



Edward Hopper

April 30, 2015

Bunker Hill Museum *of* Boston



Introduction

A pioneer in picturing the 20th-century American scene, Edward Hopper (1882-1967) was a realist whose portrayal of his native country was uncompromising, yet filled with deep emotional content.

His choices of subject matter seemed to have been somewhat unpredictable, since they were part of his constant battle with the chronic boredom that often stifled his urge to paint. This is what kept Hopper on the move—his search for inspiration, least painfully found in the stimulation of new surroundings.

Hopper has been celebrated for his highly identifiable mature style, in which urban settings, New England landscapes, and interiors are all pervaded by a sense of silence and estrangement. His chosen locations are often vacant of human activity, and they frequently imply the transitory nature of contemporary life. At deserted gas stations, railroad tracks, and bridges, the idea of travel is fraught with loneliness and mystery.

Other scenes are inhabited only by a single pensive figure or by a pair of figures who seem not to communicate



with one another. These people are rarely represented in their own homes; instead, they pass time in the temporary shelter of movie theaters, hotel rooms, or restaurants.

Hopper depicted his favored subjects: cityscapes, landscapes, and room interiors solemnly, in carefully composed compositions that seem timeless and frozen but are animated by the effects of natural and man-made light.

Hopper's subject matter can be divided into three main categories: the city, the small town, and the country. His city scenes were concerned not with the busy life of streets and crowds, but with the city itself as a physical organism, a huge complex of steel, stone, concrete, and glass. When one or two women do appear, they seem to embody the loneliness of so many city dwellers. Often his city interiors at night are seen through windows, from the standpoint of an outside spectator.

Light also plays an essential role: when Hopper paints a house, a balcony, or an interior, he leaves no doubt as to the time of day. We see morning sunlight,



noontime glare, late afternoon shadows, or approaching dusk slanting through a curtain; a tiny corner of night in the big city,

illuminated by electric lamps, spotlights, and neon signs. In every picture we know precisely what time of day or night it is, and at the same time, we sense that time is standing still and that nothing will change. We know that for the person standing at that window or seated at that table, this is the one, inescapable reality representing the universe and a tiny slice of it.

Hopper gives us clues as to the nature of this existence—a thousand details presented with the utmost clarity. And yet we sense that, ultimately, we can know absolutely nothing about it. The only thing we can be certain of is our own ignorance.





Early Work

Edward Hopper was born in 1882, in Nyack, New York, into a middle class family. From 1900 to 1906 he studied at the New York School of Art, and while in school, shifted from illustration to works of fine art. Upon completing his schooling, he worked as an illustrator for a short period of time; once this career path ended, he made three international trips to Europe, which had a great influence on the future of his work, and the type of art he would engage in during the course of his career.

Hopper's reaction to Impressionism is directly reflected in his own art. He forgot the dark, Old Master-like interiors of his New York student days, when he was influenced mainly by great European artists

including Francisco Goya, Caravaggio, El Greco, and Diego Velazquez. The influence of Impressionists, such as Paul Cezanne, Claude Monet, and Edouard Manet, is directly reflected in his own art.

In 1908, Hopper began living in a Greenwich Village neighborhood where he would continue to maintain a studio throughout his career, and he adopted a lifelong pattern of spending the summers in New England. During the 1910s, however, Hopper struggled quite a bit to gain any recognition for the works he had created. Oil painting was a focal point of the work he had done, but a majority of the sales he made during this period was for pieces he had created doing etching work and

murals. Similarly, a number of his works were distributed through various shows and exhibits in New York, but very little, if any attention, was given to his pieces.

In 1920, at the age of thirty-seven, he received his first one-person exhibition. Sixteen pieces of his work were shown at the Whitney Club, and although none of the pieces were sold at this exhibit, it pointed his career in a new direction, got his artwork out to the general public, and he became a more notable name in the type of work and the art forms for the future works he would create, which he most wanted to focus his career on.

A few years later, Edward Hopper found his career had taken a turn for the better, and he was doing well in sales, and financially with the works he had created. He was invited to do a second one-person exhibit, to feature new works, and to create a buzz about the work he had created in recent years. *The Frank KM Rehn Gallery* in New York City, was where this second exhibit took place, and it received far more attention and a much larger crowd, due to the exhibit's location, and also because more people became aware of the works Edward Hopper had created.

House by the Railroad was a famous painting created by the artist, and it became the first oil painting to ever be acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, which had only recently been opened for general viewing. Strongly defined lighting, clearly defined lines, and cropped viewpoints were some of the features

which this artwork captured; the painting's starkness embodied the style that Edward Hopper would use for the future works he would produce over the course of his career.

In 1923, Edward Hopper married a fellow student, Josephine Nivision, who also attended the New York Academy where he got his education. Not only did she pose for nearly half of the female figure pieces which he created during his career, she also encouraged and pushed him to engage in different art forms. She advised him to work with water colors, and she kept records of all the pieces he designed, the exhibits he was to be a part of, and all of the sales of the pieces which were made.





Later Years

In 1933, Edward Hopper received further praise for the works he had done, and for a piece that was on exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. His highly identifiable style and mature painting techniques were trademarks he had become known for during this period. The gorgeous landscapes, the quiet and empty rooms he designed, and the transitory effect, which many of his works posed, created a sense of contemporary life and a new style. Critics in the art world began to recognize and praise Hopper's work for its distinctive techniques.

Between the 1930s and 1950s, Edward Hopper and his wife spent quite a bit of time, and most of their summers, visiting Cape Cod, Massachusetts. In numerous works that

Hopper created during this period, many of the scenes, the common locations, and nearby attractions which they visited were often portrayed in his oil paintings.

He also started to travel further out, and visited regions from Vermont to South Carolina, in order to add new points of interest to his collection, and to broaden the works and the locations which he would include in many of the images that he created for the rest of his life.

The 1940s was a period in which Hopper found the most commercial success, and as a result, many of his works were displayed in various exhibits at the Whitney Museum in New York City.

Hopper moved from a relatively objective, almost impersonal way of viewing the world, to a very emotional one. Hopper's paintings showed still, anonymous figures and stern geometric forms within snapshot-like compositions that created an inescapable sense of loneliness. The isolation of his subjects was heightened by Hopper's characteristic use of light to insulate individuals and objects in space, whether in the harsh morning light (*Early Sunday Morning*, 1930) or the eerie light of an all-night coffee stand (*Nighthawks*, 1942).

In his later paintings, Hopper sought to express the experience of seeing and perceiving the world by treating light in such a way that it almost became a material object. His emphasis on light, the dissolution of material objects,

and his ability to visualize an internal reality received its ultimate expression.

Hopper's portrayal of the American small town showed a full awareness of what



to others might seem its ugly aspects: the stark New England houses and churches, the pretentious flamboyance of late-19th-century mansions, the unpainted tenements

of run-down sections. But there was no overt satire; rather, a deep emotional attachment to his native environment in all its ugliness, banality, and beauty. It was the combination of love and revealing truth that gave his portrait of contemporary America its depth and intensity.

In his landscapes, Hopper broke with the academic idyllicism that focused on unspoiled nature and ignored the works of man. Those prominent features of the American landscape, the railroad and the automobile highway, were essential elements in his works. He liked the relation between

the forms of nature and of man-made things—the straight lines of railway tracks, the sharp angles of farm buildings, and the clean, functional shapes of lighthouses.

Similar Artists



Notable realist artists similar to Hopper include George Wesley Bellows, Everett Shinn, John French Sloan, and William Bliss Baker. Additionally, Hopper's works also strongly influenced the Pop art movement and New Realist painters during the 1960s and 1970s.

George Wesley Bellows (August 19, 1882 – January 8, 1925) was an American realist painter, known for his bold depictions of urban life in New York City, becoming, according to the Columbus

Museum of Art, “the most acclaimed American artist of his generation.” His painting *Dempsey and Firpo*, left, is a renown painting that accompanies Hopper's works in the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

Everett Shinn (November 6, 1876 – May 1, 1953) was an American realist painter and member of the Ashcan School. He also exhibited with the short-lived group known as “The Eight,” who protested the restrictive exhibition policies of the powerful, conservative



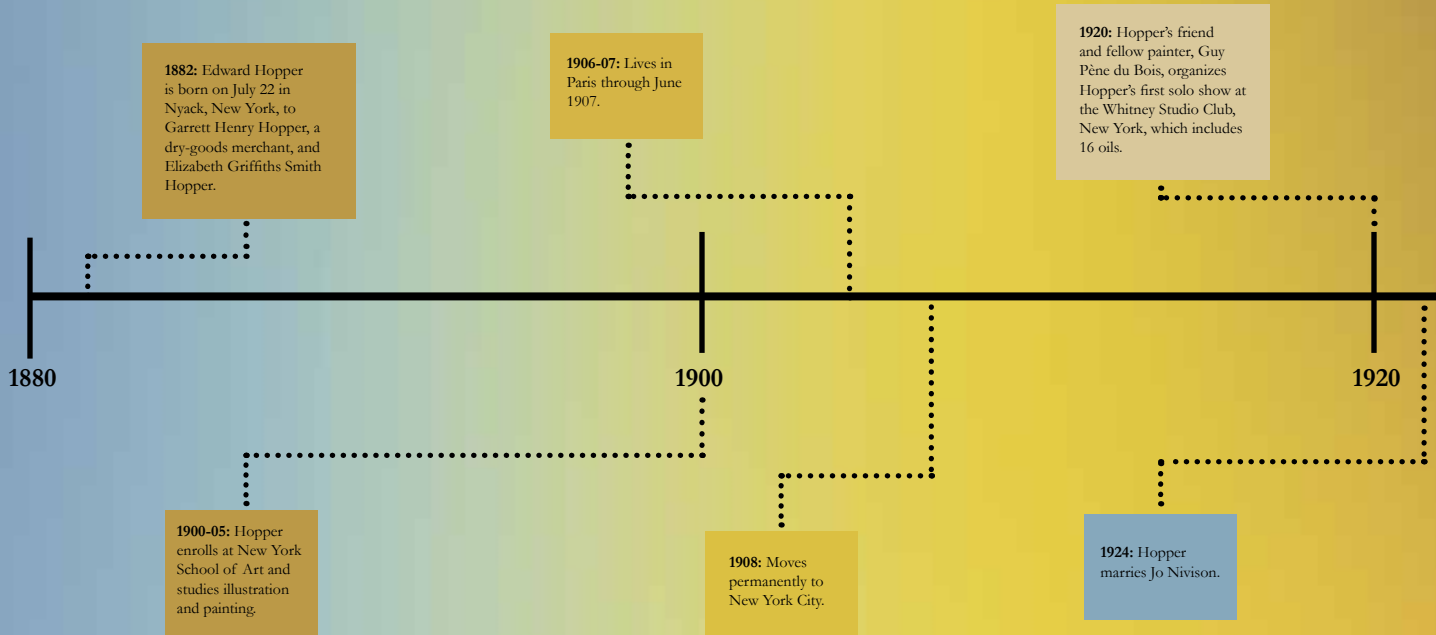
National Academy of Design. He is best known for his robust paintings of urban life in New York and London, a hallmark of Ashcan art, and for his theater and residential murals and interior-design projects. His style varied considerably over the years, from gritty and realistic to decorative and rococo. His painting, *The White Ballet*, is shown on page 14 at top left.

John French Sloan (August 2, 1871 – September 7, 1951) was a twentieth-century painter and etcher, one of the founders of the Ashcan school of American art, and a member of “The Eight.” He is best known for his urban genre scenes and ability to capture the essence of neighborhood life in New York City, often observed through his Chelsea studio window. Sloan has been called “the premier artist of the Ashcan School who painted the inexhaustible energy and life of New York City during the first decades of the twentieth century,” and

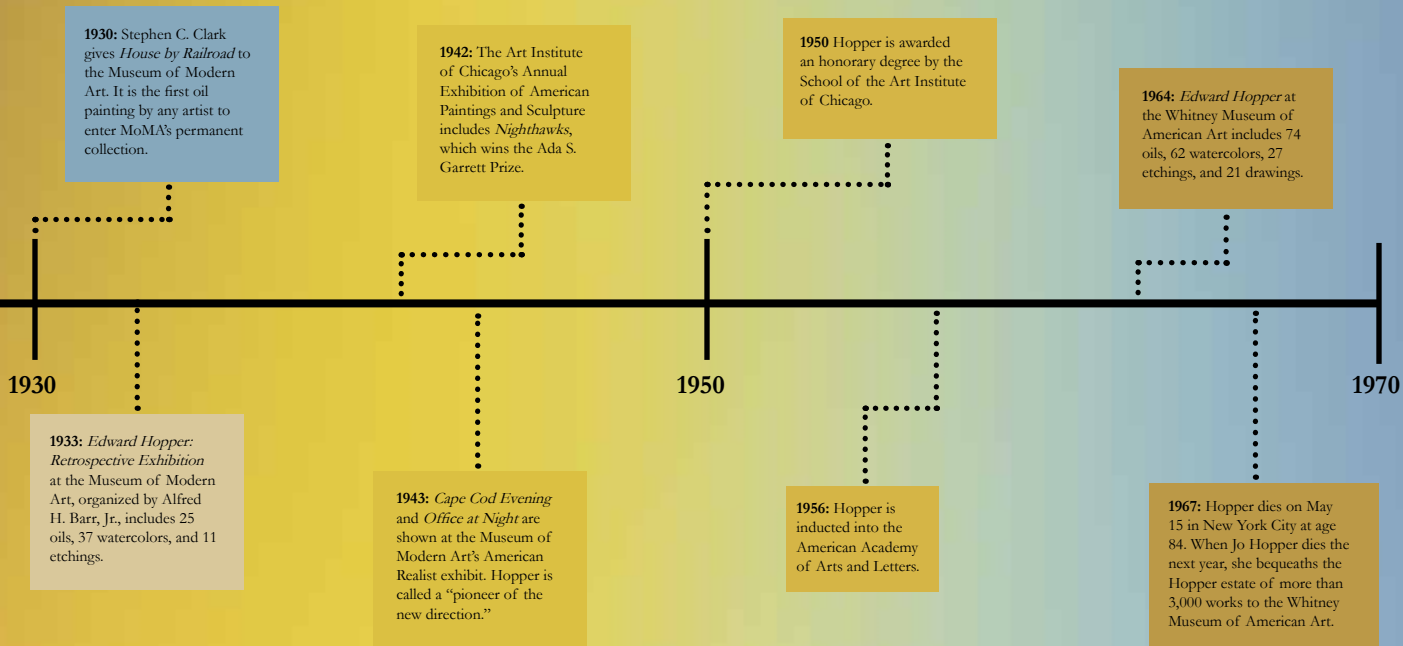
an “early twentieth-century realist painter who embraced the principles of Socialism and placed his artistic talents at the service of those beliefs.” Sloan’s painting, *McSorley’s Bar*, is shown on page 14 at bottom left.

William Bliss Baker (November 27, 1859 – November 20, 1886) was an award-winning American artist who began painting just as the Hudson River school was winding down. Baker began his studies in 1876 at the National Academy of Design, where he studied with Bierstadt and de Haas. He later maintained studios in Clifton Park, New York, and New York City, where he painted various oils and watercolors. He completed more than 130 paintings, including several works in black and white. Baker’s painting, *Fallen Monarchs*, is shown on page 14 at right.

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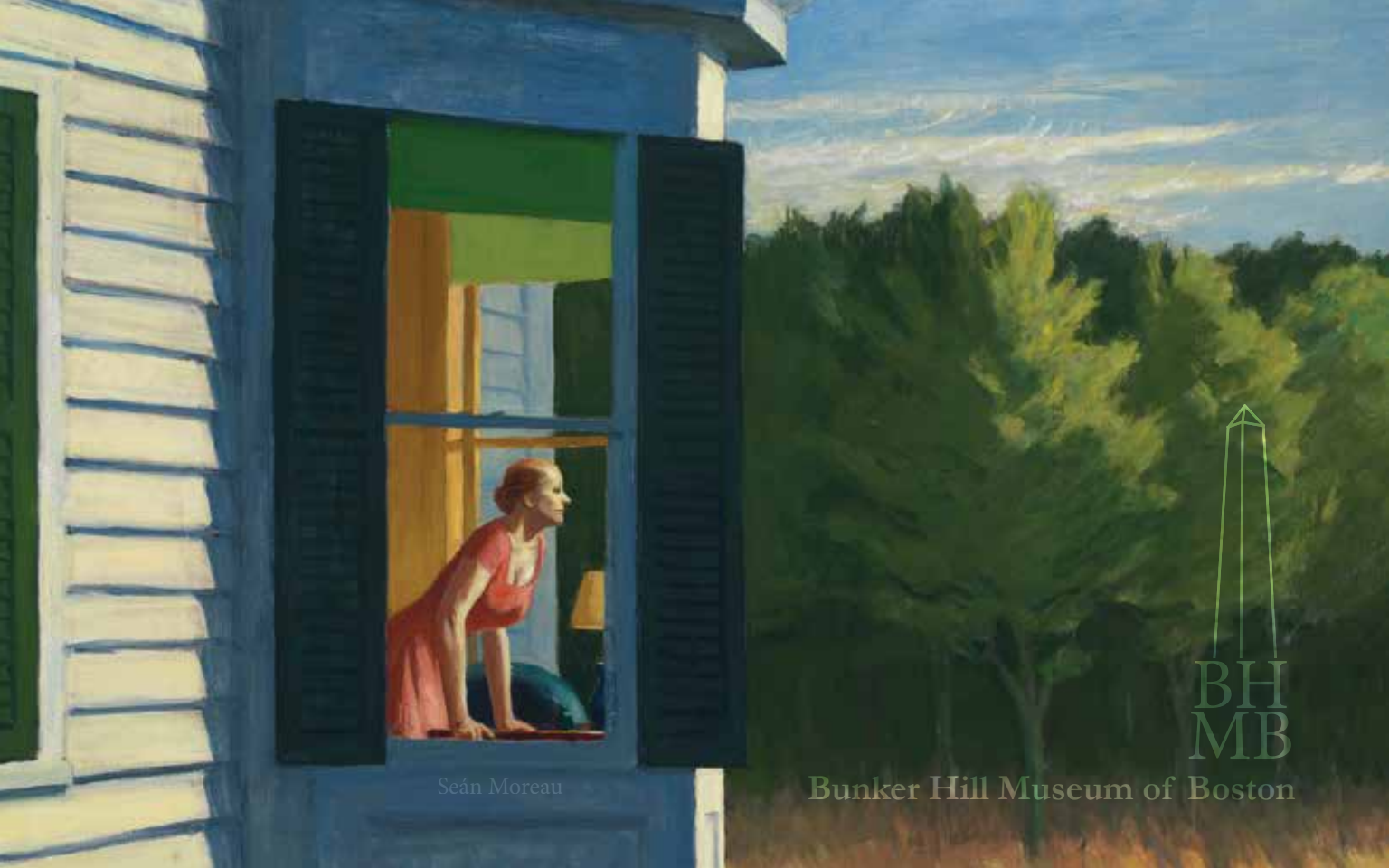
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Seán Moreau



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