

CITY LIMITS

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Edward Hopper, *Approaching a City*, 1946, oil on canvas, 27 1/8 × 36". © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper/Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

THE EDWARD HOPPER SHOW at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York focused on the artist's experience of the city, particularly the changing architecture of Greenwich Village, where he lived on Washington Square Park from 1913 until his death in 1967. Organized by Kim Conaty, the exhibition is expansive, featuring impressive selections from throughout the artist's career, from his dark circa-1900 sketches of the city's inhabitants to chalk studies, etchings, watercolors, examples of the artist's commercial work, and several of Hopper's most famous canvases, including *Automat*, 1927, *Room in New York*, 1932, and *Early Sunday Morning*, 1930. Overall, the impression is one of pessimism and skeptical reserve. Unlike the vistas of more affirmative urban representations, from Canaletto to Caillebotte, Hopper's architectural scenes are coolly anti-picturesque. They read as ambivalent counterproposals, often highlighting an eclectic mix of vernacular architectural styles. This attitude is most obvious in Hopper's aversion to portraying the structure that most directly emblemizes Manhattan's aggressive architectural ambitions: the skyscraper. As he said, "I just never cared for the vertical."

Accordingly, most of the painter's architectural scenes present a segment of a horizontal structure, be it a bridge or a row of houses, with deadpan frontality, like a stage set. There are no deep, dramatically receding spaces like the boulevards of the French Impressionists. Instead, Hopper's New York City paintings are perfectly cropped segments of a horizontal continuum, revealing only fragments of what could expand endlessly beyond the visual parameters of the canvas. This tension between the visible and the invisible is most obvious in Hopper's representations of tunnels, such as *Approaching a City*, 1946. Here, a set of train tracks leads the viewer sideways into the opaque depths of a dark tunnel whose blank white wall extends laterally across the painting's center.



Edward Hopper, *Chair Car*, 1965, oil on canvas, 40 × 50". © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper/Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In *Apartment Houses, East River*, ca. 1930, the river, its undomesticated banks, and the fresh green of the trees and meadows lining it add a strangely bucolic dimension to an austere lineup of generic rectangular housing units. Pushed into the middle ground and functioning like theatrical backdrops, these dwellings appear like ghost towns, and possess a rigid geometry that contrasts with the river's steady flow. I found an illuminating quote from Hopper's notebook reprinted in the exhibition catalogue: "The dreamer and mystic must create a reality that you can walk around in, exist and breathe in." Hopper implies that his paintings, which revolve around the beholder's viewpoint and orientation, are illusionistic tableaux to be imaginatively "entered" by the viewer.

A rather late canvas, *Two Comedians*, 1966, highlighted Hopper's love of the theater and his fascination with the interplay of performer, spectator, and viewer. It is actually a self-portrait of the artist and his wife, Jo, dressed in commedia dell'arte costumes and is one of the few paintings in Hopper's oeuvre to portray two figures interacting physically. But the actors are only performing intimacy. As they take their final bow—awkwardly arrested in an interstitial space between stillness and motion and gesturing toward an invisible audience while standing at the edge of a vast, empty stage—the pair resemble wooden figurines held up with invisible strings, this quality pointing to modernism's history of automatons and puppets. The duo's instability is further enhanced by their masklike faces and the underarticulation of their eyes, which add a somnambulistic touch to their already inanimate presence.

Stillness at the threshold of movement is a crucial feature in the illusionistic dramaturgy of Hopper's work.

Seeing without vision is also an important aspect of *Morning Sun*, 1952, one of Hopper's most iconic paintings. A motionless female figure sits on a bed in a clinical, barren room, looking out a window into the morning sun. In place of an eye is a clearly cut black triangle, as if her eyeball had dropped out of its socket. The voyeuristic aspect of this composition is balanced by the woman's rather desexualized and trancelike appearance, as well as by her indeterminate age. The model for this and many other paintings was Jo, who was already sixty-nine years old at that time. Her knees pulled toward her torso, her body triangulated, she responds perfectly to the surrounding geometric composition of the bed, the window, and its rectangular shadows on the wall behind her. Equally significant to the synching of her body to the surrounding architecture is the fact that the vertical middle axis, which separates the shaded from the illuminated section of the wall, cuts right through her skull. Like the lighting of a match or the starting of an engine, the capacity to move depends on a moment of ignition—in this case, the contact between the sun and her skin and the subsequent absorption of light and energy. Arrested between the animate and inanimate, she is a classically uncanny figurine.

This stillness at the threshold of movement is a crucial feature in the illusionistic dramaturgy of Hopper's work. Often, figures are framed by a window, which doubly functions as casement and display container, recalling the boxy, linear constructions that confine the figures in Francis Bacon's paintings. Intimations of movement—the fluttering of a curtain, the habit of a nun, or the string of a blind—are counterpoints to the figures' immobility. It is as if perception would be burdened or distracted by too much mobility within a painting.

In the late canvas *Chair Car*, 1965, bright sunlight pours in through the right-hand windows of a train-car interior. A female figure on the right sits with her back to the window reading a book, her blonde hair and neck lit by the sun behind her. She is frozen, statuesque, posing with rigidly parallel limbs and holding the book palms upward, as if making an offering. Across the aisle, on the shaded side of the train car, sits a second woman, a brunette. She is positioned at exactly the same height as her blonde partner and stares in her direction, as if magnetically drawn to her counterpart. Yet there is an

uncrossable gap separating these two equally absorbed antagonists. While looking at the painting, you may find your focus oscillating between the figures, crossing the empty space between them and prompting you to consider your own absorption in the painting.



Edward Hopper, *Two Comedians*, 1966, oil on canvas, 29 × 40". © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper/Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

The black-haired woman's unilateral attention—she fixates on the blonde woman as if she were looking at a film screen or theater performance—cannot be resolved; it will be perpetuated in the frozen stasis of unfulfilled desire. I believe these social scenarios derive from Hopper's particular approach to narrativity, rather than from any premeditated intention to express "loneliness" or "alienation." Not unlike Winslow Homer, a rare painter whom Hopper admired, he often constructed figures who refuse to behave as affirmative actors in predictable narratives that would predetermine the perception of the painting and undermine any enigmatic quality.

Accordingly, Hopper's approach is often based in an act of intentional un-rendering with regard to realism. In my opinion, the head of the dark-haired female in *Chair Car*, built of trapezoidal shapes, is deliberately painted like a Cubist mask. The fact that she lacks explicitly depicted eyes repels any human qualities we might ascribe to her. A more refined face might provide too much information, revealing, for instance, her emotional status or her age, thus trivializing the painting's sophistication by unbalancing the perfectly calibrated tension between the known and the unknown. Hopper's realism is located on the brink of *arealism* (reminiscent of Charles Burchfield, another artist Hopper adored), but it never slips into conventional Surrealism, which would threaten to sabotage

the enigmatic by visualizing it. Contrary to the current flood of contemporary figurative painting, which so often indulges in untrammelled narrative and illustration, Hopper's modestly sized compositions are characterized by masterful restraint.

"Edward Hopper's New York" is on view through March 5 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.