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How Did a Minister Come to Own Hundreds of Edward Hoppers?

An exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art exploring Hopper's vision of New York has also rekindled questions about how a Baptist minister came to own so much of his art.



"City Roofs," an oil by Edward Hopper from 1932, is among the works in the new Whitney show that were once owned by the Rev. Arthayer R. Sanborn. It depicts the view from the roof of the Greenwich Village building where Hopper lived. Credit...Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper/Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

By [Kevin Flynn](#), [Julia Jacobs](#) and [Robin Pogrebin](#)

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An exhibition opening Wednesday at the Whitney Museum of American Art examines Edward Hopper's New York, where the artist enjoyed the theater, fought development and, in a bustling city teeming with people, often chose to depict the quiet of its empty rooftops and the isolation of life inside its apartment silos.

The ambitious show is the latest in a series the museum has held on Hopper, the celebrated Greenwich Village realist whose wife left the Whitney all his art — more than 3,000 works — when she died in 1968. But it's the first informed by another huge gift: the 4,000 items of Hopper memorabilia donated to the museum several years ago by the family of a Baptist minister from Hopper's hometown, Nyack, N.Y.

In the 1960s, the minister, the Rev. Arthayer R. Sanborn, lived just doors down from Hopper's childhood home. After caring for Hopper's elderly sister, and later the artist's wife, Josephine, he retrieved — largely from the Nyack home — the huge collection of letters, photos, news clippings and notebooks that document the life of Hopper, who died in 1967.

But the minister also ended up with hundreds of works of art by Hopper, and the exhibition has rekindled questions about how he came to acquire so many.

A recent review of museum, gallery and auction records shows that at some point the minister owned more than 300 Hopper works, primarily early drawings, including several works that are now in major museums.

Before his death in 2007, Sanborn said some works had been gifts from the Hoppers. Others came to him when he purchased the contents of the Hoppers' New York apartment and the Nyack house, where he served as the caretaker on behalf of Josephine Hopper's estate.

But there are no known records of any gifts of Hopper's artworks to Sanborn. And though Josephine Hopper named Sanborn in her will, it did not leave him any art. So the fact that works from the Nyack and Manhattan homes ended up with the minister, instead of the museum, has become a bane to the Whitney's former Hopper curator, Gail Levin.

Levin, the author of a Hopper biography who spent 20 years compiling the artist's catalogue raisonné, the comprehensive inventory of his work, has spent decades challenging the reverend's account and proclaiming the Whitney shamefully indifferent to what it may have lost. She suspects that Sanborn took advantage of the elderly Hoppers, using access to their vacant homes after they died to acquire art to which he was not entitled — an assertion the minister's family has long denied.

I remember Edward Hopper

By LOUSA KREISBERG

Reminiscences of Edward Hopper. Rocklanders who knew the Nyack-born artist don't quite know what to compare him to.

Commented one old-timer: "I guess you will have to say he was most like himself."

Hopper would have appreciated that. Like Thomas Eakins, who was his hero, Hopper was his own man, fiercely independent, crisply to the point.

But unlike Eakins, Hopper remained a completely private person. While he was and is one of America's greatest painters, he never talked much about himself or his work. He avoided the press and seldom made public appearances.

If Hopper (who died in 1967) were alive today, he'd be 90. Few of his contemporaries — schoolmates and childhood friends — are still around.

But the clapboard, Victorian-style, house at 82 North Broadway, where he was born and spent his childhood is still standing.

Purchased in 1971 by the Edward Hopper Landmark Preservation, the property has been designated by the state as a historic landmark.

Hopper probably would have felt ill at ease about the enshrinement of his birthplace. In an age of clattering egos, his unalterable reserve made him as surprising as a tree growing in the middle of Main Street.

Visually, he recorded what he thought and felt with the stubbornness of an Old Testa-



The Rev. Arthayer Sanborn of Nyack
... no Hopper imprint on this community.

mentary block with a V-lid, unadorned, clean, bare, set on a hill and 17 acres of scrub and bearberry grass.

HOPPER'S WIFE, Josephine, died one year after her husband. She was the last on the Hopper family tree, for there were no children born of the union.

No word of the funeral, which consisted solely of a graveside ceremony, was ever carried by the press.

Although they were not known as particularly religious people, the couple named a Nyack minister — the Reverend Arthayer Sanborn of the First Baptist Church — as one of six heirs to the estate. (The Whitney Museum inherited the paintings.)

The Rev. Sanborn, who lives at 221 North Broadway, not far from Hopper's boyhood home, knew Edward and Josephine well enough to visit them in New York without making an appointment long in advance.

"They received instructions," says the dark-haired, gregarious minister. "You could never walk into that apartment by rapping on the door. You'd never get in without an appointment." Edward was simple-minded," the Rev. Sanborn says. "The social whirl didn't interest him. As a boy in Nyack, he didn't sparkle."

For many years, the Rev. Sanborn looked after Edward's sister Marian and when the Hoppers' health began to fail, he helped them too because "more and more they

He had a very good sense of humor.

"It's strange," she says. "People were looking for Hopper to be lonely and unfulfilled. I don't agree. He was very self-sufficient."

Hopper's sister, Marvin, was very wise and witty.

"My family knew her well," she says. "Oddly, she didn't have any of her brother's paintings hanging on the walls of that house."

"Yet the attic was filled with his paintings. Some of his drawings were used to line dresser drawers. Others were stuffed between bed springs and mattresses."

Sanborn's relationship with the Hopper family was the subject of a 1972 article in *The Journal News*, which covers New York's lower Hudson Valley.

"If Sanborn got his art legally, why was he selling anonymously?" Levin wrote in [a screenshot she tweeted out earlier this month](#), referring to the minister's early sales in the 1970s.

In recent years, Levin has posted lengthy takedowns of the minister on her [website](#), poked the media to take her concerns seriously and even published a fictionalized version of how she imagines the preacher might have pulled it all off.

"I did not go after Sanborn like Nancy Drew, girl detective," Levin said in an interview. "My Whitney curatorial job was to track provenance to determine authenticity. I cannot help it if I discovered a massive loss — that was never my intention."

But the Whitney insists it has received everything to which it was entitled. It has long disputed Levin's assertions, and the exhibition catalog does not mention her long-running critique of Sanborn because, the museum said, it was not relevant to the show..

"The Museum is aware of claims made by a former curator," the Whitney said in a statement. "Those claims were considered when first made and were again researched more recently. The Museum has found no basis to pursue the matter, and is satisfied with what it received."

In recent weeks the Whitney opened some of its internal records to review by The New York Times, but the documents did not clarify how the minister acquired his art collection.

Sanborn's son, Philip L. Sanborn, who cared for the archive after his father's death, did not respond to requests for comment. But he has said in the past that he personally witnessed Josephine Hopper give some of her late husband's artwork to his father. "Presumably, she did so, because she was appreciative of the caretaking they had provided to Edward and were still providing to her," he said in a 2012 email to The New York Times, after he was asked [about Levin's assertions](#).

He described them as unfair at the time.

"Then and now, they are unfounded and without merit," he said.



One of 123 photographic portraits of Edward and Josephine Hopper that were part of the archive donated to the Whitney by the Sanborn family in 2017. The photo is roughly from 1947. Credit...Whitney Museum of American Art

Levin was hired by the Whitney in 1976 to create the catalogue raisonné on Hopper, but was dismissed in 1984 after, she said, the museum accused her of publishing a book on Hopper without permission, which she denies. Levin contends she was fired because she continued to express concerns that Hopper artworks had been inappropriately taken by the minister. The museum said it could not comment on a personnel matter, but noted that it had acknowledged Levin's scholarship in the new catalog.

Levin is not alone in questioning the minister's account. The family of Mary Schiffenhaus, a friend to whom Josephine Hopper left a house containing artwork on Cape Cod, has said that, as another beneficiary of the will, she too should have been party to any sale of Hopper pieces by the estate.

Robert Schiffenhaus, her grandson, called Sanborn's explanations of his large Hopper collection a "farce."

"It's amazing how this has gone on for 50 years," he said in a recent interview.

There are inconsistencies in the accounts of how one mature Hopper drawing, a study for the 1958 painting "Sunlight in a Cafeteria," came to be owned by Sanborn. The catalog for a 1987 gallery exhibition listed the work as one of dozens the minister had acquired from the estate of Josephine Hopper after her death. But in a letter to Yale University, which bought the work, Sanborn said Josephine Hopper had given the drawing to him four months before she died.

James Reinish, the former senior vice president of the gallery that sold it, Hirschl & Adler, said in an interview that he recalled Sanborn telling him something about how those works had been gifts from Josephine Hopper in thanks for his helping her. But Reinish said he believed the catalog was also accurate in stating that the transfers had happened after her death, wondering whether the estate might have tried to honor her wishes.

Sanborn was serving as pastor of the First Baptist Church in Nyack, which Hopper's great-grandfather had helped found, when he began to care for Hopper's sister, Marion, who lived alone in the family home there. The Hopper house, now a museum that honors the artist, is set on a hill overlooking the Hudson River, and until her death in 1965, Marion was watched over by Sanborn, who was given a key to look in on her.

The minister later described discovering a "treasure trove" in the house's attic. It held hundreds of letters and family photos that would become the bulk of Sanborn's memorabilia archive, as well as early oils, drawings and watercolors by Hopper.



Hopper's childhood home in Nyack. Many works from the attic were delivered to the Whitney as part of his wife's bequest, but some were left behind and were purchased by the minister as part of the house contents. Credit...Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Though the minister does not appear to have been good friends with Edward Hopper, who was not particularly social or religious, Sanborn helped the elderly couple with errands and became quite close to Hopper's wife, who asked him to preside at her husband's funeral. Josephine Hopper survived her husband by 10 months, and during that time she relied on Sanborn, whom she sometimes referred to as "St. Francis."

In remarks over the years to relatives, art historians and journalists, the minister has said that much of the art had been given to him by the Hoppers as tokens of appreciation, or for safekeeping, or because the Hoppers viewed them as youthful or preparatory works — discards they no longer cared about.

Levin says the Hoppers seldom gave away art, recorded all such gifts when they did and would not have given away hundreds of items, especially youthful works that Hopper likely would not have wanted on the market. Though there are no records of Hopper gifts to the minister, Elizabeth Thompson Colleary, an art historian and Hopper specialist, said that Josephine Hopper, who was also an artist, kept a ledger of her own paintings that contains the phrase "to ARS" next to roughly a dozen watercolors, indicating that they had been given to Sanborn.

“To my knowledge and that of the people who shared their recollections of Rev. Sanborn and the Hoppers with me,” said Colleary, a Sanborn family friend, “the reverend always displayed the impeccable character and generosity of spirit that his calling as a Baptist minister required.”

Josephine Hopper listed the minister as one of 14 beneficiaries in her will, but the will did not leave him any art. Instead, Sanborn was one of six people named to split the remainder of her estate after its bills had been paid and the other beneficiaries, including the Whitney, had received their inheritances.

At the time of Josephine’s death, the Nyack house was being sold to Juanita P. Linet, who had also contracted to purchase its contents, her daughter, Margo Linet, recalled in a recent interview. Linet, an artist herself, had been particularly interested in the house because of the many Hopper works in the attic, her daughter said.

Many months before the closing, the daughter said, when she and her mother were upstairs, Sanborn entered the house and asked if he could have some unspecified items. Her mother refused, she said, and “he got belligerent and left.”

Sanborn later recalled the dispute at an event to mark Hopper’s 100th birthday, in 1982, according to a tape recording made by the Historical Society of Rockland County. The minister described how, after being refused the few items he was seeking, he convinced the estate to sell the contents of the house to him, not Linet.

“I don’t know that she ever knows how much she lost,” the minister said of Juanita Linet, according to the recording. “She lost a fortune because she was greedy.”

Within weeks of the argument, Linet’s daughter said, the art disappeared from the attic, prompting her mother to sue. It is unclear how the suit was resolved — the court records are no longer on file, according to the Rockland County Archives — but Linet said her mother never received any art.

It is also unclear exactly how the art in the attic — some of it visible, other works in boxes or tucked into drawers — was inventoried for the Whitney, and by whom. Whitney records do not contain any mention of museum officials visiting the house, or Hopper’s Greenwich Village apartment, where some of his more mature unsold art was stored. The Whitney relied instead on the Bank of New York, the executor of Josephine Hopper’s will. The bank directed Hopper’s dealer, the Rehn Gallery, to prepare a formal inventory, and a local Nyack law firm helped with estate matters.

Colleary, the art historian, said she was aware from her research that Sanborn had taken credit for rescuing art from the attic that ultimately went to the Whitney as part of the bequest.

Philip Sanborn has acknowledged that “some early sketches and drawings” were included among the contents purchased by his father, along with furniture, kitchenware, old clothing and other materials. But he said the Hoppers had previously taken what they wanted of the art there, and viewed the rest as disposable.



A postcard that Hopper sent to his mother from Paris in 1907. The card was part of the Sanborn family gift to the Whitney and is now part of the exhibition. Credit...Whitney Museum of American Art

Sanborn also acquired the contents of the Greenwich Village apartment, at 3 Washington Square North. Levin said Ruth Sanborn, his wife, told her in an interview many years ago that the couple found drawings tucked into drawers. Levin said she believed the reverend was obligated to turn over to the Whitney any art that had mistakenly fallen into his hands.

She also said she doubts Sanborn's assertion that some mature works had been gifts from Josephine. For example, she cited one drawing Sanborn ended up with that was a study for a painting called "Girlie Show," which depicts a nude burlesque dancer. "Is that really the kind of thing an older woman gives her Baptist minister?" Levin asked.

The family of Edwin Brady, a handyman at the artist's New York apartment and a beneficiary of Josephine Hopper's will, said that she did consider some art disposable and, in her last years, had asked Brady to destroy some works, which he did.

The Whitney was hardly starving for more Hoppers after the bequest. The inheritance roughly doubled the size of the museum's collection — not just of Hoppers, but of all the works it held.

So a plan was drawn up to sell off a good number of minor or duplicative Hoppers. (The plan [drew some criticism](#) and was abandoned in 1975.)

Sanborn began to sell some of his Hoppers in the early 1970s, often through private transactions handled by the Kennedy Gallery in Manhattan. Barbara Fleischman said that her husband, the gallery's chief executive, drove to Nyack to meet the minister, according to an oral history in the Smithsonian archives in which she said he "brought the U-Haul back filled with a lot of the Hoppers."

One of the Hoppers the minister sold through Kennedy was a major painting: "City Roofs," from 1932, which is in the Whitney show. The painting was exhibited there in 1977 alongside more than a dozen other Sanborn-owned Hoppers. Sanborn's son has said the painting was given to his parents as a gift, and that it hung in their dining room. But Levin said Josephine Hopper, a meticulous record keeper, had never recorded a transfer of the work and that it was listed in her ledger book as "here in studio."

It is unclear what Sanborn earned from the sale of his Hoppers. Most were private transactions, including the sale of "City Roofs," which is now estimated to be worth millions of dollars, and which is now in the Whitney's collection. Another work in the Whitney show, a charcoal drawing, "South of Washington Square," was sold by Sanborn through Kennedy for an undisclosed price. Its most recent owner put it up for sale at Christie's in 2015, where it fetched \$437,000. Last summer at a sale of American art, Swann Galleries listed some three dozen Hopper drawings that it described as having once been owned by Sanborn.

No one has disputed Sanborn's right to the archival material, which the exhibition deploys largely as accent points: ticket stubs in a section devoted to Hopper as a theatergoer, correspondence that illustrates the artist's opposition to development, illustrated advertisements that Hopper drew in the 1910s. The Sanborn family has pointed out that the minister and his wife were alone in bothering to save these records, which include, by the Whitney's accounting, 870 items of correspondence, 535 illustrations and 123 photographs of Hopper and his wife. Sanborn built upon the items with research and trips to Hopper haunts that enabled him to speak with authority about the artist and his family.

"My greatest thanks to Philip Sanborn and the Sanborn family for assuring that these materials, tenderly cared for by his father and himself, will be safe and accessible for generations to come," the Whitney's director, Adam Weinberg, said in the show's catalog.

The museum said it had been negotiating for more than two decades for the memorabilia now in its [Sanborn Hopper Archive](#), which was formally a gift of the Arthayer R. Sanborn Hopper Collection Trust.

Levin said one of her major complaints is that so much of the Hopper material had not been accessible to scholars for some 50 years. "I had only the tip of the iceberg," she said of what she was able to use for her books and articles on Hopper. (On Wednesday, the Whitney made the archive available to scholars.)

Sanborn's son has defended the extent to which the family made the Hopper materials accessible. But Vivien Green Fryd, an art historian and author of "Art and the Crisis of Marriage: Edward Hopper and Georgia O'Keeffe," from 2003, said she had not even realized that some of Hopper's correspondence, now in the Whitney archive, had existed.

"These personal letters by Hopper, which I didn't have access to," she said, "would have made a huge difference."