Edward Hopper (1882-1967)

Night Shadows
etching on paper, 1921
1991 Museum Purchase funded by Sunrise Collectors Club

image: (h) 6 7/8\" x (w) 8 ¼\"

Introduction
Edward Hopper was a leader in 20th century realism who captured the mood of America, without resorting to sentimentality. Hopper's name is synonymous with a particular look and mood of American scenes that contain overwhelming space, a sense of isolation, and a dash of mystery, his figures preoccupied with their own thoughts. His favorite subjects were barns, houses, deserted cafes and city streets. Hopper did not consider himself to be an "American Scene" painter such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood whom he felt created caricatures of America. Hopper's art does not idealize scenes of America, nor does it present a romantic image of American life. His compositional elements and use of dark and light areas enhance the mood of his images.

The Artist
Edward Hopper is one of the most popular American artists of all time, known for his melancholy, atmospheric depictions of American life. Born in Nyack, New York, in 1882, to conservative, middle class parents, he was encouraged to pursue his love of drawing, and studied commercial art and painting in New York from the age of 17. At the New York School of Art, he studied under Robert Henri, who favored a representational approach to art, and inspired many important artists associated with the movement known as American Urban Realism (later called the Ashcan School).

Paris was still the center of the art world in the early 20th century, and like many young American artists, upon graduating from college at the age of 24, Hopper traveled to Europe to further his studies and meet avant-garde artists. However, he was more interested in the Impressionist works he saw in Paris, than the abstract cubism favored by Picasso and Braque. On his return to New York the same year, Hopper tried to exhibit his Paris paintings, which had a predominantly pastel palette, but they were not well received. Disillusioned, he returned briefly to Paris in 1909, and began to paint with a stronger palette, paying more attention to the study of light, for which he would later become known.
Back in New York at the age of thirty, Hopper had never sold a painting, and was forced to do the commercial illustration he disliked, though it was relatively profitable. He began to study etching, a medium well suited to his drawing style which had a dramatic effect on the way he used light. For the first time, he began to receive praise for his work. One piece was accepted for the 1913 Armory Show, the landmark art exhibition that introduced Americans to the modern art movement.

Continuing with illustration to earn money, in his own work he focused on uniquely American scenes, such as storefronts, movie theaters, sidewalks, railroads, highways and gas stations. He married in 1924 and his wife Jo, also a painter, was the female model in almost all his subsequent work. Shortly after his marriage, he began to win praise from critics for his paintings of stark realist urban and rural scenes and by the early 1930s, when the Depression had raised a sense of nationalism for American art, Hopper had finally gained sufficient recognition to make a living from his own work. In 1933, the Museum of Modern Art held a large exhibition of Hopper’s work.

A tall, austere, and withdrawn man, Hopper served on juries, and won prizes and honors from prestigious art institutions, but he was often unable to paint due to bouts of depression. However, over the next three decades, he made some of his most important works, painting until his death in 1967. His wife bequeathed most of his work to the Whitney Museum of Art and examples of his work are found in major museums throughout the world.

Discussion
Though he is best known for his paintings, Edward Hopper’s etchings capture the essence that characterizes his work. It was through his early work in printmaking that Hopper refined the style and subject matter for which he would later become known. Working as an illustrator in New York in 1915, Hopper taught himself the etching process and spent the following decade working in the medium. This return to simplicity resulted in powerful images such as Night Shadows.

Etching is an intaglio printmaking process, a word that comes from the Italian word “to cut or incise.” In etching, a needle is used to draw on a metal plate through a wax ground. The plate is then submerged in an acid bath that bites into the surface of the metal only where it is unprotected by the wax, or “ground.” The longer it is left in the acid, the deeper the line will be incised in the plate. The plate is then removed from the acid bath, the ground is removed, and ink is forced into the etched grooves, the surface of the plate is then wiped to remove excess ink, and an impression is printed onto dampened paper using a printing press. If the artist is satisfied with the image, an “edition” can then be printed. This print, signed in pencil by Hopper, is one of a portfolio called The New Republic, that had an edition size of around 500-600.

The medium of etching lends itself well to Hopper’s stark illustrative style. The etched line gives a deep, velvety black to the areas of shadow built from the many hatched and crosshatched lines. These fine lines also give the work an energy and sense of movement, following the direction of the figure. Light is what characterizes all of Hopper’s work, and here he depicts light at its most dramatic, with the severe shadow of the lamppost that ominously dissects the
composition and the path of the figure. As with his paintings, he uses light in an almost theatrical way, enhancing the contrast between light and shadow, and in his night scenes, his use of lighting for emotional effect is at its best.

Hopper’s art communicates a sense of isolation, alienation and vulnerability. In Night Shadows the isolation, emptiness and frustration of urban life is communicated by the diminutive figure that is overwhelmed by towering buildings and looming black shadows. Hopper emphasizes the mood with an aerial perspective of the scene using foreshortening of the figure and buildings. The light surrounds and isolates the figure while the rest of the scene is cloaked in impenetrable darkness. There is a narrative quality to the work, as if it were a still from a black and white movie, perhaps a detective story in which the victim is stalked from the shadows.

There is a sense of “film noir” in Hopper’s work, a 1940’s Hollywood genre of film characterized by dark shadowy, high contrast images of urban, nighttime settings, and emotional alienation. Hopper certainly acknowledges that he was influenced by film, and was illustrating movie posters at around the same time that he made this etching. This image typifies the film noir cinematic genre, placing the viewer at an unusual elevated angle, and voyeuristic position, as they observe the solitary figure below. In later years, several directors acknowledged Hopper’s work as an influence on their cinematography.

**Style**

Hopper is considered to be one of America’s foremost Realist painters, but the artist was uncomfortable with the label of realism given to his work by critics; he considered himself an Impressionist. His work has a representational, illustrative quality that undoubtedly relates to his years spent working as a commercial artist. In addition, he trained with Robert Henri, who headed the Urban Realism movement of the early 20th century, a group of painters called the "Eight" who produced works capturing the new American identity that emerged from industry in the cities. Hopper had great respect for Henri, and was undoubtedly influenced by his ideas. That, combined with his travels to Europe and later, illustration work for movie posters, enabled Hopper to develop his own distinctive style. In his paintings, Hopper is known for his brilliant, clean use of color and strong, almost theatrical lighting. In his black and white etchings, there is the same dramatic light, and the image is built from crosshatched lines, reminiscent of Rembrandt’s moody etchings. There is a distinctive “mood” to Hopper’s work, a mysterious and above all, extremely personal vision of American life.

**Sources**


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