



QUICK FACTS

- NAME: [Edward Hopper](#)
- OCCUPATION: [Painter](#)
- BIRTH DATE: [July 22, 1882](#)
- DEATH DATE: [May 15, 1967](#)
- PLACE OF BIRTH: Nyack, [New York](#)
- PLACE OF DEATH: New York, New York

BEST KNOWN FOR

Artist Edward Hopper is the painter behind the iconic late-night diner scene *Nighthawks* (1942).

PROFILE

Edward Hopper trained as an illustrator, and devoted much of his early career to advertising and etchings. Influenced by the "Ashcan School," Hopper began to paint the commonplaces of urban life with still, anonymous figures, and compositions that evoke a sense of loneliness. His famous works include *Model Reading* (1925), *Room in Brooklyn* (1932), and the iconic *Nighthawks* (1942).

Edward Hopper (1882-1967), the quintessential realist painter of twentieth-century America, portrayed the commonplace and make the ordinary poetic.

As a young man just out of art school, Hopper first traveled to Paris in the fall of 1906 and remained there until the following summer. He then visited London and ventured across Europe, stopping off in Haarlem, Amsterdam, Berlin, and Brussels. After a second trip to Paris in the spring and summer of 1909, he toured Spain during June 1910 before passing the last weeks he would ever spend in Paris. Back home in America, as a struggling young artist reluctantly working as an illustrator, Hopper (according to what little is known of his life at this time) still managed to spend most of his summers in the country, away from the steaming streets of New York. He went to Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1912; to Ogunquit, Maine, in 1914, and 1915; and to Monhegan Island, twelve miles off the coast of Maine, every summer from 1916 to 1919.

It was a return to Gloucester during the summer of 1923 that changed Hopper's direction. There he ran into Josephine Nivison, who, like him, had studied with Robert Henri at the New York School of Art. Nivison had already exhibited her watercolors in New York, and she encouraged Hopper, who had used the medium only as a boy and, more recently, for his commercial work, to try working in watercolor that summer on painting excursions they made together. She also recognized his unusual facility and respected his ability. When she received an invitation to show her watercolors in a group show at the Brooklyn Museum that fall, she told the museum about Hopper's new work in the medium, prompting his inclusion in the exhibition. This exhibition resulted in the museum's purchase of *The Mansard Roof*, Hopper's first sale of a painting in a decade, and brought him much favorable publicity. Perhaps Hopper, then aged forty-one, realized that he had at last found his best ally; he married Jo the next summer, and they spent their honeymoon back in Gloucester, painting watercolors.

Hopper painted his watercolors directly while looking at his subjects, which were almost always outdoor scenes: ships, the seashore, a lighthouse, a church, streets, houses, and trees. Having worked in watercolor as an illustrator, he handled the medium with confidence. After outlining his composition with a pale pencil sketch, he improvised as the work progressed, focusing on the recording of sunlight, interested in structure rather than texture. The result of Hopper's improvisatory technique is a spontaneity that does not occur in his oil paintings, a contrast that is especially notable when one compares the occasional oil that Hopper painted based on earlier watercolor compositions.

Before 1927, when Jo and Edward purchased their first automobile, Hopper's daily watercolor expeditions were usually on foot, and he was subject to wind and rain and other inconveniences. Their first car - they always

bought them second-hand - provided not only transportation but also a mobile studio. With the front seat pushed forward to accommodate his long legs, Edward worked in the backseat behind the steering wheel, while petite Jo, nested next to the driver's seat, produced her own watercolors or sketches. Despite his thrifty nature, Hopper always insisted on replacing any windshield of tinted glass so that he could see his surroundings in their proper tonality.

In Paris, Hopper had painted all his oils outdoors on location. Of course, during the cold rainy months of winter, this limited his production. He found other diversions for this time, however, and he frequently sketched in cafes, endlessly observing the French who provoked his fantasies. Back in America, Hopper had already begun to improvise, painting on occasion in the studio from memory or his imagination. He continued to work outdoors during the summers that he spent in rural New England, evidently often sketching and painting directly on the canvas without making separate preliminary sketches.

Increasingly, though, Hopper began to make pencil or charcoal drawings on location, sometimes recording notes about color observations. These drawings were always done in monochrome, usually black and white but occasionally red Conte crayon. By the late 1930s, all of his canvases were produced in the studio; many were syntheses of several places Hopper had observed and sketched. For example, *New York Movie* (1939) combines drawings made at several theaters with sketches of Jo posing as the usherette in the hallway of their apartment building. Hopper never gave up working from observation; but as old age and infirmity made traveling about more difficult, he adapted by transforming his surroundings through the filter of his imagination.

In choosing his subjects, from rural New England (Maine, Vermont, Cape Ann, and Cape Cod) to South Carolina, New Mexico, and New York City and its environs, Hopper was drawn to stark architectural vistas which he usually emptied of human figures - spare compositions and situations evoking feelings of loneliness and so solitude.

Hopper's realism was not merely a literal or mimetic rendering of what he saw but an interpretive rendering of the settings he depicted. His choice of subjects is well worth examining, for therein lies an important clue to the very nature of Hopper's vision. The places that Hopper painted reveal much about his personality, his tastes, and the cultural climate of his time.

One of the most frequently recurring images in Hopper's oeuvre is a view of a body of water: seascapes and nautical scenes, lighthouse, harbors, rivers, bridges, and even the view from his summer home in Truro, Massachusetts, overlooking Cape Cod Bay. Having grown up quite near the Hudson River in Nyack, New York, Hopper was always drawn to water, which may have symbolized freedom and escape for this reclusive artist. As an adolescent, he had been encouraged by his father to build a sailboat, evidently so that he would get outside and be less of an introvert. Later Hopper admitted that he had considered a career as a naval architect; sailing remained a lifelong passion. The many lighthouses he painted may reflect a certain identification of his part: he was nearly six feet five inches tall and perhaps felt a special affinity to this genre of architecture, which, like him, stood apart, detached from the rest of the world.

While Hopper's architectural subjects are generally devoid of human figures, it was not until 1933 that his imagery was specifically described as "lonely". This subsequently of the art he had produced in the previous two decades. Hopper himself, asked to explain the absence of figures in *Macomb's Dam Bridge* (1935), a painting that depicts New York, a city of millions of people, offered: "I don't know why except that they say I am lonely."

Hopper's empty places and solitary figures repeatedly suggested pangs of loneliness to a public increasingly interested in psychoanalytic thought and aware of the growing anonymity of contemporary urban life. By 1964, these interpretations of his work forced Hopper to insist that "the loneliness thing is overdone," although that same year he responded to an interviewer's assessment of "profound loneliness" and a lack of communication in his art with the comment: "It's probably a reflection of my own, if I may say, loneliness. I don't know. It could

be the whole human condition." As early as 1923, Hopper titled an etching *The Lonely House*; but since the composition includes two children, the title suggests a larger, more existential loneliness - a kind of societal isolation. This is similar to the sense of estrangement present in his oil painting *House by the Railroad* or in his various paintings of isolated lighthouses.

Perhaps Hopper's alienation results from his reclusive personality, which, as noted earlier, was already established in childhood. He felt a frustration in human relationship that he communicated in his art, not only through melancholy solitary figures but also through metaphors for escape (trains, highways) and through the depiction of so many empty places, often where we would expect people to be present. In this sense, we must recognize that a painting like *Solitude* reflects Hopper's preference for empty spaces over the company of others, which he found difficult to accept.

Hopper's associations with the particular architecture he chose to paint are more complex. The early twentieth century was an era of burgeoning nationalism, and typical American scenes do appear as the subjects of his art. His hometown, Nyack, offered examples of architectural styles characteristic of nineteenth-century America. Although these styles were passively absorbed by Hopper in his youth, it was not until after he traveled abroad, between 1906 and 1910, that he fully came to appreciate their charm. Writing in "The Arts" in 1927, Hopper commented on contemporary American artists whose work he admired and stressed the necessity of developing a "native art", reiterating a point many critics were then noting about his own work:

The 'tangle of the soil' is becoming evident more and more in their painting... We should not be quite certain of the crystallization of the art of America into something native and distinct, were it not that our drama, our literature and our architecture show very evident signs of doing just that thing."

For example, Hopper was especially fond of the kind of roof so frequently found on American houses of the Second Empire style, built between 1860 and 1890. This style, which like its name is borrowed from French architecture developed during the reign of Napoleon III, is characterized by a mansard roof covered with multicolored slates or tinplates. In 1907 and 1909, Hopper had made several paintings of the Pavillon de Flore of the Louvre, which he could see from the corner where he lived on Paris's Left Bank. He undoubtedly admired the mansard roof of this elegant building and later must have been attracted to similar roof structures on American house, which he depicted in watercolors such as *The Mansard Roof* and *Talbot's House* as well as in his oils *House by the Railroad* and *The Bootleggers*, both of 1925. Since Hopper found these houses in a variety of locations - Gloucester, Massachusetts; Rockland, Maine; and probably New York state - it appears that he actually sought each of them out because of his fascination with the intricate mansard roof, flanked by classical moldings and ornamental details such as cornices and arched windows.

Although it seems at first glance that Hopper was routinely drawn to the most ordinary of buildings, there is inevitably something special about the subjects he selected - often a personal preference or specific association. For instance, in 1926, visiting Rockland, Maine, he had stumbled upon a deserted boarding-house at 5 South Street, near the town's shipyard. Old photographs document Hopper's verisimilitude to this subject, now long since destroyed. Despite its ordinary structure, Hopper was drawn to its state of abandonment, noting particularly its boarded-up windows and even titling his watercolor *Haunted House* - although the work has subsequently been known as *Old Boarding House*, masking the substance of the artist's original preoccupation with what must reflect his growing fascination with death. This morbidity and his characteristic pessimism are also indicated by Hopper's predilection for painting watercolors of houses surrounded by dead trees: *Dead Trees* (1923), *Dead Tree and Side of Lombard House* (1931), *House with Dead Tree* (1932) and *Four Dead Trees* (1942).

Hopper occasionally selected architectural subjects of greater aesthetic distinction. This was particularly true in 1927, during his stay in Portland, Maine, where he chose to paint watercolors of a distinguished high Victorian mansion and the elegant granite United States Custom House built in 1872 in a Grecian style. These choices were in sharp contrast to some of the more commonplace buildings that he had painted, just one year earlier, in

Rockland, Maine.

His choices of subject matter - particularly the places he painted - seem 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. As he explained to one critic:

To me the most important thing is the sense of going on. You know how beautiful things are when you're traveling.”