

IN 1964, WHEN JOAN AND I MOVED INTO OUR NEW summer studio in Truro, we realized that from our high ground we could see the Edward Hopper house on a ridge across the tiny Pamet River. And since the Outer Cape—Wellfleet, Truro, and Provincetown—is a rather small area, we found ourselves passing Hopper from time to time on the area's winding, narrow roads. He drove an old, bulbous Pontiac or Buick or the like, and sat hunched over the wheel with his gaze fixed rigidly straight ahead. He was truly a terrible driver, and a number of friends of mine told stories about how they almost ended a major chapter in American art, narrowly averting a head-on collision when the elderly artist wandered into their lane.

Hopper was enormously tall—about six-foot-five—but so sadly bent over that when he sat at the wheel of his old car he was shaped like the letter "C." He favored clothes that were several decades out of style, and often wore the kind of sharp, wide-brimmed hat favored by Dick Tracy, the Crime Fighter. I very much admired Hopper's art but was well aware of his hermetic nature; even though we were nearly neighbors and in the same profession, speaking to him seemed to be completely out of the question.

My feeling about his work is that his paintings range from overly stiff, near-illustrations to some of the most powerful and evocative images in all of American art. Like the films *Citizen Kane* and even *Casablanca*, Hopper's "Nighthawks," "Gas," and "New York Movie," three of his finest paintings, have become icons of both high and popular culture. (Can the pensive couple seated at the counter in "Nighthawks" be Rick and Ilsa, having made it safely to New York in another life?) In general, though, I tend to prefer Hopper's watercolors to his oils, and am particularly drawn to some of his early depictions of city rooftops with their forests of personalized chimney-pipes, his images of lighthouses, some of which have their windowed domes perversely cropped by the edge of the paper, and, of course, his renderings of old Victorian structures moldering proudly in the sunlight.

His paintings focused on male and female figures are often less successful, as if his cool architectural poetry tolerated the intrusion of warm, living, human beings only with reluctance. One can no more picture a Hopper painting of a cherubic baby or a pair of young lovers than one can imagine a Renoir crucifixion.

And yet there is an odd undercurrent of repressed eroticism in Hopper, stated most blatantly in his depiction of a big-breasted stripper strutting her stuff on a burlesque stage, pasties, red hair and all. More typical, however, is the sense

of a not-quite accidental voyeuristic moment: a naked woman in an unfastened blue bathrobe, standing in the doorway of a distant house; the thighs and hindquarters of a partially-clad female apartment-dweller bending over just inside an open window; a pensive young woman in a slip, waiting, wistful and alone, on a flat, featureless hotel room bed. And for someone ostensibly so interested in sunlight, an unusually large number of Hopper's tableaux take place at night. It's enough to make me wonder if he might not have taken some of those reckless drives on the backroads of Truro in the hope of coming upon just such distant erotic enticements.

Or, put another way, I can easily imagine the aging, hermetic painter working in his studio on yet another weathered Victorian cottage, laying in the gingerbread around the entrance . . . and then at the last minute allowing his fantasy to place an alluring blonde in her gaping housecoat right at the front door, gazing out towards the viewer—in this case, the artist himself.

When Joan and I first got together, she told me a story about Edward Hopper. It needs a little background in the telling, but it is both amusing and absolutely on target. Hopper was not, shall we say, a generous man, as her recollection attests. The Puritan austerity that has come to be seen—only partially correctly—as the hallmark of Hopper's work, included a very real and unattractive miserliness. When he died, workmen renovating his Truro house found an attic full of bundles of old newspapers, boxes of empty but washed-out Listerine bottles, work shirts bought in the 1940s but never worn, and so on, all being saved, one presumes, against a rainy day when they might come in handy. And whenever he dined out at a local cafe, as he often did since his wife hated to cook, chicken à la king was his regular choice. Probably because, as a one-time patron there once told me, it was the cheapest thing on the card.

My wife was a little girl during World War II when she sometimes stayed in Truro with a family named Beal in a rented house quite close to Hopper's. One day, Joan told me, she and the Beal's daughter ("my-girlfriend-Linda," I always pictured hyphens whenever Joan said the name) planned to draw and color and then cut out some paperdolls. Unfortunately, however, they had no paper. Town center was quite a walk away, and no one was willing to use the gas to drive them there just so that they could buy a sketch pad. But then "my-girlfriend-Linda" remembered that the old man at the top of the hill was an artist, and as such would surely have some paper to give them. They walked up the path to his place with trepidation, about to face the grouchy old codger who never talked to anyone.

They knocked on Hopper's kitchen door, and soon he answered, glowering down at them

from his impressive height. They stated their request: some paper so they could make some paper dolls. With more than a touch of anger in his voice he refused them. "The only paper I have is watercolor paper and it costs me 75 cents a sheet, and you can't have any." With that he closed the door and the interview was over.

In my sense of him, Joan's story is pure Hopper. Who could be less likely to have sympathy for a pair of little girls than a miserly, childless man, protective of his expensive paper, an artist who, for all I knew, had never drawn or painted a child in his life? But there is a sequel to the story.

Years later, at his huge and beautiful retrospective exhibition at The Whitney Museum, Joan and I approached Hopper to congratulate him on the show. As one after another of his admirers came up to shake his hand, he seemed to be almost smiling. We introduced ourselves, and I informed him that we lived in Truro at some distance from, but in sight of, his house. We exchanged some geographical information and a few conventional niceties, and then I found myself launching into Joan's story about the watercolor paper. I had honestly forgotten its distressing denouement, remembering only the name of the Beal family and the fact that the girls wanted to borrow some paper.

Hopper said he remembered the Beals. But with Joan melting with embarrassment and dread at my side, I continued with the story until suddenly, way down the tracks, I remembered its end. The situation called for an immediate alteration. "And so," I went on to the conclusion, "they knocked on your door and you came out, and when they asked for paper to make paper dolls, you said that all you had in the house was watercolor paper. And you gave them some." I stopped in relief, having lamely and the nick of time saved my own neck. Hopper's response was to frown down at me from his arched but Olympian height and say, "No, I never gave those little girls watercolor paper to make paperdolls." Worse, he said it as if he remembered the event, now some 20 years later. He knew that no little girls had ever gotten a 75-cent sheet of paper out of him.

This tight-fistedness affected, I assume, everything in Hopper's life. I once saw a study for one of his classic paintings, "Gas," which he'd drawn on the kind of cheap second-hand sheet that used to accompany packs of typewriter paper. On the back of this beautiful drawing was the carbon copy of a letter he'd written to the owner of—as I remember it—a Sunoco station in New Mexico. "Dear Sir," the letter opened, and I paraphrase from memory: "When I was recently motoring through your town I stopped at your place of business and purchased a tire gauge for 85 cents, plus tax. It has since proven to be defective. I am returning it under separate cover to the address on your receipt. I would appreciate a full refund, as well as repay-

ment for the cost of postage. Yours sincerely," followed by a place for his signature. He wasted nothing—neither a broken tire gauge, a worthless, throw-away piece of paper, nor even the available backside of a trivial business letter.

There's another Hopper sketch of a collie dog which was done on a piece of scratchpaper bearing the letterhead of the Truro library. Obviously he'd gone there to look up pictures of collies so that he would be able to include one, accurately drawn, in a painting he was working on. Then, rather than waste a sheet of his own for such a minor task, he naturally chose to use the library's free paper.

But despite his human failings, as an artist Edward Hopper was one of America's greatest. Though formidably talented and in many respects highly sophisticated, there was also about him a kind of wooden primitivism and naivete. Apparently he looked upon Picasso and Matisse with contempt, and was absolutely wedded to the idea that art must be stringently representational. Robert Motherwell once told me of being on a two-man painting jury with Hopper, who insisted on rejecting anything that did not adhere to his own rigid esthetic, and even tried to give the first prize to his wife, Jo, who painted exactly like him.

He seemed to have only a dim idea of the compositional inventiveness that underlies his best paintings, a subtle quality that gained him respect among the very abstract and modernist artists he chose to despise. Hopper's friend Lloyd Goodrich told me that during a slide lecture he once compared the structure of a Hopper painting with that of a dramatically simplified abstraction by Mondrian. When he told his friend of the striking similarities he'd found, Hopper responded testily: "You kill me."

I've always felt that some of Hopper's urban landscapes of the '30s and '40s recall Leger's masterful city paintings of around 1920, and an occasional work even suggests the powerful abstract-expressionist dark-and-light compositions of Franz Kline. God knows what Hopper would have thought about that. All he said he wanted to do, after all, was "to paint sunlight on the side of a house." We can be thankful he did so much more. ■

*Budd Hopkins, a painter and sculptor, was featured on the cover of Provincetown Arts in 1991, along with a dozen other artists who comprise Provincetown's artist-run cooperative Long Point Gallery. "Hopper" is a chapter in Hopkins's "ongoing autobiography," which joins his career as an artist with his avocation as a world-authority on UFO's. Hopper is America's artist of alienation and Hopkins is our poet of aliens. The date of Hopkins first UFO sighting on the Cape was the summer he moved near Hopper.*

