Part seven: Edward Hopper

Edward Hopper, the best-known American realist of the inter-war period, was born in the small Hudson River town of Nyack, New York State, on 22 July 1882. By 1899 he had already decided to become an artist, but his parents persuaded him to study commercial illustration because this seemed to offer a more secure future. He first attended the New York School of Illustrating, then in 1900 transferred to the New York School of Art. He remained at the School of Art for seven years, where William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri were his teachers. However, like most young American artists of the time, he longed to study in France. With his parents' help he finally left for Paris in October 1906. This was an exciting period in the history of the Modern movement, but Hopper claimed that its effect on him was minimal:

'Whom did I meet? Nobody. I'd heard of Gertrude Stein, but I don't remember having heard of Picasso at all. I used to go to the cafés at night and sit and watch. I went to the theatre a little. Paris had no great or immediate impact on me.'

In addition to spending some months in Paris, he visited London, Amsterdam, Berlin and Brussels. Hopper was able to repeat his trip to Europe in 1909 and 1910. On the second occasion he visited Spain as well as France. After this, though he was to remain a restless traveller, he never set foot in Europe again. Yet its influence had remained with him for a long time: he was interested in French literature, and he could quote Verlaine in the original. He said later: '[America] seemed awfully crude when I got back. It took me ten years to get over Europe.' For some time his painting was full of reminiscences of what he had seen abroad. This tendency culminates in *Soir Bleu* of 1914, a remembrance of the Mi-Carême carnival in Paris, and one of the largest pictures Hopper ever painted. It failed to attract any attention when he showed it in a mixed exhibition in the following year, and it was this failure which threw him back to working on the American subjects with which his reputation is now associated.

In 1913 Hopper made his first sale - a picture exhibited at the Armory Show in New York which brought together American artists and all the leading European modernists. In 1920 he had his first solo exhibition, at the Whitney Studio Club, but on this occasion none of the paintings sold. He was already thirty-seven and beginning to doubt if he would achieve any success as an artist - he was still forced to earn a living as a commercial illustrator. One way round this dilemma was to make prints, for which at that time there was a rising new market. These sold more readily than his paintings, and Hopper then moved to making watercolours, which sold even more easily.

His second solo show, at the Rehn Gallery in New York in 1924, was a sell-out. The following year, he painted what is now generally acknowledged to be his first fully mature picture, *House by the Railroad*. With its deliberate, disciplined sobriety, this is typical of what he would create thereafter. His paintings combine apparently incompatible qualities. Modern in their bleakness and simplicity, they are also full of nostalgia for the puritan virtues of the American past - the kind of peculiar nineteenth-century architecture Hopper liked to paint, for instance, could not have been more out of fashion than it was in the mid-192Os, when he first began to look at it seriously.

By this time Hopper, whose career was surprisingly little affected by the Depression, had become extremely well known. In 1929, he was included in the Museum of Modern Art's second exhibition, *Paintings by Nineteen Living Americans*, and in 1930 *House by the Railroad* entered the museum's permanent collection. In the same year, the Whitney Museum bought Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning*, its most expensive purchase up to that time. In 1933 Hopper was given a retrospective exhibition at the MOMA. This was followed, in 1950, by a fuller retrospective show at the Whitney.

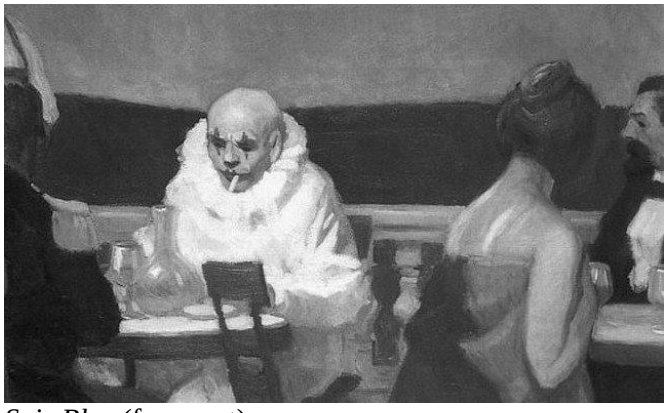
Hopper became a pictorial poet who recorded the starkness and vastness of America. Sometimes he expressed aspects of this in a traditional way, as, for

example, in his pictures of New England landscapes; sometimes New York was his context, with eloquent cityscapes, often showing deserted streets at night. Some paintings, such as his celebrated image of a gas-station, *Gas* (1940), even have elements which anticipate Pop Art.

He painted hotels, motels, trains and highways, and also liked to paint public and semi-public places where people gathered: restaurants, theatres, cinemas and offices. But even in these paintings he stressed the theme of loneliness - his theatres are often semi deserted, with a few spectators waiting for the curtain to go up or the performers isolated in the crude light of the stage. Hopper was a frequent movie-goer, and there is often a cinematic quality in his work. As the years went on, however, he found suitable subjects increasingly difficult to discover, and often felt blocked and unable to paint.

In particular, the rise of Abstract Expressionism left him marooned artistically, for he disapproved of many aspects of the new art. He died in 1967, isolated if not forgotten, and his wife Jo Hopper died ten months later. His true importance has only been fully realized in the years since his death."

- Text from "Lives of the Great 20th-Century Artists", by Edward Lucie-Smith



Soir Bleu (fragment)

House by the Railroad

Gas