

Edward Hopper's New York, an exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York

Clare Hurley
14 February 2023

Edward Hopper's *New York, an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, October 19, 2022–March 5, 2023*.

The work of American painter Edward Hopper (1882-1967) has long been a mainstay of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, which holds more of his works than any other museum in the world.

The current exhibition, *Edward Hopper's New York* (on display until March 5), drawn from the museum's collection of over 3,100 works, focuses on the artist's many depictions of the city where he spent the bulk of his working life from 1906 till his death 60 years later. New York was both the subject and theme of much of his work, which the Whitney would champion even as his style came to seem "old-fashioned" in comparison to the modernist trends of the mid-20th century.

Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning* (1930) is a quintessential work by the artist, and possibly his most recognizable painting. The one-story row of brick storefronts seems to slumber, like the tenants hinted at by the partially drawn shades and curtains in the windows above, as the bright morning sunlight casts elongated shadows from a barber pole and fire hydrant along the sidewalk.

At first glance, both the street's architecture and the style in which it is presented seem to belong to an earlier era. Though undoubtedly such modest blocks still existed when Hopper painted his image, the economic boom of the "Roaring Twenties" had set off a frenzy of construction. New York's skyline started its dizzying ascent with such iconic buildings as the Chrysler and Empire State buildings completed in 1930-31, just as the Stock Market crash triggered the Great Depression. The city was a busy, crowded place; its population had nearly doubled to 7 million since 1900. And the art scene in New York, even if still second to that of Paris, had been swept by the European modernist trends of Cubism, Fauvism and Surrealism.

(In his autobiography, Leon Trotsky, who arrived in New York City by ship in January 1917, described it at the time as the "city of prose and fantasy, of capitalist automatism, its streets a triumph of cubism, its moral philosophy that of the dollar." More than any other city, Trotsky added, New York was "the fullest expression of our modern age.")

Hopper's work seems to resist all the various modernist trends, and yet as the Whitney exhibition demonstrates, the modern transformation of the city, and by extension, the lives of its inhabitants make their presence felt in details, like the side of a tall building, unnoticed at first, taking up the far right side of *Early Sunday Morning*. The disjunctive appearance of a new multi-story apartment building sprouting up over a row of single-story townhouses, which would figure in many of Hopper's paintings, was not just an observation of a reality familiar to every New Yorker, and urban dwellers more generally, even today. It signified change, mutability. What is here today is gone tomorrow, replaced, "developed" into something different, usually bigger, and most often beyond one's control.

While rooted in observation of life, there is little direct reflection in Hopper's work of the great events of the six tumultuous decades of the 20th century through which he lived—two world wars, the Russian

Revolution, the Great Depression, a post-war boom, McCarthyism or the civil rights movements of the 1960s. Instead, Hopper's was a highly selective reinterpretation of reality. In his view, "Great art is the outward expression of an inner life of the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world."

Interestingly, Hopper's inner vision hardly seems to change over this long tumultuous period, so much so that it is hard to tell if something was painted in 1920 or in 1960. His vision seems worlds apart from Abstract Expressionism and other modernist styles that came to predominate, particularly in the post-war period. Formal differences aside however, Hopper's images share the existential angst that was the reaction of many artists and intellectuals of that period to events they imperfectly understood.

The Whitney exhibition brings out aspects of Hopper's life and experience that add to an appreciation of this remarkably consistent figure. Born in Nyack, a suburb north of New York City on the Hudson River, in a reasonably well-to-do-family, his artistic talents were encouraged from an early age, but trained in a commercial direction. After high school, Hopper enrolled in 1900 at the New York School of Art and Design, the forerunner of Parsons School of Design. There he studied with William Merritt Chase, the foremost American proponent of Impressionism, and Robert Henri. The latter had a great respect for Velasquez, Hals, Goya, Daumier and the early works of Manet and Degas. Henri's "Ashcan School" embraced depicting an unadorned social reality in order "to make a stir in the world." His group, "The Eight," included John Sloan (1871-1951), and also influenced Hopper's contemporaries George Bellows (1882-1925) and Rockwell Kent (1882-1971).

Hopper's academic training as a draftsman enabled him to get work as a commercial illustrator upon graduation in 1906, a field in which he unenthusiastically worked as a freelancer for the better part of 25 years. During these years, he saw only limited success with his oil paintings. He did have a painting accepted to the transformative Armory Show of 1913, the exhibition which shocked the provincial American art scene by introducing the work of such European modernists as Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and famously Marcel Duchamp, with his Futuro-Cubist work, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1902).

However, Hopper's work embodied the still largely realistic vein of American art. In this period Hopper, depressed by the failure of his artwork to gain traction, turned to printmaking, and achieved considerable success with his etchings in the 1920s. In the prints *Night in the Park*, a lone man reads a newspaper under a street lamp; in *House Tops*, a woman perches on the seat to look out of an elevated subway window, and in *Evening Wind*, a nude woman climbs into bed by an open window, startled by a billowing curtain. The high contrast of black and white lends the prints a dynamic and mysterious mood; they begin to explore themes and visual elements that would recur throughout the rest of Hopper's work.

The 1920s would also see other key developments in his life that would

affect his work—he married fellow painter Jo Nivison and they moved together into a studio-living space on the top floor at 3 Washington Square on Washington Square Park. Both in their early 40s at this point, the couple remained there in adjoining studios in spite of changes in the neighborhood and New York University’s attempt to evict them in order to turn the building into student housing. (In the end, the university had to preserve the Hoppers’ studios as a house-museum.) They also began to spend summers in Gloucester, Massachusetts, which was to become the second key locale for his work.

Hopper painted views of adjacent rooftops in a series of watercolors that are characterized by their warm color, geometric forms and strong cast shadows. Although they are representational images, the serried ranks of chimney pots in *Roofs, Washington Square* (1926), rows of windows and jutting water towers in *Rooftops* (1926), and the slanted glass of skylights in *My Roof* have a strong abstract quality.

In an admiring 1981 essay, then left-wing critic Peter Fuller called Hopper “an embarrassment to American partisans of modernism and avant-gardism,” but pointed out that the painter was far from a mere empiricist or photographic naturalist. The British critic suggested that the Hopper paintings “which approach the condition of masterpieces are certainly not the ones in which he most faithfully transcribes appearances.” Hopper’s working drawings “demonstrate how carefully his best paintings were constituted, all sorts of disparate observed elements are used to construct a single picture. The artist’s role is anything but ‘neutral.’”

Hopper’s other work of the period likewise emphasizes what the exhibition calls the “Horizontal City,” low-slung views of bridges and building facades often as seen from elevated train tracks or on-ramps, such as *From Williamsburg Bridge* (1928) and *The Lily Apartments* (1926). These similarly are characterized by unusual cropping, the sudden protrusion of a taller building on the skyline, and the inclusion of billboards and railings, all accentuated by strong shadows which often add unexpected visual patterns. They also are characterized by the nearly complete absence of human beings, giving them an eerie stillness.

When human figures do appear in Hopper’s work, they are almost always seen in brightly lit, jewel-colored windows. Partially glimpsed, often only partially clothed as they get into bed, as in *Night Windows* (1928) or sewing a piece of clothing for the next day in *Girl at Sewing Machine* and *New York Interior* (1921), we see these people as a voyeur, or a rider on a passing elevated train would, with the fleeting anonymity characteristic of urban living. Either sitting alone absorbed in thought as in *Automat* (1927) or together but tensely isolated from one another in *Room in New York* (1932), the people in Hopper’s world emanate a profound loneliness, a mood which remains a constant through almost all of his work, even those images painted in the quite different setting of Gloucester.

In his 1981 piece, Fuller argued that Hopper’s paintings were “so conspicuously about the vacuity, sadness, futility, emptiness and, yes, experience of alienation on the fringes of ‘the American dream’” and that “Hopper’s people are lost within themselves even when they are in the presence of others.”

Hopper’s striking use of windows as a framing device for ambiguous human dramas has prompted apt comparisons to the stage and movies, both of which Hopper and Jo regularly attended. The exhibition even includes a display of the colorful ticket stubs that Jo collected over many years, indicating that they saw everything from John Gielgud in *Hamlet, An American Tragedy* (based on Dreiser’s novel), Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* and Chekhov’s *Cherry Orchard*, to more contemporary shows like *The Front Page* (Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur) and even a burlesque show.

In addition, Hopper often painted the interior of these venues, such

as *The Sheridan Theater* (1937—the 2,300-seat Loew’s Sheridan movie theater in Greenwich Village) and *New York Movie Theater* (1939). The latter in particular highlights the way Hopper juxtaposed several disparate layers of experience within a single space—from the black and white film partially seen on the screen and the darkened figures seated in the audience on the left to the brightly lit ticket-taker standing pensively apart in the hallway on the right.

The female model for the ticket taker was Jo, and she is recognizable as the model for many of Hopper’s female figures. The exhibition includes the sketches and studies Hopper made of her over the years which became the basis for paintings such as *Morning Sun* (1952), one of his recurrent images of a figure facing into the bright harsh light of day, as though steeling herself to face the future.

His aim was not portraiture as such, however. Of this genre, he apparently made only one example, *Jo Painting* (1936). Although she is turned away in the act of painting her own painting, the portrait gives a sense of her animation.

Hopper’s fortunes as an artist finally began to rise when the Whitney Museum acquired several of his paintings for thousands of dollars in 1931, notwithstanding the Depression. Founded by wealthy society patron Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the Whitney was formally constituted as a museum of exclusively American Art in 1930, to a large degree basing itself upon Hopper, as well as Bellows and others who were considered representative of a particularly American style of modernism. Hopper’s work appeared in every one of its annual shows and the museum acquired one of his paintings every year until his death.

However, his stature was soon eclipsed. As the axis of economic power shifted to the United States following the Second World War, New York unseated Paris as the center of the art world. The New York School of Abstract Expressionism became the dominant, definitive modern art, with the work of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline and Mark Rothko at the forefront. Hopper’s work, its modern elements of abstraction notwithstanding, was falsely seen as tame and outdated by comparison.

In more recent decades, his reputation has rebounded and certainly the present exhibition argues for a renewed and well-deserved appreciation of Hopper’s work. A contradictory figure, his style was seemingly traditional and yet profoundly modern. His personal vision, like that of many of his contemporaries, was of human alienation within a modern world, yet there is much in his work that counters that. Even in today’s New York, so transformed since Hopper’s time, one can come across a faded billboard for a product that doesn’t exist anymore, or even just the warm sunlight on the side of a brick building that bring to mind what Hopper saw and captured about the city, both the solid and the transitory.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact