

EXCERPTS OF TEXTS FROM THE CATALOGUE

Edward Hopper's Critical Fortunes Tomàs Llorens

(...) Towards the end of his life Rudolf Arnheim wrote that narrating the history of art was like describing a landscape while moving through it. The small, picturesque geographical details attract our gaze while they are nearby but we soon leave them behind and forget them. In contrast, a Titian, a Rembrandt or a Goya are like great distant mountains that make their presence felt on travellers over the course of an extended period of time, although as the journey continues we see them from new viewpoints and their shapes and forms seem to change continually.

Hopper's critical fortunes rose rapidly around eighty years ago and since then his status within the field of modern art has never diminished. In the present day, and seen from the perspective inherited from the second half of the 20th century, his figure seems like a great bare, solitary rock in the desert. His stark isolation arouses not just our admiration but puzzles us and we ask how he could have come to acquire such a unique and singular form. Hopper's image was not always thus, however. During the first period of his critical fortunes, appreciation of his work rested on a framework of ideas and beliefs that were widely shared in the art world of his day. Subsequently, the wind of history, a wind that has rarely been as violent as it was in the central decades of Hopper's life, swept that structure away, eroded the vegetation and left the rock bare.

The fact that Hopper has continued to be appreciated for such a long time without his reputation diminishing in any way is an indication of the intrinsic grandeur of this artist. However, his isolation, which was a consequence of the fact that he so tenaciously resisted the erosion of history, is a sign that (as with great, solitary rocks) his work was made of a different substance to that of his surroundings. It is possible that art historians of the future, basing themselves, perhaps, on certain incompletely expressed intuitions hinted at by art historians of today, may be able to encounter other interpretations that come closer to that substance and thus embed themselves more firmly in the rock, with the result that it becomes less strange and abrupt in form and better integrated into the landscape of 20th-century art. It will, however, almost undoubtedly be a very different landscape to the one that we see now.

Edward Hopper's transcendental Realism Didier Ottinger

[...] for Henri, Édouard Manet's painting summarised the virtues that he aimed to promote among his students at the New York School of Art. "Manet never did the expected. He was a pioneer. He followed his own inspiration. He told the public what he wanted them to know and not the old, stale things that they already knew and thought they wanted to hear again." The drawings that Hopper made of *The Fifer* and *Olympia* during his years of training demonstrate the role that Manet played in Henri's teaching methods. Another of his pupils, Helena Appleton Read, enumerated the virtues that Henri conceded to Manet's realism: "All the manifestations of life were potential artistic subjects for him, which led him to think that, like the poor, it was themes closest to the realities of life that were also the best ones for art. For Henri's pupils it seemed that life flowed more vigorously and fully in the bars of the Bowery and on the docksides than in the Knickerbocker Hotel or on the fashionable streets of the Upper East Side." For Hopper, this dimension of social critique attributed to Manet's realism was one of the most important aspects that he assimilated from Henri's teaching.

Along with Manet, students at the New York School of Art were also encouraged to focus on the Spanish pictorial tradition. While Hopper's earliest portraits and nudes reflect the

influence of Manet's "Spanish" paintings and of Rembrandt in their use of a dramatic chiaroscuro, the solid composition of his few still lifes recalls Zurbarán or even the young Velázquez.

[...] In his early Paris paintings, Hopper continued to make use of the ochre and grey-brown tones that had prevailed in his works painted in Henri's studio. In order to adapt his technique to the "softer tonalities" of the city of Paris, he converted to Impressionism, initiated by Patrick Henry Bruce, one of his former fellow pupils at the New York School of Art, and discovering Pissarro, Renoir and Sisley through him.

A pupil of Matisse, a friend of Sonia and Robert Delaunay and a regular visitor to Gertrude Stein's house, Bruce (who would become associated with Orphism and Synchronism from around 1910), was unable to interest Hopper in the latest innovations in Parisian painting. Hopper's visits to the Salon disappointed him: "I rushed to the Autumn Salon and almost everything seemed very bad, although in its approach it is much more open than our exhibitions" he wrote to his mother. Despite this notably lukewarm opinion, three artists attracted him. One was Albert Marquet, who showed a series of landscapes that included several of his versions of the quaysides of the Seine. Tired of the dissolution of forms to which Impressionism inevitably led, from Marquet (whom he reencountered in February 1907 in the form of a group of works exhibited at the Druet gallery) Hopper derived his formal synthesis, the harmony of his greys, and his muted palette. Félix Vallotton exhibited some meditative figures at the Salon, shown absorbed in reading and domestic tasks (*The Seamstress* and *Reading*). The markedly volumetric character of the figures (which reminded Hopper of those of his first teacher, Kenneth Hayes Miller), modelled by a light derived from Vermeer, would subsequently appear in Hopper's own work. At the same Salon Walter Sickert exhibited a series of views of Parisian theatres (the Théâtre de Montmartre, the Eldorado), then later, in January 1907, showed nudes of an overt sensuality at the Bernheim gallery. Hopper's depictions of theatres and cinemas suggest his recollections of Sickert's canvases [...]

"All the world's a stage, and the men and women merely players"
William Shakespeare

Cinemas and theatres occupy a unique role in Hopper's painting from the late 1930s onwards (*The Circle Theater*, 1936; *The Sheridan Theater*, 1937; *New York Movie*, 1939). The iconography and the variety of "scenic" devices of which he makes use reflect a vision of the world imbued with a theatrical irony. The work of Degas, which also reveals a fascination for the world of performance, was a fruitful model for Hopper. In many of Degas' compositions the image is structured by truncating the horizontal plane of the stage, a procedure that Hopper frequently adopted.

In 1921-1922 *Girl at a Sewing Machine* announced a different type of "mise-en-scène" and one that would transform New York apartments into small theatres in which the silent drama of everyday existences was played out [...]

Hopper's Place
Valeriano Bozal

[...] Hopper's relationship with writers such as Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Steinbeck, Upton Sinclair, etc is complex, as is his relationship with photographers such as Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and John Gutmann, a European who discovered the United States in late 1933 [...]

It is difficult, for example, to look at John Gutmann's photograph *Lighthouse, Heceta Head, Oregon Coast* (1934, Center for Creative Photography, John Gutmann Archive, University of Arizona) and not think of Hopper. The crispness, conciseness and orientation of the axes, the clarity of its composition, the strength of the motifs, their precision, the way the light is used to help define them, the relationship between the buildings and the sea, are all to be found in the painter's work as well. Possibly not the proximity and the viewpoint, however, which means that we cannot speak of complete similarity but certainly of affinity. In addition, the interest in artificial lighting and neon light, which is to be found in some of Gutmann's

photographs of adverts, with their artificial nocturnal light, is also a feature of Hopper's paintings. This type of light is equally to be found in Polaroids by Walker Evans, very different as a photographer to Hopper as a painter but a figure who continually reveals shared points of reference. *South Side Corner with Buckner Grocery* (private collection), which Evans photographed in 1946, reveals various similarities with Hopper's painting: the building isolated from a setting from which it stands out, the viewpoint, someone arriving and looking, the idea of the voyeur, are all characteristics that allow us to think of Hopper [...] Many of the photographs that Evans took in the New York subway depict people who were consciously avoiding any type of contact, including visual contact, with those nearest to them, for example *Passengers on the Subway, New York* (1938-1941, private collection).

[...] These are all scenes of American life and of daily existence in the USA. Their innovativeness lies in the nature of our location and our involvement in these scenes. In order to locate the viewer, in other words, to locate our gaze, Hopper makes use of specific visual strategies. His sense of framing, of the instant and of discovery is the result of a careful process of elaboration in which proximity and scale are involved, as well as the placement of the horizon (raised, low or non-existent in some cases), the angle of vision and the interplay of light and shade, all elements that involve us in the world of the theatre and by doing so allow us, or even oblige us, to reflect on the place in which we find ourselves: where are we when we are looking at the woman in the hotel, the girl sewing, the train carriage? From where are we looking and what is the space that has been allocated to us? The reference to the place in which the viewer is positioned is a constant element in Hopper's paintings, and in this sense, as Cees Nooteboom has brilliantly observed, he is close to Dutch painting, to Vermeer and to Pieter de Hooch [...]

What are we looking at and what do we see? It has often been said that Hopper is the painter of human solitude in the midst of urban life. That is certainly the most immediate impression but the narrative element in the paintings does not allow for such a direct conclusion: his scenes show people on their own but there are also others of groups, couples, people talking etc. I believe that when solitude is referred to it means that people, whether together or not, or close to each other or not, are not communicating. The isolation is one of lack of communication [...]

We look at and see people waiting. Seated, they wait for the stage curtain to rise. They wait for a visitor, perhaps, or for someone arriving from a journey. They wait for a car to arrive so that they can fill up with petrol or look at the landscape before them. They wait to arrive at their destination, reading a book in a train carriage. They wait, talking, or in silence, they wait, perhaps, for the afternoon or the day to pass. We cannot definitely know what they are waiting for [...] It is during the course of this waiting that they are alone.

[...] There are numerous affinities between Vermeer and Hopper although naturally they are two very different painters and their oeuvres are totally different. Two traits characterise them: the first is the treatment of the spectator, and both artists construct the painting in order to give the sensation that the scene is being contemplated by someone who has just arrived, opened the door and encountered the scene, etc. Furthermore, in both cases the protagonists are not aware of that gaze or its presence. The second trait refers to the composition of the image, particularly with regard to interiors: with both artists the painted interior is depicted with precision and sobriety, the light coming from outside contributes in a decisive way to creating the appearance of the interior and its visual structure while the interior-exterior interplay is the principal element in the scene. The minimalist nature of the representation and its conciseness, the "isolation" of the figure in the interior (an isolation similar to that of objects) gives visual solidity to the characters that structure the scene, with the result that we, the spectators, focus on them without lingering on inessential details or becoming interested in them. The role reserved for windows is extremely important in the case of both artists, although Vermeer's light is different to that of Hopper, the first being undefined and the second realistic and everyday. With the exception of just a few works, the principal characters in Vermeer's painting do not look outside the pictorial space and are engaged in their own activities. This is not the case with Hopper's works, in which many of the figures are waiting for something from the outside or, without looking outwards, are waiting for something to happen, lost in their own thoughts.