

Edward Hopper

Edward Hopper (1882-1967) painted the independence and the loneliness of 20th-Century America. He was a realist in the days when most painters tended toward the abstract. Yet his paintings incite the imagination far more than the works of any abstract expressionist. His enigmatic images force the viewer to wonder what is going on:

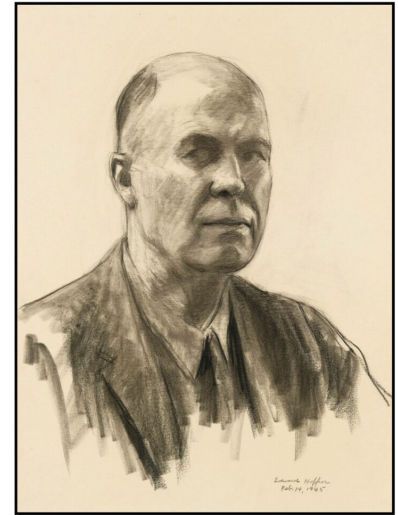
Hopper was neither an illustrator nor a narrative painter. His paintings don't tell stories. What they do is suggest—powerfully, irresistibly—that there are stories within them, waiting to be told. He shows us a moment in time, arrayed on a canvas; there's clearly a past and a future, but it's our task to find it for ourselves. (Block, 2016, p viii).

More than any other painter, Hopper has inspired writers to find the stories and meanings behind his paintings. This post summarizes his life, describes his working methods, and presents some of his pictures together with the writings they have stimulated.

Early Life

Hopper was born in Nyack, a town on the Hudson River some 25 km north of the upper end of Manhattan (Levin, 1980a, 2007). He decided early to become an artist and studied at the New York School of Art and Design in Greenwich Village, where he was taught by William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri, among others. Hopper considered Thomas Eakins his artistic hero.

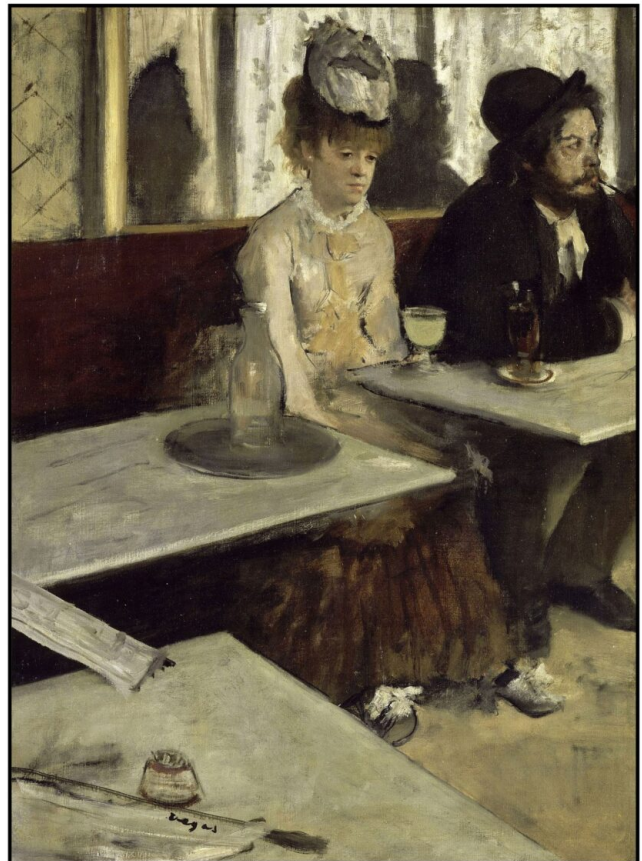
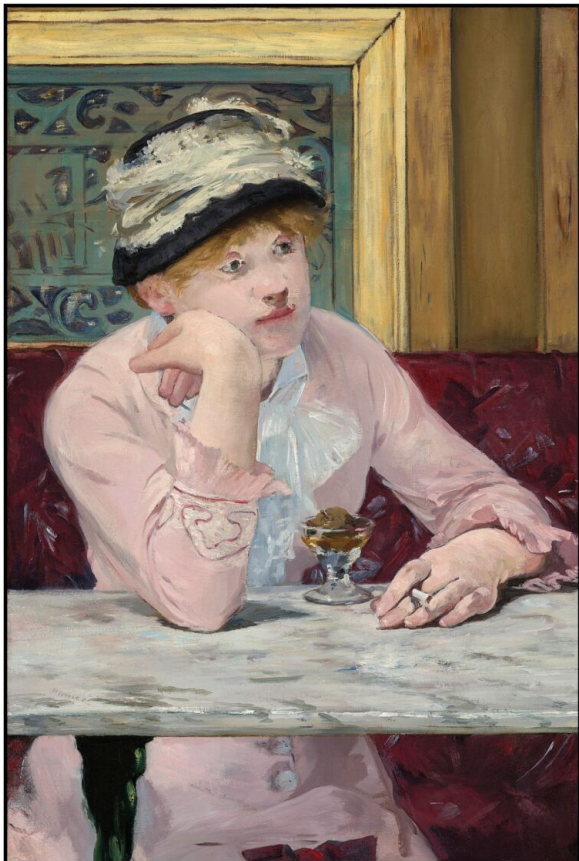
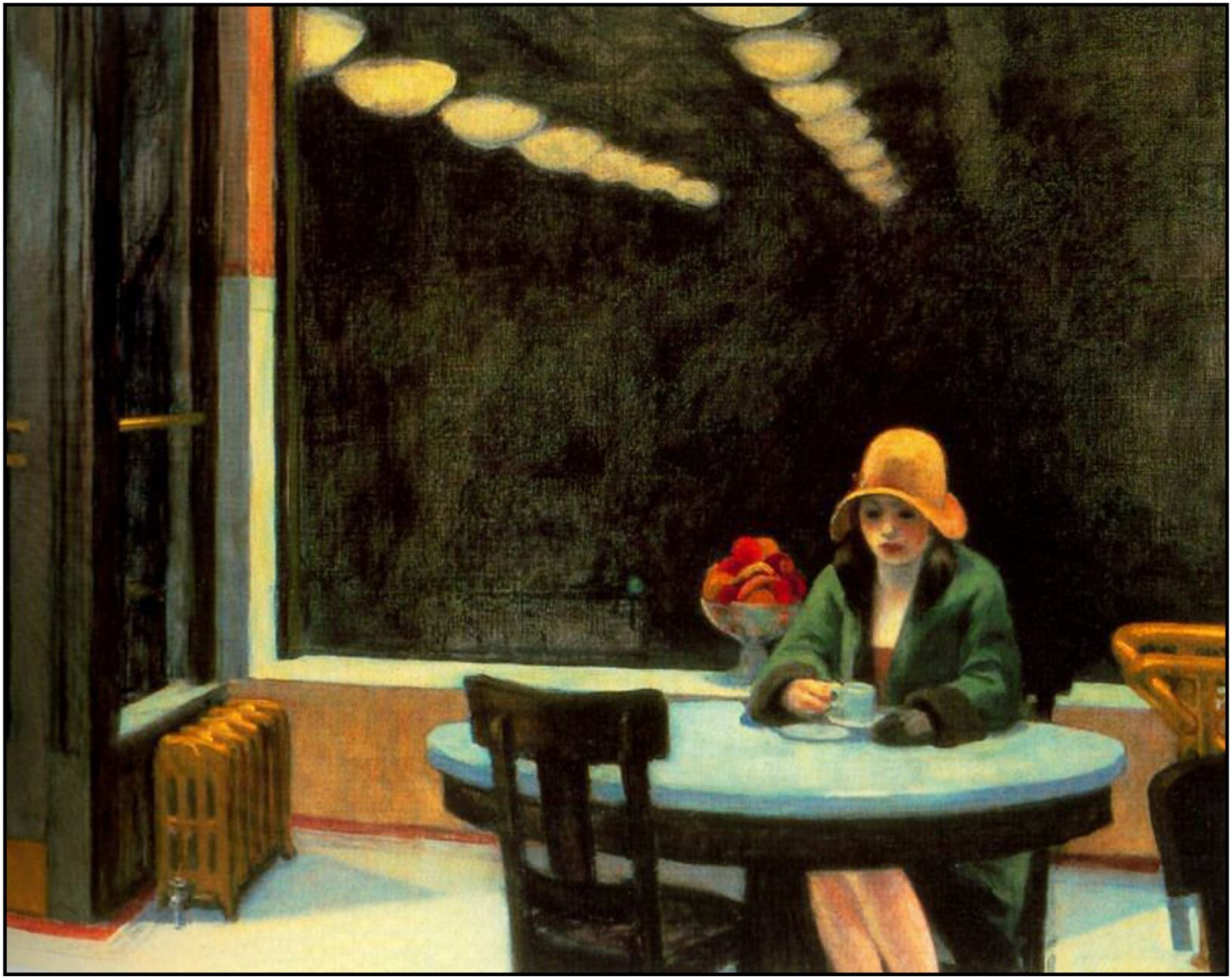
The 1903 self-portrait, illustrated on the left below, shows the conscientious young student. The others are from 1930, when he was becoming successful, and from 1945 after he had become famous.



In 1906 Hopper made his first trip to Paris, where he stayed for almost one year, making occasional journeys to other cities in Europe. He returned for two further shorter visits in 1909 and 1910. In Paris, he visited the museums, attended classes, and sketched and painted *en plain air*. The illustration on the right from the graphic biography by Rossi and Scarduelli (2021) was derived from a 1907 photograph of the young student sketching (Levin, 2007, p 68).

Hopper was influenced by the impressionists, in particular Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas (Kranzfelder, 2002, p 150). His later painting *Automat* (1927) shows similarities in mood and

structure to Manet's *The Plum Brandy* (1877) and to Degas' *The Absinthe Drinker* (1876):



Another influence was Eugène Atget who had photographed the empty streets of Paris (Llorens & Ottinger, 2012, p. 263). Since his camera required long exposure-times, Atget chose to photograph early in the morning before there were any people moving around in the streets. His haunting images foreshadow Hopper's lonely city-scenes. Walter Benjamin in his *Little History of Photography* (1931) remarked that Atget's photographs sometimes seem to portray the "scene of a crime." The same can be said of many of Hopper's paintings.

The ongoing modernist revolution in Paris had no effect on the young American. Hopper paid little attention to the post-impressionists (Van Gogh, Cézanne and Gauguin), and was apparently unaware of the current work of painters like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse.

One of the last paintings from Hopper's time in Europe was entitled *Soir Bleu* (1914). Various characters interact on a café terrace:



On the left is a *macquereau* (French: mackerel, slang for "pimp"). In the center, a garishly made-up prostitute attempts to entice a client from a table where three men are seated:

someone who appears from his beret to be an artist, a soldier with epaulettes on his uniform, and a clown in full make-up and costume. On the right a bourgeois man and woman survey the scene. One is tempted to consider Hopper as the clown, out of place and without voice among the French. Three of the figures are smoking: the clown, the pimp and the artist. This may suggest something similar in their livelihoods: they all survive by selling to the rich and powerful: the couple on the right and the soldier. Hopper exhibited the painting when he returned to New York, but it was never sold and stayed in storage at his studio until his death.

The painting's title may come from a poem *Sensation* (1870) by Rimbaud, which in its second verse talks of being mute like the clown.

*Par les soirs bleus d'été j'irai dans les sentiers,
Picoté par les blés, fouler l'herbe menue :
Rêveur, j'en sentirai la fraîcheur à mes pieds.
Je laisserai le vent baigner ma tête nue.*

Je ne parlerai pas ; je ne penserai rien.
Mais l'amour infini me montera dans l'âme ;
Et j'irai loin, bien loin, comme un bohémien,
Par la Nature,—heureux comme avec une femme.

Summer's deep-blue evenings I will go down the lanes,
Tickled by the wheat-berries, trampling the short grass:
Dreaming, I will feel the coolness at my feet.
I will let a northern wind bathe my bare head.

I will not stir my tongue; I will think of nothing.
Yet love infinite shall at once mount in my soul;
And I will go far, very far, like a gypsy,
Through Nature,—enchanted as with a woman.
(translation by Gregory Campeau)

Back in New York, Hopper was unable to sell more than an occasional painting. He therefore supported himself by

providing illustrations for magazine stories and advertisements. For a while he learned etching with Martin Lewis. From these studies, he developed a better sense of how light plays on surfaces, especially at night. He also began to define spaces more distinctly than the impressionists that he had hitherto been following.

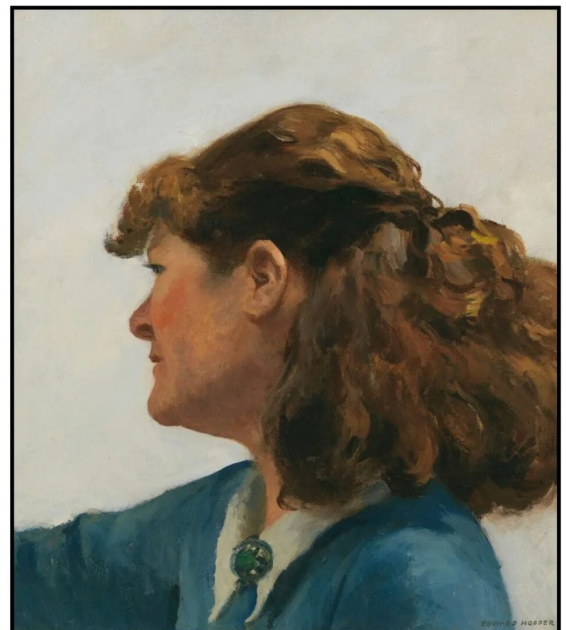
In 1913, Hopper moved into the top floor of Number 3, Washington Square North, Greenwich Village. This was his studio and residence for the rest of his life. The following illustration shows the building, the roof-top view from the top floor (Levin, 1985) and Hopper's 1932 painting *City Roofs*:



Jo Nivison

In the summer of 1923 on a painting trip to Gloucester, Massachusetts, Hopper re-encountered Jo Nivison, who had been

a fellow-student at the New York School of Art and Design. They both painted water-colors and on their return to New York, Nivison was instrumental in getting Hopper's work exhibited. They enjoyed each other's company and were married in 1924. Both were 41 years old. They were physically and psychologically different: he was 6 ft 5 inches while she was just 5 ft; "she was gregarious, outgoing, sociable and talkative, while he was shy, quiet, solitary, and introspective" (Levin, 2007, p 168). The following illustration shows a 1906 portrait of: *The Art Student Miss Josephine Nivison* by Robert Henri, a photograph of Jo and Edward (from the 1930s), and a 1936 painting of *Jo Painting* by Hopper.



Edward painted and Jo took care of things. She modelled for his figure paintings, and kept meticulous records of his paintings in a set of notebooks. She sometimes rebelled against her help-mate status, and urged her husband to promote her own artistic career. There were arguments, some of which degenerated into physical fights. Nevertheless, their marriage lasted until Edward's death in 1967. Jo died a year later, leaving all her husband's unsold paintings to the Whitney

Museum of American Art. The museum also accepted her paintings, but many of these were discarded. Jo Hopper was not given the recognition that she deserved (Colleary, 2004; Levin, 1980b, 2007, pp. 717-728; McColl, 2018).

Working Methods

Although Hopper worked *en plein air* in France and during his summer excursions to New England, most of his pictures were painted in the studio from sketches made *in situ*. His images are thus based on reality but tempered by the imagination. The perspectives are altered; the surfaces are simplified and flattened; the colors are changed to what they might have been rather than what they were. His 1946 painting *Approaching a City* shows the rail lines of the Metro-North Railroad entering the tunnel at 97th Street to travel under Park Avenue to Grand Central Station. The painting provides a heightened representation of what a traveler might experience coming into a city for the first time. The illustration below shows the painting together with contemporary (Conaty, 2022, p 13) and more recent (Levin, 1985) views of the scene.



The perspective of the painting would only be possible from

the level of the rail-lines. Hopper has tried to see from the point of view of a passenger in a train rather than a pedestrian on Park Avenue. Even if the graffiti were erased, the opposite wall is (and was) not as it appears in the painting. Hopper has flattened its texture and removed the cables. The buildings above the wall are not those on Park Avenue, either now or when the painting was made. Conaty (2022, p 13) remarks

Here. the building types – from the nineteenth century brownstone to the modern industrial structure at the far left – suggest the passage of time in the histories that coexist, pictured as a single mass of forms seen from the train track below.

The illustration below shows Hopper's 1954 painting *Morning Sun*. The preparatory sketches show both the general layout of the room the effects of the bright morning light, and a more accurate representation of the model (Jo) with extensive details about shading and color:

Greenwich Village, recent evidence has pointed to a source on Bleeker Street (Marcum 2022). The painting has a wonderful visual rhythm: the repetition and variation between the different units and their windows reminds me of the stanzas and rhymes of poetry.



John Updike (2005 p 199) describes the painting:

Early Sunday Morning is a literally sunny picture, with even something merry about it: bucolic peace visits a humdrum urban street. We are gladdened by the day that is coming, entering from the right, heralded by the shadows it throws. The glow on the sidewalk is picked up by the yellow window shades. The barber pole is cheerful, the hydrant basks like a sluggish, knobby toad. But the silent windows, especially the darkened big shopwindows, hold behind them an ominous mortuary stillness. The undercurrents of stillness threaten to drag us down, even as the day dawns. The diurnal wheel turns, taking the sun on one of its sides. But the other side, the side where sun is absent, has its presence, too, and Hopper's apparently noncommittal art excels in making us

aware of the elsewhere, the missing, the longed-for. He is, to use a phrase generally reserved for writers, a master of suspense.

The painting takes liberties with the shadows. Neither 7th Avenue nor Bleeker Street run directly east-west, and the morning sun could not cast shadows so long and so parallel to the buildings in either place. As noted by the poet John Hollander (in Levin 1995 p 43), the long shadow on the sidewalk is especially mysterious:

Long, slant shadows
Cast on the wan concrete
Are of nearby fallen
Verticals not ourselves.
Lying longest, most still,
Along the unsigned blank
Of sidewalk, the narrowed
Finger of shade left by
Something, thicker than trees,
Taller than these streetlamps,
Somewhere off to the right
Perhaps, and unlike an
Intrusion of ourselves,
Unseen, long, is claiming
It all, the scene, the whole.

A striking aspect of the painting is its overwhelming silence: the calm before or after the storm of normal life. Ward (2017, p 169) remarks

Hopper's paintings are uniquely silent, conveying a sense of unnatural stillness. The silence is more active than passive, mainly because it suggests little of the calmness, tranquility, or placidity commonly associated with it. Hopper's silences are tense-hushed decorums maintained with terrific strain.

Probably Hopper's most famous painting is *The Nighthawks* (1942), wherein a man and a woman sit at the counter of an all-night diner. They are served by a young waiter and observed by a solitary man at the other end of the counter. The diner is brightly lit; outside it is dark. The streets are deserted: it is likely long past midnight. We sense the couple's anxiety and we are grateful for the light.



Hopper may have based the painting on a restaurant near the intersection of Greenwich Avenue and 7th Avenue (now Mulry Square). More likely it is an amalgam of various diners in the area. The title apparently comes from the beak-like nose of the man sitting with the woman.

The poet Mark Strand (1994, pp. 6-7) described the general effect of the picture:

The dominant feature of the scene is the long window through which we see the diner. It covers two-thirds of the canvas, forming the geometrical shape of an isosceles trapezoid, which establishes the directional pull of the painting, toward a vanishing point that cannot be witnessed, but must

be imagined. Our eye travels along the face of the glass, moving from right to left, urged on by the converging sides of the trapezoid, the green tile, the counter, the row of round stools that mimic our footsteps, and the yellow-white neon glare along the top. We are not drawn into the diner but are led alongside it. Like so many scenes we register in passing, its sudden, immediate clarity absorbs us, momentarily isolating us from everything else, and then releases us to continue on our way. In *Nighthawks*, however, we are not easily released. The long sides of the trapezoid slant toward each other but never join, leaving the viewer midway in their trajectory. The vanishing point, like the end of the viewer's journey or walk, is in an unreal and unrealizable place, somewhere off the canvas, out of the picture. The diner is an island of light distracting whoever might be walking by—in this case, ourselves—from journey's end. This distraction might be construed as salvation. For a vanishing point is not just where converging lines meet, it is also where we cease to be, the end of each of our individual journeys. Looking at *Nighthawks*, we are suspended between contradictory imperatives—one, governed by the trapezoid, that urges us forward, and the other, governed by the image of a light place in a dark city, that urges us to stay.

Night makes us aware of our insignificance. A café can fend off these feelings. The older waiter in Hemingway's story *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* (1933) notes how his café provides an elderly customer with some sense of security in the night:

It is the light of course but it is necessary that the place be clean and pleasant. You do not want music. Certainly you do not want music. Nor can you stand before a bar with dignity although that is all that is provided for these hours. What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it

needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was *nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada*. [nothing and then nothing and then nothing]

Strong (1988) remarks on the similarities between the isolation of Hopper's images and the loneliness of Robert Frost's poems. Hopper read and admired Frost's poems. Jo Nivison painted a picture of him reading Frost in 1955 (Levin, 1980b). Frost's poem *Desert Places* (1934) ends:

And lonely as it is, that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less –
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars – on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

There is something essentially American about the lonely individualism – the internal desert places – of Hopper, Hemingway and Frost.

Ecphrasis

Ecphrasis (Greek: words about) is the verbal description of a work of art, either real or imagined, expressed in vivid poetic language (Heffernan, 2015; Hollander 1988, 1995; Hollander & Weber, 2001; Panagiolidou, 2013). Ecphrasis is concerned with the effects the art on the viewer whereas "interpretation" deals with the what and how of these effects (Carrier, 1987).

Perhaps more than any other artist, Hopper has stimulated the imagination of poets and writers. Poems and stories written in response to his paintings have been collected in several anthologies (Block, 2016; Levin, 1995; Lyons et al., 1995),

and individual poets have composed whole books inspired by his images (Farrés, 2009; Hoggard, 2009; Strand, 1994). The following are three examples of Hopper's images and the poetry and prose that they have evoked.

Hopper's 1921 etching *Evening Wind* shows a nude woman about to lie down in bed as the wind blows the curtain into the room. The viewer feels that he is in the same room as the woman, and this intimacy recalls Degas' paintings of women bathing. The Hopper website suggests that the sudden interruption of the wind might be akin to the appearance of a god, like the annunciation to Mary or the shower of gold that fell upon Danae.



Robert Mezey (Levin, 1995, p 24) describes the etching in a beautifully constructed sonnet:

One foot on the floor, one knee in bed,
Bent forward on both hands as if to leap
Into a heaven of silken cloud, or keep
An old appointment – tryst, one almost said –
Some promise, some entanglement that led
In broad daylight to privacy and sleep,
To dreams of love, the rapture of the deep,
Oh, everything, that must be left unsaid –

Why then does she suddenly look aside
At a white window full of empty space
And curtains swaying inward? Does she sense
In darkening air the vast indifference
That enters in and will not be denied,
To breathe unseen upon her nakedness?

Hopper's 1939 painting *New York Movie* depicts an usherette at one of the grand movie theaters in New York. She is standing beautifully and pensively near the side exit.

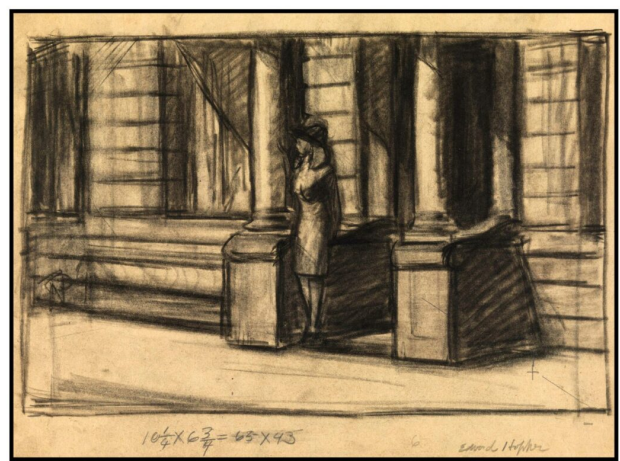


Leonard Michaels (Lyons et al, 1995, p 3) wonders about who she might be:

Of course, she wasn't going anywhere. I mean only that there was drama in the painting, a kind of personal story, and it was more engaging, more psychologically intense, than the movie on the distant blurry screen, a rectangle near the upper left corner of the painting, like a window in a dark room. The usherette isn't looking at that movie, isn't involved with any movie drama, any mechanical story told with cuts and fades while music works on your feelings. Her drama is mythical, the myth of Eurydice doomed to wait at the edge of darkness. The red flashes in the shadows of the painting are streaks of fire and streams and gouts of blood. Eurydice stands at the edge of Hades waiting for Orpheus.

This movie theater, like many others in Hopper's day, is called the Orpheum.

The 1943 painting of *Summertime* shows a young woman in a thin dress standing at the door of a New York building. She is about to face the day. She feels warm but a cooling breeze blows the dress against her body.



James Hoggard (2009) imagines Hopper talking about his painting:

It's good you noticed, if you did
A number, I'll say, have not come close
This one's a nude, the clothes a guise,
a mask, a witty, illusory stab
at idiot propriety – imagination strips
everything bare, as I've done here:
the nipples and heft of breasts in view
and the screaming delight of thighs
rising toward the truth between them,
as suggested by the curtain's cleft –
all this a celebration of my mood,
and my mood trumps anything that's yours

This lass, who looks sweetly nubile now,
is Jo, my wife, whose age has been reduced
by the cleverness of my brush and paint
I've stripped her nearly bare, but I
have also preserved defiant ghosts
in the willful set of her swelling lips

The tensions and songs here are mine
You can do with your own what you will

Homage in Film and Photography

Hopper's work has had a large influence on the visual arts as well as on poetry. Many of Hopper's paintings depict large ornate 19th-Century houses – often standing isolated from other buildings. One such picture is *House by the Railroad* (1925). According to Levin (1985) this was likely partially based on a house in Haverstraw just north of his home in Nyack (lower left of the illustration below). This house is across the street from the railway: Hopper often compressed the distances

between things in his paintings. The Mansard roof and central tower and columned porch were also found in other houses that Hopper painted. These houses defiantly insists on their isolated existence.



Variations on this house have appeared in several movies: most importantly Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Terrence

Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978). These sets are shown in the illustration above (lower middle and lower right).

Many photographers have been profoundly influenced by Hopper's pictures. Phillip Lorcia diCorcia photographs isolated people in urban settings: his images suggest what Hopper might have seen he had lived a further fifty years (Llorens & Ottinger 2012, pp. 306-309). Even more recently, the photographer Richard Tuschman has recreated many of Hopper's paintings in photographs. The illustration below shows Hopper's 1926 painting *Eleven a.m.* together with Tuschman's *Woman at a Window*, 2013. The chair has changed from blue to pink and the model now wears heels. Most importantly her face is visible.



Empty Rooms

Hopper was always intrigued by the play of light in empty rooms. His 1951 painting *Rooms by the Sea*, shows an empty room leading through an open door to the sea. The image derives from the Hopper's studio in Truro on Cape Cod. The door does not directly open onto the sea: Hopper has compressed the space. The main room in the painting is completely bare. On the left, however, another room can be glimpsed with a couch, a chest-of-drawers, and a painting on the wall. Hollander (2001, pp. 72-25) suggests that the two rooms might represent the memories of the past and the presentiments of the future.



One of Hopper's late paintings *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963) is devoid of detail. The room contains nothing but the light. The

stark simplicity almost approaches the abstract, though Hopper would insist that the image is still tied to reality.



Strand (1994, pp. 57-58) remarks:

In the later painting, *Sun in an Empty Room*, there is nothing calming about the light. It comes in a window and falls twice in the same room—on a wall close to the window and on a slightly recessed wall. That is all the action there is. We do not travel the same distance—actual or metaphorical—that we do in *Rooms by the Sea*. The light strikes two places at once, and we feel its terminal character instead of anything that hints of continuation. If it suggests a rhythm, it is a rhythm cut short. The room seems cropped, as if the foreground were cut away. What we have is a window wall, with the window framing the highlighted leaves of a nearby tree, and a back wall, a

finality against which two tomblike parallelograms of light stand up-right. Done in 1963, it is Hopper's last great painting, a vision of the world without us; not merely a place that excludes us, but a place emptied of us. The light, now a faded yellow against sepia-toned walls, seems to be enacting the last stages of its transience, its own stark narrative coming to a close.

Last Things

Hopper's last painting, *Two Comedians* (1965) portrays two actors taking their bows on a stage raised high above the audience. The actors are the artist and his wife. Representing himself as a comedian refers back to his earlier painting *Soir Bleu*. The illustration below shows the painting together with Scarduelli's impression of the elderly couple in their studio (Rossi & Scarduelli, 2021).



The Portuguese poet Ernest Farrés (translated by Lawrence Venuti, 2006) imagines Hopper's comments on the painting

Perhaps it's the costume
that lets me laugh,
or smile as it were –
for me they've been the same

Perhaps it's the clown's disguise
that lets me be
looser than I usually am
strutting cock-proud now,
goofy-eyed at a crowd,
the illusion of a crowd
no one sees but you and me

Clowns, we move toward stage's edge,
a place I've made like a roof's edge,
with threat or promise of a fall

But the moment seems sweet,
our domestic wars almost done,
and white-clad and foolscapped,
we seem blest as we press
toward the last edge we'll meet,

our lyrical selves always in France,
our final days just bibelots:
Nous sommes, Jo et moi, les pierrots

Final Words

Hopper painted the real world, but he allowed his imagination to interact with his perception. Conaty (2022, p 14) remarks that he often felt torn between working from the fact and improvising upon what he saw. Hopper argued against abstract expressionism, insisting that art should always have its source in "life." The following is his 1953 statement on art from the short-lived magazine *Reality* (quoted in Llorens & Ettinger, 2012, p 275):

Great art is the outward expression of an inner life in the

artist, and this inner life will result in his personal vision of the world. No amount of skillful invention can replace the essential element of imagination. One of the weaknesses of much abstract painting is the attempt to substitute the inventions of the intellect for a pristine imaginative conception. The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm and does not concern itself alone with stimulating arrangements of color, form, and design. The term “life” as used in art is something not to be held in contempt, for it implies all of existence, and the province of art is to react to it and not to shun it. Painting will have to deal more fully and less obliquely with life and nature’s phenomena before it can again become great.

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Hammershøi

The Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) has recently acquired a 1905 painting by the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916), the first by this artist in a Canadian public collection: *Interior with Four Etchings*:

The etchings are arranged on the wall above an elegant side-table, upon which stand three pieces of Royal Copenhagen porcelain. The details of the etchings cannot be seen, but the upper two appear to be portraits. Light comes in from the window on the left, giving a subtle violet tinge to the grey walls and emphasizing their white trim. To the left of the table stands Hammershøi's wife Ida. She faces away from us, and we cannot see what she is doing. Perhaps she has just placed the plate on the table and has turned to look out of the window; perhaps she has taken something to the window to look at. The sunlight on her neck is vaguely erotic. Everything is balanced: the shadows share the space with the light; the blue-white porcelain complements the red-brown frames; the human figure suggests movement in a room that is otherwise completely still.



To celebrate this acquisition, the gallery is exhibiting this picture alongside 25 other Hammershøi paintings, all except one coming from the National Gallery of Denmark (*Statens Museum for Kunst*). The exhibition runs from April 16 to June 26, 2016. This is one of the most impressive exhibitions I have seen in recent years. I apologize that my enthusiasm has led to another long post. However, it contains more to see than to read.

Hammershøi is quite different from other painters. His palette is austere. The main colors are, gray and white and black. On one of the walls in the AGO exhibition is a commemorative poem

by Sophus Clausen written in 1916. The poem, at least in the English translation, is unremarkable except for occasional lines:

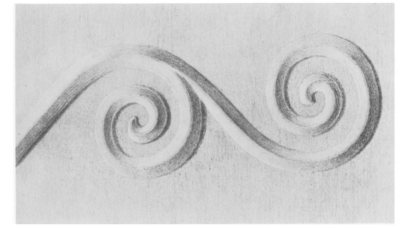
How sweet to know that blacks and greys
Give shelter to the light and let it stay
...
Gray is not grey nor is black ever black.

The greys in a Hammershøi painting are subtly tinged, often with violet, sometimes with yellow, occasionally with pink or green. On the predominantly grey background, objects are delineated in subdued browns. The most striking characteristic of the paintings is the way that they represent light. Light seems almost to move through the painted surfaces, filling out the space, defining what is present, bringing people into existence, and leaving without a sound.

The restricted palate of Hammershøi's paintings lead his friend Karl Madsen, an artist and historian, to suggest that he was Denmark's first "neurasthenic painter" (quoted in Vad, 1992, p. 73). The diagnosis of neurasthenia was popular at the time (Harris 2013). Its various symptoms, both physical (fatigue, dizziness) and mental (anxiety, melancholy), were attributed to a weak nervous system, unable to cope with the stress of modern urban life. The diagnosis is out of fashion nowadays, though similar symptoms occur in modern disorders such as chronic fatigue syndrome and dysautonomia. Although Hammershøi was quiet and withdrawn, he was far too productive to be considered neurasthenic. Nevertheless, his paintings have a tranquility that can provide respite from the hubbub of city life. They might represent a cure for rather than a result of neurasthenia.

In this posting, the paintings in the exhibition have been photographed within their frames; other paintings by Hammershøi and paintings by other artists are shown without frames.

Early Life



Hammershøi was the son of a prosperous Danish businessman. He displayed an early talent for drawing, and his family arranged for him to have lessons from the painter Niels Christian Kierkegard, a cousin of Søren Kierkegaard. The drawing on the right (Vad, 1992, p 11), from when Vilhelm was 11 years old, illustrates his early appreciation of light and shadow.

He continued his studies both at the Royal Danish Academy of Art and in the Free Study Schools. One of his teachers, P. S. Krøyer remarked that

I have a pupil who paints most oddly. I do not understand him, but believe he is going to be important and do not try to influence him. (quoted in Vad, 1992, p 24)



His 1885 *Portrait of a Young Girl* (his sister Anna) was entered into competition for a prize at the Academy. Though it did not win, it was acclaimed by his fellow students, who protested the judges' decision. It is a remarkable painting: the face and posture are sensitively portrayed; the muted palette of the background gently situates the figure; the hands suggest both rest and tension. Anna's left hand steadies the image and allows the picture's transition from three to two dimensions.



In the autumn of 1888, Hammershøi stayed with his friend Karl Madsen, who lived in an old house just north of Copenhagen. There he painted his first "interior" – a picture of an old stove with an open doorway leading into a brightly sunlit room. The light seems almost personified – it enters the other room, comes through the door, pauses on the floor and casts a shadow toward the stove. The painting makes the viewer long to go into the next room to see whence the light comes from. This type of painting was to become Hammershøi's signature style.

Though an accomplished painter of portraits and of architecture, Hammershøi is most famous for pictures showing the effects of light on lonely rooms.

In 1888, the dentist, writer and art-collector, Alfred Bramsen, bought his first painting by Hammershøi. Over the next quarter century, he was an unflagging promoter of Hammershøi's work. After Hammershøi's death in 1916, Bramsen arranged for the first catalogue of the paintings. Artist and patron were totally unlike: one introverted, reticent and solitary, the other gregarious, confident and worldly-wise.

With this patronage, Hammershøi became self-sufficient, and in 1891 he married Ida Ilsted, the sister of a fellow artist, Peter Ilsted. Following the wedding, Vilhelm and Ida went to Paris for six months. They then returned to Copenhagen, living for a while in the Hammershøi home together with Vilhelm's mother.

Over the next few years, Hammershøi painted landscapes, portraits and architecture. In 1897 Bramsen commissioned a painting of Kronborg castle in Helsingør (Hamlet's Elsinore). Hammershøi produced a masterpiece in terms of its striking perspective and subtle color.

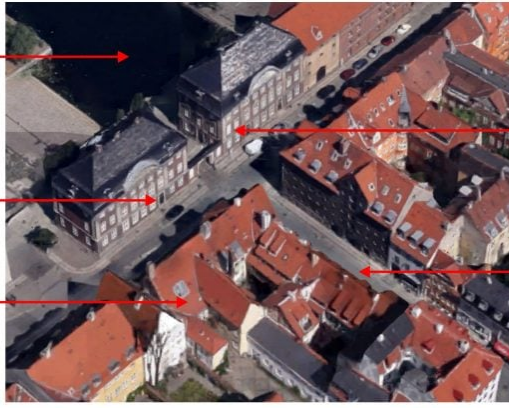


Strandgade 30

In December 1898, Hammershøi rented an apartment on the second floor of an old building on Strandgade in the old dockyard district of Copenhagen called Christianshavn. The building had been constructed in 1636. Hammershøi was likely pleased that his home originated in the time of Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch. The apartment was spacious and endowed with windows facing in all directions. As well as a home, it served as both studio space and subject matter for his art.

The building still exists. The following figures show its location on a google world-map, as well as a recent photograph (from Wikipedia) and the floor plan of the apartment (from Vad, 1992, p 187, with several revisions based on another published plan: the position of the window in room F corrected, the door between B and F doubled, and room D divided).

Dock of Asiatic Company

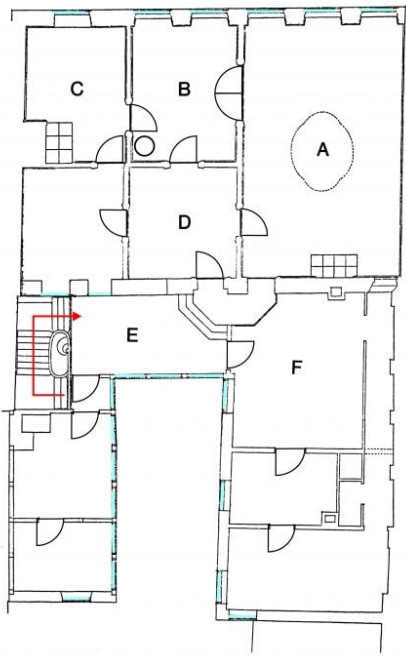


Offices of Asiatic Company

Strandgade 25

Sankt Annae Gade

Strandgade 30

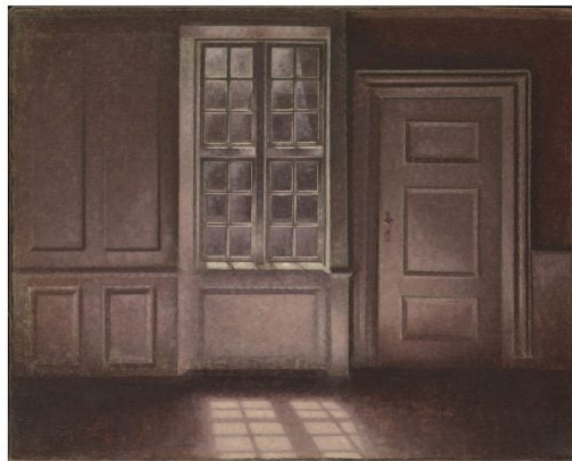


Strandgade 30, Copenhagen



In his new apartment, Hammershøi began to paint the interior pictures that became his most recognizable images. Many of the pictures were painted in Room F facing the window and door. In some the room is empty; others include a portrait of Ida sitting or standing to the left of the window. *Interior in Strandgade, Sunlight on the Floor* 1901 (in the AGO exhibit and illustrated on the right) shows Ida working at some task at a table. The painting is both realistic and impressionistic. The old house had shifted slightly over the years, and the painting shows clearly that the door is slightly askew. Yet it is impossible to tell the subject of the etchings or the focus of Ida's concentration.

This view painted with the room empty is the subject of some of Hammershøi's most famous pictures, such as *Dust Motes Dancing in the Sunbeams* (1900, Ordrupgaard, Denmark) and *Moonlight, Strandgade 30* (1906, Metropolitan Museum)





The AGO painting *Interior with 4 Etchings* (1905) was painted in Room A. Over the years the arrangement of the furniture changed. An earlier painting *Interior with Piano, Strandgade 30* (1901), illustrated on the right, shows the same view but with a piano and a bookcase rather than a table. Hammershøi tended to simplify his pictures as he grew older. His later paintings show less detail and a more restricted palette.



Interior with the Artist's Easel (1910) was painted in Room B looking toward Room A. It is a variation on a theme long used painting: the artist at his easel. Yet here there is no artist other than the light coming in the window. Since we can only see the painting from its back, we have no idea of its subject. The true subject of the actual painting is the bowl on the table in the far room. The shape of the bowl and the reflections of the light upon its curves are rendered exquisitely. If this were a photograph rather than a painting, the bowl would be in focus, and the easel in the blurred foreground.

Hammershøi's new apartment was directly across from a striking building that housed the offices of the Asiatic Company. This was the subject of several large architectural paintings. The 1902 version in the AGO exhibition shows the offices in fog. The buildings are visible but the dockyard behind them, accessed through the arch, is obscure. Masts of ships are faintly visible in the harbor-fog. Other versions of this painting show the buildings without the fog.



Sources

Hammershøi is often considered as isolated from the history of painting, as someone whose work was without either precedent or following. Yet all persons are part of the past they learn about, and all are made by the present that they experience. And everyone affects the future.

Hammershøi's paintings ultimately derive from the great paintings of the Dutch Golden Age of the 17th Century, when Vermeer and de Hooch depicted the effects of light coming through windows onto people. Hammershøi's paintings study the way light plays on domestic interiors, but the interiors are minimal rather than extravagant, the light is cool rather than warm, and the people are either absent or unobtrusive.

In the late 19th Century, James Abbott McNeill Whistler

(1834-1903) had begun to work with a restricted palette. His most famous painting is entitled *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1 Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1871). In Hammershøi's 1886 portrait of his own mother the color is even more subdued and the background even less detailed.



Many of Hammershøi's interiors include a representation of Ida viewed from the back. This motif derives from the *Rückenfigur* ("figure viewed from the back") used in German Romantic painting, most characteristically by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840). Most of Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren* are in landscapes, but occasionally they are in domestic interiors. The following illustration compares Friedrich's *Woman at a Window* (1822) with Hammershøi's *The Tall Windows* (1913). The latter was painted after Hammershøi had moved across the street to Strandgade 25.



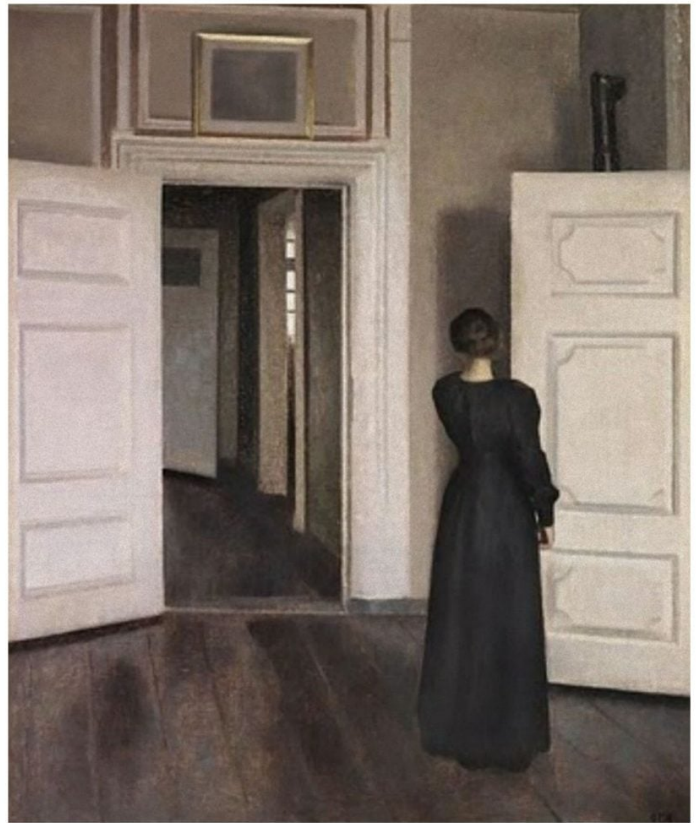
The *Rückenfigur* can be used for various purposes (Koerner, 1990, pp 233-244; Prettejohn, 2005, pp 54-59). One is to provide a foil for the viewer to enjoy the same perceptions as the artist who painted the picture. The *Rückenfigur*

is not just a represented object in the picture, but also the embodied subject of the aesthetic experience of the picture – we look *with*, rather than merely *at* the *Rückenfigur*. (Prettejohn, 2005, p 56).

In some sense the *Rückenfigur* obscures what the painting is about. We see the man rather than the sunset. We feel that we have come late – the glories of the sunset have already been seen and we can only imagine what the experience was like (Koerner, p. 233).

The presence of Ida in Hammershøi's paintings differs from Friedrich's *Rückenfigur*. Most importantly, Ida usually stands or sits on the edge of the painting rather than in the center. She complements rather than obscures the picture's subject. She gives the image a sense of intimacy: we are sharing her domestic space. We get a sense of her existence: the small tasks that make up the domestic day. She gives a human ground

to what we see and prevents it from becoming too abstract.



Sometimes, as in the *Interior with a Woman Standing, Strandgade 30* (1905) painted in Room A looking into Room D, the viewer feels uncertain. By which door has she come in? Which door is she about to go out? The woman seems “caught in the moment of deciding which door to pass through” (Alsdorf, 2016, p. 271). Although this uncertainty derives simply from the static nature of the representation, it resonates with our inability to know what is in the mind of another person.

This particular problem fascinated the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). In a recent article, Bridget Alsdorf (2016) considers Hammershøi’s interior paintings in relation to Kierkegaard’s book *Either/Or* (1843). The title of the book highlights the idea of uncertainty. In the section of the book entitled *Shadowgraphs*. Kierkegaard wrote about the difficulty in representing in art the inner state of another

person, especially the state of "reflective sorrow." Kierkegaard's idea is that art can only represent such a state of mind indirectly. He likens the process to a "shadowgraph:"

It is this reflective sorrow I now propose to draw out and render visible, so far as that is possible, in some pictures. I call them 'shadowgraphs', partly to remind the reader by the very designation that I am summoning them from the dark side of life, partly because, just like shadowgraphs, they are not visible straightaway. If I take a shadowgraph in my hand, I gain no impression from it, can form no real idea of it; it is only when I hold it up to the wall and look not at the immediate image but at what appears on the wall, it is only then that I see it. Similarly the picture I want to show here is an inner picture which can also only be detected by looking through the exterior. There may be nothing striking about the exterior, it is only when I look through it that I discover the inner picture, which is what I want to show, an inner picture too refined to be visible on the outside, woven as it is of the softest moods of the soul. If I look at a sheet of paper, to outward observation there may be nothing remarkable about it; it is only when I hold it up to the light of day and see through it that I discover the delicate inner picture which is as though too insubstantial to be seen immediately. (p. 130)

Unfortunately, Kierkegaard is quite unclear about the nature of a shadowgraph. On the one hand it might be like a transparency or silhouette through which light is projected to give an image on another surface; on the other hand it might be like a watermark seen when paper is held up to the light. In either interpretation, the image is not immediately apparent but only occurs when light is passed through the artistic representation. Kierkegaard's metaphor is as ambiguous as the title of his book.

Kierkegaard then goes on to consider the state of reflective sorrow in three characters from literature. His bravura

descriptions of their invisible state of mind *either* subvert his claim that such states cannot be represented in art *or* clearly demonstrate the process of the sympathetic shadowgraph.

Alsdorf also considers what Hammershøi might be trying to represent in his interiors by relating them to another section of *Either/Or* entitled *The Aesthetic Validity of Marriage*. In this section, Kierkegaard's character Judge William compares romantic love with married love: the one an ever-changing erotic quest, the other an unchanging relationship. Hammershøi interiors certainly suggest the timeless intimacy of the latter.

Hammershøi's images have a mystical aura to them. They are delicately balanced between serenity and disquiet. Perhaps a little like meditation when one begins to feel an underlying eternity but still senses the sorrows of the real world.

Many critics have remarked about the lack of narrative in Hammershøi's paintings. When the rooms are empty, we cannot know what has happened in them; when the rooms contain a solitary person, we have difficulty seeing what she is doing and we cannot know what she is thinking.

Yet there is an emotional force in the paintings that no amount of exegesis can attenuate. The emotions are like those aroused by music. Hammershøi appreciated music, and counted the English concert pianist Leonard Borwick among his friends. We do not fault music for lack of narrative or the absence of simple interpretation. Hammershøi's paintings fit very well with quiet music. Try them with the beginning of the Allegretto from Grieg's 1887 Violin Sonata Opus 45 (Ingolf Turban and Jean-Jacques Dünki):

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Sonte-C-Moll-Allegretto-espressivo-alla-Romanza-beginning.mp3>

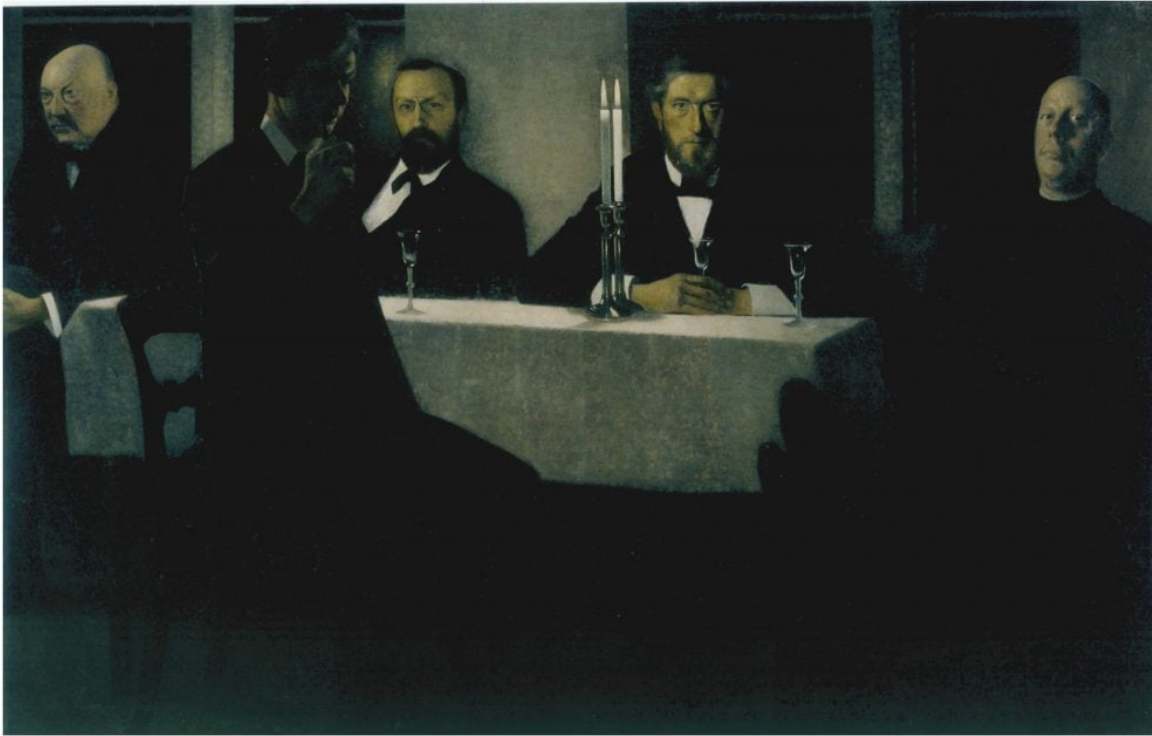
Portraits



Hammershøi was an accomplished and sensitive portraitist. The 1907 portrait of Ida with a teacup illustrates clearly the intimacy of their relationship. She stares off into space. We cannot know what she is thinking; perhaps even she does not know. The initial impression is of sadness although another version of the same portrait perhaps shows the hint of a smile. The portrait is very affecting. There is something timeless and classical about its serenity, but it is also quite momentary and individual. We can almost hear the clink of the spoon as she stirs her tea.



The 1901 portrait at the left is of J. F. Willumsen, a friend and fellow-artist. The strength of the gaze is clearly represented, but the portrait is otherwise unremarkable. However, this picture was a study for Hammershøi's largest painting entitled *Five Portraits*, completed in 1902 and presently in the Thiel Gallery near Stockholm. This fascinating painting shows four colleagues seated around a table at night in front of the windows in Room A. Karl Madsen is on Willumsen's right. In front of the table, Hammershøi's brother Svend is seen in profile. The two colleagues on the edges of the painting are the architect Thorvald Bindesbøll and the painter Carl Holsøe. The latter has his feet up on a chair, and his shoes give the painting a striking three-dimensional tension. The group appears to be gathered for after-dinner drinks, following a late but not last supper. The painting's darkness contrasts with the lightness of most of Hammershøi's interiors (and makes it difficult to obtain a good representation – I have done my best):



The most striking aspect of this group portrait is that no one interacts with anyone else. Each person seems completely engrossed in his own thoughts. Monrad (2012, p. 29) quotes a review of the painting's first exhibition:

The situation is more or less this; there has been profound talk about something or other that has moved everyone deeply, and they are now waiting for a conclusive word from a sixth party.

The sixth party could be the painter. This interpretation is possible, but Monrad discounts it as not in keeping with Hammershøi's general lack of narrative.

Robert Rosenblum (in Fonsmark et al., 1998, p. 45) remarked:

The effect is like standing before a tribunal, which comes into fixed, focal focus with the hypnotic stare of Willumsen.

It is unsettling to be judged by a painting.

Despite its starkness, I find the picture comforting. Each

person exists within his own intense solitude. Yet, as in the daylight pictures, the play of light on the faces and the table serves to bring them all together.

After Hammershøi

Hammershøi died of cancer in 1916. Bramsen donated his collection to the Statens Museum for Kunst in 1917. But fashions change, and in 1930 the paintings were returned to the donor. Hammershøi came to be considered only a minor artist in Denmark; in the rest of the world he was almost completely unknown. His reputation only began to change in the early 1980s when a retrospective exhibition of his paintings was mounted at Ordrupgaard, a gallery just north of Copenhagen, and other exhibitions were held in North America.

Hammershøi had little direct effect on subsequent artists. His friends Carl Holsøe and Peter Ilsted continued to paint interiors, though their pictures were more detailed and less affecting than those of Hammershøi. In France, Pierre Bonnard and Eduard Vuillard painted domestic scenes. One might even consider the possibility of an artistic movement called "intimism" (Hvidt, in Monrad et al., 2012, pp. 197-218). Yet their paintings lacked Hammershøi's simplicity of color and the underlying mysticism.

The American Edward Hopper (1882-1967) painted pictures that are imbued with a similar mood to those of Hammershøi. They depict the same lonely silence, the same play of light on simple interiors, and the same existential anxiety (Rosenblum in Fonsmark et al., 1998, p. 42). Yet Hopper was likely unaware of Hammershøi's work. Their relationship is an affinity rather than a direct connection. The following illustration compares Hammershøi's *Ida in an Interior with Piano* (1901) with Hopper's *City Sunlight* (1954).



To me the glowing color spaces of Hammershøi's paintings presage the completely abstract paintings of Mark Rothko. Rosenblum (1975) has suggested that a tradition in art that is particularly "northern," one that sees light as cool rather than warm, one that tends towards abstractions, one that goes from Friedrich to Rothko. Rosenblum does not mention Hammershøi in his book, but we could easily place him along this path.

The Danish film director Carl Theodor Dreyer (1889-1968) was profoundly affected by Hammershøi's images (Balló et al. 2006). The closing scene of his last movie *Gertrud* (1968; Schamus, 2008) ends on an image that could easily be a Hammershøi painting. The movie, based on a 1906 play by the Swedish writer Hjalmar Söderberg (1869-1941), concerns the passionate life of a woman who sought the freedom to love whomever she wished to love. At the end of the movie, the elderly Gertrud, living as a recluse, is visited by her old friend Axel Nygren. She returns his letters; he burns them: they say goodbye. The final minute can perhaps serve as our farewell to Hammershøi

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Gertrud-final-scene.mp4>

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