



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Edward Hopper,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Edward Hopper on June 17, 1959. The interview was conducted by John Morse for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

JOHN MORSE: This is an interview with the American painter and etcher Edward Hopper conducted by John D. Morse for the Archives of American Art. It is being recorded in the board room of the Whitney museum on June 17, 1959. Mr. Hopper, in 1933 you wrote a very interesting statement called "Notes on Painting" for the catalogue of your exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. I wonder if first of all you would mind reading that for us and then perhaps commenting on it?

EDWARD HOPPER: It goes thus: My aim in painting has always been the most exact transcription possible of my most intimate impressions of nature. If this end is unattainable, so, it can be said, is perfection in any other ideal of painting or in any other of man's activities. The trend in some of the contemporary movements in art, but by no means all, seems to deny this ideal and to me appears to lead to a purely decorative conception of painting. One must perhaps qualify this statement and say that seemingly opposite tendencies each contain some modicum of the other. I have tried to present my sensations in what is the most congenial and impressive form possible to me. The technical obstacles of painting perhaps dictate this form. It derives also from the limitations of personality, and such may be the simplifications that I have attempted. I find in working always the disturbing intrusion of elements not a part of my most interested vision, and the inevitable obliteration and replacement of this vision by the work itself as it proceeds. The struggle to prevent this decay is, I think, the common lot of all painters to whom the invention of arbitrary forms has lesser interest. I believe that the great painters with their intellect as master have attempted to force this unwilling medium of paint and canvas into a record of their emotions. I find any digression from this large aim leads me to boredom. The question of the value of nationality in art is perhaps unsolvable. In general it can be said that a nation's art is greatest when it most reflects the character of its people. French art seems to prove this. The Romans were not an aesthetically sensitive people, nor did Greece's intellectual domination over them destroy their racial character, but who is to say that they might not have produced a more original and vital art without this domination. One might draw a not too far-fetched parallel between France and our land. The domination of France in the plastic arts has been almost complete for the last thirty years or more in this country. If an apprenticeship to a master has been necessary, I think we have served it. Any further relation of such a character can only mean humiliation to us. After all, we are not French and never can be, and any attempt to be so is to deny our inheritance and to try to impose upon ourselves a character that can be nothing but a veneer upon the surface. In its most limited sense, modern art would seem to concern itself only with the technical innovations of the period. In its larger, and to me irrevocable, sense, it is the art of all time of definite personalities that remain forever modern by the fundamental truth that is in them. It makes Moliere at his greatest as new as Ibsen or Giotto as modern as Cezanne. Just what technical discoveries can do to assist interpretative power is not clear. It is true that the Impressionists perhaps gave a more faithful representation of nature through their discoveries in out-of-door painting. But that they increased their stature as artists by so doing is controversial. It might here be noted that Thomas Eakins in the nineteenth century used the methods of the seventeenth, and is one of the few painters of the last generation to be accepted by contemporary thought in this country. If the technical innovations of the Impressionists led merely to a more accurate representation of nature, it was perhaps of not much value in enlarging their powers of expression. There may come, or perhaps has come, a time when no further progress in truthful representation is possible. There are those who say that such a point has been reached, an attempt to substitute a more and more simplified and decorative calligraphy. This direction is sterile and without hope to those who wish to give painting a richer and more human meaning and a wider scope. No one can correctly forecast the direction that painting will take in the next few years, but to me at least there seems to be a revulsion against the invention of arbitrary and stylized design. There will be, I think, an attempt to grasp again the surprise and accidents of nature and a more intimate and sympathetic study of its moods, together with a renewed wonder and humility on the part of such as are still capable of these basic reactions.

JOHN MORSE: Thank you, Mr. Hopper. Now that was thirty-six years ago you wrote that. How would you change it today?

JO HOPPER: Twenty-six.

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, I don't know. Well, I'd change that last paragraph.

JOHN MORSE: Twenty-six, of course, that's right. You'd change the last paragraph regarding the forecast. Well, we've all had to eat our words now and then on making prophesies. I have, I know.

EDWARD HOPPER: I think it will come true, but no one can tell when.

JOHN MORSE: We don't see, of course, much sign of it coming true today, a return to nature, which I, myself, predicted about fifteen years ago. But you're still convinced that ultimately we will.

EDWARD HOPPER: I think so.

JOHN MORSE: Do you suppose, just to speculate, might it come from its impetus in America? Apparently America is now leading in a style of abstract expressionism. I wonder if this return to nature, as we both have referred to it, might come out of here or out of France?

EDWARD HOPPER: I don't know. France has always been the leader in aesthetic movements, so it may come from France.

JOHN MORSE: Am I right that the current movement of abstract expressionism seems to be primarily American. We, in effect, are influencing France. Do you find that to be true today?

EDWARD HOPPER: I think it is so, but I am not quite sure.

JOHN MORSE: But in any event, do you feel that any new movement will possibly come again out of France?

EDWARD HOPPER: I think so.

JOHN MORSE: Mr. Hopper, in your statement you referred to Eakins as using a seventeenth century technique, which brings me to what to us a very important subject, and that is the materials which you have used, the ones you have found most successful and the ones that sometimes have not.

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, referring to Eakins, I had rather meant his larger naturalistic method as opposed to the abstractionists. That's what I had meant. I didn't refer to all the glazing and under-painting that was done during the Renaissance because I don't think he did that.

JOHN MORSE: Then back to your own techniques, you mentioned that only one painting that you know of of yours has had to have some attention, *Nighthawks* in Chicago. What was the occasion there?

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, I think it was because in order to get a greater whiteness and brilliancy, I had used zinc white in a certain area of the picture. I think that had cracked or scaled, whereas the parts where I had used lead white did not. This is my remembrance of it.

JOHN MORSE: Was that due, do you think, to an inferior quality of the zinc white or to the nature of the materials?

EDWARD HOPPER: No, I don't think so. I think that zinc white has a property of scaling and cracking. I know in the painting of houses on the exterior, zinc white is apt to crack and scale, whereas lead white merely powders off.

JOHN MORSE: I see.

EDWARD HOPPER: So I think that the same would be true in pictures.

JOHN MORSE: And since that experience you have avoided zinc white?

EDWARD HOPPER: Yes, I use only lead white now.

JOHN MORSE: Well, what pigments do you use normally?

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, the maker is Winsor and Newton. I can't remember all the colors exactly. There are about twelve or thirteen of them.

JOHN MORSE: And what about the support of your paintings, the canvas. Do you have any preference?

EDWARD HOPPER: Yes, I get the best Winsor and Newton linen I can acquire.

JOHN MORSE: I remember Lloyd Goodrich describing your studio as looking somewhat like a carpenter's shop. Do I imply from that you make you own stretchers?

EDWARD HOPPER: No, I do not.

JO HOPPER: God forbid!

JOHN MORSE: You do not make your own stretchers. On your Winsor and Newton linen, what sort of a ground do you usually have?

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, I use the ground of the already prepared canvas. I can't tell what this ground is exactly.

JOHN MORSE: You simply trust Winsor and Newton?

EDWARD HOPPER: I trust Winsor and Newton and I paint directly upon it.

JOHN MORSE: You mentioned glazes and so on a moment ago. Have you ever found those useful in your techniques?

EDWARD HOPPER: No, I rarely use glazes, rarely.

JOHN MORSE: Directly on the canvas, with Winsor and Newton paints. And what about varnishes? That seems to be a problem with painters, allowing enough time for the pictures to dry before they varnish them - the protective film, I'm speaking of.

EDWARD HOPPER: I never use a final varnish. I use a retouching varnish which is made in France, Libert [phon. sp.], and that's all the varnish I use. If the picture needs varnishing later, I allow a restorer to do that, if there's any restoring necessary.

JOHN MORSE: And about how long normally do you allow the picture to dry before you use this retouching varnish, or can it be done fairly quickly?

EDWARD HOPPER: It can be done almost at once, as soon as there is no tackiness in the pigment.

JOHN MORSE: Well, I've been told by restorers that the function of the protective varnish film, especially today with so much smoke and soot and so on, it's terribly important to keep the paints. Does your varnish, do you feel, give adequate protection?

EDWARD HOPPER: No, I don't think it does and it doesn't last very long on the surface, but it brings out the areas that have dried in and gives them their proper value. That's why I use it.

JOHN MORSE: I see. So then you more or less leave it up to a new owner or a restorer to put on the varnish film?

EDWARD HOPPER: Yes, yes I do. [INTERRUPTION]

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, I have a very simple method of painting. It's to paint directly on the canvas without any funny business, as it were, and I use almost pure turpentine to start with, adding oil as I go along until the medium becomes pure oil. I use as little oil as I can possibly help, and that's my method. It's very simple.

JOHN MORSE: It's pure linseed oil, you're speaking of?

EDWARD HOPPER: Yes, linseed oil. I used to use poppy oil, but I have heard that poppy oil is given to cracking pigment too, so I use it no longer. I find linseed oil and white lead the most satisfactory mediums.

JOHN MORSE: Now where, Mr. Hopper, did you learn such matters of technique. I am told that our art schools - Miss Isabel Bishop told me only the other day that at the Art Students League she got no such instruction in thin to heavy and so on - where did you?

EDWARD HOPPER: I don't remember having any such instruction at the Chase school under Robert Henri or Kenneth Miller. Any methods I have accepted after that came from perhaps experience or having read some of the works of Doerner or Mayer.

JOHN MORSE: Well, what is your feeling about this, what seems to be a great lack in our schools. Shouldn't everyone who picks up a paint brush to apply it to canvas know these fundamental rules? Shouldn't it be taught them?

EDWARD HOPPER: I think it should, and it could be taught.

JOHN MORSE: It should be. Are you aware, by the way, that one result of this indifference to technique is that there are a number of paintings in the Modern Museum which cannot be sent out on loan because they are too perishable?

EDWARD HOPPER: I didn't know that.

JOHN MORSE: Well, it is true. There are a number, for example, that I'm told, could not go with the current show

that's going to Russia. They can't stand the trip. Well, I'm happy to learn from my restorer friends, the Kecks in Brooklyn, that they have never yet had a painting of yours in their studio, and you don't know of any that have deteriorated.

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, there was one picture that came back from Chicago called *Nighthawks*, and in order to get a more brilliant and less warm white, in one area I used zinc white and I think that area was the one that needed restoring.

JOHN MORSE: But so far as you know, that's the only painting that has not behaved properly?

EDWARD HOPPER: I think so. [INTERRUPTION]

EDWARD HOPPER: They are the ones that come nearest to my thought and very few of them do.

JOHN MORSE: Well, of course, saying a thing in paint and saying it in words is quite different, but some must have appealed to you more, or appeal to you after they are finished.

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, I think that one did.

JOHN MORSE: Which is this again?

EDWARD HOPPER: *Cape Cod Morning*.

JOHN MORSE: *Cape Cod Morning*. Do you recall painting it? Was it a pleasure to paint, as well as to look at today?

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, they're a pleasure in a sense, and yet they're all hard work to me. I can't say that it's pure pleasure. There's so much technical concerns involved.

JOHN MORSE: Well, why do you like it today, do you think?

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, as I say, it comes perhaps nearer to my thought about the things than many of the others. That's all I can say about it.

JOHN MORSE: What about the many lighthouse paintings, *The Lighthouse at Two Lights*, which is perhaps one of your best known pictures. Does that convey the feeling that you had at the time?

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, perhaps it did, but I'm rather dissatisfied with the lighthouse pictures.

JOHN MORSE: Oh really, that's interesting. Why?

JO HOPPER: Now look, be careful. People who own *The Lighthouse* - I don't think you want to He should be trusted to [INTERRUPTION]

JOHN MORSE: Mr. Hopper, I'd like to ask you about one particular picture that made a great impression on me when I first saw it at the Whitney exhibition, and still does, although now it's in the Duncan Phillips Collection in Washington. That's *Approaching a City*, and I'm quite sure, or how I could put it into words, the particular appeal of this picture - maybe it's impossible - but I would like to hear what you have to say about it.

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, I've always been interested in approaching a big city in a train, and I can't exactly describe the sensations, but they're entirely human and perhaps have nothing to do with aesthetics. There is a certain fear and anxiety and a great visual interest in the things that one sees coming into a great city. I think that's about all I can say about it.

JOHN MORSE: Well, in painting this picture were you aware of these wonderful solid geometric forms that took my eye at once?

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, I suppose I was. I tried for those things more or less unintentionally.

JOHN MORSE: Would you go so far as to say it's almost a subconscious result, effect?

EDWARD HOPPER: Yes, I think so.

JOHN MORSE: But what was in your mind when you were painting it, I gather then, was this feeling of approaching a city?

EDWARD HOPPER: Yes.

JOHN MORSE: Thank you. [INTERRUPTION]

JOHN MORSE: Mr. Hopper, speaking of this picture, *Dawn Before Gettysburg*, I'd like to ask you how it turned out that suddenly you painted a Civil War scene?

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, I had always been interested in the history of the Civil War, and I have the photographic history of the Civil War in which Brady's photographs predominate, and I think that was what suggested it to me.

JOHN MORSE: You told me another story. When this picture was exhibited, that was in the Museum of Modern Art show?

EDWARD HOPPER: I think so.

JOHN MORSE: And what was the story about Einstein?

EDWARD HOPPER: Well, this was told to me by one of the guards, that Einstein, in going through the galleries, had stopped a long time before this picture of mine, and I suppose it was his hatred of war that prompted him to do this as these men were evidently all ready for the slaughter.

JOHN MORSE: I see, thank you. [INTERRUPTION]

JOHN MORSE: Mr. Hopper, this program which you picked out of the stack of photographs there which Mr. Goodrich supplied, *Apartment Houses*, painted 1923; I think you'd be interested to know that both Mr. Goodrich and I thought that in this painting you had, well in a sense, crystallized your style that was going to develop and has continued ever since. Do you agree with that?

EDWARD HOPPER: Yes, I think that is so.

JOHN MORSE: Do you recall where it was painted?

EDWARD HOPPER: It was painted in my studio on Washington Square. That's all I can remember about it.

JOHN MORSE: It is now, incidentally, in the Pennsylvania Academy, and I think it illustrates also a point that several people have made in your paintings, that one looks in and out. I think this also demonstrates another quality, which Mr. Goodrich has pointed out, that one feels that there are so many, many buildings on to the side, beyond this, this is just a segment, that it isn't isolated.

EDWARD HOPPER: I think I have tried to render that sensation in most of the pictures of this sort.

JOHN MORSE: And I think that most people will agree that you have succeeded admirably. Mr. Hopper, in 1953, you wrote a statement for the unfortunately short-lived magazine called *Reality*. I wonder if you would mind perhaps reading that for us now and perhaps commenting on it if you feel like it?

EDWARD HOPPER: I shall read the statement. It goes thus: Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world. No amount of skillful invention can replace the essential element of imagination. One of the weaknesses of much abstract painting is the attempt to substitute the inventions of the intellect for a pristine imaginative conception. The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm and does not concern itself alone with stimulating arrangements of color, form, and design. The term "life" as used in art is something not to be held in contempt, for it implies all of existence, and the province of art is to react to it and not to shun it. Painting will have to deal more fully and less obliquely with life and nature's phenomena before it can again become great.

JOHN MORSE: Thank you very much, Mr. Hopper.

JOHN MORSE ADDENDUM: The voice you have heard in the background occasionally was that of Mrs. Hopper, who accompanied her husband to the interview. It should be recorded here that Mr. Hopper has kept a record book of all his paintings, giving the following information: the canvas, the date of the painting, the pigments, and when the picture was completed. This book has been transcribed by the Whitney Museum, and a copy of it is in their possession. The ultimate disposal of the original ledger is of course undecided at this time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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