

# IN SUNLIGHT OR IN SHADOW

STORIES INSPIRED BY THE PAINTINGS OF  
**EDWARD HOPPER**

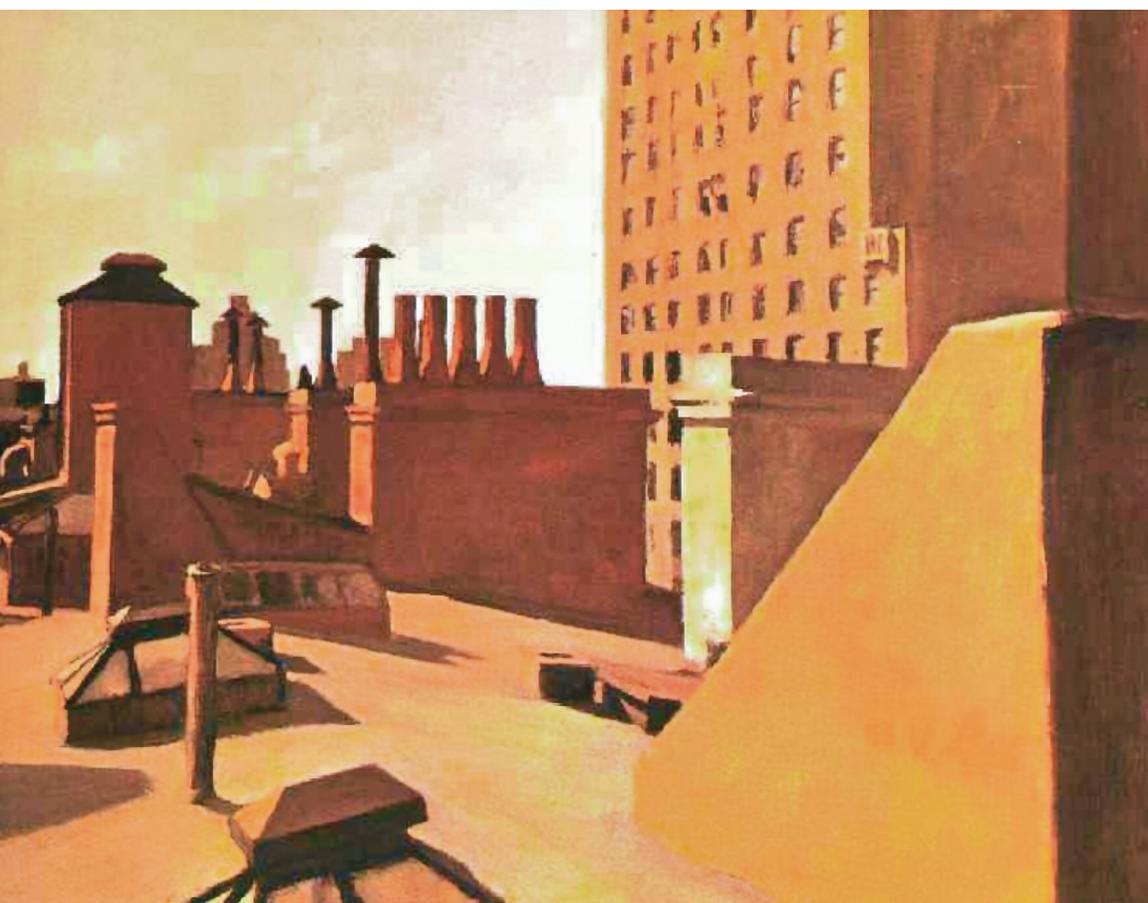
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**GAIL LEVIN** is Distinguished Professor of Art History, American Studies, Women's Studies, and Liberal Studies at The Graduate Center and Baruch College of the City University of New York. The acknowledged authority on the American realist painter Edward Hopper, she is author of many books and articles on this artist, including the catalogue raisonné and *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (both 1995). She has edited two anthologies on Hopper, *Silent Places: A Tribute to Edward Hopper*, for which she collected existing fiction that referenced Hopper (2000) and *The Poetry of Solitude: A Tribute to Edward Hopper*, for which she collected and introduced poetry about Hopper (1995). Gail Levin also worked as a curator, including at the Whitney Museum of American Art, where, from 1976-1984, she created landmark exhibitions on Edward Hopper and other topics. The present anthology is the first to publish fiction by Levin, who seconds Doris Lessing's observation in *The Golden Notebook*: "I have to conclude that fiction is better at 'the truth' than a factual record."

Levin has also published and exhibited her photography, collages, and other art works. A show of her collage memoir, "On NOT Becoming An Artist," was shown in May 2014 at the National Association of Women Artists in New York City and in 2015 in Santa Barbara, California; Santa Fe, New Mexico; and in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts. She is currently working on several books resulting from her Fulbright grants in Asia, exploring links between Asian and American culture.



*City Roofs, 1932*

# THE PREACHER COLLECTS

BY GAIL LEVIN

**T**hey call me “Reverend Sanborn.” I was born Arthayer R. Sanborn, Jr., in 1916, in Manchester, New Hampshire, son of Arthayer and Annie Quimby Sanborn. I graduated from Gordon College, a good Christian school in Wenham, Massachusetts, and then from Andover Newton Theological Seminary. I served American Baptist Churches in Woodville, Massachusetts, and in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, before I went to Nyack, New York, where I led the First Baptist Church, located on North Broadway. My job came with the security of a home, just next to the church, where I lived with my wife, Ruth, and our four children.

Before long I met at church our neighbor and long-time parishioner, Marion Louise Hopper. An aging spinster, she lived alone in her family’s old house next door to the church. She liked to boast that her younger brother, and only sibling, was a famous artist, named Edward. Edward

Hopper, however, appeared to want as little as possible to do with Nyack and his sister.

In early April 1956, Marion became ill and called Edward for help. He and his wife, Jo, had to rush up to Nyack from Manhattan. The doctor diagnosed Marion as having gallstones and a dangerous blood condition. She was then seventy-five and living in an old house with a decrepit furnace and water pipes that could scarcely do their job. The house was depressingly dark since Marion scrimped by using only twenty-five watt light bulbs. Her cat was emaciated and sick.

Her brother, just two years younger than his sister, found the role of rescuer disturbing. He complained that his ears had begun to ring; he ran to New York to see his own doctor, leaving Jo to deal with Marion. Jo found her sister-in-law disagreeable, complaining to me, "She and I make each other ill, we disturb each other so much." Nothing serious was wrong with Edward, so he had to come back to Nyack to help Jo, check on Marion, and make sure that her furnace was working a late spring snowstorm struck. Jo, however, informed me that henceforth she expected Marion's "noble" friends at church to prove their idea of worthiness. That is where I came into the picture.

Marion's dependence on the church grew as she aged and became more feeble and reclusive. I saw to it myself that the church ladies auxiliary looked in on her as needed. But I also made a point of getting to know her myself. I had Marion give me the key to her house—just in case of an emergency. I got the idea to buy the poor shut-in a television set and soon she was hooked on watching soap operas. That got her off my back. While she was glued to the television set, I took it upon myself to explore the old house from top to bottom. I thought that I should check up on condition of the roof and so one day went up into the attic.

Looking around, I was surprised to find not leaks, but stacks and stacks of early art work by Edward Hopper: piles of drawings, oil paintings, and illustrations. After I returned several times and rummaged around, I found valuable historical documents including the letters young Edward had written to his family during the three trips he made to Europe just after completing art school. The more I learned the more I became concerned about what would happen to all these treasures after Marion's

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death. Indeed, I could not get their fate off my mind. Marion's only heirs were her brother and sister-in-law, and they were just a few years younger than Marion. None of them had produced any children, who could look after their estate.

I began to reflect that to save these art works from oblivion could not only be justified, but that the savior would be a hero. So I stepped up to prevent harm from coming to Hopper's art works. I knew that vagrants might occupy an abandoned house. An empty house could be set on fire. The antique furniture and precious art works could be stolen, damaged, or destroyed. Marion certainly would not give me permission to remove these art works. They belonged to Edward. But he had all but abandoned them years ago, moving to New York. I alone cared for these art works more than anyone else in the world. I saw their value. I went to the library and read about Edward Hopper. I studied and made myself an expert. I researched the Hopper family's genealogy, dating back to its arrival in 17th-century New Amsterdam.

As time went on, I found ways to make myself useful to Edward and Jo Hopper. For them, coming to Nyack from Manhattan was an unwelcome chore. It was nearly impossible during the half of the year that they spent living in South Truro on the far end of Cape Cod. When the old couple returned to New York City, late each October, they drove via Nyack, where Edward left their car at the family home. Only at this time and when they came to retrieve the car in the spring did they plan to see Marion. They were not close to her. She remained out of sight and forgotten.

Marion had little understanding of her brother's life in New York. When he had a retrospective show at the Whitney Museum in 1964, she asked to attend the opening party and to bring her friend Beatrice and me. I was eager to go. But Edward, then eighty-two, could not be bothered by his sister's request. He wrote to her: "This is the one time in the year when I can meet museum directors, critics and collectors of importance and I shall have to devote all my time to them (and will have no time for you, Dr. Sanborn and Beatrice.)" He was most ungrateful.

Still less did Edward have time to worry about the abandoned art works in the attic of his boyhood home. At first, I just rescued a few of the smaller drawings and paintings, taking them home to study. I especially loved

a drawing he had done of that same attic and some early self-portraits that he had painted in oil. Marion never even noticed. In the beginning, I had no idea of the monetary value of Hopper's art. In fact, the works of Hopper's early years, made long before he became famous, had never been on the market. At the time he made these things, he could not sell anything, then since no one wanted his art.

The Bible says in *Ephesians* 4:28, "He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need." I know that my labors as a researcher and my efforts to save the works by Hopper that passed through my hands justify my deeds. I have shared my profits with my wife and our three sons and a daughter and nine grandchildren—all needing educations, weddings, and security in life. Such valuables should not go to waste!

Marion remained in the family home until May 1965, when a burglar wearing a pink mask broke in, held a hand over her mouth, and forced her upstairs. Nearly eighty-five, her health went downhill. When the housekeeper hired by Edward and Jo insisted upon taking her vacation over the Fourth of July, they had to come and act as Marion's nurses for a week. I volunteered to drive them up to Nyack from the city and then back home. On July 16, Marion was taken to the hospital and she died the next day. Once again, I drove to the city to fetch the elderly couple and conducted Marion's funeral in Nyack.

Edward was not interested, so that Jo was left alone to sort through the house's store of family heirlooms and old photographs. She spent about six weeks in Nyack. She told me that Marion had been "a pack rat like me . . . She not so fond of me, but from across the grave, I felt her gladness I wasn't throwing our her treasures or selling the hundred-year-old birthplace." She complained that Edward had abandoned her to the task, and had left her "breathing in the dust of a century."

I bided my time until Jo and Edward left Nyack. I still had the key to the house filled with Hopper's art, family papers, and antiques. As Edward's health began to fail, I continued to remove works from the attic trove. My concern for a valuable antique Dutch cupboard inspired me to move it out of the empty house and to store it with a neighbor. Had the

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frail Edward or Jo come calling, I could claim that I had put it there just to keep it safe. But once the Hoppers' three estates were settled, I planned to possess the object that I so desired. I alone cared for it. I deserved it.

Edward's health continued to deteriorate. In December 1966, he was in so much pain that Jo had to call an ambulance to rush him to the hospital. She phoned and told me that he had had a double hernia operation. She said that she had to postpone the cataract surgery that she needed to correct her dimming vision. Edward was back in the hospital the following July. Also affected by glaucoma, Jo slipped in the studio as she was preparing to go to visit Edward in the hospital. She broke her hip and leg, joining him in the same hospital, where they remained for three months. Due to glaucoma, her eyes proved inoperable.

Released from the hospital in December 1966, the Hoppers found daily life hard to manage. They lived on the top floor of an old row house, up seventy-four steps. They were in no condition to check up on their possessions in the house in Nyack. Nine months after his hernia operation, Edward was back in the hospital with heart problems. He returned home, barely able to eat. On May 15, 1967, he died in his studio, two months short of his eighty-fifth birthday.

Abandoned by friends who had cared only for the more famous Edward, Jo had no one to turn to but me. I had conducted Edward's funeral in Nyack. To do so, I had to fly back from Pittsburgh, which I was visiting at the time. Jo referred to me as a "13th disciple"—"a husky, good looking football coach content to shepherd a flock of Nyack ladies . . . doing needed and often arduous practical good offices for them that would include going out in kitchen and making lunch for Marion." For my services, she paid me \$500 from the estate, a mere pittance for my sustained efforts in their behalf.

Jo was left vulnerable and alone. She was ill and her vision was impaired. She and Edward had no surviving family members. She knew that she should attend to probating the will and disposing of the property in Nyack, but she concluded that she was "all so alone and nearly blind" so that she "better let it alone." She struggled to cope with daily life. Her leg was slow to heal and she felt like a prisoner on the top floor of that nearly empty building in the city. New York University had purchased

the row house and unable to evict the Hoppers, waited for their deaths to finish renovating.

In Jo's vulnerability, I saw opportunity. Few visited Jo after Edward's death, but I took the trouble to. At the end of one visit, when her vision was compromised and she was barely able to move about the studio, I adopted one of Edward's unsold canvases, a picture of *City Roofs* from 1932. It was abandoned and forlorn until I gave it a good home. I got Jo to change her will and write me into it. Unfortunately, she did not leave me any art and I did not know that she kept meticulous track of the whereabouts of Edward's art works. She continued to write in the ledger books that she had started soon after their marriage in which she recorded whenever works left the studio for exhibition, sale, or gifts. Later I claimed that she gave me *City Roofs* because I knew that she would have if she could have appreciated my efforts to save Edward's work in Nyack. Instead, in her shaky hand, she had noted that this painting that I took had not been sold and was "here in studio."

Jo Hopper died on March 6, 1968, twelve days before her eighty-fifth birthday and less than ten months after she had lost Edward. Upon hearing, I rushed to the neighbor to retrieve the Dutch cupboard that I had hidden there, successfully removing it from the estate for myself. No one remembers Jo's funeral. There wasn't one. Who would have attended?

When Jo's will was probated, it was announced that Edward's entire "artistic estate" had been left to the Whitney Museum. I kept on looking after the empty house and adding bit by bit to my little collection of early Hopper until the executor for the estate, a local lawyer in Nyack, put the house on the market in 1970, two years after Jo's death. It was sold to a Mrs. Linet, who thought that she bought the house and its contents. I had asked her for a few meager things from the house, but she turned me down. She lost a fortune because she was greedy. Because of her stinginess, she forced me to act. I informed the estate lawyer and told him about the art in the attic. Neither the lawyer nor the Whitney Museum had bothered to check on what was in the Nyack house and so they knew nothing about those works.

Before the closing, my son and I removed the rest of the art from the attic. I kept some more art and all of the memorabilia and documents

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for my collection, but delivered the rest, on the advice of the executor, to Hopper's art dealer, John Clancy. From there, the art eventually reached the museum. The buyer was surprised to find that there was no more art in that attic and sued the estate, canceling the sale. The odd bits of furniture left in the house were later put on auction to benefit the church.

After these last additions to my collection, I slowly began to put Hopper's works up for auction. I wrote letters to warn the auction houses that the objects I consigned were to be sold anonymously. I did not yet want to call attention to myself. Eventually I learned that to get higher prices, I needed to give the remaining works a history of ownership by someone who knew the artist, because that would testify to their authenticity.

I was amazed when the Boston Museum of Fine Arts paid more than sixty thousand dollars for an early Hopper self-portrait that I had given to my friend, another underpaid preacher, to sell. I was surprised and pleased by the rising values for Hopper's art. I had hundreds of drawings from the years of Hopper's maturity as well as many early works, including some eighty paintings. What I lacked was any written evidence that either Edward or Jo Hopper ever gave me any work of art.

In 1972, I called Kennedy Galleries in New York. They dealt in American art. I had seen their ads for work by Hopper in art magazines at the library. They sent their employee to Nyack to assess my collection. I showed him only a small selection, not telling him that I had much more art. Without any qualms about how I got these works of art by this leading American artist, this prominent gallery offered me a consignment deal for everything that I showed them. That same day they wrote me a check for \$65,000 as a deposit against future sales. I rushed to deposit the check in the local bank and as soon as it cleared, I submitted a letter to the First Baptist Church and resigned. As I began my retirement, I was fifty-six years old. I would devote my remaining years to researching and marketing the work of Edward Hopper.

It turned out that my sales were competing against those of the Whitney Museum, which was slowly selling Edward's work from Jo's bequest. In 1976, the museum was called out for selling off what they referred to as "duplicates" of Edward's art. The museum did not know what to do with so many Hoppers. The museum found itself attacked in *The New York*

*Times* by its art critic, Hilton Kramer, who claimed that the museum was squandering its legacy. The Whitney certainly proved by this that they did not need the works in my collection.

Looking to stop the bad publicity, the museum obtained a grant from a foundation and hired a young art historian to research Edward Hopper and write a complete catalogue of his work, studying the objects in Jo's bequest. The hiring of Gail Levin as curator of the Hopper Collection was praised in the *New York Times* by Hilton Kramer, who wrote, "She brings both a keen eye and a scholarly intelligence to the large task that awaits her."

The article spoke to me, since I realized that to assure the sale of the works in my collection, I needed Miss Levin to authenticate all of the Hoppers that I still had. As soon as I read this piece, I immediately went to see her. I lost no time, piling a small selection of the works that I had collected into a suitcase and taking it right into her office at the Whitney. I appeared as my retired self: calm, rested, sun-tanned, and since it was such a balmy late June day, I wore Bermuda shorts.

I explained to Miss Levin that I had been a close friend of Edward and Jo Hopper's. I opened my suitcase and revealed a selection of Hopper's boyhood works. A new curator still in her twenties, she was interested and curious in all that I brought in. Then she started in asking me for any inscriptions, personal notes, in short anything that would document how I obtained these works of art that I told her had been gifts. I told her had nothing to show.

As she pursued her research, she would later discover that Jo carefully recorded the gifts that Edward Hopper gave to her and to others in the record books that she kept whenever works left the studio. The only exception turned out to be documented by Jo in her diary. I had not yet realized this unfortunate detail. But on that day, Miss Levin had barely started her research. She had no reason as yet to suspect me.

That summer Miss Levin made an appointment to visit my wife Ruth and me in our vacation home in Newport, New Hampshire. I purchased it with sales of some of Hopper's works, but she did not need to know that. She came up from New York to see the works in our Hopper Collection stored there, but I kept many of them hidden from her on that first visit. I

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did not want to overwhelm this naïve but inquisitive young lady or provoke too many more questions.

Miss Levin was too curious. She questioned how we happened to have so many of the sketches for Hopper's mature paintings. She surmised correctly that these would not have been stored in the Nyack attic with Hopper's boyhood works. My wife, Ruth, told her by way of explanation, "As one of the legatees, Reverend Sanborn, was allowed to buy from the contents of the New York studio after the art had been sent to the Whitney. The entire contents were valued at just over \$100. We took advantage of that offer to purchase a low boy, a high boy, and several other pieces of antique Dutch furniture. Low and behold, we found underneath the dresser-drawer linings, stacks of Hopper's drawings." Miss Levin seemed satisfied with that explanation.

She followed up by visiting us in our winter home in Melbourne Beach, Florida, where I kept more of my Hopper Collection. She arranged to have a professional photographer record at the museum's expense each of our Hoppers for the complete catalogue of his work that she was producing for the museum. This would authenticate them for posterity. She was doing just what I needed her to do.

That same winter, Lawrence Fleischman of Kennedy Galleries organized a show of Edward Hopper's works. All of the early works and some of the later drawings were from my collection. He added other works bought elsewhere and did not acknowledge my singular efforts in his catalogue. I felt annoyed by this and would not do further business with him. He enlisted both Miss Levin and Lloyd Goodrich, who had directed Hopper's shows at the Whitney, to write essays in the catalogue. Neither one wrote about me.

When Miss Levin organized her first show of Edward Hopper at the Whitney in 1979, I loaned many of his illustrations and some drawings from my collection. I had saved them from the Nyack attic, when no one else was interested in what was there. I was surprised to read that although she thanked me, she did not acknowledge me as the close friend of Edward and Jo Hopper that I had told her I had been. All along she appeared to doubt what I had told her. Why then should I share my Hopper documents with her as she requested?

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I had kept all of the Hopper family photographs and documents from the attic for my own collection. I got the letters that Hopper wrote home to his family from Paris and the illustrated letter that he sent to his mother from his trip to Santa Fe in 1925, shortly after he married Jo. I also got two of Hopper's record books, one of which I sold to Kennedy Galleries. It turned out Lloyd Goodrich gave the Whitney those record books that Jo had left to him in her will. My two never made it into the estate.

In 1980, Miss Levin opened her second big Hopper show at the Whitney Museum, "Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist." Once again she gave me what I considered inadequate credit for my extensive work on Hopper. In the end, I had loaned her some of Hopper's letters and other documents and she had quoted from them and even made copies of them without getting my permission to do so. I went to see her boss, the museum's director, Tom Armstrong. He wanted the main record book that I still had in my possession. I said, "Well, we can talk." It turns out that Miss Levin was claiming to her boss that I had stolen the works that I had taken from Hopper's studio and the Nyack attic. Armstrong and I agreed that this should never become public. He offered to fire Miss Levin if I gave up the record book and some other things. We made a deal. The rest, as they say, is history. My role as a collector of Edward Hopper is now secure. My children and grandchildren will take care of my legacy.

*Gail Levin served as curator of the Edward Hopper Collection at the Whitney Museum of American Art from 1976-1984. Her project of a catalogue raisonné of Hopper's work was published by W. W. Norton and Co. for the Whitney in 1995.*

Arthayer R. Sanborn, Jr. died on November 18, 2007 at the age of 91, in his home in Celebration, Florida. Of the others named in this story, only the author remains alive.