

“Dramas of the human predicament”
Edward Hopper’s Prints

Menconi +
Schoelkopf



A critic called Hopper “The O. Henry of the Needle,” marveling at his ability to use an etched line to tell intriguing stories.¹ Another saw him as a descendant of Rembrandt.² Etching was the medium in which Hopper first made his mark in the art world: although his paintings had been ignored for more than a decade, in the early 1920s he was lauded in the art press as “an etcher who stands out” and as one whose prints were “conspicuous for their originality.”³ Etching became a

laboratory for ideas and themes Hopper worked out in small scale and black and white that he would later pursue on larger, more ambitious canvases: “After I took up etching, my painting seemed to crystallize,” he said.⁴ Hopper experimented with subjects that subsequently became part of his signature vision of American life as in *Girl on a Bridge* (fig. 1). But his prints were more than just a proving ground. A number of them are among his most affecting work in any medium.

FIG 1
Girl on a Bridge, 1923.
Etching, 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ × 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches
(image). Signed at lower
right: Edward Hopper



Hopper turned to printmaking during a period of artistic searching. Essentially self-taught, he made his first prints about 1915, after years of failing to gain traction as a painter and feeling frustrated and bored by the illustrations he'd produced for years to pay the bills. He was a natural draftsman, and etching—made by using a special needle to scratch a design into a wax-coated metal plate—was a relatively uncomplicated printmaking technique that made good use of his drawing skills. Ideas for prints seem to have come easily to him. During

his first few years of working with the medium he produced at least twenty plates (some of which he didn't bother to print, and these are known only in posthumous impressions). These record scenes inspired by his student years in France (fig. 2), images of friends, his musings on literary subjects, and other observations and imaginings. By the late teens, he had arrived at his mature etching style, and his prints were finding ready acceptance in exhibitions. He showed this work regularly at the National Academy of Design, the Whitney Studio Club, and in private galleries. They were modestly

FIG 2
Les Poilus, 1915–18.
Etching, 9 $\frac{5}{16}$ × 10 $\frac{1}{16}$
inches (sheet). Whitney
Museum of American Art



FIG 3
Night on the El Train, 1918.
 Etching, 7½ × 7¾ inches
 (image). Signed at lower
 right: Edward Hopper;
 signed in the plate at lower
 left: E. Hopper; inscribed
 at lower left: Night the "L"
 Train. \$18

FIG 4
A Corner, 1919. Etching,
 3⅝ × 4 inches (image).
 Signed in pencil at lower
 right: Edward Hopper;
 signed in print at lower
 left: E. Hopper; inscribed
 at lower left margin: \$10

priced to accommodate middle-class budgets: *Night on the El Train* (1918, fig. 3), a dramatically composed and skillfully etched image, cost only \$18; the evocative night scene *A Corner* (fig. 4) was only \$10 (which would be about \$230 and \$125 today). They found a steady market among collectors and museums, culminating in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's purchase of fifteen prints in 1925.

Although many of his etched images look simple, Hopper worked hard at his printmaking. He made carefully detailed, full-scale drawings for many of them (see, for example, the drawing for *Summer Twilight*, fig. 5, or the elegant study for *Evening Wind*, fig. 6), from which the subtle gradations of grays, deep rich blacks, and expressive use of white paper were developed into more dramatic contrasts in the prints. Hopper was thoughtful



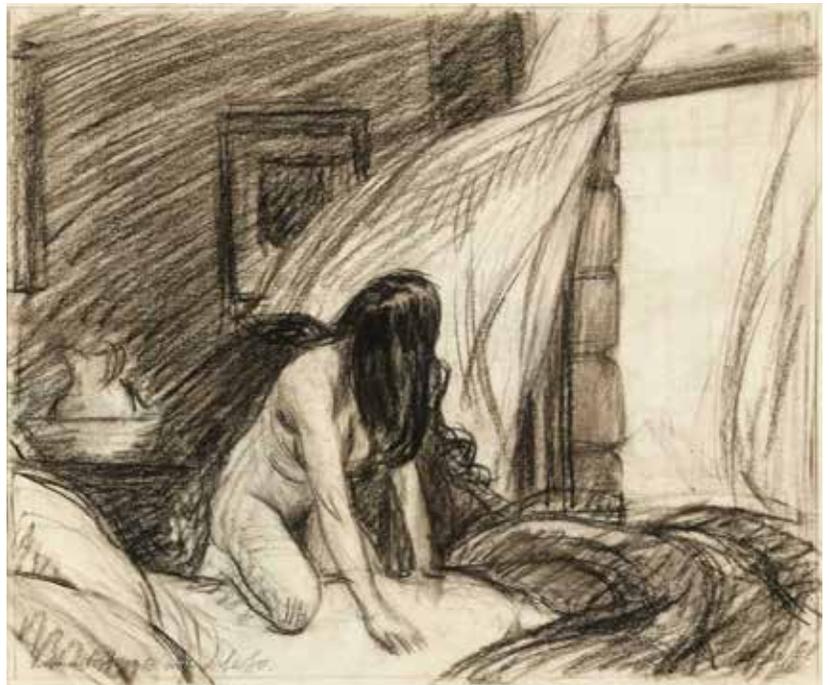


FIG 5
Drawing for "Summer Twilight," c. 1920.
 Graphite and crayon on paper, 8½ × 10 inches.
 Signed and inscribed with title at lower right:
 E. Hopper / Drawing for "Summer Twilight";
 inscribed at lower left:
 To Ned

FIG 6
 Study for *Evening Wind,*
 1921. Fabricated chalk on paper, 10⅛ × 13⅙ inches.
 Whitney Museum of American Art

about the materials and processes he used for his etchings. He sought out the blackest inks and brightest papers and avoided the complex virtuosic techniques that he derided as a misplaced infatuation with "the graces of the etching's methods."⁵ Contrasting his work with the aestheticism of the previous generation whose works were "printed discreetly on mellow old paper," a critic remarked that Hopper's "plates are honestly bitten and boldly printed on modern paper that is unashamed of its whiteness."⁶ His materials and his methods were considered hallmarks of both his modernity and his integrity. For Hopper, the strong contrasts and clarity his materials afforded were a means of revealing the emotional intensity of seemingly ordinary subjects.

But if Hopper rejected the preciousness of the previous generation of printmakers, he did find spiritual kinship with contemporaries such as





Martin Lewis and especially John Sloan, who recorded their observations of the modern city in a more straightforward manner. Hopper was careful to distinguish his intentions from the socially conscious Sloan's—of *East Side Interior* (fig. 7), he commented, “No implication was intended with any ideology concerning the poor and oppressed. The interior itself was my main interest—simply a piece of New York, the city that interests me so much.”⁷⁷ Nonetheless, he admired Sloan's ability to portray urban life with a “truer and fresher eye” than most other artists, and shared his desire to record his explorations of the city “with an honest simplicity of means.”⁷⁸ He was also profoundly interested in printmakers of the past. He repeatedly expressed deep respect for Rembrandt, whose poetic use of light, both spiritual and sensual, he emulated, and for the late nineteenth-century French etcher Charles

Méryon, another master of romantic sunlight, whose loving portrayals of the old buildings of Paris provided precedent for Hopper's use of architecture to convey feeling.⁷⁹

Hopper's prints not only introduce motifs and compositional devices for which he became known; they also reflect his sometimes uneasy relationship with his times. He produced more than thirty plates in the late teens and twenties. These include visual souvenirs of his summer working vacations in Gloucester and Maine, based on sketches made out-of-doors as he searched for subject matter. He portrayed lighthouses, sailing ships, austere landscapes populated only by cows, and rambling old buildings. His prints of the city, like his later oils, show parks, street corners, dreary apartment interiors, and carriages in the El train. In the prints he developed a stylistic vocabulary of odd, dramatic viewing angles; diagonals that

FIG 7
East Side Interior, 1922.
Etching, 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 9 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches
(image). Signed and
inscribed at lower right:
Edward Hopper;
inscribed with title at
lower left: East Side
Interior \$50

FIG 8

Night Shadows, 1921.
Etching, 6 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 8 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches
(image). Signed at lower
right: Edward Hopper;
inscribed with title
at lower left: Night
Shadows \$30



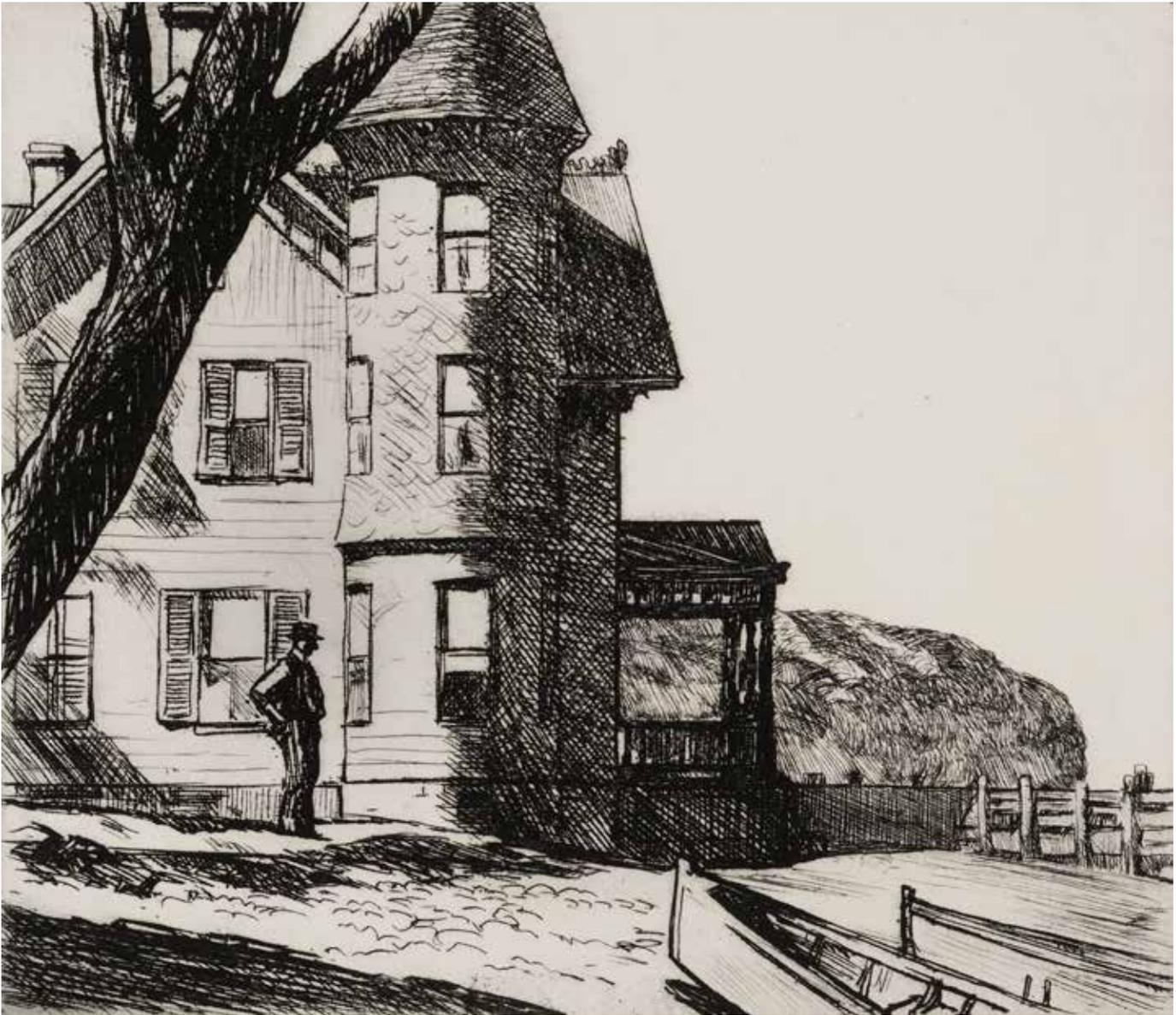
FIG 9

American Landscape, 1920.
Etching, 7 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 12 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches
(image). Signed at lower
right: Edward Hopper;
signed and inscribed
with title at lower left:
American Landscape /
Edward Hopper / 3
Wash. Sq. No. New York



function as trajectories, hurtling the viewer into the scene; and above all, light as a vehicle for mystery and suggestion. Hopper was a committed realist, but these prints are not simple documents. They are distillations of experience fueled by invention. And they speak for those who, like Hopper, were not entirely comfortable with modernity.

Night Shadows (fig. 8) and *American Landscape* (fig. 9), Hopper's other masterpieces of printmaking were made at the beginning of an era known as both the Jazz Age and the Machine Age, a time characterized by an overt dedication to progress and an underlying anxiety about change. *American Landscape* is, on the one hand, a humorous view



of awkward animals seen from behind, while on the other it is a brooding meditation on the passage of time. The cows make their way across railroad tracks that drive relentlessly to the future; they lumber rather mournfully toward a house tied to the past. The critic for *The New York Times* found in *Night Shadows* a similar anxiety about technological progress, interpreting it as showing “the black sword of the machine lying across a lighted path upon which stands man the pigmy.”¹⁰

The unexceptional, old-fashioned, vernacular architecture that would become a prominent feature of Hopper’s pictorial vocabulary first appears in images like *American Landscape*, *House by a River* (fig. 10), and *Summer Twilight*. The

Victorian style was completely out of fashion in the 1920s, an age that simultaneously embraced streamlined skyscrapers and brick colonials. Hopper, ever the contrarian, returned again and again to these much-reviled buildings, in his prints and then in his watercolors. Critics, while despising the houses and the era that produced them, marveled at Hopper’s ability “to extract beauty from them,”¹¹ celebrating his talent for identifying disenfranchised relics of history and making them into subjects of current interest.

Hopper was also credited with revealing “the beauty hidden in commonplaceness”¹² in his city views. His images of people in parks, or riding the El, or gazing out their apartment windows at

FIG 10
House by a River, 1919.
 Etching, 6¾ × 8⅞ inches
 (image). Signed and
 inscribed at lower right:
 Edward Hopper / [with the
 price] 18-; inscribed with
 title at lower left in another
 hand: House by a River



FIG 11
Evening Wind, 1921.
 Etching, 7 × 8¼ inches
 (image). Signed at lower
 right: Edward Hopper

FIG 12
The Lonely House, 1922.
 Etching, 7⅞ × 9⅞
 inches (image). Signed
 at lower right: Edward
 Hopper; inscribed with
 title at lower left: The
 Lonely House

the passing scene, all began as observations of the everyday. But then, as the perceptive critic Henry McBride wrote of *Evening Wind* (fig. 11), they become infused with a “sense of the dramatic possibilities of ordinary materials.”¹³ Hopper had little interest in the conventional pictorial motifs of the modern city—skyscrapers, machines—or in New York’s bustling crowds. Etchings such as *Night Shadows*, *Evening Wind*, and *The Lonely House* (fig. 12) spoke for those uneasy with the city’s raucous energy and conspicuous pursuit of progress. As Hopper’s close friend, Guy Pène du Bois, noted, “His New York City . . . is one that people with their relentless need for change have overlooked: it is a part of its backwaters untouched by the swift current of the main tide.”¹⁴

Above all, the etchings introduce Hopper’s lifelong preoccupation with the rendering of





FIG 13
Eleven A.M., 1926.
 Oil on canvas, 28½ ×
 36⅞ inches. Hirshhorn
 Museum and Sculpture
 Garden, Washington,
 D.C.

light—both the “sunlight on the side of a house” and the “long shadows of early and late sunlight.”¹⁵ These images, too, began as memories of what he saw in his walks around the city, but reveal what Hopper would later call “my most intimate reaction to the subject as it appears when I like it most.”¹⁶ Light was also a vehicle through which Hopper portrayed solitude. His urban scenes are rarely populated by more than one or two characters and provide backdrops for private stories that remain unresolved—what the esteemed print scholar Carl Zigrosser called “dramas of the human predicament.”¹⁷ In *Evening Wind* and *East Side Interior*, he created two intimate and tender views of women, alone and unaware that they are being observed, who turn toward the light with both curiosity and longing. Made when Hopper was about 40 and still unattached, these prints are personal, but they are also universal, dramatizing

the fantasy and romantic possibility offered by the anonymous city. The subtle tension Hopper suggests between the dark interior spaces—familiar, yet confining (note the baby carriage parked close to the young seamstress in *Evening Wind*)—and the greater possibilities and risks of the world beyond the window, introduce a theme he would return to again and again in such masterful oils as *Eleven A.M.* (fig. 13) and *Morning in a City* (1944, Williams College Museum of Art).

In 1923, Hopper received the Logan Prize from the Chicago Society of Etchers for *East Side Interior* in February, and in March the same print was awarded the W. A. Bryan Prize for the best American print at the International Printmakers Exhibition in Los Angeles. In November Hopper had unexpected success with a group of watercolors submitted to the Brooklyn Museum’s inaugural contemporary watercolor exhibition. While one

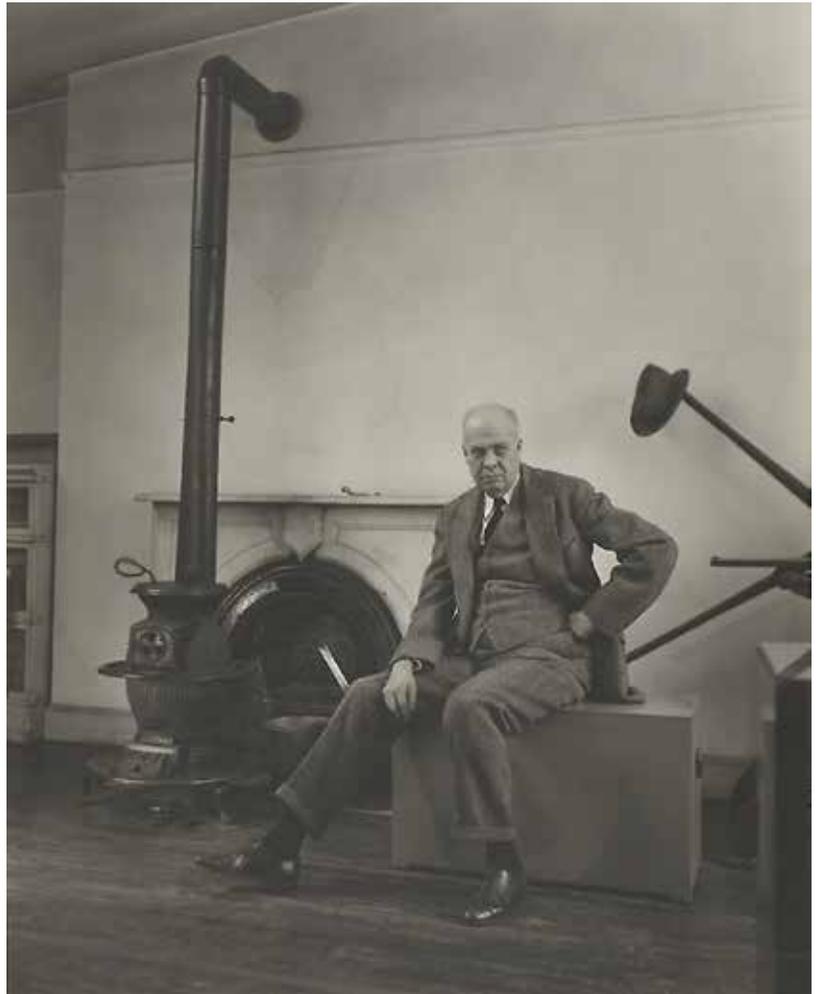
FIG 14

Hopper's Hat on His Etching Press, after 1924. Fabricated chalk on paper, 11 × 15½ inches. Whitney Museum of American Art



FIG 15

Berenice Abbott, *Edward Hopper*, *Greenwich Village, New York*, 1947–48. Gelatin silver print, 16 × 12⅞ inches. Art Institute of Chicago



critic of the show still referred to him as “the etcher,” another gushed about the watercolors: “We rejoice that he is using the medium.”¹⁸ Brooklyn bought *The Mansard Roof* for \$100—Hopper’s first sale of a painting in ten years. The next year he sold sixteen watercolors for \$150 each, and in 1924 the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts paid \$400 for *Apartment Houses*, his first oil to be purchased by a museum. At this point, Hopper decided to set aside his printmaking to concentrate on painting, and thereafter he made only one or two more prints. But he retained his affection for his etchings, which continued to be a source of income and critical acclaim. He never gave up his etching press. It remained in his apartment/studio on Washington Square North for the rest of his life. While he sometimes used it as a hat rack, it was always a significant presence—a drawing of his press with his trademark fedora resting on it (fig. 14) has been interpreted as “a commanding surrogate self-portrait.”¹⁹ And his prints became a way he showed his appreciation for other artists and friends. In 1949, when Berenice Abbott came to photograph him in his studio (fig. 15), he was so pleased with the result that he gave her an impression of *Night Shadows* as thanks.



CAROL TROYEN, Kristin and Roger Servison Curator Emerita of American Paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Yale University, and also earned her

Ph.D. from Yale. Her 2007–2008 exhibition of the works of Edward Hopper was seen in Boston, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. She has lectured at museums across the country and in 2011, she served as Interim Chief Curator at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. She is now an independent scholar.

NOTES

1. [*New York Evening Post*, April 1922, quoted in Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 140.

2. Virgil Barker, “The Etchings of Edward Hopper,” *The Arts* 5 (June 1924), p. 324.

3. Henry McBride, “Art Exhibitions of a Busy Week,” *New York Herald*, February 26, 1922, sec. 3, p. 5; Barker, “Etchings of Hopper,” p. 323.

4. Hopper, quoted in Suzanne Burrey, “Edward Hopper: The Emptying Spaces,” *Arts Digest* (April 1, 1955), p. 10.

5. Carl Zigrosser, “The Etchings of Edward Hopper,” in Zigrosser, ed., *Prints: Thirteen illustrated Essays on the Art of the Print* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), pp. 157, 160.

6. Barker, “Etchings of Hopper,” p. 323. See also Guy Pène du Bois, who decried print collectors’ concern for virtuosity and “rarity” over artistic expression. “Edward Hopper, Draughtsman: An Appreciation of the Work of an Etcher Who Does Not Belong to the Rank and File,” *Shadowland* 7 (October 1922), p. 22.

7. Hopper to Marian Ragan, February 10, 1956, quoted in in Avis Berman, *Edward Hopper’s New York* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Books, 2005), p. 53.

8. Edward Hopper, “John Sloan and the Philadelphians,” *The Arts* 11 (April 1927), pp. 171, 173.

9. Katharine Kuh, “Edward Hopper,” *The Artist’s Voice: Talks with Seventeen Modern Artists* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002, reprint of 1962 edition published by Harper & Row), p. 135.

10. “George Hart and Edward Hopper,” *The New York Times*, February 11, 1923, sec. 7, p. 7.

11. “Hopper’s Water Colors,” *Art News* 23 (October 18, 1924), p. 2. Hopper later confessed, “at Gloucester, when everyone else would be painting ships and the waterfront, I’d just go around looking at houses,” Hopper, as quoted by William Johnson, typescript, October 30, 1956, Whitney Museum of American Art Archives, Edward and Josephine Hopper Collection.

12. Barker, “Etchings of Hopper,” p. 325.

13. Henry McBride, “Art Exhibitions of a Busy Week,” p. 5.

14. Guy Pène du Bois, “The American Paintings of Edward Hopper,” *Creative Art* 8 (March 1931), pp. 190–91.

15. Hopper famously said, “Maybe I am not very human. What I wanted to do was to paint sunlight on the side of a house.” Lloyd Goodrich, “Notes of Conversation with Hopper,” typescript, April 20, 1949, Whitney Museum of American Art Archives, reprinted in Carter E. Foster, *Hopper Drawing* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2013), p. 222, and Hopper as quoted in Levin, *Intimate Biography*, p. 531.

16. Hopper, letter to Charles H. Sawyer, Oct. 19, 1939, Addison Gallery of American Art Archives, Andover, MA.

17. Zigrosser, “The Etchings of Edward Hopper,” p. 160.

18. “Water Colorists Shown in Brooklyn,” *Art News* 22 (November 17, 1923); Royal Cortissoz, “Charming Water Colors and Drawings: A Fine Collection at the Brooklyn Museum,” *New York Tribune*, November 25, 1923, sec. 6, p. 8.

19. Foster, *Hopper Drawing*, p. 58.