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ART REVIEW

# The Whitney's Good Old Friend Is Joined by Some of His

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**By Roberta Smith**

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It's Edward Hopper time again at the Whitney Museum of American Art. A little more than four years ago the museum's 75th-anniversary celebration, "[Full House](#)," devoted an entire floor to his work.

Now he's back, with "Modern Life: Edward Hopper and His Time," a slightly snoozy, ultimately satisfying floor-filling display that opened on Thursday. As the title implies, it mixes Hopper's efforts with those of his contemporaries. It also beefs up the proceedings with a handful of major loans from nearby museums.

These include the voluptuous shell of glowing, orange-tinted space that is the Newark Museum's "Sheridan Theater," which depicts one of the Art Deco movie palaces that Hopper so loved to paint. The scene is inhabited by a lone woman who watches the screen standing at the back of the house, her chunky figure contradicting the flowing architecture. Also here is the Neuberger Museum of Art's imposing "Barber Shop" of 1931, with its monumental shaft of sunlit white wall imbuing a manicurist reading a magazine with unexpected grandeur.

Loans aside, Hopper is part of the Whitney brand, a reliable box-

office draw, as identified with the museum as Picasso is with the Museum of Modern Art. There are more Hoppers in the Whitney collection than anywhere else — some 2,500 works — thanks to a bequest from the artist's widow.

The show is largely a condensed version of one organized by Barbara Haskell, the Whitney's veteran curator, and Sasha Nicholas, its senior curatorial assistant, that traveled last year to Hamburg and Rotterdam. It mixes and matches 32 paintings and works on paper by Hopper with 40 efforts by nearly 30 artists and photographers whose lives overlapped with his. (He was born in Nyack, N.Y., in 1882 and died in his studio on Washington Square Park in 1967.)





“Modern Life: Edward Hopper and His Time,” at the Whitney, includes his 1937 work “The Sheridan Theater,” one of the Art Deco movie palaces that Hopper loved to paint. Newark Museum

The curators might have dug deeper into the Whitney’s Hopper vastness for a few more-unfamiliar, less-chestnutty works than some of those here. But it is hard to say. It may be in the nature of Hopper’s art — and thus of exhibitions of his art — to leave you wanting.

With its supernal stillness, its disinterest in detail, its forthright brushwork and its seemingly impenetrable ambiguity, Hopper’s art rarely feels on target or settled. He tends to avoid the reassuring rightness we expect from painting’s greats. Rather than hit you between the eyes, his work tends to sneak around behind. One moment you’re distracted and a little resentful; the next, you’re hooked.

The hook is the strangely unreal realism. Hopper’s paintings depict a fragment of the familiar world as a deliberate, even forced

confluence of form, paint and light — a nearly abstract distillation in which little distinction is made between animate and inanimate. His paintings capture snapshots of life and hold them for eternity, but they can expand exponentially internally, stretched out by surfaces that are at once weirdly solid yet provisional, capable of being dismantled if studied over time.

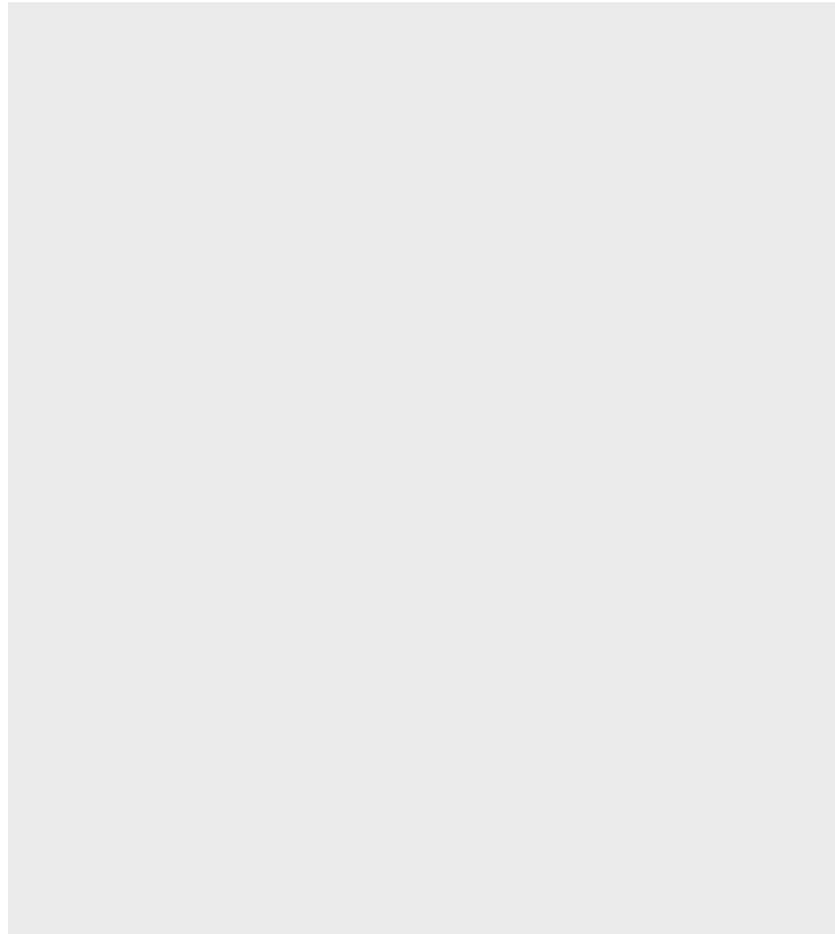
This show accommodates such study by creating a cat's cradle of telling differences and similarities, proving once more that nothing illuminates an artist's work than something by a different artist.

It unfolds in five galleries, each with a different emphasis and cohort. Throughout, Hopper plays what might be called the straight man, offering quiet, repose and glacial surfaces.

The supporting cast ranges from the photographers Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand — with whom Hopper shared a penchant for monumentality — to Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh and Paul Cadmus, whose notion of form often seems shabby and overwrought next to Hopper's.

There is an emphasis on artists to whom Hopper was close: John Sloan (1871-1951), the Ash Can realist who was an important mentor early in his career; Guy Pène du Bois (1884-1958), who flavored his own implicitly classical treatment of the figure with a

dash of caricature; and Charles Burchfield (1893-1967), a more visionary interpreter of American life than Hopper, who was also lumped together with American Scene painters (like Benton, Marsh and perhaps Cadmus).



Charles Demuth, "My Egypt," from 1927, part of an exhibition at the Whitney of works by Hopper and his contemporaries. Whitney Museum of American Art

Off the elevator [Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand's 1921 "Manhatta,"](#) possibly America's first avant-garde film, flickers on the wall. Inspired by Walt Whitman's lyrical odes to the city, it is a great opener, even if — pardon the anthropomorphizing — the nearby Hoppers seem a bit taken aback. In Hopper's 1908 view of a regal tugboat, rendered in terra cotta pinks, even the rosy smoke emerging from its black smokestack feels solid. And the implacable form in his "Queensborough Bridge" is as much an immense four-legged dinosaur as a symbol of modernity.

The city — especially at night — dominates the first two galleries, where Hopper's work is grouped with efforts of Stieglitz, Strand, Sloan and Pène du Bois. His three trips to Paris — made from 1906 to 1910 — are acknowledged in the small "Le Bistro or the Wine Shop," which suggests an allegiance to the grace of Corot and Monet. Next to it hangs some all-American alienation in a pre-Paris work full of Hopper's future: a grisaille study of a man sitting by himself in the front row of a theater, waiting for the show to start.

In "New York Interior," a woman in a corset and crinolines sits on bed mending as if preparing for a night on the town or the stage. Her outstretched pose is reminiscent of both the ballet dancers and

bathers of Degas, whom Hopper admired. One of the Whitney's least familiar Hoppers is the 1912 "American Village," in which we look over a window ledge to a luminous patch of street, lined by stores and dotted by people and cars. It could be by Walker Evans.

Gaston Lachaise's big bronze nude waves you into the next gallery, but you may only have eyes for the Museum of Modern Art's "Night Windows," where once again you overlook the action. This time it is a glowing interior visible through a curving set of windows framed in near darkness: nothing too racy, just a woman bending over to pick something up.

Hopper takes a back seat in the next gallery, where four of his watercolors of buildings and boats hang with images by different Precisionists. They include Sheeler's 1932 "River Rouge Plant," a blockade of white forms and gray reflections; George Ault's "Hudson Street," whose forms have the warm tones and brittleness of the Italian Primitives; and Charles Demuth's view of pharaonic grain elevators titled "My Egypt," a phrase whose catch-in-your-throat exhilaration is more vivid than the actual image. The message here: Hopper may look old fashioned, but he wanted something deeper.

He finds it in the next and fourth gallery, where he and Burchfield

meet for a moment in a series of poignantly restrained images of street scenes and white clapboard houses. Then Hopper peels off to various almost Surrealistic ruminations on solitude. In five paintings he posits single stage-set-like structures — a house, a gas station, a railroad watchtower, a storefront and then another — against vast expanses of forest or plain.

And in the fifth gallery the American Scene painters have a go at him. “Sheridan Theater” and “Barber Shop” hold their own, along with the better-known (if not necessarily better) “A Woman in the Sun.” It depicts a nude woman standing in her bedroom in a yellow rectangle of sunlight, looking toward the window it streams through as if facing her destiny.

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