



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1989 Volume V: America as Myth

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## The HopperVille Express

Curriculum Unit 89.05.01  
by Casey Cassidy

This curriculum unit is designed to utilize Edward Hopper’s realistic 20th century paintings as a “vehicle” to transport middle school children from the hills and seashores of New England, through the metropolis of New York City, and across the plains of the western United States. As our unit continues along its journey, it will cross a timeline of approximately forty years which will serve to highlight technological improvements in transportation, changes in period attire, and various architectural styles. We will experience a sense of nostalgia as we view a growing spirit of nationalistic pride as we watch America grow, change, and move forward through the eyes of Edward Hopper.

The strategies in this unit will encourage the youngsters to use various skills for learning. Each student will have the opportunity to read, to critically examine slides and lithographs of selected Hopper creations, to fully participate in teacherled discussions of these works of art, and to participate first hand as a commercial artist—i.e. they will be afforded an opportunity to go out into their community, traveling on foot or by car (as Edward Hopper did on countless occasions), to photograph or to sketch buildings, scenes, or structures similar to commonplace areas that Hopper painted himself. In this way, we hope to create a sense of the challenge facing every artist as they themselves seek to create their own masterpieces. Hopper was able “to portray the commonplace and make the ordinary poetic.”<sup>1</sup> We hope our students will be able to understand these skills and to become familiar with the decisions, the inconveniences, and the obstacles of every artist as they ply their trade.

## Introduction

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A few years ago, my friends and I were sitting in a local restaurant enjoying a libation or two, and as the evening progressed, a print of Edward Hopper became the focal point of our conversation. Out of that discussion, an “unbridled love affair” developed with one of America’s great realistic painters as we discussed the virtues of “The Nighthawks” (1942), a situation not entirely unlike our own. Since that evening, I find myself at the Yale Art Gallery, The Whitney and the Metropolitan Museums in New York City, and other art galleries on countless occasions appreciating, admiring, and sitting in awe of masterpieces created by “mere mortal men.”

My preliminary work has involved several projects, among them visits to regional and local art galleries to

photograph and/or to purchase prints for classroom discussions, correspondence to the Chamber of Commerce and to the town historians of Nyack, New York (Hopper's birthplace) and Truro, Massachusetts (his summer home), and letters requesting background information from the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. and the Phillip Morris Agency in New York City, both of which sponsored Edward Hopper exhibitions.

The unit will be taught during a timeframe of approximately twelve weeks. The format will involve 10 preselected Hopper prints, each of which will be discussed and analyzed on a weekly basis. The first week will act as an introduction to Hopper and the final week will culminate with our photographic expeditions.

## Goals and Objectives

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The primary goals and objectives of this unit are the following:

To gain a pictorial sense of America's cities, towns, seashores, and western plains during the early years of the 20th century.

To examine the technological improvements in America as we *compare* and *contrast* today's cities and towns and those of Edward Hopper's era.

To foster an artistic appreciation and a sense of the monumental size of each project as the artist goes about his daily tasks.

To familiarize students with the nomenclature, the style, and the subtle techniques employed by the artist to deliver messages of underlying meaning.

To utilize (10) prints of Edward Hopper which span the fifty plus years of his work as separate but unified chapters of a narrative exposition.

## Hopper's Formative Years

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Edward Hopper (1882-1967) was born in Nyack, New York, a small town some forty miles north of New York City. As a realistic painter of twentieth century America, he portrayed everyday ordinary people and places as poetic yet sometimes mysterious entities. His paintings were often interpretive renderings of the settings he saw as he sought to change or transform the scene in his mind many times before he finally actually painted. Hopper was naturally drawn to New York's metropolis with its art schools, museums, galleries, theaters, and other cultural opportunities. Early in his career, he studied commercial illustration which served to provide parttime work while attending the New York School of Art. In these early years, Hopper was influenced by William Chase, Kenneth Miller, and Robert Henri who later was to serve as Hopper's mentor. Between 1906 and 1910, Hopper made three trips to Paris to study the fine arts, watercolors, and Manet, and in 1910, he returned to America to be influenced by John Sloan. By the end of 1913, he had moved to his Greenwich Village studio at 3 Washington Square North which would become his home and his workplace for the remainder of his life.

Having grown up close to the Hudson River, Hopper appears to have a close affinity to water. Many of his works involve seascapes, lighthouses, nautical scenes, harbors, rivers, bridges, and even a view of Cape Cod Bay. “Hopper was always drawn to water, which may have symbolized freedom and escape for this reclusive artist.”<sup>2</sup> His choice of subjects provides an important clue to Hopper’s vision. The places and scenes that Hopper painted reveal much about his personality, his tastes, and the cultural climate of his time.

As Hopper was growing up in Nyack, New York in his teen years, Stephen Crane was busily writing narrative, journalistic reports about ordinary people and places down the road apiece. Crane was considered a realist, a naturalist, and a symbolist in many ways comparative to Hopper. Crane, in trying to explain his writings, suggests: “The true artist is the man who leaves pictures of his own time as they appear to him.”<sup>3</sup> It is to this end that I believe that Hopper, as well as Crane, were true artists in every sense of the word.

## Thematic Approaches

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Edward Hopper was a pioneer in the realistic portrayal of the American scene. During his painting career of sixty plus years, he strove to interpret the everyday features of contemporary America. As early as 1908, he was painting railroads, tugboats, steamers, and other objects or sites that none of his contemporaries seem to be interested in. Hopper’s chief subject matter was the physical face of America. “No artist was more aware of the architectural disorder and monotony of our cities, the dreariness of our suburbs, the rawness of our countryside, ravaged by industry and highspeed transportation.”<sup>4</sup>

Hopper’s choices of subject matter seem to be somewhat unpredictable but for the most part represented the city, the town, the water, and the countryside. Hopper concentrated on the myriad of pictorial possibilities within our large cities. He painted unique, unusual subjects in art such as hotel lobbies, apartments, offices and restaurants. He utilized empty evocative settings to project various moods. Through these moods, he revealed a variety of emotions and interpersonal relationships. His solitary figures often were central characters caught in contemplative, dreamlike circumstances. But there are no crowds in Hopper’s cities. The occasional figures are parts of the whole scene but not leading actors.

The small town represented another portrayal of the United States. The village buildings and boatfilled harbors were painted for their fascinating forms. In particular, Hopper loved the seaside towns of New England, especially Cape Cod. He and his wife Josephine spent many summers in Truro; subsequently many of his nautical paintings are of lighthouses, harbors, boats, and water. Since his boyhood days, he had been attracted to everything connected with boats and water. At the age of fifteen, he had built his own sailboat and sailed on the Hudson River at Nyack, New York. Although later in life, he readily admitted that sailing and the building of sailboats was not his forte.

As for the countryside, Hopper loved to travel. His American landscape paintings broke with tradition immediately. As he traveled throughout New England, the South, the far West, and Mexico, he painted the highways, gas stations, motels, railroad depots with their buildings and train crossings, and various forms of quaint architecture. Often the horizontal line of a road or railroad tracks formed a border or base for his drama that was beginning to unfold.

## Compositional Techniques

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Edward Hopper was a pure painter, interested in his material for its own sake, and in the utilization of his idea of form, color, and special development. There is a strong emotional, almost dramatic quality about his work and one can interpret his underlying meanings of architecture, city life, and landscape as one wishes. "My aim in painting is always, using nature as the medium, to try to project upon canvas my most intimate reaction to the subject as it appears when I like it the most; when the facts are given unity by my interest and prejudices. Why I select certain subjects rather than others, I do not exactly know, unless it is that I believe them to be the best medium for a synthesis of my inner experience."<sup>5</sup> The sheer physical power of his paintings strike us immediately. His forms are massive, simplified, and stripped of nonessential details. His design is characterized by straight lines, sharp angles, and strong contrasts of horizontals and verticals. He designed his paintings consciously and deliberately, spending a great deal of time studying his motifs and making many sketches of them. It was not uncommon for Hopper to make composites of sketches from many locations for a single painting. "The idea for *Room in New York* had been in my mind a long time before I painted it. It was suggested by glimpses of lighted interiors seen as I walked along the city streets at night, probably near the district where I lived (Washington Square), although it's no particular street or house, but it is rather a synthesis of many impressions."<sup>6</sup>

Choosing the proportions for a painting was a matter of great concern for Hopper. The very long horizontal shape of *Manhattan Bridge Loop* was an effort to produce a sensation of extending the scene beyond the borders while dwarfing the pedestrian may have been an attempt to suggest the overpowering affect that major cities have upon their inhabitants.

The dramatic play of light and shadow played an impressive role in many of his compositions. Light and shadows are sharply defined and strongly contrasted. Light was an active force by streaming into a scene, falling on forms and modeling them, and acting as a dynamic element in the whole pictorial concept.

In his usage of light, Hopper was unrestrained. Often, the mood of the painting or the hour or the season or the weather was determined by lighting conditions. There is an incredible sensation produced by the intensity of the painted sunlight falling on the white walls of his *Lighthouse at Two Lights* and there's an eerie feeling of night as the fluorescent lighting of the diner creates sharpangled shadows against neighboring buildings in *Nighthawks*. But the light is never literal; it is perhaps the most powerful tool of Hopper's expressive compositional techniques.

A device which Hopper has used ever since his Paris days is the bold, foreground horizontal such as a sidewalk, a wall, the railing of a bridge, or a railroad track. They are like the edge of a stage beyond which the drama begins.

On occasion, Hopper would freely alter what he observed. He would subtly change the spatial organization of a composition to one that better suited his purpose. By cropping the house in *Rooms For Tourists*, he ensures that the viewer's eye receives the inviting message of the availability of warm hospitality.

Multiple points of view were selected intentionally to increase the sensation of realism. In *Cape Cod Evening*, we see the home from the left side creating a frontal affect for the collie that is parallel to the viewer plane. In *Mansard Roof*, the viewer is located below the subject while in *Night Shadows*, an elevated position has been chosen. Hopper sometimes chose to compress space, making the foreground distances disappear, as he did in *Davis House*.

Hopper's idea of casting the spectator as a witness is evident in *Office at Night* as the viewer observes the sexual tension and the drama created by this encounter. Throughout his long career, Hopper was primarily interested in mood and human interaction. Many critics have claimed that Hopper only painted what he saw, yet his writer believes that there was much more than what initially engaged the eye. For Hopper, painting was an intensely private experience. "So much of every art is an expression of the subconscious that it seems to me most of the important qualities are put there unconsciously, and little of importance by the conscious intellect. But these are things for the psychologist to untangle."<sup>7</sup>

## Synopsis of Hopper's Paintings

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Each week a preselected Hopper painting will be employed as the central focus of a teacherled classroom discussion. As we proceed throughout our curriculum unit, Hopper's formative years, his thematic approaches, and his compositional techniques will be applied to each classroom learning experience. If available, slides will also be used to highlight style and compositional techniques.

### **Self Portrait (1925/1930)**

In Hopper's *SelfPortrait*, one cannot tell whether he is sitting or standing. He is viewed from left to right, from foreground diagonally inward, and because he is wearing a hat, we assume that he is just arriving or just leaving. His eyes give us the appearance that he is looking into a mirror—perhaps the mirror or reflection of his life. His hat, in casting a shadow over his eyes, acts as sort of a mask—perhaps a mask of inner feelings.

### **House by the Railroad (1925)**

In this composition, a mansardroofed Victorian house stands along the dramatic edge of the railroad tracks. The tracks cut diagonally inward to create a deeper space. By 1925, this nineteenth century house is reminiscent of America's past—a time left behind by "modern urban life." This canvas allows the viewer a glimpse back into time as if it was viewed by a passing traveler.

### **Hills, South Truro (1930)**

The *Hills, South Truro* is a very beautiful piece of countryside/seaside landscape. It shows a railroad track, a house, and rolling hills leading to the sea. The entire composition is simple—yet simply magnificent.

### **Railroad Sunset (1929)**

In this painting, Hopper used a simple horizontal format with the railroad tracks cutting across the composition—much like the railroads were cutting across the rural farmlands of America. Perhaps the sunset is signifying the end of an era as America was entering the Great Depression.

### **Early Sunday Morning (1930)**

*Early Sunday Morning* was constructed on a horizontal plane utilizing dramatic sunlight and shadow techniques. The row of small, serviceoriented shops with curtains hanging in the apartment windows above suggest a lively, enduring strength of small time business entrepreneurs that managed to withstand the difficulties of the Great Depression. The continuous line of shops extending beyond the borders of the composition suggest that the reconstruction of America and the return to prosperity may well lay in the hands of the small businessmen and service community.

## **Gas (1940)**

In the 1940 highway painting *Gas*, Hopper suggests the anxious feelings of traveling on a lonely country road at night. The Mobil gas station indicates the extent to which the automobile was traveling throughout America.

## **Nighthawks (1942)**

The setting of *Nighthawks* suggest the vulnerability of people out alone at night. The lunch counter is an oasis of light in the midnight city. Strong light, both fluorescent and street, falls on the four characters spotlighting each of them. The couple whose hands almost touch accentuate the loneliness of the solitary diner across the counter. Hopper, when he was painting this masterpiece, remarked that he didn't see the street as particularly lonely but he later suggested that unconsciously, he was probably painting the loneliness of a large city.

## **Western Motel (1957)**

*Western Motel* continues Hopper's concern for the automobile and the world that it has created. The painting is situated much as if one was to photograph a woman sitting on a bed near a window with a mountain view to suggest that the woman was a typical tourist. The two suitcases and the double bed suggest that the artist was there as well.

## **Sunlight in the Cafeteria (1958)**

In *Sunlight in the Cafeteria*, Hopper used the restaurant setting to portray the tensions or the awkward first meeting between a man and a woman. Each person, while sensing each other's presence, has not as yet "broken the ice." He gazes over towards the window, holding a burning cigarette, and she lingers on, having finished her coffee. The sunlight, as it falls diagonally into the room, highlights the drama within.

## **Two Comedians (1965)**

In *Two Comedians*, the tall comedian bows and gestures to the female, who shyly returns the gesture. The painting suggests that all of Hopper's works were a collaborative venture that required the efforts of both of them. At this time, Hopper knew that he was sick and would die shortly. This painting was their farewell in that he would die in 1967 and Jo would follow him in 1968.

## **Lesson Plan Outline**

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1. The ten preselected prints of Hopper's works will be employed on an individual weekly basis primarily as a teacher-led classroom discussion. If available, slides will also be used to highlight style or compositional techniques (10 weeks).
2. An introductory slide show will acquaint the student with Edward Hopper and a sampling of his works.  
A tour of the Yale Art Gallery will provide each student with a firsthand observation of
3. three of Hopper's major works: *Rooms by the Sea*, 1951; *Western Motel*, 1957; and *Sunlight in a Cafeteria*, 1958.
4. A photographic expedition of the student's community to allow each student to photograph similar ordinary and commonplace buildings or sites that are closely related to Hopper's compositional topics.

5. A journal writing assignment which permits each student to record the occurrences, the obstacles, and the preparations before, during and after the photographic experience.
6. Background reading selections which will discuss Hopper's thematic approaches, his subject matter, and his stylistic techniques.
7. Within the context of each weekly print, each student will write a comparison/contrast essay citing the technological improvements/differences as reflected within Hopper's works and their contemporary times.

## Conclusion

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Hopper's remarkable following did not encourage him to speed up the production of his art. He painted slowly, sometimes completing only one or two paintings a year. As we have seen, his art was the end product of a long and conscientious process, a composite of many sketches, a synthesis of his inner experience. But his deliberate and selfcritical work has produced magnificent fruits of his labor. "Few living painters have produced so little in so long a time and very few have been able to give to each work such distinct and vivid individuality. Behind this selfdiscipline and technical accomplishment there stands a gentle, a modest, a noble man. Americans may well be proud of Edward Hopper."<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

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1. Levin, Gail. *Hopper's Place*,. (New York: Knopf, 1985).
2. Ibid.
3. Katz, Joseph. *The Portable Stephen Crane*, (New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1969) p. IX.
4. Goodrich, Lloyd. *Edward Hopper*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1971) p. 8.
5. Hobbs, Robert. *Edward Hopper*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987) preface.
6. Ibid., pp. 625.
7. Goodrich, Lloyd. Ibid., p. 164.
8. Barr, Alfred. *Edward Hopper: Retrospective Exhibition*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1933), p. 15.

## Teacher's Bibliography

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- Levin, Gail. *Hopper's Places* (New York: Knopf, 1985).
- Levin, Gail. *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist* (New York, London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1986).
- Schjeldahl, Peter. *Edward Hopper: Light Years* (New York: Hirschl and Adler Galleries, Inc., 1988).

## Student's Bibliography

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Short, xeroxed selections will be utilized from the teacher's bibliography as they correspond to the style, composition, technique and dramatic structures of each preselected Hopper print. Over a course of time, as this unit continues to be taught, the print selections will change; subsequently, the xeroxed copies will be chosen to correlate to each print as it becomes the subject of our experience.

## Photograph and Painting Appendix

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Photographs of the sites that Hopper painted demonstrate just how realistic that his compositions were. But they also reveal the freedom which he exercised as he subtly changed the compositional organization to better suit his purpose. To understand Hopper is to understand the places that attracted him. Whether he was on foot or in his automobile, he constancy made miniature sketches of his works. The locations of these projects were recorded by his wife Josephine, although the exact house or site was usually vague. Dilemmas in finding these areas were compounded by building additions to the original structure, absence of or overgrown shrubbery or just simply that the building had been torn down. However, many places that Hopper painted have survived and the resemblance to the original photograph is remarkable down to the tiniest detail. In Paris, the building i-in which he lived and in Mexico, the Hotel Arizpe Sainz where he stayed, along with the E1 Palacio cinema, the architecture, and the mountain views all remain unchanged. Just north of Nyack, New York, is a Second Empire style house that clearly resembles that in *House by the Railroad* and one can feel relatively comfortable that the following examples are accurately identified as a result of the comprehensive note taking of Josephine Hopper.



Page 1 Libby's House, 1927

Page 1 Prospect Street, Gloucester, 1928

Page 1 Rooms for Tourists, 1945

Page 2 Photograph, 1985

Page 2 Photograph, 1985

Page 2 Photograph, 1985

These paintings offer an insight into the tremendous talent that Hopper possessed and his ability to depict his surroundings from his artistic vantage point. He has done his job well, as Crane suggests, by leaving pictures of his own time as they appeared to him.

*(figures available in print form)*

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