

THE 21ST-CENTURY HOPPER

Exhibits of Edward Hopper, Painter

On an early Saturday afternoon in September at the Art Institute of Chicago, foot traffic is healthy as museumgoers stroll up and down the marble stairs and through long hallways that open into wide galleries. Most people in Gallery 262 of the American Art wing huddle around the only Edward Hopper currently on display in the museum, leaving the rest of the space and the art in the room relatively unoccupied.

Darby English, a professor of twentieth-century American Art at the University of Chicago, stands five feet from what is Hopper's most famous painting, *Nighthawks* from 1942, and surveys the bubbling crowd.

“If there is something that we need from Hopper now, it may be a reminder of what it means to seek connection—to oneself, to others, to one's environment—and a reminder to be curious about the world as it is in an undecorated, unimproved way,” English says. “If there is an interest in loneliness in 2016, it could be because we've convinced ourselves that we don't know what it means. In other words, it's exotic. All of these are possible reasons why a return to this artist makes sense now.”

In 2016 alone, Hopper's work has been celebrated in dozens of exhibits around the globe: from Paris and Cape Cod to London and Des Moines, and Minneapolis and Bologna to Chicago. Since his emergence onto the scene in the 1920s, Hopper has been recognized as one of the most brilliant painters of human experience. Though Hopper may not have agreed. “Maybe I am not very human,” he once said. “All I've ever wanted to do was to paint sunlight on the side of a house.”

Forty-nine years after his death, Hopper's paintings continue to attract millions of people across the globe, in exhibits that draw crowds of admirers. One such exhibit, *America After the Fall: Painting in the 1930s*, which debuted at the Art Institute of Chicago in June and left to travel to Paris and London in September, featured several Hopper works including *Gas* (1940), a painting of a lone man standing at a gas station on the corner of a desolate country road, and *New York Movie* (1939), a painting of a blonde woman standing alone at the entrance of a dark movie theater.

“We're really far away in my opinion, to see how it works, that it's a really fuzzy picture. There's a lot of surprise about the lack of resolution in the faces.” While other paintings, like those of the Impressionists, require you to stand back for the picture to snap into focus, you have to stand close to a Hopper to discover it fully, says English.

Though he teaches *Nighthawks* every spring, as a series of details rather than an overall image, he watches it now as if for the first time. Cupping his chin, his eyes dart across the quadrants of the canvas, as if it were a heat map thumping over the meaningful focal points.

“I rarely see people take details when they take photographs of paintings. They usually only want a picture of a picture. But I just saw someone zooming in on the three [figures] at the right hand side.”

English is referring to several of the *Nighthawks* subjects—the man with a fedora, the woman in red, and the bent over bartender—huddled but disengaged at the restaurant bar. It is one of the corners he teaches in the classroom because the triangular relationship between the figures is the high-point of the painting’s story.

“It’s a climax within an ambiguous meaning,” says English. “It’s where the interest or action is, but even in that moment there’s no clarity to what’s taking place.”

As he says this, the patrons ahead of us stand in various proximities to the painting, but it is as if the space itself has become a heat map, too: most of them have paused at the right hand side. Aside from some whispering, and the faint echoing of that whispering, the flurry of feet on the floor remains constant, perpetual—like the white noise of television static.

Whatever Hopper’s aims and whatever the public’s attraction to his work, understanding his paintings, for English, begins with technique—the verifiable, indisputable facts of the canvas. He suggests that Hopper is a well-trained enough painter to know how to foreshorten details to make it look as if there is contact taking place between people when there is, in fact, complete alienation.

“It’s a trick of painting that makes the hands of the woman in red and the man in the grey hat look like they’re touching. It’s the touching of the hands that makes us think the couple is one thing when actually within just a couple of seconds of apprehending that detail, we realize they’re separate from each other, and they have become something else.”

English cites Hopper’s technique, in which he uses a very dry oil paint on a dry brush, resulting in a grainier, grittier composition. English calls this “a scrim of grain” and he says it is where our sense of alienation—and Hopper’s reputation as the great painter of loneliness—may come from. His subjects are lone actors caught in a moment of isolation, but that is an interpretation that stems, according to English, from Hopper’s dry brush.

“If Hopper had elected to work in a wetter style with higher value colors,” as in painter Jean Singer Sargent, “our vocabulary for his art would be completely different.” English says it is Hopper’s techniques, of dry brushwork and graininess, that ultimately invoke feelings of isolation in us.

An artwork is better appreciated and understood if viewers first understand the techniques that produced it, according to English. That way, he says, we can all move toward a place of meaningful conversation and then meet with objection or agreement.

Hopper's international appeal is clear, but a question remains: Why is a 21st-century audience—one in which a fast-paced, digital lifestyle is the norm—stimulated by Hopper's old-fashioned, contemplative paintings of human experience?

According to Denise Mahoney, Collections Manager and Research Assistant in the American Art Department at the Art Institute of Chicago, the feeling of lost time is a possible reason.

“One can only speculate but I believe it to be the craft of his painting—the color and the light—mingled with the portrayal of American scenes and settings at specific points in time. And yet, the viewer can also feel empathy with the figures portrayed—with a bit of nostalgia for times passed.”

Mahoney notes that Hopper has never been out of favor. His exhibitions are always a draw. She believes, when all is said and done, that there was little more to his message than portraying the life and settings around him, perhaps viewed through the lens of his own shyness.

Despite—or because of—his shy tendencies, Hopper's paintings have a certain beauty and yearning to them, according to Verena Graupmann, Assistant Professor of Psychological Science at DePaul University, whose major area of research involves belonging. She says that in their careful conception and rendering, Hopper's paintings demonstrate a balance—and tension—between connection in our busy lives and embracing the value in moment-to-moment loneliness.

“We don't know how to be alone anymore. I think the bigger stressor for some people is the stigma of loneliness—that if you live a successful life you shouldn't be lonely. And that can add to whatever other stressors are associated with being lonely,” Graupmann says. She believes this is where Hopper can give relief: by wrapping loneliness and yearning in beauty within these iconic scenes “as an almost legitimization of being lonely.”

Still, Graupmann asserts that Hopper's paintings command human-to-human connection, which is particularly important to us today. She says that people come home and immediately turn on the television, or they wake up and the first thing they do is look at their phone because there might be a message. Graupmann says humans today, without realizing it, have conditioned themselves to respond to any possible cues of connection, especially technology-driven: a ding from an incoming message, a notification of a being reaching out to another being.

“And it works really well because that is our makeup as humans,” she says. “We're alert to social cues. In the past, if you were alone at home, you were alone. There was no social cue. Maybe the telephone would ring. But today, there are potential cues everywhere—and we don't even notice that we're making the decision to look.”

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Does Edward Hopper and his art, then, represent a kind of social cue to his wide net of admirers in the 21st-century—a cue of nostalgia for passed time, a cue to slow down, a cue to embrace loneliness? As viewers pause and ponder before his paintings, do they feel the subjects calling

out to them? At the end of the day we can only speculate about the cluster of strangers standing alone together before Hopper's paintings of pixelated faces.