIVATE COLLECTION



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Jo became the object of Hopper’s dry wit. In *The sacrament of sex (female version)*, ca. 1935 (left), and *Meal time*, ca. 1935-40 (right), Hopper communicated—even argued—with her through caricatures.





In the evolution of *Hotel Lobby*, 1943, from preparatory drawing (bottom) to final painting (top) Hopper accentuates the sense of noncommunication to reveal a poignant lack of emotional interaction.

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Thus, it is important to keep in mind that Hopper was directly concerned with emotional content in his art, even though he may not have intended that content to be clearly interpretable. And while the meaning of his paintings may not always be accessible to us Hopper's admitted search for personal expression invites our investigation into the nature of his personality as a key to the understanding of his art. While Hopper was in no sense a narrative painter and had long since transcended his own work in illustration, his canvases are much more than mere representations of reality. They are not just descriptive or topical, but reveal the artist's own emotional world. Through his personal vision, Hopper aspired to the universal, refusing to be narrative and aiming instead at a suggestive symbolic content. His best results are paintings that timelessly and poignantly express the drama of human existence. ■

*The exhibition "Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist" will be on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art from September 23 through January 18. It will also be presented in 1981 at the Hayward Gallery, London, from February 11 to March 29; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, April 22 to June 17; the Städtische Kunsthalle, Düsseldorf, July 10 to September 6; the Art Institute of Chicago, October 3 to November 29; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art from December 16, 1981, to February 14, 1982.*

and death," with "the old lady for whom all passion is spent" contrasted with the young lady "fertile and sure in the movement of seasons to be fulfilled." Hopper noted of

the letter: "... I thought it would interest you. Since I took the trouble of having a photostat made of it, it may indicate that I am not as modest as I am said to be."