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By Gail Levin, Ph.D.

Tracing an Erased Artist in Multiple Archives: Josephine Verstelle Nivison Hopper

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In June 1976, when I began at the Whitney Museum of American Art as the first (and only) curator of the Edward Hopper Collection, I had no thought of researching his wife, Josephine

Verstille Nivison Hopper (1883 – 1968). It was only when I needed to authenticate some unsigned canvases (which had been shipped to an outside conservator long before I arrived to work at the museum) that I learned what her art was like. The undistinguished, perhaps unfinished, works in question came from Jo's bequest to the Whitney, which included both her husband's artwork and her own. I knew many of Edward's portraits of Jo painting, sometimes recording the same subjects that appeared in his own work.

There was then no place to look up information on Jo's career. Her contemporaries were gone, though I did interview collectors and others who had known her. She had kept careful record books of every time Edward's artwork (their "children") left the studio for exhibition, sale, or gift. But she commented that her own "little bastards" seldom "stepped out," and got little attention. I knew that in 1906 she had posed at the New York School of Art for her teacher Robert Henri's portrait of *The Art Student* and that she and Edward had met then, but little else.

I started with the 1920 federal census, finding the names of her Texas-born father Eldorado Nivison, a piano teacher, and her mother, Mary Ann McGrath. With those names, I found the family in the City Directories (that documented their frequent moves) and in the 1900 census, where her father reported that his only daughter was "at college." "College?" I only knew that she attended the same art school as Edward, but calling it "college?" Where could a poor girl have studied in New York? I remembered that the mother of my childhood chum had gone to Hunter College and that it had once been free and all women. Could Jo have gone there? I called the archivist with the possible dates. Sure enough! There she was in the Class of 1904 at the Normal College of New York, under President Thomas Hunter, for whom the college would be named in 1914. She enrolled in 1900 at the age of seventeen. I was able to acquire her transcript with her courses and grades. She was an average student, but she got a much broader education than Edward did in art school. I learned that Jo was active in the college's drama club and that she published her drawings in two school publications, a magazine and the yearbook. Those reproductions showed that she had developed a marvelous Art Nouveau linear style of drawing in pen and ink.

Looking in Haarlem, Netherlands for Edward Hopper's signature in the sign-in books for visitors to the collection of Frans Hals paintings, I found Jo's name instead. She had traveled there in 1907, as a member of Henri's landscape and portrait classes, having earned her way by recruiting the other members of the class.

Much later I would find in a private collection a cache of diaries that Jo kept for most of her married life. I also found clues in letters, interviews, and the tattered clippings and drawings that survived at the Whitney even after the museum discarded most of her canvases. I knew that Jo had worked as an elementary teacher in the New York City public schools (and found her records in Special Collections at Columbia's Teachers College) and that she had left in 1918 to work in France for what turned out to be the American Expeditionary Forces in a government program for wounded and disabled soldiers from World War I. I discovered a cache of documentation in the U.S. Office of Personnel Management in St. Louis, Missouri. What a thrill

each new discovery was! Like a treasure hunt—I was the first to put together pieces of this puzzle!

There were many more such discoveries when persistent imaginative detective work paid off, but also hours, days, and weeks when one came up empty-handed and frustrated. Now, having written all of this into my 1995 biography of Edward Hopper, I have the satisfaction of reading about Jo in her own Wikipedia article, which references my publications. The best part about it is that, by searching in diverse archives on two continents, I succeeded in inscribing Jo into art history by pulling together the suppressed story of this forgotten but significant artist.

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