Edward Hopper. The name conjures up images of rooflines and water towers, red brick facades, lighted windows glimpsed at night, and lonely women in various states of undress, sitting on beds in hotel rooms and gazing at rooflines and water towers and red brick walls—urban images all. Send perspective flying northward from New York, à la Google Earth, and Hopper becomes synonymous with white lighthouses and billowing sails against the brilliant blue skies and seas of Maine, the undulating, softly colored dunes of Cape Cod, and the classically small-town houses and steeples of Gloucester, Massachusetts. And running in between are the roads, carrying the earthbound Hopper between city and country, linking the manmade streetscapes of Manhattan with the unpaved landscapes of New England. Railroads, macadam roads, asphalt roads, and dirt roads: running to the horizon or disappearing into the trees; shooting straight ahead, forked, or curving; lined with wireless telephone poles and fence posts; going somewhere that could be anywhere.

To me, the important thing is the sense of going on.
You know how beautiful things are when you’re traveling.

Edward Hopper, quoted in “Traveling Man,” Time, 1948

ONE
Edward Hopper
THE ANSWER IS IN THE PAINTINGS
Traveling on them is Edward Hopper, looking at this part of his world from behind the wheel or, stopping to make a sketch, from the back seat of the car. Looking, restlessly searching for places he wants to paint, with his wife, Josephine, by his side, both of them drawing and making notes, recording the places they like, places to stop at or return to another time.

And sometimes arriving at a place that he or they like so much that they decide to stay. Thus they found Vermont, exploring it on day trips at first, starting in 1927, crossing the Connecticut River from New Hampshire and driving west and north. At some point they discovered South Royalton and a farm that boarded tourists, and in the summers of 1937 and 1938 they settled in for a month’s vacation. For Hopper, “vacation” seems to have meant painting something different, taking a break from the studio-bound easel, canvas, and oils, being outdoors and painting en plein air. A change from the usual tempo of their lives, for Jo as well as for Edward. But for both of them, it meant sketching, drawing, painting, always recording, translating what was around them to paper.

As a consequence of these summer travels, Edward Hopper produced a number of distinct groups of works that are strongly characterized by place, and by a sense of place. His paintings of Vermont, numbering no more than twenty-five watercolors and a few drawings, are among the most distinctive of these regional works. With their differences in subject and style from the work that he produced in other times and other places, the Vermont works are hardly recognizable as being by Hopper. There are no monumental oil paintings, only watercolors and a few charcoal or pencil drawings. These images are completely uninhabited by human figures, as is true for the great majority of Hopper’s watercolors, wherever they were painted. In the case of the Vermont paintings, however, signs of human presence are minimized, if not completely obliterated. Architectural features are mostly absent, save for a few paintings of barns, one of a classic Vermont sugar house, and another of a steel bridge. Manmade intrusions are otherwise confined to traces of house rooftops, the tip of a church steeple, a road, and a railroad bridge, for the most part obscured by vegetation or distance.

The majority of Hopper’s Vermont watercolors and drawings are pure landscapes, or about as pure as Hopper ever got in painting outdoor scenes. These works focus exclusively on natural surroundings, the mountains,
meadows, hillsides, woods, and watercourses in the vicinity of Vermont’s White River Valley. They are quiet paintings, inviting contemplation but not narrative. The only story they tell is one about Hopper himself, revealing aspects of the painter and person that are not apparent in his work from other times, other places.

Nearly five decades since his death, Edward Hopper and his work continue to be the subject of exhibits, catalogs, books, articles both scholarly and popular, and recently, an opera and a play.¹ Both the man and his paintings consistently inspire fascination. Type in his name on Google or another Web search engine, and the hits rival those for Leonardo da Vinci, surely one of the most famous artists of all time. Yet despite the plethora of words written about him, Edward Hopper the man remains almost as much an enigma as the Mona Lisa, the object of endless speculation. Who was he, what did he really think, and what is the meaning behind this or that painting?

Hopper is seen by many as the quintessentially American artist, perhaps a more sophisticated and painterly version of Norman Rockwell, although without the warmth. Hopper’s pictures set off subliminal associations for many of us, eliciting flashes of scenes glimpsed from moving cars and trains in which we are observer rather than participant, scenes that leave us wondering about the person viewed momentarily through an unshaded window or while passing by a restaurant or cafe on a city street, or that evoke memories of vacations on the coast in Maine or Cape Cod, with the monumental lighthouses and the sailboats, the blues and whites of sunny summer days. Some of Hopper’s pictures, such as the late-night diner scene in Nighthawks or the sunlit and shadowed line of red brick facades in Early Sunday Morning, are so ubiquitous on calendars and refrigerator magnets that they have become absorbed into our universal subconscious as Americans—so much so that we experience real places through the filter of the remembered paintings, in a turnabout that seems like life mimicking art.

And yet it is not just Americans who respond to Hopper. In 2010, exhibits of his work in Italy and Switzerland² attracted crowds and long lines, with posters from the Fondazione Roma Museo showing people from all walks of life, including monks, holding a copy of Second Story Sunlight and declaring
that Hopper is their favorite artist (“L’Artista Preferito Di Alessia?” “L’Artista Preferito Di Fra Francesco e Fra Mario?” “Edward Hopper!”). Transcultural takes on Hopper include the Italian novelist Aldo Nove’s Si parla non troppo di silenzio, an imaginary encounter between Edward Hopper and the writer Raymond Carver, in which Hopper remains a man of few words even while speaking Italian. To some, taking the stance that “all art is local,” the Hoppers in Italy are still just Americans traveling abroad: “Edward Hopper’s work, like all good art, remains local on some crucial level. . . . It’s about projection, in other words, which all good art provokes, whether by Sargent, Zille, Moore or Hopper, whose laconic and merciless drawings can, seen by a New Yorker passing through Rome, have a kind of Proustian eloquence.” Perhaps the Italians, the English, the Swiss, and others who’ve been taken by storm by an exhibit of Hopper’s paintings have associations not so much from life but from American movies, where cinematography was influenced by Hopper, just as he may have drawn imagery in turn from films.

“Hopper is hot,” as one recent writer claimed, and so far he shows no signs of cooling down. Yet Hopper himself, by some accounts, was an emotionally cold man. His wife certainly thought so. She exposed this side of her husband’s nature to the world through her letters and, after her death, her diaries, quoted in detail in Gail Levin’s Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography, which reveals things about Edward Hopper that some of us would rather not know. Despite Jo’s many highly detailed exposés of her husband’s persona and behavior, however, even to her the man was a puzzle, a silent wall that she could not penetrate, intermittently driving her wild with frustration. Endlessly loquacious, she often felt she was talking to herself: “Sometimes talking with Eddie is just like dropping a stone in a well, except that it doesn’t thump when it hits bottom.”

Hopper wrote and said so little about himself that we are always obliged to guess, leaving room for perpetual interpretation. He has a blank-slate quality for which art historians should be grateful: there will always be room for another book. When Hopper did say something about himself and his work, he could be at the same time eloquent and laconic, precise yet broadly general, succinct but complex, answering questions by opening doors to yet other possibilities. In interviews, such as the one from 1962 that Brian O’Doherty included in his 1980 film, Hopper’s Silence, Hopper prefaces many answers
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with a slight sigh and an “I don’t know . . . ,” gazing off into space before uttering a five- or six-word response, then trailing off into verbal ellipses until the next question. O’Doherty, a sculptor and writer who came to know the Hoppers well during the 1960s, wrote that Hopper “is an economical man, exactly fitting the word to the idea.” Doherty also commented on Hopper’s pessimism, saying that it was “so deep that you can easily get him to agree with you, thus stopping the conversation short of any illumination.”

Frederick Sweet, a former curator at the Brooklyn Museum who met Hopper in the 1930s (fig. 1.1), said that he “always looked like a very distinguished banker. . . . If you didn’t know who Edward Hopper was and just saw him at a distance, you’d never think he was one of the greatest American painters.” O’Doherty wrote a more complete physical description of Hopper: “He was very tall, stooped, slow-moving, deliberate. Though patient and stoic, he was always observant and quick-witted. He was courteous and well-dressed. . . . His gestures were few. He rarely crossed his legs when he sat down, perhaps because they were so long. He clasped his hands on his lap. . . . Sometimes the forefinger [of his right hand] would hover in front of his lips in the gesture that indicates silence. . . . He was sensual, puritanical, highly principled, direct, honest, generous, and he kept his word.”

“I’m trying to paint myself,” Hopper famously said, a circular statement for a man who ultimately was so unknowable. What was said by those who knew him just muddies the water even more, leading to more head scratching among those who try to figure him out. Helen Hayes, whom he admired on the stage, found him to be irascible when she commissioned him to paint a portrait of her house, “Pretty Penny”: “I guess I had never met a more misanthropic, grumpy, grouchy individual in all my life, and as a performer I just shriveled under the heat of this disapproval. . . . Really, I was utterly unnerved by this man.”

Jo Hopper, though devoted to her husband, portrayed him as a rather miserable man, withdrawn, ungiving, and sometimes cruel. Conversely, the collector and gallery owner Lawrence Fleischman, who met Hopper for the first time in 1950, wrote in the introduction to an exhibit catalog that Hopper “was always a friendly and supportive person. . . . He always had an unselfish and encouraging word to offer his friends.” In an earlier interview, Fleischman gave what is perhaps a more candid assessment: “I had
many discussions with Edward Hopper. He was a very lonely man. He was a great admirer of Thomas Eakins and talked a lot about him. Always there was a loneliness about him. He was very sweet, very gentle, and very deep.”

When the art critic and curator Katherine Kuh asked Hopper whether he agreed with the critics who saw loneliness and nostalgia as themes in his work, Hopper responded emphatically: “If they are [themes], it isn’t at all conscious. I probably am a lonely one. As for nostalgia, that isn’t conscious either. People find something in your work, put it into words, and then it goes
Similarly, Hopper told O’Doherty that he felt “The loneliness thing is overdone. It formulates something you don’t want formulated.” In the filmed interview shown in Hopper’s Silence, when O’Doherty asked about the psychological elements in Hopper’s work, mentioning “isolation, modern man, manmade environment,” Hopper replied: “Those are the words of critics, and I can’t always agree with what the critics say, you know. It may be true; it may not be true. It’s how—partly how the viewer looks on the pictures, what he sees in them, what they really are.”

Hopper always bristled when characterized as a painter of the “American scene,” a classification that was applied to many of his colleagues who depicted vernacular subjects in the 1920s and 1930s. He thought that some of these artists “caricatured America.” He also wanted nothing to do with the federally supported art programs of the New Deal during the Great Depression. He was staunchly Republican and anti-Roosevelt, uninterested in using his work to communicate any socially relevant message. In essence, he consistently rejected attempts to tie intention, narrative, theme, or meaning to his work.

In 1933, in an introduction to the catalog for the Edward Hopper Retrospective Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Hopper’s friend and fellow artist Charles Burchfield wrote a straightforward assessment of his work, excerpted here with respect to his landscapes: “Hopper’s viewpoint is essentially classic; he presents his subjects without sentiment, or propaganda, or theatrics. He is the pure painter, interested in his material for its own sake, and in the explication of his idea of form, color, and space division. . . . [I]n his landscapes there is an old primeval Earth feeling that bespeaks a strong emotion felt, even if held in abeyance.”

In his own “Notes on Painting” for the Museum of Modern Art, Hopper wrote that his “aim in painting has always been the most exact transcription possible of my most intimate impressions of nature.” This statement gains complexity if it is considered in conjunction with Hopper’s favorite quotation from Goethe, which he had written on a small piece of paper and carried in his wallet: “The beginning and the end of all [artistic] . . . activity is the reproduction of the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is in me.” Add to this another quote from Hopper himself: “The interior world
of any human being is a vast and varied world.” And a second quote, from another time: “The nucleus around which the artist’s intellect builds his work is himself: the central ego, personality, or whatever it may be called, and this changes little from birth to death. What he was once, he always is, with slight modifications.”

Words aside, it is Hopper’s paintings that have much to tell us about his interior world. Hopper himself said so, at the end of his interview with Kuh, who probed for explanations about Hopper’s intentions in painting: “The whole answer is there on the canvas. I don’t know how I could explain it any further.”

Perhaps we should be grateful for Hopper’s reticence. As one curator commented, assessing the works in a 1975 exhibit, it is “the things he never said that keep his work a constant surprise.”

A recent review in the New York Times commented on “the profound, still underappreciated vastness of [Hopper’s] seemingly single-minded art.” Hopper’s Vermont works are a part of his vast world—watercolor paintings and drawings of hillsides and meadows, roadside views, and scenes along the White River against the backdrop of the Green Mountains, pure landscapes with few traces of architectural form. Relatively unknown and underappreciated, they differ from Hopper’s other works in subject and mood and in the techniques he used to capture the distinctive colors and quality of light of the Vermont landscape.

Edward Hopper’s Vermont works reveal something more about this ever-elusive, silent man who found voice through his paintings. His going to Vermont and staying for a while, on a farm in a small town along a river, also tells us something about what Hopper was seeking in his constant traveling, his looking for places to paint—places that reflected some untraveled aspect of his own vast interior landscape.

As Hopper said: “I’m after me.”