

BOOK REVIEW

“Rethinking Edward Hopper”

Gail Levin *Edward Hopper, an Intimate Biography* University of California Press

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Rarely in the late twentieth century has an artist been so consistently lionized as an ‘American Master’ with so little interrogation of his work in postmodern critical terms as Edward Hopper. The literature on Hopper is still filled with words like ‘epic’ ‘universal’ and ‘quintessentially American’ without any qualification. His paintings are celebrated as presenting ‘Portraits of America.’ⁱ Whose America? Why quintessential?

Gail Levin’s ‘intimate biography’ of Edward Hopper begins the process of rethinking Hopper by throwing new light on his relationship to his wife, Josephine Nivinson Hopper. It is the most recent of eight books on Hopper by Levin, including what could be considered the companion volume to the biography, the catalogue for the 1980 Whitney Museum exhibition in which all of the major paintings by Hopper are illustrated in color.ⁱⁱ The biography has no color illustrations with the exception of *Four Lane Road* on the cover. The painting was obviously chosen for its subject matter—a woman calling from a window to a detached and depressed man—which sets the tone of the book.

Levin has used black and white sketches as illustrations as she discusses the major Hopper paintings in terms of the minutiae of their formation, production, exhibition and sale, with brief comments on what constitutes Hopper’s contribution to American art such as ‘it is his profound alienation from contemporary life that makes his art so characteristic of modernity itself.’ (p. 229).

The copious quotes from Jo Hopper’s personal diaries—the artist’s wife is a virtual co-author of the book—form the backbone of the book. Starting in June 1933, Jo wrote a total of sixty-three diaries of various types that have recently come to light in a private collection. The combination of meticulous art history scholarship, anecdotal

narrative, editorializing, and the powerful emotions of the diaries leads to sometimes surprising juxtapositions and changes of tone. Levin had a difficult job in integrating so much new primary source material into a cohesive book.

The spare facts of Edward Hopper's biography are well-known, from his childhood in Nyack, New York, early training in illustration, study with William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri, years in Paris, and the long period when he worked as an illustrator before his work began to be even shown, much less sold. A fundamental turning point for him was his marriage to Josephine Nivinson in July 1924.

One of the most striking aspects of the current biography is that Jo emerges for the first time, since the stunning portrait of her as *The Art Student* painted by Robert Henri in 1906, as a full-fledged person. She was a 'new woman' who worked as a school teacher on the Lower East Side of New York, was friendly with avant garde poets and writers and contributed to *The Masses*. She associated with feminists and performed at the Washington Square Players. Levin constructs her as a lively and courageous woman with a clear-cut identity as an artist.

After marrying Hopper, she began to focus increasingly on his withdrawn and silent person, his conservative approach to art, and the promotion of his career. Her choice to obsess about Edward's career was clearly her means of having a relationship with her husband. The diaries reveal Hopper's paintings, for which Jo was the only female model, as a series of theatrical tableaux embedded in the melodrama and rituals of their life together. The side effect for Jo was an almost insane level of frustration, as her life became slowly frozen, like the scenes in the paintings.

The diaries were Jo Hopper's primary means for emotional release. Hopper emerges in them as a misogynist who actively undermined her career and her self-esteem. Levin quotes Jo on his comments on women artists and women in general (pp. 321, 409, 439), his selfish style of lovemaking (pp. 179–181), and his undercutting of her work (pp. 264, 304, 341, 409, 447). In comparison to Georgia O'Keeffe and Frida Kahlo, both

contemporaries who have now eclipsed their famous husbands, Jo Hopper was more constantly denigrated by her husband and, not coincidentally, more caught up in his work rather than her own.ⁱⁱⁱ

Within this context, it is easy to read Hopper's paintings as a prison for Jo both in reality as she spent hours posing for them, and metaphorically, as she was caught and stopped and silenced by the artist's tight grip. In addition to that, Hopper physically laid his sexual fantasies onto his wife's body as he built up the breasts, thrusts out the hips and buttocks through tight dresses, emphasized the nipples. His women are strong and large, but scary and unavailable. Jo would often model for him in New York after he had visited movie theatres or attended burlesque performances for several nights by way of "research." Consequently, the urban paintings with figures are tension-filled sets with deeply repressed fantasies between a man and the 'other' woman in theatres, offices, hotel lobbies, and bedrooms. They also depict impotent and unhappy couples, and nude women alone in bedrooms and inside apartments. Rarely is a woman free of a frame and she is always an object.

While critics have repeatedly spoken of Hopper in terms of 'isolation,' he and Jo were practically always together throughout their narrow, ritualized lives. They lived in the same building on Washington Square from 1924 until their deaths (Edward Hopper lived there from 1913), they built a house on Cape Cod and went there almost every summer from 1933. While other American artists were involved in the public sphere, Hopper had no political involvement except to despise Roosevelt and vote against him. Hopper was isolated by his own rejection of the world. No wonder his cities and towns are all empty of people and his couples are alienated.

So what of Hopper's 'American master' status? Certainly, the nationalism of the Depression years helped to establish him. But today, why are depressed, well-heeled, sexually- frustrated men and women and postcard-like Cape Cod houses and Maine lighthouses still seen as so "quintessential." Is it the undercurrent of sexual fantasy ?

Nighthawks, for example, seem clearly to be about that universal and epic subject, a man who has just picked up a prostitute. Brightly and energetically-painted phallic shapes like gas pumps, barbershop poles, and lighthouses also point to other fantasies.

Levin's biography does not explore these questions. Just as Hopper set himself up as a realist who stuck to facts, Levin also lays out 'facts.' We cannot know what else is in the diaries, how the biography was constructed from the material, or what other story could have been told, since no one else has seen these diaries. Gail Levin has picked up the mantle where Jo Hopper left it, and has taken on Hopper as the primary focus of her research for many years. Reading the diaries, though, has clearly led her in a new direction. It has even brought down criticism on her from others who wish to protect the artist's status.^{iv}

Clearly, Hopper needs contextualizing. One chilling aspect of the book for me was the reviling of Roosevelt (pp. 287, 330, 376). This 'universal' artist was, in fact, a self-centered conservative who didn't hesitate to say that his painting was about himself. The myth of individualism is alive and well with Hopper. Yet we can clearly see his debt to Winslow Homer, Robert Henri, John Sloan, Charles Burchfield, Thomas Hart Benton and to his long-time supporter, Guy Pène du Bois, in his subjects, compositions, scale and medium. He shares the nostalgia of mid century Regionalist American Scene painting, but his region was the Northeast, rather than the Midwest.

His paintings depict a white Anglo-Saxon upper middle class world of repressed masculinity, rather than the superhero pioneer, politician or worker. His male figures are glum introverts in static poses, rather than the hypermasculinized and active Western leaders in the paintings of John Steuart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton. There is no sign of thirties' 'virility' in Hopper. His status as a 'classic' artist seems to be based more on the absences and silences in his paintings, on what is missing or doesn't happen, rather than on what is there. Levin's biography, through Jo Hopper's words, reveals the repressed, and sometimes cruel and violent, man that lay behind those silences. It finally

prepares the ground for more layered readings of Hopper's position in mid twentieth century American art.

ⁱSee for example, Deborah Lyons introduction to *Edward Hopper and the American Imagination*, New York and London, 1995; Wieland Schmied, *Edward Hopper, Portraits of America*, Munich and New York, 1995; and Gail Levin, 'Edward Hopper and the Democratic Tradition,' *Democracy and Arts in the United States*, Munich, [1993].

ⁱⁱGail Levin, *Edward Hopper, The Art and the Artist*, New York and London, 1980.

ⁱⁱⁱ Levin has begun the process of re-constructing Jo's artistic career by including photographs of several of her now-lost paintings. Some of these paintings were de-accessioned by the Whitney Museum. See Levin, *Edward Hopper, An Intimate Biography*, pp. xi-xvii.

^{iv}Barbara Novak, 'The Posthumous Revenge of Josephine Hopper,' *Art in America*, vol. 84 (June 1996), 27-30.