



At left, a preliminary study for Edward Hopper's "Cape Cod Evening" (1939), part of the Hopper bequest to the Whitney Museum; at right, the painting now in the private collection of John Hay Whitney.

Art

THE news of the Edward Hopper bequest to the Whitney Museum of American Art is, like a great deal that passes for good news these days, not quite as good as it sounds at first hearing. At the very least, there is something disturbing in the way this extraordinary donation is going to be dealt with. We all know that art museums are changing, and the assumption is often made—though not, to be sure, by the present writer—that they are changing in all ways for the better. But consider the implications of this affair.

Hopper died in 1967 at the age of 85. He left his entire artistic estate to Mrs. Hopper, with the understanding that she, in turn, would will the work to the museum, which she did. Mrs. Hopper died a year after her husband, and the museum has since been at work cataloging and photographing the contents of the estate, which is said to include something in the vicinity of 1,500 items—many of them, of course, minor sketches and other works of small importance.

Precisely what (if any) the major works in the estate are we do not yet know. The Whitney spokesmen are carefully evading all questions put to them on this matter. We are told that the "oil paintings include many of Hopper's

mature works," but only three such paintings have been specified: a "Self Portrait" from the nineteen-twenties; "Railroad Sunset" (1929), which was included in the Whitney's 1965 Hopper retrospective, and a "Cape Cod Sunset," no date given. Otherwise, the estate is said to contain a large number of paintings from Hopper's early years in France, landscape oils and many watercolors from the later years, many prints and sketches, some of his student work, a large group of drawings from the days of the Whitney Studio Club in the mid-twenties, and many later drawings (such as the one reproduced on this page) that were carefully conceived studies for his major paintings.

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We shall be in a better position to evaluate the importance of this bequest when the Whitney mounts an exhibition of what is promised to be "a large portion" of it in September. Meanwhile, there is no reason to doubt that John I. H. Baur, the director of the Whitney, is correct in saying of the Hopper collection: "It establishes a corpus of work in which the development of his art can be traced, in which several new or little-known aspects of his art are revealed, and where the evolution of many paintings can be followed through preparatory studies and drawings."

The Hopper Bequest: Selling a Windfall

By HILTON KRAMER

But if you think that the Hopper bequest means that we shall now have a permanent archive at the Whitney where all this material can be studied by the scholars and critics of future generations, you would be guilty of harboring a very old-fashioned notion of how museums conceive of their responsibilities. The Whitney, it appears, plans to retain only a certain portion of the Hopper bequest for its permanent collection. The rest will be put up for sale on the open market—in gradual stages, of course, in order to keep the (high) price of Hoppers from suffering any precipitous decline.

So this is what the news of the Hopper bequest actually comes down to: we are to be given a temporary glimpse of a portion of the collection while the museum prepares a campaign to enter the art market as owner and agent of the Hopper estate. The museum is thus prepared to act like any other mercenary

heir to an unexpected windfall. What the Whitney itself describes as "the most important bequest of an American artist's work to a museum" is going to be turned into a kind of fund-raising project.

Nowadays it is hardly a novelty for museums to sell works out of their own collections. Though rarely publicized, the practice is a common one. As the prices on works of art of museum quality have risen to their present insane levels, museums have discovered that some of their own holdings—presumably, those currently deemed unessential to their permanent collections—can be advantageously disposed of as swaps or outright sales. In other words, even permanent collections are no longer as permanent as we tend to suppose.

I am very far from believing that any categorical rules can or should be formulated to apply to every conceivable case, but I nonetheless find this practice of museums selling works out of their per-

manent collections a disturbing augury. Taste changes from one generation to another. Concepts of quality change. Even the concept of what is unessential to a particular museum collection changes. The margin for error is great, and the decisions irrevocable.

If there is a museum in all the world where one had reason to believe this lesson had been learned, and learned the hard way, it is the Whitney. Some years ago, in an act of folly that is still dizzying to contemplate, the Whitney decided to devote itself exclusively to American art of the 20th century and thereupon sold off all of its 19th-century holdings. In the nineteen-sixties, however, it reversed itself, devoting its opening exhibition in the new Madison Avenue building to a survey of the entire history of American art and using the occasion to launch a new campaign for collecting the work of earlier periods.

Now it looks as if another mistake of comparable gravity is about to be made in the contemplated disposal of the Hopper bequest. There is something both tragic and comic in all of this. It is tragic that a country as wealthy as ours has organized the economy of its culture in such a way as to force institutions like the Whitney into unseemly and self-defeating money-raising adventures of this sort. (And make no mis-

take about it: The sums to be realized from the Hopper bequest are going to be large. My colleague Grace Glueck reports that a major oil painting by Hopper recently sold for \$60,000, and the artist's watercolors—of which the Whitney is now in possession of an enviable stock—have sold for as much as \$35,000.) But it is also comic to find a major institution suffering from such a feeble sense of its own identity and purpose. On the one hand, the museum extols the importance of this generous bequest, and on the other, quickly draws up plans for its liquidation.

It is all very sad, and very illuminating. And is it too, perhaps, all very American? One can imagine the uproar that would have followed a comparable decision by one of the French museums. In France, bequests of this sort are not so rare as they are here. Brañcusi, Laurens and other artists of great stature have bequeathed sizable collections of their work to the national museums. And it is not as if the French museum system was suffering from an overabundance of cash. What is different, I suppose, is the sense of pride in a certain esthetic heritage. How awful that a museum, which in principle should exemplify that sense of pride, should in practice have so little understanding of it.