Wilder’s paean summed up the qualities of the Vermont landscape that have attracted artists from the eighteenth century onward. Some, like the artists of the Hudson River School, came for brief sojourns, making trips into Vermont to sketch, camping out in the forests of the Green Mountains, and returning home to complete their grandly scaled oil paintings. Other artists paid longer visits, staying for months at a time and producing a season’s worth of watercolors and oils to show and sell in the galleries of New York City.

A resident of Woodstock, in central Vermont, Wilder had been trained at the New York Art Students League and the Brooklyn Art Guild, and thus he understood the attraction of Vermont for urban artists. He also knew that the state had to compete with the long-established art colonies of the New England coast—in Ogunquit and on Monhegan Island in Maine, and in Gloucester and Provincetown in Massachusetts—as well as with the other Woodstock, in New York State, closer and more accessible to Manhattan. Wilder wrote

Mountains and lakes are common attractions in many other states, but in Vermont there are certain charms in landscapes seldom found outside the Green Mountains. . . . Subjects for a painter—they are at every hand. While, in midsummer, many artists coming for the first time to Vermont find it difficult to grasp the best pictures, on account of the near-by hills in all localities; with familiarity this soon appeals to them to be the character of the landscape. Following the Connecticut river valley, one sees charming bits on every hand.


THREE

“Subjects for a Painter . . . at Every Hand”

(1928–36)
his article when Vermont was pulling out all the stops in an attempt to attract tourists and improve the state’s economy. An article adjacent to Wilder’s in the Vermont Review urged more aggressive exploitation of economic opportunities to capture the “vast urban market to the southward of north-country New England.” The writer issued a challenge: “Cannot the state shake off its long time lethargy . . . and jump into the contest to put Vermont products—perfect products perfectly packed and everlastingly marketed—well over on the great urban public?”

For Vermont, one of these products was the landscape, which was (and is) as much a commodity as maple syrup. An article in the New York Times in August 1927 about the “new industry” of tourism, as well as the appeal of the scenery to artists, noted: “New England is coming to believe firmly in the recreation industry because New England is firmly convinced that she has ‘the goods.’ . . . If the scenic aspects of New England often have been emphasized, not so much has been said about the response of the artists of the country and of the world to the attraction of this scenery.” Marketing the landscape to artists had the promise of a double payoff. As tourists, artists fed the economy directly. In turn, the artists made pictures of Vermont that they carried back to sell in the galleries of New York and other urban centers, and these images served to attract other tourists, who wanted to see the real places that had inspired the paintings.

Although Wilder and a number of other artists had settled in central Vermont, the state’s first arts organization, the Southern Vermont Artists, had been established some fifty miles to the south and west, in Manchester. This area was somewhat closer to New York City than Vermont’s Woodstock, and it was accessible by rail. The official history describes the Southern Vermont Artists as originating from a “simple plan hatched in Dorset, Vermont” in 1922 by a group of five painters, Edwin B. Child, Francis Dixon, Wallace W. Fahnestock, John Lillie, and Herbert Meyer, who organized an exhibition of their work in the Dorset Town Hall.

South Dorset was the home of the nation’s first commercial marble quarry, opened in 1785. The area was a major source of the stone for monumental buildings such as the New York Public Library, during the period in American history when the banks were still made of marble, to paraphrase the lyrics of a 1940s song. Throughout its history Dorset epitomized the best of a thriving Vermont economy: “Although marble was the jewel in the crown
of Dorset’s history, other industries flourished. There were sheep farms, dairies, cheese factories, saw and grist mills, apple orchards, iron foundries, maple sugaring and the Fenton Pottery kilns, which produced stoneware from 1800 to 1833." Additionally, by 1870, Dorset and nearby Arlington and Manchester had been discovered by tourists, who boarded at private homes and farms or stayed at one of the many historic inns, enjoyed the scenery, and played golf on one of the area’s legendary courses. Nature lovers and artists were attracted by the views, including that of Mount Equinox, at 3,800 feet the highest peak in the Taconic Mountains.

The so-called Dorset Painters included artists who had studied at the Art Students League in New York (Child, Fahnestock, Meyer) and in Europe (Dixon) and who initially came to Vermont in the summer; Child and Meyer eventually lived in Vermont year-round. One member of the group, Lillie, had been born in Dorset and remained there for his entire life, working as a farmer, mason, carpenter, and builder. Lillie and his wife boarded tourists in the summer, including landscape painters who asked his advice about where to find the best views: “The story goes that one day when all the artists were away from the farm, John [Lillie] found a smooth board and with a shaving brush and some house paint created his first work of art. He placed it [in the barn] among the other drying paintings and when it was discovered the next day, the visitors were lavish in their praise and enthusiasm.” Lillie’s work was later included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Corcoran Gallery, and the Carnegie Institute.

In August 1927, five years after its hatching, the “simple plan” of the Dorset Painters had evolved into an annual ten-day exhibition in Manchester of more than 100 paintings, drawing some 1,600 visitors from twenty-eight states and foreign countries. Thirty-nine artists were represented in the 1928 exhibition. “Landscapes predominated,” but all types of work were accepted by a jury that included the founders Lillie, Fahnestock, and Meyer, as well as Henry Schnakenberg and others.

Over 100 artists were represented in the 1932 exhibition, an indication of the size of the Southern Vermont Artists’ “colony,” which remained an informal association of amateurs and professionals connected by geographic proximity and love of the Vermont brand of New England scenery. Any artist who met the criterion of “living within a 50-mile radius of Manchester for
a part of the prior year” was assured of having at least one piece selected by the jury. No prizes were awarded. This and other rules intended to democratize eligibility and eliminate exclusivity are reminiscent of the principles underlying New York’s Whitney Studio Club, founded some years earlier.

From their inception, the Southern Vermont Artists’ exhibitions attracted the attention of New York critics, and the Manchester Journal noted that the shows were a valuable source of publicity for the area: “No feature of Vermont life, political or social, is awarded as much space in the metropolitan newspapers.” The exhibitions had a salutary effect on the local economy. In addition to the sales of artwork (which totaled $2,500 in 1932), the associated tourism provided welcome revenue to the inns and to farmers who boarded summer visitors to supplement their income during the Great Depression. Furthermore, by 1935, artists were buying property in the area so that they could reside within the fifty-mile radius required to qualify for the exhibition.

In 1928, the headline for an article by the New York Times critic Edward Alden Jewell proclaimed: “Another Local Exhibition Has Set the Whole Country-side Agog.” Jewell reported that during the previous summer, a farm woman had burst into tears when viewing this first large exhibit in Vermont:

All her life . . . this woman had vainly longed to attend an art exhibition, and now that the dream at last was realized, happy emotion proved too much. . . . Well, so the tale unfolds. All Manchester is on tiptoe with excitement; the surrounding countryside as well. For art has taken hold in Vermont. And that Vermont has plenty of talent, when it comes to producing instead of just appreciating, the crowded walls bear witness.

True, not all of the artists whose work appears in this year’s exhibition are local in the sense that the country at large knows nothing about them. But it is a genuinely local show in the sense that all of the work was done by Vermont artists or by artists who spend a part of each year here. You realize, in fact, without being told, the moment you enter the gallery, that this is a Vermont show; for in picture after picture the valleys and hills of the beautiful State reappear, transformed, it is true by individual imagination, but in spirit immediately recognizable.
So far as the landscapists are concerned, only native inability to express, or poverty of response, could excuse work of poor quality, did it exist; for the country all about Manchester, as does the country spreading and sunning itself so opulently throughout this Green Mountain region, speaks “with the tongue of angels.” Some one has said of Ghiberti’s marvelous bronze doors in Florence that they are worthy of being the gates of Paradise. These valleys and hills, domed by a sky so rich in its ceaseless change, might well be thought of as an approach to the gates.

By the 1930s, the connections between the New York art world and the Manchester-Arlington-Dorset area of Vermont were well established. Rockwell Kent, one of Hopper’s longtime colleagues in New York, lived in Arlington between 1919 and 1925. Juliana Force visited Kent there at least once, in 1923, and purchased his view of Mount Equinox, Winter for Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. Even after Kent left Vermont, Force returned to Manchester for summer visits, and by 1939 her association with the Southern Vermont Artists included “annual duty as bartender” at the fall show, according to the art historian Avis Berman. Royal Cortissoz, an art critic for the New York Herald, summered at the Equinox House in Manchester for more than twenty-five years.

The most significant link between the artists who frequented Vermont and the New York art world, however, was Robert G. McIntyre, vice president of the Macbeth Gallery in New York and a summer resident of Dorset. In 1934, when the Southern Vermont Artists became incorporated, McIntyre was elected president. He played an active role in organizing the Manchester exhibits in the summers, and in the fall and winter his gallery served as a New York venue for many of the same artists. Throughout the 1930s, the Macbeth Gallery featured the work of Vermont artists (Herbert Meyer, Aldro Hibbard, and Henry Holt) as well as New York artists who painted in Vermont (Henry Schnackenberg and Reginald Marsh) in exhibits such as the 1932 Paintings from the Summer Colonies and Vermont Watercolors by Henry Holt. These exhibits garnered favorable press not only for the artists but also for Vermont. For example, Art Digest called Holt’s show an “antidote to depression.”
The Macbeth shows and McIntyre’s work as a dealer and an interface with the Southern Vermont Artists also spurred acquisitions of the artists’ work, by both private collectors and museums. Between the Vermont artists’ 1933 and 1934 exhibits, the Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased three associated paintings for its permanent collection: *Winter*, by Herbert Meyer; *Still Life*, by Luigi Lucioni; and *The Old Factory*, by John Lillie.\(^{16}\)

The artists who exhibited in Manchester included colleagues and friends of the Hoppers, most prominently Schnakenberg, described in the *New York Times*’s review of the 1928 show as “expressing himself with his accustomed sureness in a series of water colors of which no single item is lovelier than the ‘Sunlit elm.’”\(^{17}\) As a boy, Schnakenberg had spent summers in Manchester with his family. He knew the Hoppers through the Whitney Studio Club, and in the summer of 1927, he was one of the colleagues whose work was exhibited in Charlestown, New Hampshire, at Maxstoke.\(^{18}\) Schnakenberg was also consistently active as a member of the Southern Vermont Artists, serving on the juries and hanging committees for the group’s annual exhibitions from the earliest years of the organization onward.

Reginald Marsh, who moved in the same Whitney and Rehn Galleries circles as the Hoppers, also had close connections to Vermont. In 1934 he married the artist Felicia Meyer, daughter of Herbert Meyer, one of the original Dorset Painters and founders of the Southern Vermont Artists, and thereafter the couple spent their summers in Dorset. Felicia Marsh and Jo Hopper became friends—intimately enough so that Jo named Felicia as a beneficiary in her will—yet there is no record that the Hoppers ever visited the Marshes in their Vermont home. Reginald Marsh actually claimed to dislike Vermont,\(^{19}\) so it is doubtful that he would have encouraged the Hoppers to visit.

Despite these relationships with the artists who frequented southern Vermont—or perhaps because of them—the Hoppers did not go to Manchester, Dorset, or Arlington during any of their trips to Vermont. It seems clear that Edward, at least, was not looking for the society of an artists’ colony, nor did he seem interested in the Vermont subjects that they painted. Idyllic views of cultivated farmland against the dramatic backdrops of Equinox, Ascutney, or Mansfield, Vermont’s highest mountains—as variously portrayed in the work of Kent, Schnakenberg, Lucioni, and others—may or may not have
won his admiration, but these were not the Vermont landscapes that Hopper sought to paint.

Between 1927 and 1935, Edward and Jo did not return to Vermont to paint. This was not for lack of money, at least during the early years of the Great Depression, when Hopper was experiencing solid success. His works sold well through 1931, and by that year he had paintings and etchings in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, the Phillips Memorial Gallery in Washington, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Chicago Art Institute, the Brooklyn Museum, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, Harvard University’s Fogg Museum in Cambridge, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and other U.S. museums, as well as in the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Hopper’s association with the art dealer Frank K. M. Rehn had begun in 1921, when Rehn took several prints of a Hopper etching on consignment for his three-year-old gallery. At that point Hopper’s major source of income was commercial illustration; in 1923 he earned $1,325 from this work and an additional $233.40 from sales of prints and two $25 prizes. In the fall of 1924, Rehn exhibited Hopper’s watercolors in a back room of his Fifth Avenue gallery. As noted in the previous chapter, the show sold out, and Hopper had to bring in additional watercolors to satisfy the demand, selling a total of sixteen at $100 apiece. From 1924 onward, Rehn sold Hopper’s works in all media—prints, watercolors, and, increasingly, oils.

The 1924 show at the Rehn Galleries was Hopper’s first significant success, boosting his income so that he could give up the illustration work that he detested. With more time and, presumably, the incentive provided by sales, Hopper showed a burst of activity, producing between fourteen and twenty-eight watercolors each year between 1924 and 1930, while at the same time increasing his output of oils. In 1928 he sold thirteen watercolors and five oils; his income, including sales of prints, totaled $8,486.

This flush of prosperity had come to Hopper, oddly enough, immediately after the 1929 stock market crash. By the mid-1930s, however, the Hoppers were beginning to feel the effects of the Great Depression. Unlike other artists in those times, including some of his friends, Hopper had no interest...
in working through any of the government-sponsored arts programs of the New Deal, painting murals or making other public art. According to Levin, he believed that “government funding would merely encourage artistic mediocrity and he condemned Roosevelt and all his works.”

Childless and reasonably abstemious, the Hoppers were able to adhere to such principles while making do on the modest, and somewhat irregular, income from sales of Edward’s works. Having reached middle age before achieving success, they had well-established habits of frugality, remaining in their fourth floor walk-up abode on Washington Square and maintaining the relatively austere lifestyle to which they were both accustomed.

Throughout these years, Hopper struggled increasingly to find material that he wanted to paint. His summer expeditions with Jo, first from New York and later from South Truro, Massachusetts, were largely the result of his need to find scenes and subjects that caught his interest and attention. Both Hoppers liked to travel, although Jo’s letters indicate that she derived more enjoyment from the touristic aspects of their trips, while Edward continually and restlessly sought new sources of inspiration for paper and canvas. This is what led him to cross the Connecticut River into Vermont in 1927, and after these initial excursions, Vermont remained in his mind as a place with unexploited potential for painting.

In 1928 the Hoppers had returned to Gloucester, Massachusetts, where Hopper did a dozen or so watercolors. Leaving Gloucester, the Hoppers went to Ogunquit, Maine, to visit their friends Clarence Chatterton and his wife, Annette. “Chat” found that Hopper “was quite depressed because it was the middle of summer and he hadn’t done anything.” In a later interview, Chat recalled Hopper’s report of riding around in the car with Jo, stopping at place after place, but to no avail; he could not find anything of interest to him or that was “right” for a painting.

In the summer of 1929, the Hoppers drove to Charleston, South Carolina, which was experiencing a renaissance during the 1920s and attracting writers and artists. There Hopper painted eleven watercolors, delivering them to Rehn in New York before taking off again for Massachusetts and Maine, ending up at Cape Elizabeth. The following summer, the Hoppers visited their friend and collector Edward Root and his wife, Grace, in Clinton, New York. From there, the Hoppers went to Truro, Massachusetts, near Provincetown.
and Wellfleet but much less populated, which suited Edward. They rented a cottage, and Hopper proceeded to paint watercolors of his immediate surroundings. They returned to South Truro in the summers of 1931 and 1932.

In 1933 the Hoppers’ financial situation was unexpectedly alleviated, when Jo received an inheritance from an uncle. This windfall inspired another type of quest, to find a place to build a summer home, a place that both Edward and Jo liked, and where Edward felt he could paint. The inheritance may also have allowed them to buy a new car; at some point during the 1930s they turned in the Dodge for a 1929 Buick.26 Their trip that summer began with a return to Charlestown, New Hampshire, where they stayed again with Katherine Budd, now Mrs. Proctor. Although Katherine and William H. Proctor had married before 1930, apparently the Hoppers were meeting him for the first time, which indicates that they had not been to New Hampshire for a number of years.27

Some eleven years older than Katherine, William Proctor was, like her, widowed and a native Vermonter. He was a president and stockholder in one of Brattleboro’s major industries, Hooker, Courser & Mitchell Co.—a manufacturer of overalls and work garments that employed several hundred people. Although clearly a man of means, Proctor seems to have been a down-to-earth Vermonter. A letter from Jo to Katherine on June 24, 1933, suggests that the two men had felt an affinity for one another during the visit. Anticipating that the Proctors might come to New York to see Edward’s retrospective exhibit that fall, Jo wrote: “No fear Mr. P won’t fancy it. There is no flapdoodle about either of them, praise be!” Jo also presented the case for shared traditional values, perhaps making a pitch for the two men, Yankee and New Yorker, to become friends: “The art of E. Hopper is so fundamental in its character, its [sic] like Abr. Lincoln or G. Washington—for best American tradition. There is honesty, simplicity. . . . Reality seen clearly & given its dignity. A God-fearing quality.”28

After staying only one night in Charlestown, the Hoppers drove on to Quebec. It is possible that they passed through Vermont on this trip. Two pages in Jo’s sketchbook, undated, record a trip “traveling N.W” from Massachusetts to New Hampshire and then on from Charlestown through Windsor, Vermont.29 Jo’s scribbled notes afford glimpses through the windows of the Hoppers’ Buick, a record of what caught their eyes as tourists and artists driv-
ing along Route 12. In “Keane,” Jo’s misspelling of Keene, New Hampshire, she jotted down “grey mansard house—big—avenue of Elms on R. side of road—seen before, passing—from opposite gas station—tower facade—iron railing on top,” and just beyond Walpole, “before crossing Conn. [the Connecticut River] at Charlestown—Big red brick house with tall 2 story white columns.” On the facing page of the sketchbook, she wrote, “Barns—opposite my tree—on road to Winsor [Windsor, Vermont]—not far after crossing bridge at Charlestown—other side of old [?] water color with horse [?]”.

Jo’s handwriting here is difficult to decipher, but if my transcription is correct, she may have been referring to Edward’s 1927 watercolor *Horse and Vermont Barn*, which she described thirty years later as being painted “near Bellows Falls,” some twenty-five miles to the south of Windsor (see chapter 6). Jo’s references to “my tree” and to the mansard house being “seen before” indicate that this was not the first time that the Hoppers had followed this route through Windsor. Elsewhere in the sketchbook, a drawing of a pointed and faceted steeple extends horizontally across two pages. Labeled simply “Windsor,” this sketch may have been made on another trip through this part of Vermont.

In Hartland, Vermont, Jo noted “village green with little soldier monument” (a Civil War Memorial), and drew a sketch of an “old house—yellow . . . hill in back—road and trees other side.” As a Civil War buff, Edward would have been interested in the monument on the village green. Significantly, however, Jo made no notes about the area’s most important historic feature, the Cornish-Windsor Bridge, a 450-foot span across the Connecticut River, the longest covered bridge in the United States. Hopper did not sketch or paint this structure—or any other covered bridges, for that matter, despite their prevalence in Vermont—which underscores his avoidance of the standard subjects of Vermont iconography. Typically, he did not choose to paint the expectable or repeat what other Vermont artists had already done.

Driving north to Canada, the Hoppers stayed in Quebec City for two nights and then drove north along the St. Lawrence River. Their time in Canada was enjoyable, but Edward found nothing to paint, and they returned to Cape Cod via Portland, Maine, and Gloucester and Boston, Massachusetts. Again established in a rental cottage in Truro, the Hoppers decided that the time had come to build their own home and studio, where Hopper
could paint both outside—en plein air—and inside, when the weather was bad. They bought a piece of land in October 1933, thus putting down roots for the remaining summers of their lives.\textsuperscript{31}

In New York during the winter of 1934, Edward himself drew up the plans for the house, and in the spring he and Jo hired a contractor and began construction, renting the Jenness house in South Truro until July, when the house was finished and ready to occupy. The new house kept both Hoppers busy and distracted for most of the summer, although they appear relaxed and happy in a snapshot taken in August by a friend, Davenport West (see fig. 2.1).\textsuperscript{32} It was not until September that Edward finally began to produce paintings other than of the Jenness house. Four out of five of his watercolors from the fall of 1934—\textit{Hill and Cow}, \textit{Pamet River Road}, \textit{Forked Road}, and \textit{Longnook Valley}—are Cape Cod scenes, but they are portents of the subjects that Hopper later gravitated toward in Vermont.\textsuperscript{33}

The following spring, Hopper pursued another subject that would be reflected in a subsequent Vermont painting. In March he began making sketches of the Macomb’s Dam Bridge, which crosses the Harlem River at 155th Street in Manhattan. The painting, \textit{Macomb’s Dam Bridge}, now in the Brooklyn Museum, is a large oil on canvas, measuring 35 by 60 3/16 inches. Hopper finished it on April 14, 1935, and delivered it to the Rehn Galleries the following week. Jo’s description in the record book focused on the sky, water, weather (“a grey day, no sun”), and colors (“picture fairly colorful because of expanse of blue water”), concluding that it was a “lovely big blue picture.” Hopper’s own notes recorded technical details: “Zinc white, Rembrandt colors, poppy oil.”\textsuperscript{34} Neither commented on the structure of the bridge, yet this must have been what attracted Hopper in the first place: the strong geometric shapes of the steel trusses framing glimpses of sky and buildings. The open forms are echoed by the solid forms of the concrete piers anchoring the bridge, some in shadow, and lighter areas of grassy banks are seen in the interstices. The roadbed slices neatly through the center of the picture, carrying the eye from one side of the river to the other, Manhattan to the Bronx, but there are no vehicles or pedestrians on the bridge, surely the only unrealistic aspect of this painting.

In June the Hoppers traveled to their new home in South Truro. Inspired by their view of the bay, Hopper painted two pictures with sailboats, a wa-
tercolor, *Yawl Riding a Swell*, and an oil, *The Long Leg*. Drives to Wellfleet and Eastham yielded *House with Big Pine*, again a predictor of the kind of scene that would attract Hopper in Vermont.

By September 1935, Hopper was restless to find new places to paint. He had written to Frank Rehn in August, having just received a letter and entry blank from the Carnegie Institute for its fall exhibit, and he asked Rehn to “fill in the price and insurance for the ‘Macomb’s Dam Bridge,’ which I shall send as I have nothing here that’s worth sending.” He noted: “I am leaving the price to your best judgment. Whatever you decide is alright [sic] with me.” And he went on: “I’ve not had much luck so far with the work this summer. We may go to Vermont in the autumn to see what I can do there.”

Intention turned to action, and the Hoppers did indeed drive to Vermont. On the eve of their departure, Jo wrote to Edward’s sister, Marion, indicating that Edward felt he had already painted everything on the Cape.

**Sept. 10, 1935—Sun Night**

> We’re leaving screech of dawn for Vermont—somewhere—to look for a canvas. E hasn’t been able to do a thing here—has done it all already—needs new pasture for a while. So, here we go—me adhering to a can of corned beef, jar of jam, cheese, bread, . . . and hard boiled eggs, not to mention, salt, sugar, postum, etc. to keep expenses down. We’ll come back here.

> . . . E well (and fat) but worried about his work. Will let you know if we settle somewhere.

> With much love—Jo

Jo’s dated list of “where bouts” in the Ledger Book record that they reached East Montpelier, which is more than 300 miles from South Truro. Given the distance, this trip must have involved an overnight stay. It is possible that either coming or going, the Hoppers stayed with the Proctors in Charlestown, New Hampshire, a drive of about an hour and a half from East Montpelier. From Charlestown they could have driven along the Connecticut River to White River Junction, then taken Route 14 through the White River Valley, allowing time for sketching and painting before heading back. Alternatively, they might have driven from Charlestown to Woodstock, Ver-
mont, and from there to Montpelier via Route 12. Or they may have driven first to East Montpelier and then headed south, returning to Massachusetts after an overnight stop in Charlestown. Any of these routes would have favored further exploration of Vermont.

The Hoppers may have wanted to visit Montpelier, situated in the valley of the Winooski River. With the gilded dome of its State House gleaming against the backdrop of dark-green hills, Montpelier was touted as one of the most beautiful state capitals in the country. A further lure for the Hoppers might have been the Wood Art Gallery on State Street, the only art museum in central Vermont. The legacy of the Vermont artist Thomas Waterman Wood (1823–1903), the gallery housed Wood’s own works, including genre paintings such as The Drunkard, which the Hoppers may have seen when it was shown at the Whitney just a few months earlier. By the mid-1930s, the Wood’s collection had been augmented by the work of Hopper’s Vermont contemporaries, including John Lillie, Henry Schnakenberg, Luigi Lucioni, and Herbert Meyer, and Hopper may have been curious to see their work exhibited in a Vermont venue.

Continuing for just a few miles on Route 12 along the Winooski River, the Hoppers would have reached East Montpelier, the destination Jo recorded in the Ledger Book, and thence to the site of the single watercolor that can be tied to this expedition to Vermont in the fall of 1935. This is a painting of a steel truss bridge, a subject that resonates with Hopper’s oil of Macomb’s Dam Bridge, done just six months earlier. Signed by Hopper but never sold, this bridge watercolor was still in his studio when he died and thus was part of the Josephine N. Hopper Bequest to the Whitney Museum. There it was catalogued, tentatively dated as circa 1934–38, and assigned the provisional title of Country Bridge (plate 6).

Bridges had been a consistent subject for Hopper, from oils painted along the Seine in Paris in 1906 and 1909, to both oils and watercolors of bridges and their approaches in New York, including the Queensborough, Williamsburg, and Manhattan Bridges. In Cape Cod Hopper had painted a simple wooden bridge in Wellfleet, and a steel platform bridge, possibly a railroad bridge, across a dam.

The steel truss bridge in Country Bridge is most likely Washington County’s Three Mile Bridge, which crosses the Winooski River between the towns
of Berlin and Middlesex. This is a Parker through truss bridge, similar to many such structures in Vermont and New England, but in this case distinguished by the small, arched pony truss at the approach.

Robert McCullough, an authority on Vermont bridges and their history, examined a reproduction of Hopper’s watercolor. He agrees that the bridge that Hopper painted is probably Three Mile Bridge in Berlin, as shown in a 1928 photograph from the collection of the Vermont Agency of Transportation (fig. 3.1). The photograph is taken from a different perspective than Hopper’s, but the match nevertheless seems clear, even down to the tree trunk on the left side of the painting, near the front edge of the pony truss on the left side of the bridge.

In the early 1900s there was a covered bridge at the Three Mile location, although it is unclear whether this was still standing at the time of the 1927 flood. Whatever structure was there in 1927, however, was apparently one of the more than 1,200 Vermont bridges of all types that were wiped out by the surging waters. The replacement, the steel truss bridge, was constructed in 1928 by the Palmer Steel Company of Springfield, Massachusetts, and the photograph (fig. 3.1) was probably taken shortly thereafter, in the late fall or early winter, judging from the leafless deciduous trees. The relatively barren hillside probably reflects both the season and the vegetation-stripping effects of the previous year’s storm.

In Hopper’s painting the trees have the tawny goldish-green color of early autumn, and the dense vegetation is the result of seven years of undisturbed growth after the flood. Lacking any account by Edward or Jo about their discovery of this bridge, one can only speculate about why Hopper chose it as the subject for a watercolor, apparently the only painting he did on a brief trip into Vermont. Having recently painted the steel truss spans of the relatively monumental Macomb’s Dam Bridge, Hopper may have been intrigued to come across this much smaller version on a rural back road in Vermont. (He might even have been amused at the contrast between Macomb’s and the Vermont bridge, although a sense of humor was not among his more notable traits.) Hopper may also have seen Three Mile Bridge as another way to show a hillside view, as framed by the bridge and seen through the interstices of the steel truss.
Iron truss bridges were built in Vermont from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, but in comparison to the covered bridges and other types of wooden spans, they were a sign of progress and a figurative bridge to industrial New England. In 1935 Three Mile Bridge would have represented not only progress but also recovery and reconstruction, and Hopper may well have seen it as symbolic of Vermont’s postflood rehabilitation, which he would have read about in the *New York Times*.

During the ride from Massachusetts and through Vermont to reach East Montpelier, regardless of which route Hopper took, he would have crossed bridges of all types. He certainly would have seen a number of Vermont’s
Edward Hopper in Vermont

Historic covered bridges, much celebrated by artists and photographers as classic icons of New England, but Hopper neither sketched nor painted these weathered wooden structures. It is probable that he selected this particular steel truss bridge to paint because of its rural setting, and the arched pony truss at the approach may have caught his eye, giving him another visually interesting variation on the geometric forms that he had already depicted in sketching and painting Macomb’s Dam and other bridges in the past. Framing hillside and trees, with no other signs of habitation or human use, Three Mile Bridge may have embodied for Hopper the span between rural and urban, nature and technology, tradition and progress.

Then again, the Hoppers may simply have found Three Mile Bridge while looking for a peaceful place to park their car and eat the lunch of cheese and hard-boiled eggs that Jo had packed. If they had left South Truro at “the screech of dawn,” as Jo wrote to Marion, they could have reached this area...
of Vermont by mid-day, and judging from the lack of shadows in the painting, they were seeing Country Bridge when the sun was directly overhead. The quiet road, still a country lane bordering farmland, has a place to pull off where Hopper could have painted from the back seat of the car, which indeed seems to be his perspective for this watercolor.

We can only guess at the reason for Hopper’s interest in Three Mile Bridge. Nevertheless, the painting remains a marker of the newly reconstructed Vermont scene in the 1930s and a classic image that can still be recreated today (fig. 3.2). The pony truss has been removed, but the bridge is otherwise unchanged, more than seventy-five years after Hopper captured it with pencil and paint on paper.

Notably, Macomb’s Dam Bridge and Country Bridge, both from 1935, were the last bridge paintings that Hopper made. In the case of bridges, as with other themes and subjects that he pursued consistently for a certain period of time, Hopper seems to have reached a kind of closure or completion—perhaps what Jo referred to as his having “exhausted” the material in a particular place—and hence the endless seeking and the need to move on. Predictably, then, in the following summer, Hopper was again unproductive and “worried” about it, as Jo wrote to Marion on July 5, 1936, from South Truro: “We’ve been here 5 weeks or so and are still digging about—so much to do—and so many daily chores. Ed isn’t really started with his work yet and isn’t very interested, yet knows he needs to be so that keeps him worried. We will have to try Vermont soon or he won’t have any pictures. He’s so nearly exhausted the material here.”

By 1936 Vermont had recovered enough so that the flood of 1927 seemed a distant memory, and a new burst of publications emerged to promote tourism in the Green Mountain State. In June 1936, This Is Vermont, by Manchester residents Margaret and Walter Hard, was published and reviewed in the New York Times. Vermont received glowing accolades; the book fared less well. Citing certain “shortcomings which hold their work back from perfection,” the reviewer conceded that the authors had met their initial aim: “People who read this book and look at its illustrations will indeed want to visit Vermont. And they will have got from these pages some arresting sense of the quality of the State, its scene, its story, its citizens. Of all the forty-eight States, none, probably, has more effectively kept its individuality from time long past. . . .
One will find imperfections in Vermont, as everywhere! But the State has its own character: it is individual, interesting, and beautiful.” Unfortunately, the practical value of the book as a guide to travelers was undermined by the lack of a map and a confusing, looping itinerary of trips around the state. But the *Times* article, with its fetching headline and illustrations—taken from the book—of paintings by Vermont artists, must have served in and of itself to attract tourists. The timing was right, at the beginning of summer, and it is possible that this piece served to remind the Hoppers and many other readers of the *New York Times* of the scenic delights and relaxing pleasures that lay to the north.

If the Hoppers had opened the Hards’ book, they would have immediately found an incentive to travel from South Truro, Massachusetts, into their neighboring state. Chapter 1 begins in Mr. Hard’s voice: “As we crossed the invisible line between Massachusetts and Vermont I said to [Mrs. Hard]: ‘Well, here is where we change time. . . . I mean the pace changes when you get into Vermont. I always feel as though I could sit back with my whole heft and take a long breath the minute I catch sight of the Green Mountains.’”

The book also contains numerous black-and-white photos of the typical Vermont icons: steepled churches, covered bridges, and historical monuments (including the Joseph Smith obelisk in South Royalton). There are several Nutting-esque river scenes that might have appealed to Hopper, views with features that later appeared in his Vermont watercolors: a river with rocky outcrops “near Wardsboro” and the Battenkill River, with a gravel bar, both with mountains in the distance; the curving Ethan Allen Highway at Pownal Center, with white-capped boundary posts on the curve; and a sugar house at Pittsfield, perched on a hillside in the midst of a grove of trees.

The review of the Hards’ book and other publications touting the virtues of Vermont may or may not have spurred another visit to the state by the Hoppers, but apparently the publicity had reached many others. One writer described the Connecticut Valley as “a sort of extension of Broadway, and the New York numberplate is always conspicuous in the traffic here.” Jo’s diary entry for September 12, 1936, reported that there were swarms of tourists and high prices. Worst of all, “E didn’t find anything to do for a canvas until we were on our way home, then he wouldn’t stop.” References to prices and to Jo’s doing a “watercolor of some black eyed Susans in a tin can,” rather than
flowers growing by the side of the road, indicate that they did stop somewhere in Vermont for an overnight stay.

Although Edward might not have found inspiration for “a canvas”—that is, a major painting in oil—he did produce at least three watercolors on the 1936 trip. One of these is unsigned and possibly unfinished; it was never turned over to the Rehn Galleries for sale and now resides in the Whitney Museum of American Art as part of the Josephine N. Hopper Bequest. Assigned the provisional title Vermont Landscape (plate 7), the foreground of this scene is dominated by a dirt road with a slight uphill slope and a blurry area, sketched out but not painted in, probably indicating shrubs or bushes. Beyond is forested hillside. Along the road, as it curves into the distance, are the slender trunks of tall pines, crowned with feathery boughs. Farther up the hillside is a grove of birches, their white bark standing out against the shaded forest floor, with fallen trees littering the steep slope below. In the distance is another rounded hill. The sky is a clear wash of grayish-blue, cloudless and untextured, perhaps another part of the painting that Hopper did not finish.

The other two watercolors from 1936 appear on facing pages in the Ledger Book with pen-and-ink sketches by Edward and descriptions by Jo. The left-hand page, labeled “Watercolors 1936 Cape Cod & Vermont,” includes Vermont Hillside as well as two Cape Cod watercolors, House with a Rain Barrel and Oaks at Eastham.


Plainfield is just a few miles from East Montpelier, indicating that the Hoppers returned to the same area of Vermont that they had visited in 1935. The colors in Vermont Hillside (plate 8) are those of a day at the height of summer, with brilliant blue sky and well-formed clouds, and the play of light and shadow on the hillside suggests that the time is late afternoon. The forest is a mix of deciduous trees—perhaps birches, judging from the light color of the trunks—and pines. Jo does not mention the topographical features, such as the softly rolling slopes of the meadow, the rock outcrops, or the odd bump in the foreground that could be a grass-covered tree stump or a small
mound of hay. All of these elements add up to make a scene that is distinctively Vermont and yet not attributable to any one definite location; it could be almost anywhere in the central part of the state. Hopper probably made this painting from the seat of the car, while parked across the road from the hillside; the thin brownish-grey band running horizontally across the painting appears to be a dirt road, nearly obscured by the high grass along its edge.

On the opposite page of the Ledger Book, labeled “1936 Cape Cod & Vt,” is Edward’s sketch and Jo’s description for Mountain Meadow (previously titled Vermont Meadow, according to Gail Levin’s Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné). Jo again described the colors: “Sky dappled grey. Trees darkish green masses except patch of foamy green L. centre. Hill pinkish earth. Foreground: very pale yellowish green. Horizontal strip of white bet. this & beginning of hill.” At first glance Mountain Meadow (plate 9) does not appear to be as finished as Vermont Hillside; it is less polished and more impressionistic, with flatter tonalities and lacking the contrast of light and shadow of Hillside. However, in Mountain Meadow the pale-blue sky, seen through streaks of wispy, unformed clouds, seems more realistic and more carefully done than the well-defined oval clouds of Hillside. The sky and clouds of Meadow look like those of Hopper’s Cape Cod paintings, which he was accustomed to putting on paper. In Hillside, on the other hand, Hopper may have captured the unusually well-formed clouds of a particular day in Vermont, where the color of the sky and shapes of the clouds are sometimes so remarkable that they seem unreal, unbelievable.

Mountain Meadow has a translucent quality that is unusual for Hopper. Light seems to reflect from all surfaces with relative equality, and the depth and movement from foreground to background is a function of shape and composition, rather than of light and shadow. What probably attracted Hopper to this place were the shapes in the landscape, a series of repeating triangles formed by the steep-sided hills and the pine trees, forming an irregular procession through the deep V of the valley back to the shallow V where land meets sky. Running across the center of the painting is the grey band of a dirt road, separated from the viewer by a flat plane of neutral color, perhaps another dirt road or just a turning-around place where Hopper parked his car.

The triangular hills of Mountain Meadow, described as “pinkish earth” by Jo, may well have been cut as a source of sand. Such cuts into the faces of
hills, resembling landslides, are typical features of the landscape in Vermont, a state where more miles of roads are constructed and filled with local sand, dirt, and clay than with asphalt or cement. Such a feature can be seen in the middle distance on the right side of Hillside, and it is possibly the same earthen hill that is in Meadow—that is, these two scenes may have been adjacent to one another, and Hopper simply moved down the road to paint the second. In another of Hopper’s Vermont watercolors, Route 14, Vermont (plate 10), painted the following year (1937), the triangular forms appear again, and in this case they clearly are sandpits or landslides. Although overgrown, these same scars are still distinguishable in the roadside landscape today, near the intersection of Route 14 and Post Road.

Regardless of their origin, however, these triangular shapes are one of the distinctive elements in this series of Vermont works, and they must have had composition value for Hopper. They are reminiscent of the quarry scar on the Hudson River palisade depicted in Hook Mountain, Hopper’s earliest watercolor landscape, painted in 1899 when he was seventeen years old. The similarities of form and feature in these natural landscapes, far apart in distance and time, and the fact that Hopper selected them to paint at an interval of more than thirty-seven years, lends support to his statement about consistency and persistence in artistic perception: “In every artist’s development the germ of the later work is always found in the earlier.”

All three of the hillside scenes from 1936—Vermont Hillside, Mountain Meadow, and Vermont Landscape—may have been painted along the same stretch of road, as Hopper searched for the right perspective to achieve a composition that would combine all the attributes of trees, slope, meadow, road, and sky that spoke to him. He may have grown dissatisfied with Vermont Landscape before he finished it, or perhaps his time was cut short; judging from the darkness under the trees and the flat light, this painting appears to have been done at the end of the day.

One of Hopper’s relatively rare drawings—Vermont Trees I (fig. 3.3)—may be related to the three hillside landscapes done in 1936. This drawing is in pencil, signed, and clearly a finished piece (as opposed to Hopper’s rough sketches and studies for his oil paintings). In addition to recording the structure and foliage of various types of trees, both deciduous and coniferous, in this drawing Hopper leads the eye from the hillside meadow into the woods,
through the spaces between the tree trunks and into the nuanced light and shadows of the forest floor, uncleared places where a few rounded boulders are intermittently scattered. This drawing was listed by Jo in the Ledger Book as *Vermont Trees I* at the time it was sold, in 1957 (see chapter 6). No creation date is given, but in composition and subject this drawing seems closer to Hopper’s 1936 watercolors than to the works done in Vermont in subsequent years. This may also be true for two other drawings on Jo’s list, *Vermont Trees II* and *Vermont Road*, but I have not seen these.  

Trees were a continuing source of fascination for Hopper, whether in small clusters or as individuals, as in the Vermont paintings *Trees on a Hill* (plate 11) and *Sugar Maple*, or as stands that form the massed wall of a forest, as in the 1934 watercolor *Longnook Valley* (Truro, Massachusetts) and the oil painting *Gas* (1940), as well as in the later oil *Road and Trees* and watercolor *Mass of Trees at Eastham*, both painted in 1962.

In an interview in 1962, Hopper commented that in painting nature he tried to capture “certain kinds of texture,” and that trees “have a different texture than houses or human flesh.” In the Green Mountains of Vermont,
named for their abundant vegetation, Hopper had ample opportunities to explore the texture, shapes, and colors of all varieties of trees, whether on the forested hillsides or along the banks of rivers. The fact that trees were the focal point of a number of Hopper’s careful drawings indicates that they were an important element of what Hopper was “after” in Vermont, features that were not as available to him in the relatively treeless dunes of his summer home on Cape Cod.

Interpreters of Hopper’s work, however, see much more than texture in his renderings of trees, at least in those trees that were outside of Vermont. In a book of short essays about Hopper’s work, the poet Mark Strand referred to Hopper’s walls of trees as “generic” elements of his paintings, ready to “absorb the viewer.” To Strand, “Hopper’s trees . . . look the way trees do when we drive by them at fifty or sixty miles an hour. And yet his woods have a peculiar and forceful identity. Compared to the woods that precede them in American painting, they are somber and uninviting. . . . For Hopper, the wilderness is nature’s dark side, heavy and brooding.”

In comparison to the forbidding trees described by Strand, however, the Vermont woods in Hopper’s drawing—as well as the woods in the three hillside watercolors from 1936—are mysterious but not threatening. In these Vermont works, the border between meadow and woods is softly curving, with the tree trunks irregularly spaced, in contrast to the straight, seemingly impenetrable wall of trees in Longnook Valley, where the tree trunks stand as sentinels, fence-like. The Longnook trees are like those described by Strand, but Hopper’s Vermont woods are more evocative of the woods depicted by another poet, Robert Frost.

In a conversation with Hopper, Brian O’Doherty identified trees as a continuing motif in his paintings, asking Hopper if he agreed that his woods were “menacing” or, like Frost’s, “lovely, dark and deep.” Hopper did not respond to the “menacing” part of the question, but he replied that he admired Frost and that he especially liked his poems “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” and “another called ‘Come In.’” In the latter poem, the narrator pauses at the edge of a woods (“Inside it was dark”), hearing the song of an unseen bird.

Frost’s image is much like the woods in Hopper’s drawing of Vermont Trees, dark, “pillared” by tree trunks, mysterious, and yet enticing. The
narrator in “Come In” resists the impulse to follow the thrush song. Similarly, the narrator in Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” feels the pull of the woods, “lovely, dark and deep,” although he moves on, with “miles to go before I sleep.”

Hopper’s Vermont trees are more like window frames than walls, with the viewer an outsider, but able to look in. In further contrast to paintings such as Gas, where the woods are indeed seen from the perspective of a traveler, a passerby who sees only the impression of trees, Hopper’s Vermont woods are observed by a more contemplative viewer, one who takes the time to see the individual trees and their different shapes and textures, the floor of the forest underneath, the spaces between the trunks hinting at the landscape within. This again reflects something of Frost’s poetic vision, and perhaps a glimpse of the visions that his poems evoked for Hopper.

Raphael Soyer, Hopper’s friend and fellow artist, believed that “Hopper painted mentally all the time.” Vermont Trees and the wooded hillsides in the Vermont watercolors of 1936 may reflect images that Hopper drew in his mind as he read Robert Frost, images that found reality when he discovered the real landscape that had, in turn, inspired the Vermont poet.

In the late 1940s, preparing for first major Hopper retrospective exhibition at the Whitney, Lloyd Goodrich examined the Vermont paintings and made detailed notes on them. His description of Vermont Hillside, which he had purchased in 1947, is reproduced here courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Goodrich’s response to Vermont Hillside shows that even Hopper’s modest watercolors could deliver, as he put it, “a terrific punch”:

Vermont Hillside . . . The subject is . . . a hillside with trees, strong sunlight, as of a sun of about 4 p.m., in front of us and to the left. Blue sky with light-edged oblong clouds.

Very fine. Powerful effect of sunlight. The foreground all in sun; the hillside mostly in shadow, with the tops of the trees sunlit. A sense of a clear, fine summer day, with strong sun and a breeze blowing the white clouds across the sky. A sense of health and air and freshness, exhilaration. Masculine instead of the delicate femininity of the impressionist spirit. A beautiful variety of
strong greens—through dark blue-green, almost black, of the evergreen, a pale blue-green of some other kind of tree, strong yellow green of grass.

The picture has a terrific punch—a concentrated power, effectiveness. The strong contrast of sunlit foreground, plain, simple; the dark hillside with its variety of greens, its dramatic play of forms and colors, building up to a climax at the upper left, where the dark trees mass against the sky. Beautifully composed. Simpler than his oils, but as finely composed; and to me, more agreeable in technique.

Full-blooded power.

The observation of the colors of the hillside in shadow, of the dark mystery of the shadows under the trees.

This is lyrical, not in any pretty way, but deeply and movingly. Hopper is not by any means a man who dislikes nature—he feels it deeply.

Hopper’s work is dramatic. He feels things in terms of color. Full-bodied color. Henri.66