



THE WORLD SURROUNDING HIM

Edward Hopper and Nyack

by Avis Berman

THE ESSENTIALS OF CHILDHOOD FORM US ALL. Even when we rebel against them, our thoughts, beliefs, dreams, and preferences are consequences of our birth-place and earliest years, and Edward Hopper (1882–1967) was no exception. His artistic personality was shaped by his roots in Nyack, New York, and the town and its environs helped contribute to the figure he would become. Nyack's general history, topography, and architecture were critical to his early preoccupations and his later pursuits, and the particulars

Fig. 1: Edward Hopper (1882–1967), *Hook Mountain, Nyack*, ca. 1899. Watercolor and graphite pencil on paper, Sheet: 5½ x 6⅞ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Josephine N. Hopper Bequest (70.1558.55). Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

of his family's own house at 82 North Broadway afforded him an ideal place to flourish. During the period he lived in Nyack, which lasted until 1910, when he rented his first known studio in Manhattan, Hopper began formulating the central themes of his art, those which distinguished him from everyone else, and were his and his alone.

To explore the impact of the early years on the artist's work, the Edward Hopper House Art Center, located in his childhood home in Nyack, is presenting *Edward Hopper, Prelude: The Nyack Years*. The exhibition, which includes previously unseen paintings, drawings, and watercolors created primarily during the time he lived in Nyack, as well as memorabilia from his youth, also celebrates the fortieth anniversary of the art center. Built in 1858 by the artist's maternal grandfather, the house was occupied for 107 years by members of the Hopper family. After Hopper's death, the house fell into disrepair, but local citizens saved it from demolition and rehabilitated it as a cultural landmark.

Nyack prepared Hopper for the credo he rigorously followed: that the aim of art "is the reproduction of the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is within me, all things being grasped, related, re-created, molded and reconstructed in a personal form and an original manner."¹

Nyack was an impetus for Hopper's extraordinary artistic career because his earliest impressions were safeguarded and refined for later use. When a critic ascribed later influences to him, Hopper protested: "The nucleus around which the artist's intellect builds his work is himself; and this changes little from birth to death. What he was once, he always is, with slight modifications. Changing fashions in methods or subject matter alter him little or not at all."²

Located on the western side of the Hudson River, late nineteenth-century Nyack was a bustling river and commercial town, with small



Fig. 2: Edward Hopper (1882-1967), *Portrait of Artist's Father Garret Henry Hopper (1852-1913)*, 1903. Graphite pencil on paper, Sheet (Irregular): 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Josephine N. Hopper Bequest (70.1560.61). Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

LEFT:

Fig. 3: Edward Hopper and his father Garret in the backyard of their home in Nyack. Courtesy of The Arthayer R. Sanborn Hopper Collection Trust.





factories and major boatbuilding and shipping activities. The hub of the village was ringed by farmland, and its streets gave way to rural roads and wooded trails that Hopper would take to nearby Hook Mountain (Fig. 1), the massive promontory that partially demarcates the Tappan Zee, a natural widening of the river that measures three miles at its broadest point. This expanse of water is responsible for the variegated sunlight that Hopper saw on the water and shore.

Hopper's parents were more than tolerant of his interest in art. Garret Henry Hopper (1852–1913) (Figs. 2–3), a dry-goods merchant with a store on South Broadway, apparently did not pressure his son to work in the business. Elizabeth Griffiths Smith Hopper (1854–1935) (Fig. 4) drew and painted herself, and encouraged Edward's gift, which was apparent from grade school. As a boy, he was furnished with paint boxes and sketchbooks. His pencil-box is bravely inscribed, "E. Hopper, Would Be Artist." When Hopper got older, his parents let him take over the attic to use as a studio.

The family house was one block away from the waterfront, and Hopper spent much of his leisure time there or on the river (Fig. 5). Sailing and boats—and the bodies of water surrounding them—were recurrent motifs in his childhood art. The subject of his earliest known watercolor, dating from about 1893, is a boat race, and he reprised nautical subjects throughout the 1890s. Hopper was painting in oils by the mid-1890s, and his first dated canvas, created in Nyack in 1895, showed a rowboat in a cove.³ Boats and water remained a

Fig. 4: Edward Hopper (1882–1967), *My Mother* [Elizabeth Griffiths Smith Hopper (1854–1935)], n.d. Black Conte crayon on paper, Sheet: 14 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 10 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Josephine N. Hopper Bequest (70.906). Digital image © Whitney Museum of American Art © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

RIGHT:

Fig. 5: Edward Hopper, late 1880s. Courtesy of The Arthayer R. Sanborn Hopper Collection Trust.

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Fig. 6: Edward Hopper (1882–1967), *Standing Nude*, 1902–1904. Oil on canvas, 22 $\frac{3}{16}$ x 15 $\frac{3}{16}$ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Josephine N. Hopper Bequest (70.1269). Photography by Robert E. Mates. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.



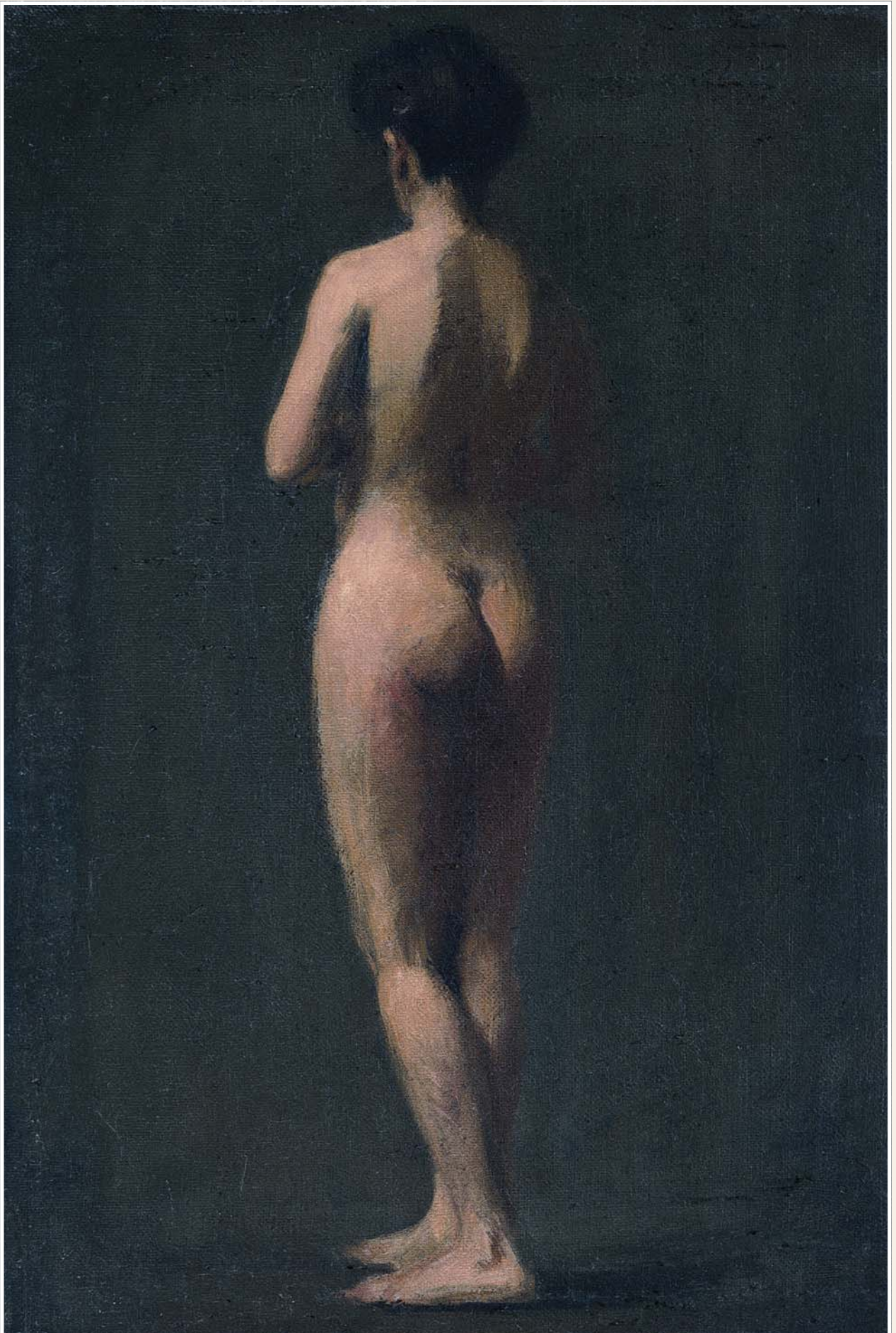




Fig. 7: Edward Hopper (1882-1967), *Self-Portrait*, 1903-1906. Oil on canvas, 25¹⁵/₁₆ x 22 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Josephine N. Hopper Bequest (70.1253). ©Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art. Photography by Sheldon C. Collins.

constant throughout his oeuvre. He recorded the boats and boat landings on the Seine in Paris, the dories in Ogunquit, Maine, and the trawlers in Gloucester, and the yachts off Cape Cod in Massachusetts.

Hopper was so enamored of ships and their workings that he considered becoming a naval architect⁴ and, like the sea, the built environment remained an abiding preoccupation. The kind of architecture that Hopper liked to chronicle in his work were low-rise vernacular structures similar to those he had seen in turn-of-the-century Nyack and surrounding Rockland County, which was rich in Dutch, Federal, Greek Revival, Carpenter Gothic, Queen Anne, and Italianate buildings. Hopper equated these eclectic buildings with integrity and authenticity. What he wrote about the work of his friend and contemporary Charles Burchfield (1893–1967) applies also to his own work: “Our native architecture, with its hideous beauty, its fantastic roofs, pseudo-Gothic, French Mansard, Colonial, mongrel or what not, with eye-searing color or delicate harmonies of faded paint, shouldering one another along interminable streets... these appear again and again, as they should in any honest delineation of the American scene.”⁵

The Hopper family house was a simple rectangular design, with a peaked roof, fretwork, and sharp angles that made for strong reflections of light. Hopper noticed at an early age the way that light fell on this façade and on the neighboring houses. “As a child I felt that the light on the upper part of a house was different than on the lower part,” he later recalled. “There is a sort of elation about sunlight on the upper part of a house... Light... is a natural expression for me.”⁶ Hopper selected some of his compositions for the way light hit a building, as titles like *Sun on Prospect Street*, *Sun in an Empty Room*, and *Sunlight in a Cafeteria* denote. In 1939 Hopper was unhappy that he had agreed to paint a portrait of “Pretty Penny,” the Nyack residence of the actress Helen Hayes and her husband, playwright Charles MacArthur. The couple thought that their imposing mansion would be a perfect commission for Hopper. But the artist complained that “[t]here’s no light and there’s no air that I can find for that house.”⁷

Hopper’s parents let their son study art, provided that he specialize in illustration as a way to make a living. After graduating from Nyack High School in 1899, Hopper enrolled in a commercial art school in New York City. After about a year, he matriculated to the New York School of Art, where he initially continued with illustration. But he transferred to the painting curriculum in order to learn from some of the most influential teachers of the day, including William Merritt Chase (1849–1916) and Robert Henri (1865–1929), both then at the forefront of progressive American

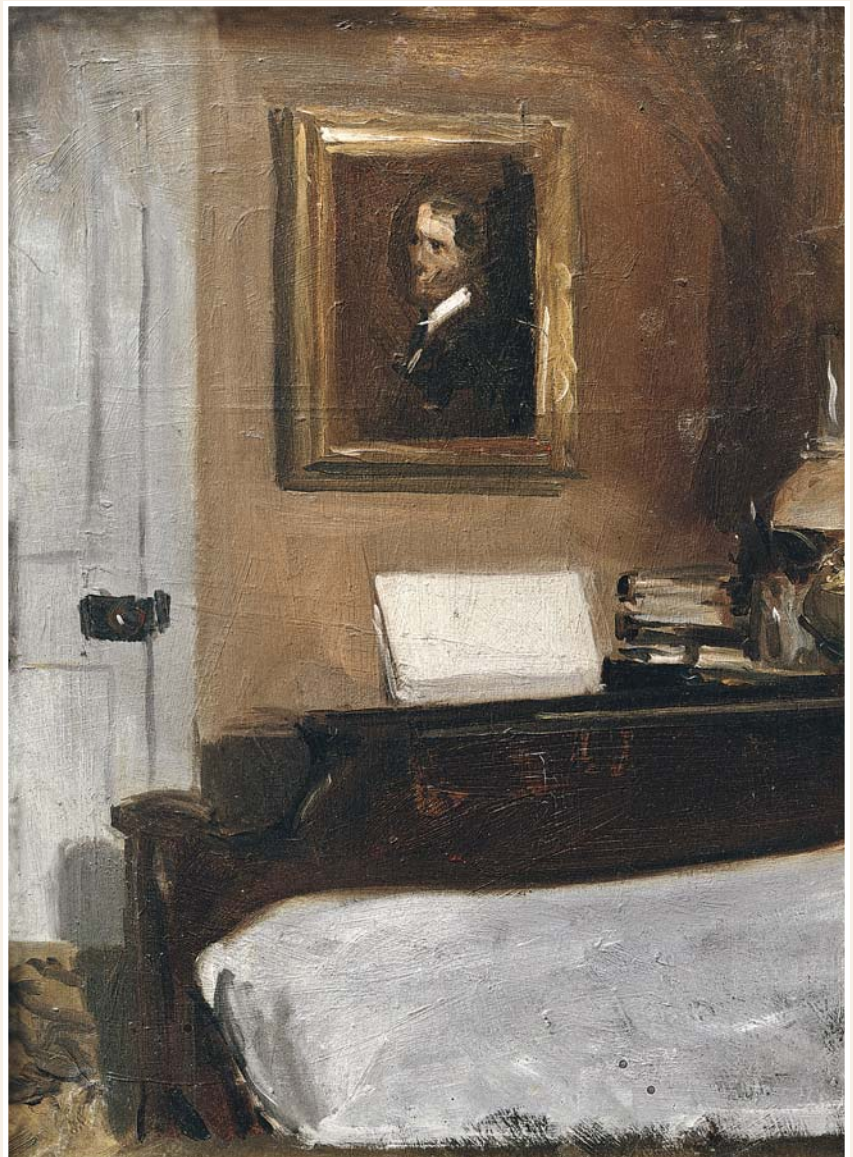


Fig. 8: Edward Hopper (1882–1967), *Artist's Bedroom, Nyack*, ca. 1905–1906. Oil on composition board, 15 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{16}$ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Josephine N. Hopper Bequest (70.1412). ©Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art. Photography by Jerry L. Thompson.

painting. (Kenneth Hayes Miller, another instructor Hopper had, did not become better known until years later.) Chase and Henri were inspired by Frans Hals, Diego Velázquez, and Impressionism as exemplified by Edouard Manet, but Chase was more conservative than Henri in defining what constituted suitable sources for art. Henri encouraged his students to forgo tired academic formulas and choose the grittier parts of American cities as subjects.

Many of Hopper’s surviving paintings from this period are assignments from his classes. In *Standing Nude* (Fig. 6) he showcases his preoccupation with light and the way it falls on the model’s flesh. Hopper was also painting portraits of models, friends, and himself for school critiques. The self-portrait here (Fig. 7), signed, “E. HOPPER,



Fig. 9: Edward Hopper (1882–1967), *Park Benches and Trees*, 1907. Oil on wood, 9¾ x 13 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Josephine N. Hopper Bequest (70.1300). Photography by Sheldon C. Collins. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.


NYACK, N.Y.” on the back, shows that he is following Henri’s injunction to use large brushes. Emulating Manet and Henri, Hopper restricts his palette, eliminates half tones, and downplays modeling. Hopper thought enough of this image to give it a central place on the wall seen in *Artist’s Bedroom, Nyack* (Fig. 8), a painting of his bedroom in the family house. Even within this small compass, Hopper demonstrates his gift for creating convincing three-dimensional pictorials.

Eager to absorb the glories of Western European art and architecture, and with money from his parents, Hopper left for Europe in autumn 1906. He lived in Paris until June 1907, and traveled to London, Amsterdam, Berlin, and Brussels before returning home in August 1907.⁸ In Paris, he jettisoned the limited chromatic schemes he adhered to in art school (Fig. 9). Black no longer dominates, the color is bright and bold, the flurries of brushstrokes are agitated, and the surface pigment looks wet. These stylistic experiments with Impressionism were temporary, but they were nonetheless valuable

to Hopper as he worked his way toward a personal vision.

Hopper’s next interlude in Paris lasted from March to July 1909, and after he returned to Nyack he painted *Summer Interior* (Fig. 10). It is his first important treatment of a nude in an interior, a theme that would beguile him for decades to come. Unlike the standing nude he executed as an academic study, this female figure is not so much nude as daringly naked. She sits on a bedsheet that trails onto the floor, her slump suggesting the aftermath of a sexual encounter. The canvas announces Hopper’s inimitable approach to narrative: he freeze-frames a small drama of an interrupted or unconsummated personal transaction that promises an escalation of emotional tension. Equally characteristic is the patch of raking light that defines forms and intensifies their isolation from each other. The paint simulating this light is thickly applied. Light—intangible, ephemeral, shimmering—is transmuted into something solid in Hopper’s hands.

At age twenty-eight, Hopper established a studio in New York and

took steps to transform the world around him, but Nyack remained part of the world permanently within him, integral to the creation of his personal form and original manner. 

Edward Hopper, Prelude: The Nyack Years is on view at the Edward Hopper House Art Center, Nyack, New York from May 21 to July 17, 2011. For information call 845.358.0774 or visit www.edwardhopperhouse.org.

Avis Berman, a writer and art historian, is the author of *Edward Hopper's New York* (2005). This article is adapted from her catalogue essay for *Edward Hopper, Prelude: The Nyack Years* (2011).

1. The Goethe quotation was Hopper's favorite one, and he kept a copy in his wallet. See Brian O'Doherty, *American Masters: The Voice and the Myth in Modern Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1982), 10.
2. "Edward Hopper Objects," *The Art of Today* 6 (February 1935): 11.
3. The dates of these works are drawn from Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*, vols. 2 and 3 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with W. W. Norton, 1995).
4. Edward Hopper, interview with Arlene Jacobowitz for the Brooklyn Museum, 1966, p. 11, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
5. Edward Hopper, "Charles Burchfield: American," *The Arts* 14 (July 1928): 7.
6. Quoted in Katharine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Modern Artists* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 140.
7. Quoted in Levin, *Edward Hopper*, vol. 3, 268. The painting is now in the collection of the Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Mass., a gift of Helen Hayes.
8. Carol Troyen, et al., *Edward Hopper* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2007), 240.



Fig. 10: Edward Hopper (1882–1967), *Summer Interior*, 1909. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29 inches. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Josephine N. Hopper Bequest (70.1197). ©Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art. Photography by Robert E. Mates.