

# American painter Edward Hopper in Chicago

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*Edward Hopper*, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, May 6 through August 19, 2007; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., September 16, 2007 through January 21, 2008; Art Institute of Chicago, February 16 through May 11, 2008

What is it in the work of American painter Edward Hopper (1882-1967) that continues to resonate with many viewers in the twenty-first century? Perhaps Hopper's work conveys a psychological uneasiness pervasive in modern class society. We recognize a social disconnect that has only deepened in the 40-plus years since the artist's death.

The Art Institute of Chicago is currently hosting the final installation of the retrospective show *Edward Hopper*, following its stints at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

The exhibition of more than 90 oil paintings, watercolors, sketches and etchings is organized in loose chronological fashion. The first rooms contain early sketches and etchings, then watercolors from summers in the working-class fishing town of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and rural Maine. The urban scenes, mostly of New York City, are also grouped together.

The center of the exhibition displays "The Icons"—i.e., works from what many consider Hopper's most fertile years, the 1930s and 1940s, during which he painted the famous "Early Sunday Morning" (1930), "Nighthawks" (1942) and "New York Movie" (1939). The final work in the exhibition, "Sun in an Empty Room (1963)," is described in the curator's notes as Hopper's "coming full circle," fulfilling his self-proclaimed desire to "paint light on the side of a building."

Born in Nyack, New York, to a middle class family (his father owned a dry goods store), Hopper studied at the New York School of Art for seven years beginning in 1900. He eventually gained a great deal from the classes he took with Robert Henri, one of the major figures of American Realism (the so-called "Ashcan School") and, politically, an anarchist. Hopper made several extended trips abroad toward the end of that decade and came under the influence of French and European literature and culture, but claimed to be unaware of and unaffected by Modernist art work (Picasso and others). The painting that apparently impressed him the most during his travels was Rembrandt's "The Night Watch," which he viewed in Amsterdam.

Before he gained recognition as an artist who had something significant to say, Hopper's paintings were largely ignored. He worked as a commercial illustrator, also selling prints and watercolors, unable to make his first sale of a painting to a public institution until 1923. Not until he was more than 40 did Hopper enjoy success. He sold every painting from his second solo show,

in 1924, around the time he first married.

The current exhibition in Chicago provides a retrospective look that is both broad and deep. It allows us a window into the artist, much as the artist peered through windows into the soul of the US in the last century.

The window, viewed sometimes from without, sometimes from within, is a recurring theme in Hopper's paintings. It is this hint of voyeurism linked to an acute sense of aloneness (not quite loneliness) that so captures twentieth century America. Whether he painted a New England house or a glimpse into a New York apartment, Hopper's work expresses a profound, if perhaps unconscious, affinity with the modern psyche in the century of two world wars and the Great Depression.

We are moved by the emptiness, the estrangement between people and places as much today as viewers in the early to middle part of the last century. Hopper's work conveys not just anxiety or alienation as represented by the subject matter, but a thoughtfulness and even optimism created by his astute and sensitive interpretation of light as it plays on the surfaces, objects and people that inhabit his canvases.

Considered a Realist in that his subject matter is drawn from life and not abstract, Hopper avoided sentimentality to the point of verging on detachment. He painted mundane places and ordinary people doing ordinary things, and powerfully revealed an essential disquiet in that existence. His artistic choice of subject matter was, at the time, considered quite daring. While he was influenced by Daumier, Courbet, Degas, Eakins and other artists of an earlier period, Hopper turned his attention to buildings, railroad tracks, restaurants, rooftops and, increasingly, to individuals seen as though from a passing elevated train, or observed from a distance while engaged in a private moment.

Denied early recognition (and therefore income) as a painter, Hopper produced more than 50 etchings between 1915 and 1923. Many of these are included in the exhibition, and they are quite startling. "Night on the El Train" (1920) depicts a couple in conversation, the woman's back to the viewer, the man's face tilted downward towards his companion, both tucked into the left side of the picture. The light is falling primarily on a row of empty seats in the foreground, touching the woman's back and the man's face only slightly. The darkened windows reveal nothing of the world speeding past.

"Night Shadows" (1921) treats a lone pedestrian, observed from the height of a modern skyscraper, approaching the ominous shadow of a street lamp cast across the deserted street and corner shop. Similarly, "Night in the Park" (1921) seems to suggest that the artist has stumbled on a solitary man reading a newspaper

under harsh lamplight in a lonely park. There is a darkness of mood in these visions of anonymous people, deserted landscapes and depopulated buildings, created with chiaroscuro reminiscent of Rembrandt's etchings.

The growth of big cities and America's emergence as a massive industrial and commercial power, with all its implications, inevitably form part of the intellectual background to such works. Hopper belonged to the generation of artists and writers that in the 1920s shook off a great deal of American provincialism and parochialism.

The mystery, the removed point of view and the concern with everyday life remained Hopper's signature throughout his long career.

However, his preferred medium was oil when working in his studio and watercolor for his outdoor work. The first painting he ever sold to a museum, "The Mansard Roof" (1923), is an impressionist-inspired, fresh water color of sunlight playing on a Victorian house, the canopies brushed by the breeze, the movement of the foreground trees indicated with delicate wash.

During his summers in Massachusetts and Maine, Hopper produced striking drawings and watercolor studies as well as oil paintings of lighthouses, homes and industrial buildings, developing an increasing interest in the solid architectural shapes created by the changing light on the structures. As his style matured, his technique became less "free," more deliberate and architectonic.

Many of the works included in this exhibition are remarkable. Some are less successful. Hopper's attempts at painting boats at sea seem stiff, despite the concerted attempt to portray the motion of a vessel in the water. His early years as an illustrator occasionally insert themselves when a less predictable style would be more effective. The exhibition as a whole, however, allows the viewer to appreciate the development of the artist during the most convulsive years of the twentieth century.

Critics have noted the influence of *film noir* (American filmmaking characterized by dark, tense representations of life) or similar cinematic sensibilities on Hopper's work. (How many of his works have "Night" in their title?) Hopper came of age at the time of the emergence of the moving picture, as well as the acceptance and use of 35mm still photography by figures such as Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz and others who turned snapshots into art. Many of Hopper's works give the impression that the artist is recalling fragments of life as though captured on a frame of film. The artist never tells us the whole story. So much is left to the viewer's imagination that an entire film could, in turn, be created from looking at a Hopper painting.

We *feel* the emptiness created by the massive dark window in "Nighthawks," framing characters that are together, yet uncommunicative. Observed in the wee hours, the painter looks in through a large plate-glass window to a spare diner, past its lonely patrons, to the silent streets behind. "Room in New York" (1932) peers in at a couple in their living room through the open window of a city apartment. The pair are separated by space both physical and psychological, each preoccupied. Hopper conveys a palpable disquiet by the angle of the woman's starkly lit shoulder as she turns away from her companion to plunk a solitary note on a piano.

"Night Windows" (1928), which at the time caused controversy, shows the rounded corner of a city apartment as if seen from a passing elevated train. A warmly lit interior is seen through three windows. A rounded woman in a translucent red slip, her back to the observer and half-obscured by the central window, is captured slightly bent over as if putting something on an unseen chair. One could, without too much prompting, work out an entire scenario from this single moment. The painting seems intended to encourage such an effort.

Hopper's later work, represented in the exhibition by "Western Motel" (1957), "Sea Watchers" (1952) and "Sun in an Empty Room," became less sensuous, more geometric and deliberately surreal. One of the most distinctive pieces from this period, "Rooms by the Sea" (1951), is unfortunately not included in this show.

These post-World War II scenes of the American 1950s and 1960s capture the increasingly stagnant and banal social climate of that period. The figures have become stiffer, more angular. And typical of Hopper, the influence of monumental events is inferred, never referred to directly. The elements of social disengagement that Hopper was sensitive to in the post-World War I era, given impetus by the impact of urban life, modern industry and the political disappointments of the mid-century, have evolved into cold indifference by the 1950s.

Hopper was a highly self-conscious artist. He felt that the best artists (and he of course included himself in that category) reveal "an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world. No amount of skillful invention can replace the essential element of imagination. One of the weaknesses of much abstract painting is the attempt to substitute the inventions of the intellect for a pristine imaginative conception." His source material was always "the facts," as he told Lloyd Goodrich, former director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, but the final product was from his own imagination. Viewing this expansive collection allows Hopper's imagination to engage ours as well.



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