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EDWARD HOPPER mined his uneventful life and found poetry in the prosaics of the modern world. After a few years of study with William Merritt Chase, Kenneth Hayes Miller, and Robert Henri, followed by three trips to Paris in the years 1906—10 and a long stint as a commercial illustrator, Hopper’s life settled into the routine of a patient observer of change.

Hopper was born in Nyack, New York, in 1882. In 1913 he moved to 3 Washington Square North, New York City, where he lived until his death in 1967. In the teens and twenties he spent summers in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and Ogunquit and Monhegan Island, Maine—all favorite retreats for vacationing artists. He married the painter Josephine Verstille Nivison in 1924; the two bought a Dodge in 1927, and over the years they made several cross-country trips. In 1934 they built a summer house in South Truro, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod, where they spent six months out of almost every year for the rest of their lives. Even though Edward Hopper began to enjoy in the mid-1920s a comfortable income from the sales of his art, the Hoppers lived frugally; they wore clothes purchased at Woolworth’s and Sears, and their only extravagances were books, films, and plays.

In 1924, when he was forty-two years old, Hopper was given a one-person show at the Frank K.M. Rehn Gallery. All the works in the Rehn Gallery exhibition sold, and Hopper’s art became an overnight sensation in the art world. Although success seemed to mean little to him, it permitted him more time to paint because he could now give up his job as a commercial illustrator. Success also meant that Hopper could have his first retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in 1933. Nevertheless, Hopper remained distrustful of popularity throughout his life.

Hopper’s remarkable following did not encourage him to step up the production of his art. He painted slowly; he waited for inspiration, and he usually completed only one or two paintings a year. He said that a painting was almost completely established in his mind before he began to paint it. His art was the result of a long and painful period of allowing various im-

Office at Night
1940. Oil on canvas, 22 1/2 x 25”
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
Gift of the T. B. Walker Foundation, Gilbert M. Walker Fund, 1948

This painting characterizes the repression and vulnerability of the locked-out generation that came to maturity during the Great Depression.
pressions to form a synthesis, and then it was a patient and equally difficult
time of trying to re-create that synthesis, a process of finding painterly
equivalents for the vision he held. “I find, in working,” Hopper wrote in
The Museum of Modern Art catalogue, “…the disturbing intrusion of
elements not part of my most interested vision, and the inevitable obliteration
and replacement of this vision by the work itself as it proceeds. The
struggle to prevent this decay is, I think, the common lot of all painters to
whom the invention of arbitrary forms has lesser interest.” In 1961 he
reaffirmed this idea in a televised interview entitled “Invitation to Art”
with the critic Brian O’Doherty when he mentioned that he carried in his
billfold the following statement of Goethe:

The beginning of the end of all literary activity is the reproduction of the world that
surrounds me by means of the world that is in me. All things being grasped, related,
re-created, loaded, and reconstructed in a personal form, in an original manner.

Hopper added: “To me that [Goethe quotation] applies to painting
fundamentally and I know that there have been so many different opin-
ions on painting. Now, there will be many who protest that this is out-
moded, outdated, but I think it’s fundamental.”

If the outward events of Hopper’s life—except for his almost over-
night acceptance as an important painter in the mid-1920s—are unre-
markable, the inner world chronicled in his art is an intriguing story that
parallels in many respects the history of the United States in the first half
of the twentieth century. It is a story of an isolated individual dealing with
the problems of advanced industrialization: as Hopper wrote in 1927, “It
is something if a modicum of the brutal reality can be saved from the ero-
sion of time.” Hopper underscores his own interests in plumbing the ordi-
nary in an article on the painter Charles Burchfield. After citing
Emerson’s statement “In every work of genius we recognize our own re-
jected thoughts,” he describes Burchfield’s art in a manner apposite to his
own:

From what is to the mediocre artist and unseeing layman the boredom of everyday ex-
istence in a provincial community, he has extracted that quality we may call poetic,
romantic, lyric, or what you will. By sympathy with the particular he has made it epic
and universal. No mood has been so mean as to seem unworthy of interpretation; the
look of an asphalt road as it lies in the broiling sun at noon, cars and locomotives ly-
ing in God-forsaken railway yards, the streaming summer rain that can fill us with
such hopeless boredom, the blank concrete walls and steel constructions of modern in-
dustry, mid-summer streets with the acid green of close-cut lawns, the dusty Fords
and gilded movies—all the sweltering, tawdry life of the American small town, and
behind all, the sad desolation of our suburban landscape. He derives daily stimulus from these, that others flee from or pass with indifference.

In this article Hopper also makes reference to “our native architecture with its hideous beauty, its fantastic roofs, pseudo-Gothic, French, Mansard, Colonial, mongrel or what not” and to “a sense of vast expanse beyond the limits of the picture” that are also characteristic of many of his own works. Unlike Burchfield who becomes romantic and nostalgic in his realistic landscapes, Hopper approaches these subjects with an understated rigor appropriate to the twentieth century.

Coming to prominence in the 1920s, in the heyday of the flappers and the first widespread use of the radio and the automobile, Hopper presented a new and poignant vision of America. Choosing not to paint the hustle and bustle or to delight in the anecdotal, he remained true to his stoic, calm self by discovering an equivalent of his inner state in the image of America that the automobile helped to produce. His paintings approach the disinterested casual glance of the tourist; they also emphasize streets, telephone lines, signs, intersections, gas stations, tourist homes and motels, as well as the out-of-the-way roads that provide views of run-down farms and deserted, boarded-up houses. The assumed spectator of these scenes may well be the taciturn and shy Hopper himself, but he or she is also one of the new inhabitants of the twentieth century who find themselves aliens in the world and as much a mystery to themselves as the world is a mystery to them.

Hopper merits a special chapter in the history of American art. He follows the art-for-art’s-sake attitudes of Tonalism, a refined style that reacts to the closing of the American frontier by accommodating itself to twilit, intimate landscapes, to nostalgia, and to a refined aesthetic that recoils from the vulgarity of the gilded age and that questions the aspirations of a materialistic industrialized world. Hopper also comes after the Eight, a group formed in 1908 and composed mostly of illustrators-turned-painters led by Robert Henri, who reveled in New York City street life, in the influx of immigrants, and in the possibilities they provided for upsetting America’s recently formed class structure. Unlike his artistic forebears, Hopper is the poetic distiller of the landscape of late industrialism. He is also the first chronicler of the views of America dictated by the automobile, and, most important, he is the first to understand the ramifications of the automobile, an invention that would serve to isolate people from each other and separate them from the country they hoped to escape to on weekends. At an early date he understood the ways that the automobile would transform America and make it psychologically as decentralized as present-day Los Angeles. This book is about Edward Hop-
Even though the season is summer or early autumn, Hopper makes the sunlight look cold and wintry. The couple's resignation seems to capture the mood of many people in the United States who had gotten over post-World War II euphoria and found themselves caught up in the unresolvable conflict of the Cold War.

Seawatchers 1952. Oil on canvas, 30 x 40" Private collection

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that constitutes both a drive in an automobile and a film; and because it is little understood, nature becomes in the art a mysterious force, a symbol of the other. Hopper is the first artist to recognize that visual images in the twentieth century have become so common that they have also become expendable. He plays on the way individual images become prevalent in the twentieth century, and he memorializes in his art undistinguished scenes available to everyone. Frequently his images pay homage to the ubiquitous victims of progress by picturing abandoned country houses, weeds along railroad tracks, and desolate Victorian mansions.

In his art Hopper stops the narrative that constitutes a drive in an automobile or the montage of a movie to focus on strangely isolated stills. Seen by themselves, these stills are mysterious and haunting. They evoke a desire for the rest of the narrative, and they powerfully convey the break-up of the storyline, the disjunction that is characteristic of modern life. In this manner they awaken in the viewer a desire for the whole, and thus elicit feelings of isolation and loss. The feelings of loneliness experienced by viewers of Hopper’s art, who sometimes use the term “desolation” to describe what they see, come from the fact that a continuum has been broken. The machinery of industrialism is no longer operative, and the illusion of progress as a motivating life force is no longer believable. By stripping modern life of its illusions of momentum, Hopper leaves his viewers isolated; he shows the breakdown of traditional spiritual underpinnings in the modern world and reveals the poverty of a society that has forsaken a meditative calm for a frenetic view of progress. The stills communicate a profound disbelief in the positive benefits to be obtained from constant movement. In Hopper’s stills there are never enough clues to provide a definitive narrative; his mature paintings always emphasize their fragmentary state: they remain unsolvable question marks that indicate a profound distrust of the entire modern age.

In a letter written in 1948 to Norman A. Geske, who was then at the Walker Art Center, Hopper described the origin of Office at Night (1940) and indicated an awareness of his freeze-frame technique:

The picture was probably first suggested by many rides on the ‘L’ train in New York City after dark and glimpses of office interiors that were so fleeting as to leave fresh and vivid impressions on my mind. My aim was to try to give the sense of an isolated and lonely office interior rather high in the air, with the office furniture which has a very definite meaning for me.

Later he cryptically referred to the insoluble puzzle his art represented when he told his friend Lloyd Goodrich, then director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, that Second Story Sunlight (1960) “is an attempt
to paint sunlight as white, with almost or no yellow pigment in the white. Any psychologic idea will have to be supplied by the viewer.” And in response to a question by Brian O'Doherty regarding the content of his art, Hopper responded, “I can't always agree with what the critics say. You know, it may be true or it may not be true. It's probably how the viewer looks at the pictures. What he sees in them... That they really are.”

Both Edward and Jo Hopper tried to compensate for the isolation and fragmentation reflected in his art by assigning names and identities to some of the characters in the paintings and by giving nicknames to the paintings themselves. In the ledger books that Jo kept over the years to record paintings leaving the studio, Office at Night is called “Confidentially Yours Room 1005” and the woman in the work is referred to as Shirley (Vol. II). When describing Conference at Night (1949), Jo notes that “Deborah is blond, a queen in her own right. Heavy table golden oak. Big green ledger with dull red edge. Sammy better looking than here in drawings” (Vol. III). This game of storytelling was probably initiated by Jo, who was as garrulous as Edward was taciturn, but it is clear from the entries here that the artist joined her in trying out roles for his figures:

Sea watchers—Sheila and Adam, Irish girl, gentle, sweet, large—Yankee clam digger—very fine people—on New England coast for late swim. People inventions of E.H. (Vol. III)

Second Story Sunlight—1960—A.M. sunlight... 2 figures—white haired Gothic and elderly and “Toots”—“good Toots, alert but not obstreperous lamb in wolf's clothing” the painter quoted. (Vol. III)

A Woman in the Sun—1961—E.H. called her “A wise tramp.” Begun cold, very early Oct. 1. Tragic figure of small woman, blond straight brown hair, grabs cigarette before shimmy skirt—brightest note at R. seen off stage, on curtain of window off stage right easts [sic]. Cigarette and sad face of woman unlit. (Vol. III)

Intermission painted in N.Y. Studio in March & April 1963. E.H. says she is “Nora.”... Nora, with strong long hands. She is not the kind to slip feet out of long reasonably high heeled pumps. E. says Nora is on the way of becoming an “egghead.” An efficient secretary or prize chatelaine of big house. (Vol. III)
It is possible to write these references off as an innocent game played by a childless couple. But it should also be pointed out that each painting is an abstraction from life, and that many of the works created a disturbing void that affected even the Hoppers. One could try to make the Nora of Intermission (1963) a modern-day counterpart to Ibsen's famous Nora, but the woman in the painting could just as easily be a secretary. The lack of specific information about these people is essential to the art and helps to accentuate the mystery of the commonplace.

Hopper's works depend on ellipses, on the missing parts of a narrative, and on the presence of a viewer who is assumed within the fictive realm of the painting and made a reality by the actual people who look at the work of art. These people take note of the absence of a storyline and then face an ambiguous situation. They do not provide the narrative for the picture so much as note the presences and absences on which this art is premised. In Hopper's work the assumed viewer is analogous to a camera in a film: the unseen but essential modus operandi of the work of art. The camera analogy is important, for it enabled Hopper to be intimate and distant, to show glimpses of people's everyday lives without seeming to invade their privacy. Frequently the people spied upon are types rather than individuals, and thus the act of looking is made abstract; it becomes more a phenomenon of the modern world rather than an individual's voyeuristic fantasy, although at times Hopper does succumb to the latter. His paintings, watercolors, and prints maneuver us so that our passive looking becomes a means for acting out the alienation of modern life. The observer then becomes an actor, the painting a script, and the play a reading of the script by the actor/viewer.

Although one cannot provide a specific narrative for an individual work, one can look at earlier pieces made in the French and American traditions to which this artist attaches himself and see how he has reoriented these images. He pares away elements of traditional art to establish a significant ellipsis which creates a new, alienated vantage point indicative of the twentieth-century point of view.

Intermission
1963. Oil on canvas, 40 x 60
Private collection

The woman here appears to be both familiar and anonymous. She could be a suburban housewife, a corporate executive, or a maid. Hopper is frequently concerned with the fact that people in the modern world can look like distinct individuals without revealing any clues as to their vocation or status.