Edward Hopper in Vermont
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Hopper’s paintings on Cape Cod and elsewhere in New England demonstrated that it was possible, without sentimentality, to express affection for places that were naturally beautiful. One did not need to be ashamed of having a heart. . . . Hopper’s pictures still instruct and delight in ways that are new to me.

*Robert Adams, “The Difference a Painter Makes,” 2009*

Epilogue

The photographer Robert Adams, two generations removed from Edward Hopper, views him as a teacher, writing that Hopper’s works made him aware of “the poignancy of light” and that it is light that makes “all places . . . interesting.”¹ Adams’s comments are from his essay in the catalog for the 2009 exhibit at the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco, *Edward Hopper & Company*, described in chapter 6. The juxtapositions between Hopper’s work and the photographs by Adams and others highlight the universal qualities of the five road images, including Hopper’s *Route 14, Vermont*, rather than their regional identity. The implication of the pairings is not that Hopper necessarily influenced the photographers, but that they and he shared compositional values and perceptions of what constitutes beauty. In Adams’s opinion, the combination led to a fresh approach for evaluating and appreciating Hopper’s works—including the landscapes from Vermont.
In the many years between Hopper’s first one-man show, at the Whitney Studio Club in 1920, and the Fraenkel Gallery’s innovative show in 2009, Hopper’s works have been included in hundreds of exhibitions and have inspired voluminous commentary. The Vermont paintings have been exhibited only intermittently, however, and consequently they have received little critical attention. If the Vermont works have been on the critics’ radar screen at all, they have been considered simply as anomalous individual pieces among Hopper’s watercolor oeuvre, some 300 mature paintings spanning forty years and depicting many different locations. The Vermont watercolors have never been shown together in any significant numbers, nor have they been accorded serious critical consideration as a group or a series of related works.

There are a number of reasons for the relative invisibility of the Vermont works. First, the total number is small: only twenty-three watercolors (including two that are clearly unfinished) that can be tied to Hopper’s Vermont sojourns. Of these, seven remained in Hopper’s studio, unknown and out of sight, until after his death. Of the fourteen Vermont watercolors that Hopper turned over to the Rehn Galleries, four were never exhibited before they were sold in the 1950s, two decades after Hopper painted them. Others were exhibited once or twice and then sold to private collectors, not to be seen again until the Whitney Museum’s retrospective exhibitions of Hopper’s work, in 1950 and 1964. And although each of these major exhibitions included five or six of the Vermont watercolors, they nevertheless went unacknowledged by critics or commentators—certainly understandable, given their minimal presence among the hundreds of other Hopper works in all media that were hung in these shows.

A paramount explanation for the infrequent exhibition of the Vermont paintings may be fragility of the medium: watercolors simply cannot stand up to permanent display or frequent exhibition, which could render them quite literally “disappeared.” Another reason for these works to have remained out of sight may be the relative “worth” of Hopper’s watercolors versus his oils. Hopper’s oil paintings, much larger in size and seen as more universal in subject matter than the regional watercolors, make a more significant statement and thus have greater exhibition value. On exhibit, the oils dominate a show, and they are most likely to be picked out for review and commentary, as exemplified in a long review of the 1964 retrospective of Hopper’s work.
that appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The writer, who had seen the exhibit in Chicago, acknowledged the proficiency of Hopper’s watercolors while touting the supremacy of his oils: “Hopper’s oils . . . provide the main line of his work. There are also etchings, all of them early and rather less important, and watercolors, which are a significant chapter in themselves. No one handles the translucence of watercolor quite as magnificently as Hopper, and as is appropriate to the radiance of his style in this department, the subject matter is mostly rural: small town buildings, isolated houses and lighthouses, and straight landscape. He is the last great master of the Gloucester School of watercolorists. But when all is said and done, it is the oils that account for his reputation, especially the oils on urban themes.”

Another reviewer took a similar position, while being considerably less laudatory of the watercolors: “On the whole Hopper’s water colors . . . lack the strong contrasts, precision and dialectical subtlety of his mature style.”

Years earlier, however, Hopper’s watercolor *oeuvre*, including the Vermont works, had found a staunch and permanent champion in Lloyd Goodrich. In 1966, in the introduction to a portfolio of Hopper’s watercolors and drawings, Goodrich wrote:

For Hopper, watercolor has been a major medium, on a par with oil . . . [b]ut painted directly from the subject . . . Beginning with a pencil drawing, precise but not detailed, they are then built up with the brush, firmly and with great economy of means. The medium is kept translucent, without gouache or opaque white. Compared to his oils, his watercolors are more naturalistic . . . But from the first they showed an instinctive rightness of composition; the best of them are as finely designed as his works in any medium. Products of a fresh eye and a sure hand, they have a quality of utter authenticity, not only in subject-matter but in purity and freshness of visual sensation.

Hopper says that watercolor painting is “a series of glazes”; and his later watercolors have been built up in glaze over glaze. But they still preserve the freshness and transparency that are among the special beauties of the medium.

In both his publications and his unpublished notes, archived in his professional papers at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Goodrich registered particular appreciation for Hopper’s watercolors of Vermont. He examined
these paintings during the 1940s, while most of them were still at the Rehn Galleries, recording copious descriptive comments, and keeping track of them when they were sold. His notes detail his observations and visceral reactions to individual works, apparently written as he prepared exhibit labels and catalog copy with the original paintings literally under his nose.

Goodrich also kept careful records of his many conversations with Hopper. As a result of these talks, Goodrich purported to know what Hopper was “after”—what he hoped to capture or achieve with a particular painting—often having had the opportunity to hear this directly from the artist, albeit in Hopper’s generally elliptical terms. This knowledge gave Goodrich the context for analyzing Hopper’s work relative to his intentions.

In his introduction to the catalog for the 1950 Whitney retrospective, which included four of the Vermont watercolors, Goodrich described Hopper’s rural landscapes in detail:

He has painted the country almost as much as the town. His landscapes are those of a realist. All the works of man that his predecessors avoided he accepts and includes. Even his most nearly pure landscapes usually show some sign of human use and habitation. He likes to contrast the varied, irregular shapes of nature with the stark functional forms of man-made things—the straight horizontals of railroad tracks, the mathematical curves of highways, the severe angles of New England farmhouses, the immaculate lines of lighthouses. He insists equally on the forms of the earth. He loves country that is rugged and dramatic, where the structure of the earth is apparent—the naked rolling moors of Cape Cod, the granite-strewn pastures of Cape Ann, the abrupt green hills of Vermont. His is a masculine landscape art as contrasted with the feminine one of the impressionists. In its strength and its deep feeling for the earth, it reminds one of a realist older than impressionism, Courbet.

Later descriptive comments by Goodrich are also applicable to the Vermont watercolors, particularly with regard to color: “In all of Hopper’s works, light plays an essential role. Whether outdoor or indoor . . . its source, direction, and color are as fully realized as the objects on which it falls. . . . By creating clear-cut patterns of light and shade, light acts as an integral element of design. . . . In Hopper’s landscapes, light again is a principal factor. . . .
In his landscapes, light creates movement rather than the motionless forms themselves; it streams into the picture, becomes a dynamic force in the whole pictorial concept. . . . Especially striking in his landscapes is the use of cool colors—vivid greens, blues, and blue greens.”

Goodrich also published reproductions of the Vermont works, yet another way of making this aspect of Hopper’s work visible and known. Notably, seven of the Vermont watercolors are reproduced in Goodrich’s oversize volume from 1971, published by Abrams.

Goodrich’s comments have a unique value because they were informed by direct contacts with Edward Hopper and his work over a period of many years. Goodrich’s ability to be completely objective may have been compromised by his relationship with Hopper, however; he certainly would not have written anything negative that the artist might have found offensive. Further, in his position at the Whitney, Goodrich had a vested interest in promoting exhibitions of Hopper’s work to potential museum goers as well as to the press, another factor militating against anything other than a laudatory interpretation of the artist’s work.

Goodrich also saw Hopper through the lens of his own expertise as an authority on American watercolor traditions. He described Hopper’s landscapes using the same terms that he used for the artists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, placing Hopper in a continuum that included Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer, whom Hopper himself claimed as inspirational. This became a fixed position for Goodrich, with the result that his analysis of Hopper’s work, once established, remained static throughout the forty years that he was “the artist’s staunchest official supporter.”

In 1945 Goodrich’s position on Hopper’s watercolors was challenged by Edgar Richardson, an art historian and the director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, in a review of the exhibition American Watercolor and Winslow Homer, a major show organized by Goodrich that traveled to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the Brooklyn Museum. Goodrich wrote that the purpose of the exhibition and the associated book was “to show the development of the naturalistic tradition in American watercolor as represented by some of its leading artists, stressing Winslow Homer’s contribution to the development.” He defined “naturalistic” in a broad sense, including those artists who “retain a very direct relation
to nature,” painting what they saw around them, even if straying “radically from natural appearances.”

Focusing on Winslow Homer, the exhibition also included the work of contemporary artists such as Maurice Prendergast, John Marin, Charles Burchfield, Adolf Dehn, Reginald Marsh—and Edward Hopper, who showed nine watercolors dating from 1926 through 1943. Vermont was represented by *First Branch of the White River, Vermont*. Although Richardson found the exhibit to be “a very interesting and significant commentary upon the whole subject of American watercolor painting,” he nevertheless offered an interpretation for Hopper that departed radically from that of Goodrich:

Rather unexpectedly Hopper is, in Goodrich’s opinion, the foremost representative of the “naturalistic” style initiated by Homer. It is a point one might argue about, for the extremely well chosen group of Hopper’s work makes his special interests and abilities quite clear—his ruling interest in light and form, his use of the high key of transparent watercolor (in a palette whose bright blue shadows are reminiscent of almost any other American Impressionist except Homer), and a devotion to the man-made objects in a landscape which is both his strength and his limitation. Give Hopper white houses, roofs, chimneys, barns, in fact any geometric forms to paint and he is vigorous, sure, and full of character. But with trees, rivers, all the organic forms of nature which Homer understood so well, Hopper deals hesitantly—their unexpected organic variety of form escapes his style and his power is gone. The stillness of his silent, tenantless scenes often has a haunting life of its own, but it is not the surging energy of nature which Homer’s imagination saw.

Richardson’s comment about Hopper’s “hesitancy” in dealing with “the organic forms of nature” clearly refers to *First Branch*, as it was the only landscape devoid of architectural forms among the nine Hopper watercolors in the show. Richardson’s opinion that Hopper’s rendition of the natural landscape lacked “power” is in direct contrast to Goodrich’s reaction to the Vermont pictures. His notes on *Vermont Hillside*, for example, refer to it as having “a terrific punch—a concentrated power, effectiveness,” descriptive terms that he also jotted down with respect to *Gravel Bar, White River* and others of the Vermont watercolors. Richardson’s observation about Hopper’s “bright
blue shadows” actually mirrors Goodrich’s own comment about the “vivid greens, blues, and blue greens” of Hopper’s Vermont landscapes, although clearly the two disagree about the association with Homer. Perhaps Goodrich was trying too hard to fit Hopper into his long-established critical scheme.

The Vermont watercolors did not entirely escape the eyes of commentators other than Goodrich. For at least one critic, Hopper’s rural landscapes were seen as a welcome relief from the gritty urbanism and social commentary typical of art during the Great Depression. In 1938, when *White River at Sharon* was shown in the Whitney annual exhibition, it was singled out for a compliment by Henry McBride, an art critic for the *New York Sun*, who complained about the exhibit as a whole but found respite in Hopper:

“There is a great deal of ‘social comment’ in these works of art . . . too much. We are quite fed up with it. Much more satisfactory is the water color department. Here are quite a few artists who seem to be concerned with the handsomeness of nature—a good thing to be concerned with. The most professional is Edward Hopper’s ‘White River at Sharon,’ a cool and unworried transcription from a most agreeable scene.”

The 1950 retrospective exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, Hopper’s largest one-man show up to that date, included seventy-three oils, sixty watercolors, twenty-two prints, and seventeen drawings; it traveled to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the Detroit Institute of Arts. Four of the Vermont watercolors were shown, along with the unusual inclusion of at least one Vermont drawing, *Banks of the White River. Vermont Hillside* (1936), was loaned by Lloyd Goodrich, then the painting’s owner; *First Branch of the White River, Vermont* (1938) was loaned by Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts; and *Gravel Bar, White River* and *White River at Sharon* (both 1937) were loaned by the Rehn Galleries. This exhibition received wide coverage in the the newspapers and arts magazines. Margaret Breuning’s review in *Art Digest* did not list the Vermont paintings by name, but it clearly referred to them with appreciation. The critical value of her comments might be questioned, however, as they essentially paraphrase Goodrich’s introduction to the catalog: “[Hopper’s] pure landscapes display a closeness to a world of rolling earth masses, lush foliage, streams and hills, and he enhances them with flooding sunlight and depths of shadow. The translucent watercolors, all in the pure medium, with occasional flashes of white paper approach
naturalism more closely than the oils. Fluency, crispness of contours, rich, sparkling wealth of broken light planes distinguish all of them.”

Howard Devree, writing in the New York Times, provided a more novel and insightful commentary, noting the New England values reflected in Hopper’s works: “Hopper’s literary counterparts are some of the verse of Robert Frost and his New England predecessors. . . . His painting is full of reserves—at times one would perhaps say inhibitions—and even the somewhat freer, and more personal water-colors give the effect of poetry deliberately turned into prose. There is a persistent graphic strain in the work supported by preoccupation with light and shade and a very restrained palette. It is all one aspect of one grimly, uncompromisingly American attitude—canny, earthy, direct and rather Puritan.”

Nine years later, the Vermont works were finally shown in the heart of New England, when the Currier Gallery in Manchester, New Hampshire, mounted an exhibition called Watercolors by Edward Hopper with a Selection of His Etchings. A total of forty-five watercolors were exhibited, including six of the Vermont works. By this time all had been sold, and they were loaned by their respective owners. The exhibit traveled to the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence, and to the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. Given the New England venues, it is particularly disappointing that this exhibit apparently received no review. Charles Buckley commented only briefly on the Vermont works in his introduction to the catalog: “By 1930, Hopper had begun spending his summers in Cape Cod, with visits to Vermont in 1936 and 1937 where, along the verdant banks of the White River near Sharon and Royalton, he found subjects devoid of architectural interest as in such fine watercolors as Windy Day, Vermont Hillside; and Gravel Bar, White River, among others.”

In the spring of 1964, a Hopper show at the Edward W. Root Art Center in Clinton, New York, included seventeen watercolors; Vermont Hillside and Gravel Bar, White River were among them. The exhibit was a collaborative project between the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute and the Art Department of Hamilton College, whose art center is dedicated to Edward Root, one of the early collectors of Hopper’s pictures. In his introduction to the catalog, Joseph Trovato repeated Hopper’s oft-quoted words about his objective to make “the most exact transcription possible of my most intimate
impressions of nature.” In a departure from other critiques, however, Trovato also acknowledged the abstract qualities in Hopper’s works, as well as their timelessness: “Hopper has taken the most common subjects—a building, a freight yard, a roadway, a hillside [a Vermont hillside, in this case]—all typically American things which we encounter every day of our lives, and has employed an equally common painting approach. . . . What is so remarkable and what links him with the tradition of great art is the way in which he invests his subjects with a feeling of elemental character and timelessness, an air of suspended animation and—despite their seeming literalness—an abstract framework of shape, form and color.”

In September 1964 the second Hopper retrospective exhibition opened at the Whitney, traveling the following year to the Art Institute of Chicago, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the City Art Museum in St. Louis. In addition to scores of oils, prints, and drawings, the exhibit included sixty-two watercolors, with Vermont represented by five: Vermont Hillside, Gravel Bar, White River at Royalton, White River at Sharon, and First Branch of the White River. The show received a good deal of critical attention nationwide, as a major exhibition of works by one of America’s preeminent and venerable artists, then eighty-two years old.

Robert Coates, reviewing the exhibit for the New Yorker, called the retrospective “a massive affair” and referred to Hopper as “a man whose eye has always been focused so sternly on the angularities of his own contemporary scene, from the beginning of the nineteen-hundreds onward, that he might playfully be called the ‘hard-edge’ realist of his period.” Notably, however, Coates described Hopper’s watercolors as showing another side of Hopper, differentiating them from the works that depict as he put it, “the ungregariousness of man,” his way of describing Hopper’s aloneness. Coates added: “There are other aspects of his work, notably his landscapes and houses and his occasional sea scenes, almost all of them crisp and fresh and sunny—the production of a fully rounded man.”

The attention that the 1964 retrospective received from so many quarters was in part due to the publicity it received. Although it preceded the era of blockbuster museum exhibits, it was promoted to a popular audience. Goodrich even wrote a piece for Woman’s Day, illustrated by reproductions of fifteen Hopper oils and watercolors, Gravel Bar, White River among them.
Addressing the housewives who read this publication, Goodrich returned to the traditional rhetoric about Hopper’s paintings, emphasizing the “American scene” aspect and underscoring that Hopper painted not only the city but also rural scenes and small towns. Regarding the landscapes, he wrote that Hopper was “interested in the relationship between nature’s irregular forms and the functional forms of man-made things,” a reference to *Gravel Bar, White River*.

In the *New York Times*, John Canaday wrote that “the remarkable thing about Hopper is not that he is still good at the age of 82, but that he has never been anything but good. . . . The Whitney retrospective is the steadiest and solidiest exhibition this town has seen in a long time.” Gerald Nachman, who visited Hopper in his Washington Square studio during the final days of the 1964 retrospective, reported that the show had been “attracting some 50,000 people a week since it opened. . . . At least once a week Hopper turns up at the museum to look again on his paintings, many of which he hasn’t seen since they were sold.”

In the 1970s the Vermont watercolors continued to turn up in occasional exhibits, most often as individual items in a venue associated with their respective owners. An exception was the exhibition of watercolors by *Ten Americans* at the Andrew Crispo Gallery in New York, May 16–July 15, 1974. The “ten” were the twentieth century’s most prominent watercolorists: Milton Avery, Charles Burchfield, Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, Winslow Homer, Edward Hopper, John Marin, Maurice Prendergast, John Singer Sargent, and Andrew Wyeth. The sixteen Hopper watercolors in the show were a mini-retrospective of his work in this medium, dating from 1924 (Gloucester) to 1946 (Mexico) and including *Vermont Meadow*, then owned by the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York, and *White River at Sharon*, from the Sara Roby Foundation Collection. One reviewer fastened on the “unexpected” elements of this exhibit. With regard to Hopper, he wrote: “The exhibition brings a growing awareness of the varying nuances and stances within the complex range of an individual artist’s work in watercolors. Even habitual art addicts can find much that is new and challenging in the show.” Although he did not refer directly to the Vermont
pieces, this reviewer captured an essential aspect of their potential appeal, as being “new” Hoppers to many viewers.

The value of Hopper’s lesser known works to critics’ and scholars’ continuing attempts to “know” the artist has been recognized in assessment of the works in the Hopper bequest to the Whitney. This was the subject of a thoughtful piece by the *New York Times* critic James Mellow, “Hopper: More Than a Great American Realist.” Mellow commented that what was gained from seeing the works in the Hopper bequest was “a far greater understanding of the range and complexity of Hopper’s art—and of its exceptional quality at nearly all phases of his career.” In Mellow’s opinion, the works then on exhibit “are, by and large, summer pictures—Hopper in a relaxed mood. But it is as a master technician that the current show reveals Hopper.”

In the summer of 1975 *Sugar Maple*, rarely shown, was included in an exhibit of *Oils and Watercolors by Edward Hopper* at the Museum of Art of Ogunquit, Maine. In a brief essay in the catalog, DeWitt Hardy, the curator, cast Hopper’s work in a modernist light, grouping the Vermont painting with two other watercolors, one from Maine and another from New York: “Three . . . watercolors, ‘Rockland Harbor,’ ‘Rooftops,’ and ‘Sugar Maples,’ [sic] show a remarkable combine of light, shadow and color, whose complexity is as daring as any cubism.”

In the decades since Hopper’s death, his work has been the subject of major traveling exhibitions originating at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York (1980) and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (2007). The National Museum of American Art of the Smithsonian Institution (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum) sponsored an all-watercolor exhibition in 1999. Each of these exhibitions was accompanied by a lavish catalog, edited and with interpretive essays by such Hopper scholars as Gail Levin, Carol Troyen, and Virginia Mecklenburg. The Vermont works have been given a tip of the hat in all cases. As would be expected, however, in these large exhibits they were not picked out by commentators, if noted at all.

The title of Hilton Kramer’s review of the 1980 exhibit at the Whitney, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist*—which included 170 oils, 36 watercolors (none of Vermont), and 152 drawings—sums up the attitude of some critics about these blockbuster exhibits: “When the Size of a Show Overwhelms Its Contents.” Kramer feared that what was endangered was
“the experience of the art itself.” Each of these exhibits, however, has drawn huge audiences and increased Hopper’s popular appeal. Additionally their excellent catalogs—which have remained in print long after the exhibits closed and are available in museum shops, bookstores, and libraries—make Hopper’s art accessible to everyone while making new contributions to art history scholarship, shedding new light on the painter to whom light was of utmost importance.

Finally, it must be pointed out that First Branch of the White River is the only one of the Vermont watercolors to have been exhibited in Vermont. First Branch was included in the bicentennial exhibit Vermont Landscape Images: 1776–1976 at the Robert Hall Fleming Museum, in Burlington, in the summer of 1976. A black-and-white image of Hopper’s watercolor was included in the catalog, but the painting’s return to its home state was not otherwise noted in print.

Hopper’s Vermont watercolors may never be accorded the same attention and praise as his monumental oils, but they nevertheless allow an assessment of this complex artist from yet another vantage point, another point of view of the “ME” that Hopper said he was “after.” Exhibited together in this volume, without the distraction or interruption of his works from other times and other places, they may inform art historians about another side of Hopper and provide more fodder for analyses of the full extent of his genius. They will certainly give all of us a glimpse into what Hopper found compelling about his surroundings during a few months in the summer, more than seventy years ago.

The fact that these works remain virtually unknown to Vermonters was underscored by Vermont Senator Patrick J. Leahy’s comment while visiting the major Edward Hopper show at the National Gallery in September 2007. A review in the Washington Times, describing how Hopper’s work “-touches different people in different ways [that] some people find difficult to explain,” reported that Leahy “mentioned paintings he called ‘those old farmhouses’ as reminders of his home state.” The houses in Hopper’s paintings, however, were in Massachusetts and Maine (and actually bore little resemblance to those of Vermont), while Leahy apparently missed Hopper’s First Branch of the White River, the single Vermont watercolor that was exhibited in Washington in the 2007 show.
The Whitney Museum of American Art, with the largest collection of Hopper’s work, thanks to the Josephine N. Hopper Bequest, always has a few Hoppers on display, and usually a number of others are out on loan to museums with Hopper exhibits organized around particular themes. This was the case in 2011, when the Bowdoin College Museum of Art mounted a special show called *Edward Hopper’s Maine*, featuring little-known, rarely displayed oils from Hopper’s summers in Ogunquit and Monhegan between 1914 and 1919. This exhibit drew crowds and generated new interest in Hopper and works that, as the art historian Diane Tuite put it, “continue to exist outside the standard narrative of his career.”

This could be a good omen for the future visibility of Edward Hopper’s watercolors from Vermont. In my view—admittedly, the view from Vermont—they deserve to be seen, if only for the enjoyment of those who love the landscape that they so beautifully recreate.