NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

Edward Hopper
American, 1882 - 1967

Ground Swell

1939

oil on canvas
overall: 91.92 × 127.16 cm (36 3/16 × 50 1/16 in.)
framed: 127.3 × 152.4 cm (50 1/8 × 60 in.)
Inscription: lower right: EDWARD HOPPER; on reverse of frame: frame made for / Edward Hopper by / Carl Sandelin framemaker / 133 E 60th St NYC.
Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund) 2014.79.23

ENTRY

In a vast expanse of open sea, a catboat heels gently to starboard as it navigates a course that has brought it close to a bell buoy.[1] Under feathery cirrus clouds and a brilliant blue sky, the boat's three passengers and pilot gaze at, and presumably listen to, the buoy's bell, which tilts toward them as it crests one of a sequence of rolling waves. Although Edward Hopper is renowned for lonely urban scenes that have led his work to be understood as emblematic of the mood of the modern city and the isolation of its inhabitants, he was also a dedicated painter of nautical subjects.

Born in Nyack, New York, Hopper spent his formative years sketching the maritime industry of this bustling shipbuilding port on the Hudson River.[2] From 1930 onward, Hopper and his wife, Josephine "Jo" Nivison, whom he had met in art school, spent summers painting in Truro, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. In 1934 they built a cottage in South Truro; *Ground Swell* was painted in the adjacent studio. Jo conveyed the anticipation surrounding Hopper's completion of *Ground Swell* in a letter to his sister:

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> Ed. is doing a fine large canvas in studio—sail boat, boys nude to the waist, bodies all tanned, lots of sea and sky. It ought to be a beauty. Frank Rehn [Hopper's dealer] will be delighted. Everyone has wanted Ed to do sail boats. He has only 2 or 3 weeks to finish it—and it will need some fine weather with rolling seas to go look at. Dense fog today but scarcely any rain here either.[3]

Ground Swell numbers among a group of similar seafaring subjects Hopper executed during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Along with paintings such as *The Long Leg* [fig. 1] and *The "Martha McKeen" of Wellfleet* [fig. 2], *Ground Swell* has come to be seen as exemplary of the artist's recurring theme of escape.[4] It is a motif familiar from better-known paintings like *New York Movie* [fig. 3] and *Eleven A.M.* [fig. 4] that take as their focus liminal spaces: thresholds, windows, railroads, and so forth.[5] If Hopper's iconic *Nighthawks* [fig. 5] conveys the anxiety of the urban experience through the acidic hue and high contrast of its artificial illumination, *Ground Swell*'s cool palette and balanced, rhythmic composition would seem to illustrate the peaceful solace the artist, a notorious recluse, sought in his idyllic coastal retreat.[6]

Ground Swell's subject is not uncommon in American art. It recalls, for example, *Thomas Eakins's Starting Out after Rail* [fig. 6] and *Winslow Homer's Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)* [fig. 7], the sparkling vibrancy of which has been interpreted as corresponding to the nation's incipient optimism a decade after the Civil War.[7] Whereas Homer's sailors gaze intently at a clear horizon connoting future promise, Hopper's are transfixed by the bell buoy, which strikes a dark note, literally and figuratively, in the otherwise sunny scene.

The function of a bell buoy is to issue auditory warning of submerged dangers or channel boundaries. Hopper's bell clangs in response to the painting's titular ground swell, a heavy rolling of the sea caused by a distant storm or seismic disturbance. Unseen trouble may lurk beneath the surface or beyond the horizon of Hopper's otherwise serene painting. The visual rhyming of the ocean swells and the cirrus clouds in the upper register might reinforce such a portentous interpretation. Cirrus clouds are often harbingers of approaching weather, forming at the outer edges of hurricanes and thunderstorms.[8] Indeed, a hurricane had devastated much of the northeast coast in late August 1938, one year before Hopper completed *Ground Swell*.[9] The accuracy and specificity of Hopper's sky

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indicate, if nothing else, that it is one the artist had seen, rather than one born of imagination or synthesis [fig. 8] [fig. 9] [fig. 10] [fig. 11] [fig. 12] [fig. 13] [fig. 14] [fig. 15] [fig. 16] [fig. 17].[10]

Alexander Nemerov has noted that while Hopper worked on *Ground Swell*, from August to September 15, 1939, news of the eruption of World War II was broadcast on American radios. As radio waves brought news of distant conflict to US shores, the bell buoy in *Ground Swell* sonically registers the reverberations of some unspecified distant turmoil.[11] Hopper was famously resistant to explaining the meaning of his paintings, but he broached, obliquely, the relation between the war and his work in a 1940 letter to his friend, the artist Guy Pène du Bois. Explaining that Jo had wept in a grocery store when she learned of the fall of Paris, Hopper resignedly concluded: “Painting seems to be a good enough refuge from all this, if one can get one’s dispersed mind together long enough to concentrate upon it.”[12] The artist’s canvas, like the catboat’s white canvas sail, seemingly offered a means of escape.

The ramifications of the war were certainly felt in the North American art world. The minutes of an April 1943 meeting of the Corcoran Gallery of Art’s board of trustees, for instance, testify to a debate regarding the suitability of holding the *Eighteenth Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings,* “in view of the existing war situation.”[13] The exhibition was mounted and later deemed “unusually successful.”[14] Hopper was a juror and *Ground Swell* was included in the biennial, from which it was acquired by the Corcoran.[15]

Adam Greenhalgh

September 29, 2016

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Edward Hopper, *The Long Leg*, c. 1930, oil on canvas, The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, Gift of the Virginia Steele Scott Foundation. © Huntington Art Collections, San Marino, California

fig. 2 Edward Hopper, *The "Martha McKeen" of Wellfleet*, 1944, oil on canvas, Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, on loan at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. www.museothyssen.org

fig. 3 Edward Hopper, *New York Movie*, 1939, oil on canvas, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY

fig. 4 Edward Hopper, *Eleven A.M.*, 1926, oil on canvas, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1966. Image: Cathy Carver

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fig. 5 Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks*, 1942, oil on canvas, The Art Institute of Chicago, Friends of American Art Collection 1942.51. Image no. 00000002-01, www.artic.edu

fig. 6 Thomas Eakins, *Starting Out After Rail*, 1874, oil on canvas on Masonite, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, The Hayden Collection–Charles Henry Hayden Fund. © 2016, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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fig. 7 Winslow Homer, *Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)*, 1873–1876, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the W. L. and May T. Mellon Foundation

fig. 8 Edward Hopper, study for *Ground Swell*, 1939, fabricated chalk, charcoal, and graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.339. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

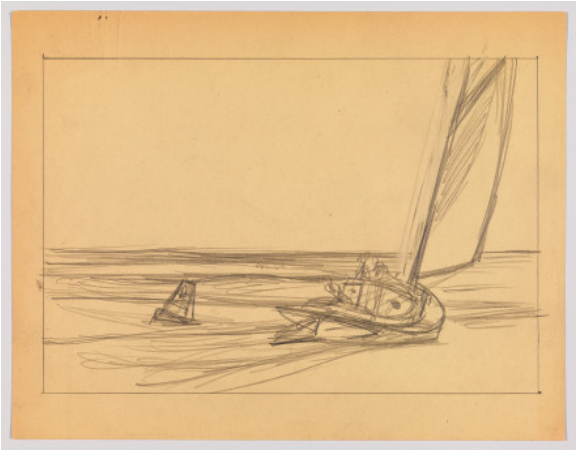

fig. 9 Edward Hopper, study for *Ground Swell*, 1939, fabricated chalk, charcoal, and graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.859. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

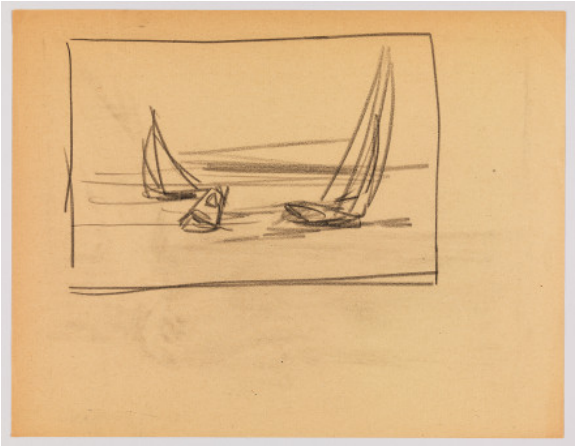

fig. 10 Edward Hopper, study for *Ground Swell*, 1939, fabricated chalk, charcoal, and graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.860. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

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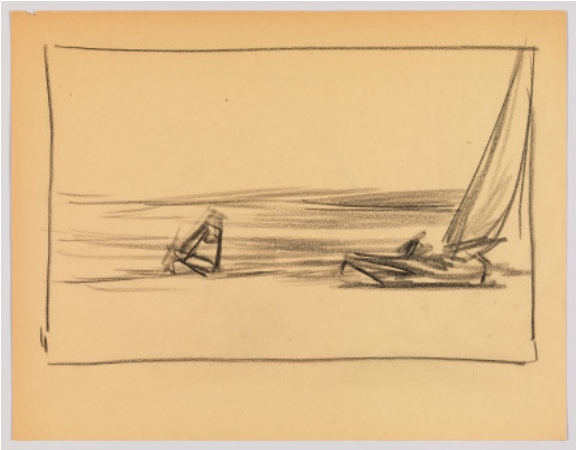

fig. 11 Edward Hopper, study for *Ground Swell*, 1939, fabricated chalk, charcoal, and graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.861a. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

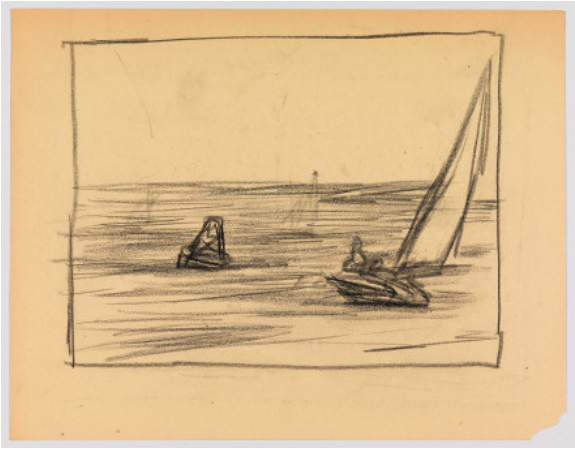

fig. 12 Edward Hopper, study for *Ground Swell*, 1939, fabricated chalk, charcoal, and graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.862. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

fig. 13 Edward Hopper, study for *Ground Swell*, 1939, fabricated chalk, charcoal, and graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.863a. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

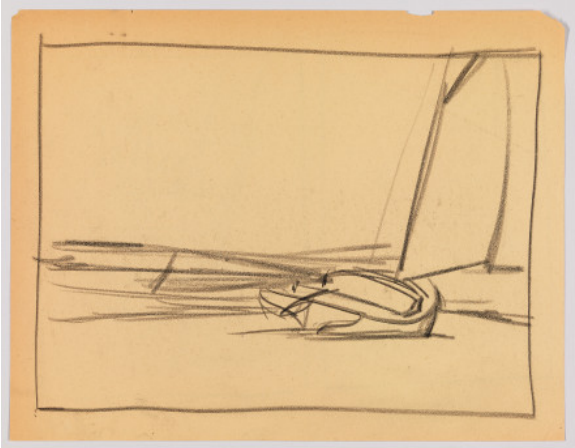

fig. 14 Edward Hopper, study for *Ground Swell*, 1939, fabricated chalk, charcoal, and graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York,Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.864a. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

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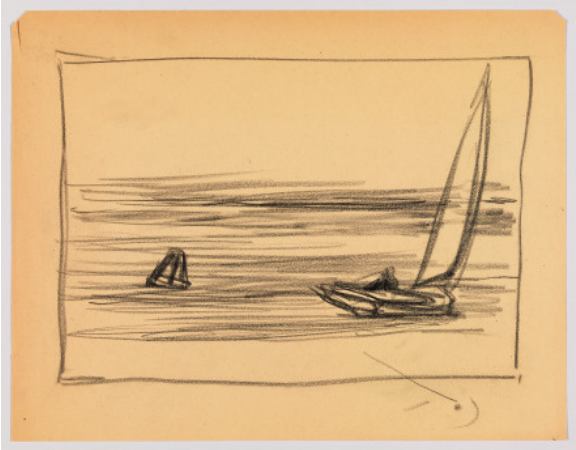

fig. 15 Edward Hopper, study for *Ground Swell*, 1939, fabricated chalk, charcoal, and graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.865. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

fig. 16 Edward Hopper, study for *Ground Swell*, 1939, fabricated chalk, charcoal, and graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.866a. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

fig. 17 Edward Hopper, study for *Ground Swell*, 1939, fabricated chalk, charcoal, and graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.868. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

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NOTES

[1] This entry is a revised version of text that was originally published in *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011).

[2] Hopper's earliest-known oil painting depicts a rowboat in a secluded cove; see Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 3 vols. (New York, 1995), 3:1, no. 0-1. His first sale, furthermore, from the Armory Show of 1913, which showcased developments in avant-garde European and American modern art, was a marine subject, *Sailing* (1911). For Hopper's biography, see Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (New York, 2007).

[3] Jo Hopper to Marion Hopper, Aug. 26, 1939, quoted in Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 3 vols. (New York, 1995), 3:266. Hopper's entry in his Record Book (II, p. 33, Whitney Museum of Art) reads: "Ground Swell. Finished September 15, 1939. Bright light blue picture. Sail, boat, clouds, boy's slacks white. Mast boom, gaff, edge of hatch 1 & rim of boat yellow, pillar orange. Buoy dark, bluey green with brown seaweed on buoy. Boys very tanned. Red headkerchief & halter on girl & dark slacks. Sky & water blue, water darkest at horizon. Touch of green on water reflected by dark green waterline of boat. Winton canvas, Block x and Winsor & Newton colors, lead white, linseed oil, 1 month painting. Painted in South Truro studio."

[4] Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 3 vols. (New York, 1995), 1:83.

[5] Susan Alyson Stein, "Hopper: The Uncrossed Threshold," *Arts Magazine* 54 (March 1980): 156–160.

[6] On the connection between Hopper's enthusiasm for nautical subjects and his "love of solitude," see Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist* (New York, 1980), 42.

[7] Nicolai Cikovsky Jr., "Breezing Up (A Fair Wind)," in Franklin Kelly et al., *American Paintings of the Nineteenth Century*, part 1, The Collections of the National Gallery of Art Systematic Catalogue (Washington, DC, 1996), 314. On the comparison with Eakins, see John Wilmerding, *A History of American Marine Paintings* (Salem, MA, and Boston, 1968), 245.

[8] The author thanks Stanley David Gedzelman, professor of earth and atmospheric sciences, City College of New York, for discussing Hopper's cloud formations. See Gedzelman, "Sky Paintings: Mirrors of the American Mind," *Weatherwise* 51 (Jan.–Feb. 1998): 65.

[9] Alexander Nemerov, "Ground Swell: Edward Hopper in 1939," *American Art* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 57.

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[10] Fourteen preparatory sketches for *Ground Swell* are extant. Four of these include roughly delineated cloud patterns, and one is a highly detailed cloud study (Whitney Museum of American Art, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest, acc. no. 70.856).

[11] Alexander Nemerov, "Ground Swell: Edward Hopper in 1939," *American Art* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 50–71.

[12] Hopper to Pène du Bois, Aug. 11, 1940, Guy Pène du Bois Papers, reel 28, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

[13] Committee on Works of Art and the Art School, Report to the Board of Trustees," April 16, 1943, Corcoran Gallery Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, Cor.RG01, Corcoran Gallery Board of Trustees records, 1884–2014, box 2008.006, Special Collections Research Center, George Washington University Libraries.

[14] "Committee on Works of Art and the Art School, Report to the Board of Trustees," April 16, 1943, Corcoran Gallery Board of Trustees Meeting Minutes, Cor.RG01, Corcoran Gallery Board of Trustees records, 1884–2014, box 2008.006, Special Collections Research Center, George Washington University Libraries.

[15] Hopper had won the first William A. Clark Prize of $2,000 and a Gold Medal from the *Fifteenth Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings* at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1937 for *Cape Cod Afternoon* (1936, Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh).

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric that is pre-primed with a thin cream-colored layer that does not obscure the weave of the canvas.[1] It has a replacement stretcher, but all the original tacking margins are intact, indicating that the painting is very close to its original dimensions. Graphite squaring-off lines are visible in several places along the edges and very faintly through the sky near the right edge. This technique is usually an indication that the composition was either transferred from a smaller drawing or possibly from a photograph. The paint was brushed on in opaque but quite thin layers in many places, leaving ground showing through in the initial buildup of the color. The most heavily painted area is the water, which has been applied in many thick layers. It has a convoluted texture made by repeatedly applying and dragging the thick layers of paint with the brush. Traction crackle in the water reveals earlier layers of a darker blue, which probably wasn't fully dry when subsequent layers were

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added, hence the wide cracks. The sail was thickly painted with a palette knife. To add the rigging on the boat Hopper utilized graphite from a pencil, a somewhat unusual technique. Although the early treatment history of the painting is unknown, at some early point in its stay at the Corcoran Gallery of Art it was wax-lined and stretched onto a new support, possibly by Russell Quandt, one of the collection's early conservators. In 1980, Robert Wiles relined it with the same adhesive and restretched it on another new stretcher. He also cleaned the painting, removing grime, varnish, and staining, applied a new synthetic resin surface coating, and carried out minimal retouching.[2]

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] It is known that the ground was commercially pre-primed because it extends over all of the tacking margins.

[2] Wiles's report is in NGA conservation files. In addition, Lance Mayer prepared a comprehensive technical summary for *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011). A copy of this summary is also available in NGA conservation files.

PROVENANCE

(Frank K.M. Rehn Gallery, New York); purchased 1943 by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington;[1] acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

[1] The painting was purchased from the Corcoran's 1943 *Eighteenth Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings*.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1940 Second Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Paintings, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, 9 March - 21 April 1940, no. 93, repro.

1940 Survey of American Painting, Department of Fine Arts, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 24 October - 15 December 1940, no. 329, pl. 121.

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1940 The Cranbrook-Life Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, Cranbrook Academy of Art, Cranbrook Museum, Bloomfield, Michigan, 17 May - 2 June 1940, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1943 Eighteenth Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 March - 2 May 1943, no. 98.

1944 Sport in American Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 10 October - 10 December 1944, no. 69, repro.

1947 Sports and Adventure in American Art, Milwaukee Art Institute, 15 February - 30 March 1947, no catalogue.

1949 The Coast and the Sea, a Survey of American Marine Painting, Brooklyn Museum, 19 November 1948 - 16 January 1949, no. 64, repro.

1950 By the Sea [15-venue tour organized by the Museum of Modern Art, New York], first 7 venues did not include *Ground Swell*; Washington Workshop, Washington, D.C.; Rhode Island League for Arts and Crafts, Providence; Pennsylvania College for Women, Pittsburgh; Quincy Art Club, Illinois; Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester; Hamline University, St. Paul; Albion College, Michigan; State Teachers College, Potsdam, New York, 14 September 1950 - 7 June 1951, no catalogue.[1]

1950 Edward Hopper Retrospective Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Detroit Institute of Arts, 11 February - 2 July 1950, no. 52, pl. 20.

1953 Judge the Jury, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, 13 February - 22 March 1953, no catalogue.[2]

1955 Sport in Art from American Collections Assembled for an Olympic Year, Time and Life Building Reception Hall, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville; Dallas Museum of Fine Arts; Denver Art Museum; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco; Dayton Art Institute, 31 October 1955 - 28 October 1956, no. 53, repro.

1964 Edward Hopper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; Detroit Institute of Arts; City Art Museum of St. Louis, 29 September 1964 - 9 May 1965, no. 36, repro.

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1967 Sao Paolo 9: United States of America / Estados Unidos da America, Edward Hopper [and] Environment U.S.A., 1957-1967, Museum of Modern Art, Sao Paulo; Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, 22 September 1967 - 24 March 1968, no. 21.

1972 Edward Hopper: Fifteen Paintings, Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach; Pasadena Art Museum, 12 January - 23 April 1972, no catalogue.

1976 Corcoran [The American Genius]. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 24 January - 4 April 1976, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1980 Americans at Work and Play, 1845-1944, University Art Museum, University of Texas at Austin, 6-20 March 1980, no. 36, repro.

1980 Guy Pène du Bois: Artist About Town, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha; Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, Evanston, 10 October 1980 - 10 May 1981, no. 98, repro.

1981 Of Time and Place: American Figurative Art from the Corcoran Gallery, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Cincinnati Art Museum; San Diego Museum of Art; University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington; Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga; Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Des Moines Art Center; Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, 23 September 1981 - 21 May 1983, no. 54, repro.

1985 Henri's Circle, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 20 April - 16 June 1985, unnumbered checklist.

1989 Edward Hopper, Musée Cantini, Marseille; Fondation March, Madrid, 23 June 1989 - 4 January 1990, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1998 Forty-Fifth Biennial: The Corcoran Collects, 1907-1998, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 17 July - 29 September 1998, unnumbered checklist, repro.

2005 Encouraging American Genius: Master Paintings from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, 27 August 2005 - 29 April 2007, checklist no. 93.

2007 Edward Hopper, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; National Gallery of Art, Washington, 6 May 2007 - 11 May 2008, no. 74, repro.

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2009 American Paintings from the Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 6 June - 18 October 2009, unpublished checklist.

2012 Hopper, Museo Thyssen-Bornemizsa, Madrid, 12 June 2012 - 28 January 2013, no. 47, repro.

2013 American Journeys: Visions of Place, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013 - 28 September 2014, unpublished checklist.

EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES

[1] A checklist and the itinerary of the exhibition tour are in the Archives of the Museum of Modern Art, New York: CEII.I/43/(2); copies in NGA curatorial files.

[2] Virginia Museum of Arts, Richmond: Official Record of Receipt, 21 January 1953; copy in NGA curatorial files.

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1994 Kranzfelder, Ivo. *Edward Hopper, 1882-1967: Vision der Wirklichkeit*. Cologne, 1994: 106 repro.

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1995 Constantino, Maria. *Edward Hopper*. Greenwich, 1995: 82, 83 repro.

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