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*Cities and Towns.*

Elements of the shared community life—a barber pole and fire hydrant—are the main “characters” in this glimpse of Hopper’s beloved neighborhood, Greenwich Village in New York City. Yet he was intrigued with the City’s ability to isolate its inhabitants.

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# An Ordered Neighborhood

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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Edward Hopper grew up in the small town of Nyack, New York, in the Hudson River Valley about thirty miles north of New York City. The handsome white-framed house where he and his sister were born is in a neighborhood just a few blocks from the river. It has been restored by the Hopper family as a community cultural center and gallery space that maintains the memory of the artist.<sup>1</sup>

After graduating from Nyack High School in 1899, Hopper went to New York City to study commercial illustration at his parents' urging (to have a more secure economic future in fine art). Yet he returned to Nyack each weekend to offer art classes in the family house. He often painted scenes of Nyack or elsewhere in rural Rockland County, and the town's main industry – boat building – figures prominently in many of his paintings.<sup>2</sup>

Hopper entered the New York School of Art in 1900 to study commercial illustration, but after only a year he began studying painting and drawing with William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri. He toured Europe for the first of three times in the summer of 1906, visiting Paris, London, Haarlem, Amsterdam, Berlin, and Brussels before returning to New York in August 1907. Though he moved to New York City in 1910 and never lived in Nyack again, the picturesque structures and sense of community in his hometown continued to influence his artwork.

*Early Sunday Morning* and *Nighthawks* reflect the next phase of the artist's life in the Greenwich Village neighborhood on Lower Manhattan Island. In 1913, he moved from his room on 59<sup>th</sup> Street to a Village apartment and studio, Number 3 on Washington Square North, where he would live the rest of his life.

Hopper began selling his paintings that year at the famous Armory Show. His *House by the Railroad*, in 1925, was the first painting acquired for the Museum of Modern Art. Five years later when Hopper painted *Early Sunday Morning*, critics were praising his paintings as "American Realism."

He painted in his free time while he continued to work as an illustrator for several trade magazines in New York. Yet he came to detest illustration to the point that he would not discuss it in his later life.

His trips to Paris had an enormous influence on his work. Hopper read French Symbolist poetry and emulated French painters like Degas. He especially enjoyed painting *en plein air*, as the Impressionists did.

In 1924, he married Josephine Nivison, an artist in Greenwich Village whom he had met years before in art school. She became the model for many of Hopper's pictures. The couple spent their summers painting sea-scapes and architecture along the coasts of New England, and it was Jo who encouraged Hopper to begin painting watercolors there in the open air.

### **MORNING CALM**

In *Early Sunday Morning*, Hopper captures a personal moment in his neighborhood. In an empty street, the strong raking light illuminates the façade of stores on the ground level and apartments above. Although no human beings are depicted, the presence of the individual city dwellers is evident in the details – the varying types of curtains, heights of shades, and colors in the windows – of their personally decorated homes. The calmness of this scene may be due to the morning hour or the day of the week, though some interpreters think it is frightening in its uncanny quiet and emptiness.

Elements of the shared community life – a barber pole and fire hydrant – become, along with the building façade, the main “characters” in the composition. Hopper highlights them in a way traditionally reserved for human figures, in an almost theatrical manner. The artist clearly enjoyed Greenwich Village and the city of New York in the 1930s, yet he was intrigued with the City's ability to isolate its inhabitants.

“Hopper claimed that he was inspired to paint *Early Sunday Morning* in 1930 by shops on Seventh Avenue and *Nighthawks* in 1942 by a restaurant on Greenwich Avenue where two streets come together (Eleventh Street and Seventh Avenue),” a few blocks west from his studio, Gail Levin reports. The building in the background of *Nighthawks* closely resembles this one in *Early Sunday Morning*. Yet the exact inspiration for the two images is not known, because the diner that inspired *Nighthawks* no longer exists and, as Levin notes, the commercial building in the two paintings seems “to resemble many places, none exactly right.”<sup>3</sup>

### **UNUSUAL PEACE**

*Nighthawks*, Hopper's most well-known painting of city life, is often adapted and parodied in popular culture. Maybe you have seen the online version with characters from the CBS hit series *CSI: Crime Scene Investigators* gathered around a corpse in the famous corner diner.<sup>4</sup> More famous is Gottfried Helnwein's spoof, *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*, where Elvis, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and Humphrey Bogart substitute for Hopper's nighthawks. At one time this poster was among the most popular in college dormitory rooms. How could *Nighthawks* be transformed into an icon of the college experience? For some it may capture the desolation and loneliness of dorm life, where one is surrounded by peers, but isolated from family and neighborhood for the first time. Or, on the other hand, it may depict experiencing life in a new and exciting way.

Hopper's painting instructor, Robert Henri, a member of the Ashcan School of New York artists, had urged him to depict the gritty realities of the city. Yet Hopper did not choose to paint rough or dirty scenes, but rather the calm mornings and late evenings in his neighborhood. Perhaps he chose to depict these moments because they were so unusual – moments when a person could be alone in a place with thousands of people, and when the city was quiet and peaceful. (The appeal to the stressed-out college student makes even more sense now!)

"Hopper denied that he purposely infused any of his paintings with symbols of isolation and emptiness, yet he acknowledged of *Nighthawks* that 'unconsciously, probably, I was painting the loneliness of a large city,'" according to the Art Institute of Chicago's study guide for this painting.<sup>5</sup> This theme of loneliness and isolation has been overplayed, however, especially in the parodies of the painting.<sup>6</sup> In Hopper's image, after all, the woman and man are clearly together and have the attention of the server.

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*Edward Hopper, American (1882-1967), NIGHTHAWKS, 1942. Oil on canvas, 84.1 x 152.4 cm. Friends of American Art Collection, 1942.51, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago. Used by permission.*

Lighting creates the mood in the painting. Fluorescent lights had just become popular in the 1940s, and Hopper combines their strange glow with the thick window glass of the Art Deco style in fashion at this time. While the glass separates the figures from the darker street outside, it invites the viewer into the diner to contemplate the four "nighthawks" there.

## CONCLUSION

Edward Hopper's birthplace, which is a suburb of New York City today, was a small riverside town in the nineteenth century. As a boy he was drawn to the beauty of the Hudson River and he never lost that desire to be near the open water.

Yet Hopper was also drawn to the bustling, creative environment of New York City, a place where world events affect people in a forceful way on an almost hourly basis. The stock market crashed in 1929 and Hitler came to power in 1933, but *Early Sunday Morning* (1930) is serene. Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941 and the Allied army landed in Normandy on D-Day in 1944, yet three individuals quietly drink coffee on Greenwich Avenue in *Nighthawks* (1942). Hopper was able to communicate the American Realism of an ordered neighborhood at a time when the rest of the world was looking to the United States for solutions to chaos.

## NOTES

1 For information on the Edward Hopper House, see [edwardhopperhouseartcenter.org](http://edwardhopperhouseartcenter.org).

2 Gail Levin, "Edward Hopper," *Grove Art Online* (Oxford University Press, 2006), ([www.groveart.com](http://www.groveart.com), accessed June 4, 2006). For more about the life and work of the artist, see Gail Levin's *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (New York, Knopf, 1995) and *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1995).

3 Gail Levin, *Hopper's Places*, second edition (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 20.

4 The image advertises the concluding episode in the 2006 television season of *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* ([www.cbs.com/primetime/csi/diner](http://www.cbs.com/primetime/csi/diner), accessed June 8, 2006). While the visual reference to *Nighthawks* is clear, the Las Vegas nightscape has replaced the New York City façade and slot machines take the place of the drink dispensers in the diner.

5 See the Art Institute of Chicago's online study guide for *Nighthawks* at [www.artic.edu/artaccess/AA\\_Modern/pages/MOD\\_7.shtml](http://www.artic.edu/artaccess/AA_Modern/pages/MOD_7.shtml).

6 Some imitations show a total lack of interaction among the figures. This exaggeration is most evident in the *CSI* parody where a dead body is slumped over the counter among the show's characters who pose on either side of the corpse!



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