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**Edward Hopper's NEW YORK MOVIE creates an alternate
reality that begins in the physical world of New York
City but ends inside the soul of the viewer.**

The Field of Experience and Sensation

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Like many of Edward Hopper's paintings, *New York Movie* (p. 40) and *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* (p. 43) appeal to a wide audience, evoking from viewers differing interpretations relevant to their experiences in America's large cities. In essence, Hopper's paintings create an alternate reality, a place that begins in the physical world of New York City but ends inside the soul of the individual viewer. The paintings touch a sensitivity within each of us that may elicit quite diverse thematic interpretations—of isolation and loneliness, or constructive solitude and meditative reflection—at different times in our lives.

Edward Hopper was not born in the big city, but he spent a majority of his professional life working there. He is from my hometown, the small Hudson River town of Nyack, which is about thirty miles north of New York City. The house where he and his sister were born has never left the Hopper family. Today it has been restored to serve as a community cultural center and a gallery space that maintains the famous artist's memory.¹

When he graduated from Nyack High School, Hopper moved to New York City in 1900 for art instruction, but he commuted to Nyack on weekends to teach drawing classes in his family's home. Because his parents wanted him to study commercial illustration in order to have a more secure economic future in fine art, he began by taking coursework at the Correspondence School of Illustrating (1899–1900). He continued to study illustration at the New York School of Art (1900–1906), but turned to study painting and drawing after only a year. Hopper took classes from the American Impressionist painter William Merit Chase (1849–1916), but he strongly preferred to study with Robert Henri (1865–1929), a leading figure in the Ash Can School of artists who painted gritty realistic images of the poorer neighborhoods in the city.² When he finished his studies at the New York School of Art in the fall of 1906, Hopper made his first trip to Europe to examine first-hand the artwork there, visiting Paris, London, Harlem, Amsterdam, Berlin, and Brussels. He made two other trips to Europe. These trips had an enormous influence on his art. He especially enjoyed painting *en plein air*, as the

Impressionists did. He continued to read French Symbolist poetry and emulated French painters, including Edgar Degas (1834-1917).

In 1910, Hopper moved to a room on East 59th Street in New York City. After selling his first painting in 1913, he purchased a larger apartment and studio, Number 3 Washington Square North in Greenwich Village, where he lived until he died. He worked as an illustrator for several trade magazines and painted in his free time. Yet, he detested illustration to the point that he would not discuss it in his later life. Hopper began exhibiting his work in 1908, and sold his first painting in 1913 at the International Exhibition of Modern Art – the famous “Armory Show” that introduced the work of many contemporary modern painters.

In 1924, Hopper married the painter and actress, Josephine Nivison, whom he had known in art school. She served as a model in many of his drawings and paintings. They spent their summers on the coasts of New England, and many of Hopper’s works depict scenes from places they vacationed, especially on Cape Cod and in Gloucester, Massachusetts. But most of his subjects are drawn from locations near his home and studio in New York City. The two paintings illustrated here reflect daily life of New Yorkers in locations still popular today – a movie theater and a cafe.



Hopper was able to capture a moment and incorporate a personal context that spoke to many viewers. A keen observer of the people and situations surrounding him, he was especially intrigued with the City’s ability to isolate its inhabitants.

For instance, Hopper enjoyed going to see a film with friends, but the subject of *New York Movie* (p. 40) is not the film or fellowship with friends, but a blonde usherette who stands, deep in thought, leaning against the wall positioned on the right side of the composition. Two moviegoers are seated separately. These three figures share a common space, but they do not interact with each other. The viewer, however, is immediately concerned with the usherette who raises her right hand to her chin as in thought and reflection. To her right is a stairway, presumably leading up and out of the main theater area. The painting is organized with strong verticals: the slender usherette, the curtains, the yellow spiral column, and the walls to the right of the seated moviegoers. The large square lights receding towards the stage and film screen convey the depth of the theatre space. There are eight rows of seats, clearly painted in deep red velvet, which further help our understanding of the vast space.

City life evokes an anonymity and, perhaps, resulting loneliness that this scene explores. Hopper believed that great art expressed an artist’s “inner life” which he described as “a vast and varied realm.” Yet he did not identify this inner realm with the sense of social isolation that critics

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SUNLIGHT IN A CAFETERIA draws viewers to weave a scenario to explain the relationship between the figures who sit in unexplained isolation from one another. Hopper's image remains mysterious, an invitation for viewers into a virtual reality they imagine.

Edward Hopper (1882-1967), SUNLIGHT IN A CAFETERIA (1958). Oil on canvas. 40 3/16" x 60 1/8". New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery. Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark. Photo: © Yale University Art Gallery / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

find in this painting. In diaries that Jo Hopper kept about her husband and his paintings, she notes that Hopper spent much time in a state of reflection, “so enjoy[ing] his inner life, he can get on fine without interruption from other humans.” The solitary figures in Hopper’s paintings may well be evocations of such contented solitude, rather than the loneliness so often cited in discussion of his work. Hopper stated that his primary subject was “the field of experience and sensation which neither literature nor a purely plastic art deals with.”³

This work is contemporary with the Surrealist movement, which valued surprising, fantastic imagery in art. André Breton (1896-1966), a leading poet and theorist of the movement, wrote about this painting soon after the Museum of Modern Art acquired it in 1941, “The beautiful young woman, lost in a dream beyond the confounding things happening to others, the heavy mythical column, the three lights of *New York Movie*, seem charged with a symbolical significance which seeks a way out of the curtained stairway.”⁴



Hopper enjoyed going to urban restaurants; he sketched such a scene when he was only fourteen years old. In *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* (p. 43), Hopper depicts just two figures: a woman sitting at a table by the window, and a man sitting to her left who raises his hand towards her but does not speak. The woman tilts her head ever so slightly to be aware of the man, but her attention is focused on her hands. The sunlight enters the cafeteria from the empty street outside on a diagonal and moves us from one side (that of the woman) in the direction of the man. There is an unspoken uneasiness in this painting because the two figures share the same space in a close proximity, but remain in unexplained isolation from one another.

In September 1958, Hopper wrote to his patron, Stephen Clark: “I’m very pleased that you have acquired my picture, *Sunlight in a Cafeteria*. I think it’s one of my very best pictures.”⁵

The image draws viewers to weave some scenario or other to explain the relationship between the woman and man. (Indeed, a Brooklyn playwright Anna Ziegler has written a one-act play *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* in which she imagines the two characters in this painting coming to life and talking to each other.⁶) Yet each scenario will be a personal narrative that is more indicative of the moment and emotional life of the viewer than of the artist and his painted figures. Thus, Hopper’s image remains mysterious, an invitation for viewers into a virtual reality they imagine.

NOTES

1 For more information on the Edward Hopper House Art Center in Nyack, New York, please see www.hopperhouse.org (accessed December 2, 2010).

2 Gail Levin, "Hopper, Edward," Grove Art Online, www.groveart.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu (accessed November 4, 2010). For more information on the life and work of Edward Hopper, see the other publications by art historian Gail Levin, especially *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980); *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1998); and *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*, three volumes (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

3 Pamela N. Koob, "States of Being: Edward Hopper and Symbolist Aesthetics," *American Art* 18:3 (Autumn, 2004), 52-77, here citing 63. Available online www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdf/10.1086/427532 (accessed December 2, 2010).

4 Gail Levin, "Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, Surrealism, and the War," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 22:2 (1966), 181-195, 200, here citing 181-182.

5 "Edward Hopper, Sunlight in a Cafeteria," Yale University Art Gallery online, artgallery.yale.edu (accessed November 4, 2010).

6 Anna Ziegler, *Sunlight in a Cafeteria*, produced by Dina Leytes and Gbenga Akinngabe as part of the playwright's "Under the Influence" at the Tank, New York City, May 2010.



HEIDI J. HORNİK

is Professor of Art History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.