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# Mr and Mrs Hopper

Gail Levin

2245 words

EDWARD HOPPER

edited by [Sheena Wagstaff](#).

Tate Gallery, 256 pp., £29.99, May 2004, 1 85437 533 4

Edward Hopper languished into his forties as a commercial illustrator. He got his first break thanks to a boost from a fellow artist called Josephine Verstile Nivison, who in the fall of 1923 got the Brooklyn Museum to include him in a group show to which she had been invited to contribute. He married her the following year. Success of a sort followed. Hopper's painting of a tall, old-fashioned house, cut off by the modern encroachment of a railroad track, was the first painting acquired by the new Museum of Modern Art, and he had his first retrospective there three years later, in 1933. His watercolours and canvases were snapped up by patrons and museums almost as soon as they were finished. He had major museum shows.

Overall, however, Hopper produced relatively little work, in later years sometimes as few as two or three canvases. He struggled to find inspiration: he read widely in philosophy, fiction, poetry in English and French; frequently went to movies and plays; sometimes drove thousands of miles to New England, Mexico or the American West, yet found little to spark new work.

Often his wife would provoke him by starting a picture herself. Often they would create scenes together. An actress as well as a painter, Nivison would provide props and costumes, dress up or undress, and pose for the pictures that betray her small-town puritan husband's penchant for spying on the female form. Often they would quarrel, as Hopper, very much the late Victorian male, repaid her support and collaboration by disparaging and discouraging her own artistic output.

Childless when they died in their eighties (he in 1967 and she in 1968), they left everything to the Whitney Museum of American Art, which had no experience with a legacy of that sort. In the confusion that followed, the museum discarded whatever it thought was

Nivison's and even sold some of Hopper's paintings before critics protested. Much of his work as well as hers unaccountably got into the hands of a preacher who had ingratiated himself with Hopper's spinster sister and had the run of the family house in Nyack, New York, where the pictures were stored. In 1976 the Whitney Museum hired me to study the bequest, organise exhibitions and write a catalogue of Hopper's work.

I collected letters, interviews with Hopper and his wife, exhibition checklists and reviews, theatre ticket stubs and Hopper's commercial illustrations. I interviewed everyone I could find who had known the Hoppers. Above all, I found more than sixty notebooks in which Nivison had recorded art-world gossip, details of their travels, marital problems, what they were reading (often aloud to one another) and watching, and often the step-by-step progress of her husband's major paintings.

Nivison's impact on Hopper was discussed in Vivien Green Fryd's book *Art and the Crisis of Marriage: Georgia O'Keeffe and Edward Hopper* (2003), which shows just how significant dysfunctional marriage was for Hopper's art. The new Hopper exhibition at Tate Modern until 5 September seems determined to write Nivison out of the script, however. The show includes Hopper's one mature self-portrait on canvas but omits its companion, *Jo Painting* (1936), which is also in the Whitney collection. In fact, Nivison has been all but expunged from the record as far as this exhibition and its catalogue are concerned. At the press preview, the show's curator, Sheena Wagstaff, remarked that Nivison 'had no influence on her husband's art'. I find this hard to understand, since diaries, letters and interviews prove the active part she played at every stage of her husband's production. Some evidence of this has crept into the small print of the catalogue's chronology. An entry for 1947 reads: 'According to Jo's diary Hopper suffers from depression and frequently reads poems of Robert Frost.' The audio tour claims that *Two Comedians* (1966), Hopper's last canvas, is 'unusually autobiographical' and demonstrates 'the extent to which Hopper's work was a collaborative process with his wife as model, muse and archivist'. Wagstaff, by contrast, sees Hopper as a philosophical artist 'who was concerned with abstract values as a means to a figural end'. This might have surprised Hopper, who, though usually aloof, in the early 1950s joined the editorial board of the artists' journal *Reality*, the purpose of which was, in Nivison's words, 'to preserve the existence of realism in art against the wholesale usurpation of the abstract by the Modern Museum, Whitney, & thru them spread thru most of the universities for those who cannot abide not subscribing to *le dernier cri* from Europe'.

Rothko dominates an essay in the Hopper catalogue by David Anfam, the author of the Rothko catalogue raisonné, who notes that 'so much has been written about Edward Hopper that perhaps one of the few remaining royal roads by which to approach him is via another massively interpreted artist.' Anfam makes the case for Hopper's influence on Rothko's formative years and suggests that Hopper's interest in Symbolist literature made his work more appealing to an artist such as Rothko.

It is true that Hopper was reluctant to admit too much in the way of content in his work. Wagstaff takes his ironical reticence at face value and ignores everything we now know from his wife's diaries about its rich intellectual and autobiographical content. For example,

she accompanies her essay with a quotation from Hopper's interview with the critic Katharine Kuh in 1962: 'There is a sort of elation about sunlight on the upper part of the house. You know, there are many thoughts, many impulses, that go into a picture ... I was more interested in the sunlight on the buildings and on the figures than in any symbolism.' But Wagstaff has isolated this remark from its context: Hopper was discussing his painting *Second Storey Sunlight* of 1960, which he told Kuh was one of his favourites.

It shows the top storeys of two houses with an upper porch and two figures, a young and an older woman. I don't think there was really any idea of symbolism in the two figures. There might have been vaguely; certainly not obsessively so. I was more interested in the sunlight on buildings and on the figures than in any symbolism. Jo posed for both figures; she's always posed for everything.

'Any psychological idea,' he added, 'will have to be supplied by the viewer.' To Frank Crotty, another journalist who inquired about the new picture's name when Hopper showed him the canvas, Hopper replied: 'Toots.' According to Nivison, he later assured them that 'Toots [is] not a bad sort. Just a lamb in wolf's clothing.' In the record books she kept for her husband she noted that he described 'Toots' as 'good Toots, alert but not obstreperous'. On seeing *Second Storey Sunlight* exhibited, a third critic, James Flexner, wrote to Hopper:

I felt both in the formal and emotional tensions of your painting a pull between restraint and the opulence of nature. Restraint represented by the peaked architecture and the old lady for whom all passion is spent; opulence, by the line of trees, the sky, and the marvellously buxom young lady sitting on the edge of the porch, not waiting for anything in particular, yet fertile and sure in the movement of the seasons to be fulfilled. I felt it was an allegory of winter and spring, life and death.

Hopper sent a copy of Flexner's letter to Lloyd Goodrich, his early champion and the director of the Whitney, with a note stating: 'Since I took the trouble of having a photostat made of it, it may indicate that I am not so modest as I am said to be.' Writing to Flexner himself, Hopper dismissed the interpretation and told the astonished critic that the painting depicted 'a tuberculosis sanatorium'. The Hoppers had read *The Magic Mountain* with avid attention in 1949 at the time he was painting *High Noon*; in both paintings, Hopper portrays sunlight as the force of life. 'Tommy Gray can't see this sunlight,' he said at their handyman's funeral, echoing what he had said after the death of Juliana Force, the first director of the Whitney.

Wagstaff refers to Nivison's diaries (where the remark about Tommy Gray is recorded) only when they buttress her view of Hopper. And she seems to believe that Hopper told critics the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Her exhibition skews the evidence to present Hopper as a Minimalist artist of light and shadow. It's as if we'd travelled back in time to the formalist criticism of the 1960s, when Clement Greenberg reigned supreme. But even Greenberg acknowledged that there was more to Hopper's art than form, when he wrote in 1946: 'He is not a painter in the full sense; his means are second-hand, shabby and impersonal. But his rudimentary sense of composition is sufficient for a message that conveys an insight into the present nature of American life for which there is no parallel in our literature, though that insight in itself is literary.' Greenberg further argued that

'Hopper's painting is essentially photography, and it is literary in the way that photography is ... Hopper simply happens to be a bad painter. But if he were a better painter, he would, most likely, not be so superior an artist.'

Hopper was a Republican working in a conservative American context who produced paintings the politics of which were far from evident. In 1949, his major patron, Stephen Clark, returned the painting *Conference at Night* because his wife thought it 'looked too much like a Communist gathering'. Such experiences must have confirmed Hopper's reluctance to speak about the content of his pictures. About this one, he would say only: 'The idea of a loft of a business building with the artificial light of the street coming into the room at night had been in my mind for some years before I attempted it. And had been suggested by things I had seen on Broadway in walking there at night.'

Visitors to the Tate show may well be puzzled by the juxtaposition, across a corner of a gallery from each other and side by side in the catalogue, of *Summertime* (1943), which depicts a seductive young woman in a see-through dress standing on an urban stoop, and *Two Puritans* (1945), a representation of two simple New England houses. The pairing goes unexplained in the exhibition and the catalogue. Presumably the pictures were hung together because of the proximity of their dates, or some idea that they look well that way, but it is also true that the second title brings to mind the comment by Hopper's friend Guy Pène du Bois, that Hopper 'turned the Puritan in him into a purist, turned moral rigours into stylistic precisions'.

Margaret Iverson discusses Hopper as a self-consciously melancholic artist. She suggests that his monumental painting *Hotel Room* of 1931 (one of many key works missing from the Tate's show) makes an allusion to Rembrandt's *Bathsheba with King David's Letter*. While it is true that Hopper may have been inspired by this painting, he clearly borrowed the precise pose and composition from an illustration by Jean-Louis Forain in a 1908 issue of *Les Maîtres humoristes* that he brought back from Paris and treasured all his life.

The catalogue appears to have been hastily assembled. Errors abound. Wagstaff puts Hopper's age as 44 instead of 42 when he had his first gallery show in 1924. She mentions that I suggested Toulouse-Lautrec and Watteau as possible sources for *Soir bleu*, but then announces that she has found a 'more obvious antecedent', Degas's *Women in Front of a Café* – which I had also put forward. Peter Wollen claims that the urban *Sunlight on Brownstones* depicts a place 'not located in the city'. He can't know Manhattan's Upper West Side near Riverside Park, where Hopper liked to walk, looking for subjects. He states that 'Hopper bought his first car in 1925 ... and then promptly drove it all the way from New York to Mexico.' In fact, Hopper got his first car in 1927 and did not go to Mexico until 1943, when he travelled by train because of wartime petrol rationing.

Tate Modern's show is advertised as 'an exhibition of around seventy works' that 'covers Hopper's entire career'. In fact, it is a much more modest affair, lacking any of Hopper's Impressionist-inspired work, most of which can be seen now at Giverny. Neither *Soir bleu*, nor any other canvas from the period between Hopper leaving art school in 1906 and his success in the 1920s, is shown (although there are five etchings). Just over forty canvases represent the years of his maturity; a number of these are works that he rejected, but which came to the Whitney Museum through the bequest of his widow. Hopper was a keen judge of his own work: *Cape Cod Sunset* (1934), for example, is not up to his usual level, which was remarkably consistent. The Tate has managed to borrow some of the most famous works, including *Nighthawks* (1942) and *Office at Night* (1940), each of which has

its own shrine-like room, accompanied by a few preparatory sketches on paper, the only ones in the show. Richard Gluckman's airy and spare installation both artfully masks the small number of pictures actually present and allows them plenty of light and space.

## Gail Levin

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Gail Levin organised the first retrospective of Edward Hopper's work in Britain for the Hayward Gallery in 1981. *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* was published in 1998.

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# Letters

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Elizabeth Thompson Colleary's response to my review of Edward Hopper at the Tate misrepresents the facts ([Letters, 2 September](#)). All of Josephine Nivison's canvases, which she bequeathed to the Whitney in 1968, were discarded – either put in the trash or given to local hospitals with no strings attached. They were not loaned, as Colleary claims, and none can be traced at any of the hospitals today. The works bequeathed by Nivison now at the Whitney survived only because they were accidentally identified as by her husband, or overlooked and therefore not discarded, and almost all of these are on paper. I am not aware that the Whitney has accessioned for its permanent collection any work by Nivison, although a recent bequest by her friend, the artist Felicia Meyer Marsh, includes some of Nivison's small oil paintings.

**Gail Levin**

City University of New York

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The Whitney Museum of American Art did not, as Gail Levin has it in her piece on Edward Hopper, 'discard whatever it thought was Nivison's' ([LRB, 24 June](#)). The museum owns more than two hundred pieces by Hopper's wife, Josephine Nivison. It loaned or gave many of her oil paintings to hospitals in New York City to hang in offices and reception areas. Some were discarded. However, the watercolours and a few oils have been kept in storage at the museum alongside works from the permanent collection. Though none of Nivison's work is on display at the museum, four of her Whitney paintings are being loaned for a group exhibition that will open at Brigham Young University in January.

**Elizabeth Thompson Colleary**

College of New Rochelle, New York

SEND LETTERS TO

The Editor  
London Review of Books  
28 Little Russell Street  
London, WC1A 2HN

[letters@lrb.co.uk](mailto:letters@lrb.co.uk)

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