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

Edward Hopper
American, 1882 - 1967

Cape Cod Evening

1939

oil on canvas
overall: 76.2 x 101.6 cm (30 x 40 in.)
framed: 106.7 x 132.1 cm (42 x 52 in.)
Inscription: lower right: Edward Hopper; lower right on reverse of frame: frame made for / Edward Hopper by / Carl Sandelin framemaker / 133 E 60th St NYC.
John Hay Whitney Collection 1982.76.6

ENTRY

In the summer of 1930, Edward Hopper and his wife rented a cottage in South Truro on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Situated close to the art colony of Provincetown, Truro had been a thriving whaling village until its gradual decline after the Civil War. By the time the Hoppers arrived, it was a small, isolated village with a population of only 541 people, half of whom were of Portuguese descent. A 1937 travel guide notes that Truro had “attracted a colony of artists and writers who have found its quiet simplicity and freedom from crowds a congenial environment for creative work,” and that “no other spot on the Cape is richer in folklore and piquant legend.”[1] These qualities appealed to the Hoppers, who built a studio house there in July 1934, where they spent six months of almost every succeeding year.

Cape Cod Evening depicts an athletic man sitting at the front door of a Victorian house and unsuccessfully attempting to summon a collie standing in the exact center foreground of the composition, chest-deep in grass. The dog's attention is riveted to an unseen entity to its right, and it ignores its master. A woman stands

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behind the man with her arms folded across her chest, locked in a gesture that signifies withdrawal and defensiveness. She wears a tightly fitting dress that accentuates her stocky figure. Several aspects of the scene are disturbing: typical of the human protagonists of Hopper's paintings, the man and woman—presumably a couple—are self-absorbed and oblivious to each other's presence; the uncut grass and encroaching locust grove are out of character with the well-maintained house; the dog's alert stance seems a portent of some imminent danger; and the advancing darkness of evening imparts a melancholy mood.

Cape Cod Evening is one of the best known among Hopper’s numerous Cape Cod subjects.[2] The genesis of the painting is exceptionally well documented. The artist's wife describes it in the record book of Hopper’s works:

> . design on glass door and house. ground glass. Foinet canvas, Block x & Winsor & Newton colors, linseed oil, lead white. 1 month painting.
>
>] formation, creeping up on one with the dark. The Whipporwill is there out of sight. Painted in S. Truro studio. Dog sat in front seat of car parked at Truro P.O.[3]

Hopper's friend, printmaker Richard Lahey, has related how the collie came to be drawn and has provided additional details regarding the development of the composition:

> Edward was getting the dog painted and he was pretty well along with the whole composition—one day he decided to go down to the Truro Library and check the physical [identification] in the encyclopedia so as not to be at fault—There seemed to be no actual collie dog in Truro—or at least none that had come to his attention. When he returned with meager information from the library—they parked the car and there was this small miracle—just the kind of dog that was wanted came out of the parked car ahead—with a child while the mother went into the nearby store to shop. Jo made friends with the children and dog—Edward got out

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> his sketch book and pencil and while Jo held the dog with patting . . . Edward got his sketch. Speaking of the experiences of painting it Edward said "I made studies in pencil. Then take the canvas 36 1/2 x 50 1/4 out to the landscape when the light and time of day was about the same. I worked from nature and then painted (oils?) in the studio from memory—changing organizing composing—I remember how I would say to myself when I was working in the studio and going a little stale—How wonderful it would be to go back to nature again with the big canvas and get fresh suggestions of nature—and then after a few days working would declare—The accidents of nature are getting in my way—I want to get back to the studio again." So it went back and forth until he had landed it.[4]

Even the usually laconic Hopper offered some informative comments about the painting:

>] or some evening sound."[5]

Although Hopper was noncommittal about the whip-poor-will, his wife's comments indicate that the bird was important, and that the painting was almost named after it. The widespread and nocturnal whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferus*), a species named after its distinctive vocalization, inhabits deciduous woodlands and forest edges, where it feeds on insects at dusk. Its implied presence here is thus appropriate because of the twilight ambience and setting at the edge of a grove of trees. Hopper, who often selected his imagery from popular culture, may well have been familiar with the opening line of the song "My Blue Heaven": "When whip-poor-wills call and evening is nigh." The 1928 performance of this song by the singer Gene Austin became one of the best-selling singles of all time.[6]

Like many of Hopper's paintings, *Cape Cod Evening* was not a preconceived composition, but the result of a long process of deliberation. Its evolution can be traced in the surviving preparatory drawings [fig. 1] [fig. 2] [fig. 3] [fig. 4] [fig. 5] [fig. 6] [fig. 7] [fig. 8] [fig. 9]. From the outset, Hopper had a basic sense of the composition's main components, with the grass field occupying the painting's lower half, the house set in the upper right quadrant, and the locust grove in the upper left quadrant. He experimented with a number of different positions for the figures before arriving at their final disposition in a sketch that was blocked out for

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transferal to the canvas. The only significant difference between the last sketch and the painting is the placement of the windows in the second story of the house. The “changing organizing composing” to which Lahey alluded must have involved less noticeable alterations, such as the length of the woman's dress, the window shade on the right, and the placement of the trees.

Hopper was an introverted individual who was notoriously secretive about the meaning of his paintings. *Cape Cod Evening* is a representative example of his mature work that features his most characteristic motifs and themes. Like many of his paintings, including other Cape Cod subjects,[7] the scene occurs at a specific time of day indicated both in the title and by his use of light. He was fascinated by architecture, and buildings play a major role in many of his paintings, either as subjects or as primary accessories. The psychological isolation that separates the male and female protagonists in *Cape Cod Evening* reflects Hopper’s penchant for mysterious, quasi-narrative subjects that imply dysfunctional sexual relationships.[8] Also typical of Hopper, the painting’s sinister ambience may have been influenced by contemporary film noir.[9]

Attempts by art historians to interpret this enigmatic composition range from the excessively speculative to the more or less plausible. Lloyd Goodrich was one of the few who confined himself to basics when he described the scene as representing "a Yankee couple and their dog outside their neat white house in the twilight, the woods growing dark, the whippoorwill [*sic*] beginning."[10] Noting the lack of communication between the "disenchanted couple" and the use of an evening ambience to convey a negative connotation, Gail Levin wrote that in this work dusk "alludes to the twilight of a relationship." She theorized that Hopper ignored the dog's traditional iconographic function as a symbol of fidelity and used it instead as a symbol of lasciviousness and gluttony "to make his own ironic comment on the couple's deteriorating relationship."[11] Levin later suggested that the scene alludes to Hopper's deteriorating relationship with his wife Jo: "The woman appears angry, her posture tense and forbidding—a stance that suggests the fury that Jo recurrently directed toward Edward."[12] Levin, followed by Heinz Liesbrock, opined that the mysterious evening ambience was inspired by Robert Frost, whose poetry Hopper admired.[13] Both Levin and Liesbrock saw a parallel in Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” particularly in the line: “The woods are lovely, dark, and deep.”

Rather than viewing the man and woman as estranged from each other, Robert C. Hobbs saw them as mutually alienated from their environment: "*Cape Cod Evening*

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is concerned with the loss of a viable rural America: it focuses on those people and places that have been left in the wake of progress."[14] That the Victorian house stands in a field of grass rather than an orderly lawn, along with its uncomfortable proximity to the grove of locust trees, indicates nature's reclamation of the land. The implied presence of the whip-poor-will "symbolizes the power of nature over culture." The woman "is a composite of misaligned signs" who "symbolizes nature overgrown and ill at ease with itself, nature corseted and wearing bobbed hair."[15] Hobbs concluded that *Cape Cod Evening* "constitutes a new paradigm in American landscape painting, for it emphasizes the passage of the agrarian age and the forlorn individuals who become idle caretakers of an anachronistic way of life."[16] For Mark Strand, "the fact that the man's coaxing is not answered suggests that it is only a matter of time before the dissolution of the family, momentarily bound by focused attention, will occur."[17] In 1995, the writer Ann Beattie published a short story inspired by the painting, in which she conjured the interactions between the Hoppers and fictional neighbors on Cape Cod during the summer of 1939, shortly before war broke out in Europe.[18]

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the painting is how Hopper achieved such a powerful evocation of sound through purely visual means. The collie's alert pointed ears indicate that it has heard something in the distance, while the inscrutable, self-absorbed human protagonists seem inattentive and oblivious as they focus on the ruminations of their own minds. During his trip to the Truro Library to research the collie, Hopper probably read that the breed is noted for being unusually obedient. One contemporary authority wrote that a collie, particularly of the Scottish, Welsh, or English variety, "obeys the voice or whistle of his master instantaneously."[19] Another writer declared that the collie was an excellent watchdog, whose "faithfulness and loyalty have been widely and justly publicized. He is usually reserved and distrustful of strangers but devoted to his master."[20] But in *Cape Cod Evening*, the collie, riveted by the sound of the whip-poor-will, ignores its master. It seems that the dog is momentarily neglecting its domestic allegiances for the call of the wild.

The theme of the natural world encroaching upon civilization predominates in *Cape Cod Evening*, with three-quarters of the composition devoted to the grass and trees. Hopper presents the viewer with an assemblage of carefully orchestrated dissonances that convey a generally pessimistic, skeptical attitude about humanity's relationship with nature and human nature itself. Although Hopper may have selected imagery from the world around him, he was only

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superficially a realist. Taking external visual reality as his starting point, he transformed his subjects into "mental impressions of things," reassembling them into deeply personal visions that lie beyond the reach of literal or psychological interpretations.

Robert Torchia

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES

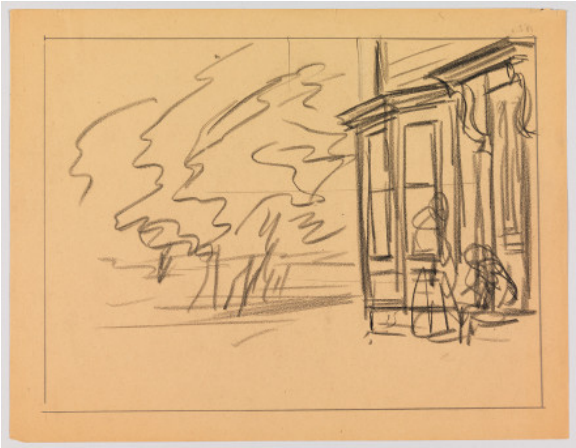

fig. 1 Edward Hopper, study for *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939, fabricated chalk on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.182. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

fig. 2 Edward Hopper, study for *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939, graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.227. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

fig. 3 Edward Hopper, study for *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939, fabricated chalk on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.183a. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

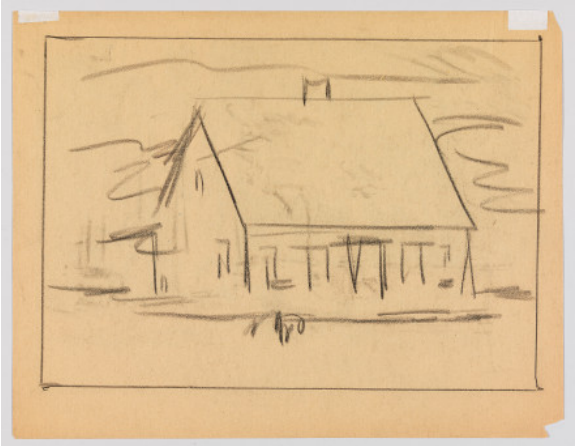

fig. 4 Edward Hopper, study for *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939, fabricated chalk on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.183b. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

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fig. 5 Edward Hopper, study for *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939, fabricated chalk on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.181. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

fig. 6 Edward Hopper, study for *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939, fabricated chalk on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.180. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

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fig. 7 Edward Hopper, study for *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939, graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.164. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

fig. 8 Edward Hopper, study for *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939, graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.163. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

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fig. 9 Edward Hopper, study for *Cape Cod Evening*, 1939, graphite pencil on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Josephine N. Hopper Bequest 70.338. © Heirs of Josephine N. Hopper, licensed by the Whitney Museum of American Art

NOTES

[1] *Massachusetts: A Guide to Its Places and People* (New York, 1938), 505.

[2] For a discussion of Hopper's relationship with Cape Cod, see Alexander Theroux, "Edward Hopper's Cape Cod," *Art & Antiques* (Jan. 1990): 57–66, 97–98.

[3] Josephine Nivison Hopper, "Artist's Ledger, Book II," 1907–1962, 31, Whitney Museum of American Art; quoted in Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 3 vols. (New York, 1995), 3:264; and reproduced in Deborah Lyons, *Edward Hopper: A Journal of His Work* (New York, 1997), 51.

[4] Richard Lahey Papers, "Reminiscences: Artists I Have Known," Edward Hopper Papers, Archives of American Art, roll 378, frames 980, 982; quoted in Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 3 vols. (New York, 1995), 3:264.

[5] Edward Hopper, quoted in Grace Pagano, *Contemporary American Painting: The Encyclopedia Britannica Collection* (New York, 1945), 57.

[6] Walter Donaldson wrote the music to "My Blue Heaven" and the lyrics were by George A. Whiting. Another well-known song featuring the whip-poor-will is Jerome Kern's "Whip-poor-will" (1920); for a discussion of that song see

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Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900–1950* (New York, 1972), 52–53.

[7] Other examples are *Cape Cod Sunset* (1934, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), *Cape Cod Afternoon* (1936, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA), and *Cape Cod Morning* (1950, National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC). *Clamdigger* (1935, private collection) has the same basic composition as the Cape Cod paintings and contains many of the essential elements found in *Cape Cod Evening,* including the seated man, the dog, the grove of trees, and the house. However, as related by Gail Levin in *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (New York, 1995), 305, Hopper considered *Clamdigger* an abysmal failure.

[8] For a discussion of the pervasive and constant theme of alienation in Hopper's art, see Linda Nochlin, "Edward Hopper and the Imagery of Alienation," *Art Journal* 41 (Summer 1981): 136–141.

[9] For the influence of film and photography on Hopper's work, see Gail Levin, "Edward Hopper: The Influence of Theater and Film," *Arts Magazine* 55 (Oct. 1980): 123–127; Erika Doss, "Edward Hopper, Nighthawks, and Film Noir," *Postscript: Essays on Film and the Humanities* 2 (Winter 1983): 14–36; Marc Holthof, "Die Hopper-Methode: Vom 'narrativen' zum 'abstrakten' Realismus," and Paul Levine, "Edward Hopper und die amerikanische Kultur," in *Edward Hopper, 1882–1967* (Frankfurt, 1992), respectively, 19–27, 28–32.

[10] Lloyd Goodrich, *Edward Hopper* (New York, 1964), 42.

[11] Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper* (New York, 1984), 57.

[12] Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 3 vols. (New York, 1995), 3:314. Also see Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (New York, 1995), 313–314.

[13] Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist* (New York, 1980), 62; Heinz Liesbrock, *Edward Hopper: Das Sichtbare und das Unsichtbare* (Stuttgart, Germany, 1992), 51–52

[14] Robert C. Hobbs, *Edward Hopper* (Washington, DC, 1987), 109–110.

[15] Robert C. Hobbs, *Edward Hopper* (Washington, DC, 1987), 109–110.

[16] Robert C. Hobbs, *Edward Hopper* (Washington, DC, 1987), 109–110.

[17] Mark Strand, *Hopper* (Hopewell, NJ, 1994), 22.

[18] Ann Beattie, "Cape Cod Evening," in Deborah Lyons and Adam D. Weinberg, *Edward Hopper and the American Imagination* (New York, 1995), 9–14. Alexander Nemerov has also interpreted Hopper's *Ground Swell*, painted immediately after *Cape Cod Evening*, as an ominous harbinger of World War II. See "Ground Swell: Edward Hopper in 1939," *American Art* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 50–71.

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[19] Charles T. Inglee, *Working Dogs: The Breeds as Recognized by the American Kennel Club* (New York, 1935), 57–58.

[20] Fredson Thayer Bowers, *The Dog Owner's Handbook* (Boston, 1936), 78–79.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The plain-weave, single-thread, medium-weight fabric support was wax-lined and remounted on a nonoriginal, six-member expansion bolt stretcher in 1964.[1] There is one crossbar in each direction. The tacking margins are intact, showing that the painting is still very near its original dimensions. The artist applied paint in layers, mostly wet over dry, on a commercially prepared white ground.[2] He left reserves around the figures and emphasized the halo effect by scraping away the ground and exposing the support's texture. Infrared examination reveals underdrawing in the dog and the man's hand.[3] Incised lines define the vertical edge of the far right window, and pencil marks delineate the ends of the horizontal lines of the clapboard. The pigment in the locust trees has faded from green to blue, probably because it contains a fugitive yellow component. Paint at the top edge, which was protected from light under the rabbet of the frame, retains the original green color. The painting's original appearance is preserved in a color photograph in *Contemporary American Painting–Encyclopedia Brittanica Collection* [fig. 1]. The painting is in good condition. The surface is coated with a thin layer of synthetic varnish.[4]

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TECHNICAL COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Edward Hopper, *Cape Cod Evening*, as reproduced in *Contemporary American Painting: Encyclopedia Brittanica Collection* (New York, 1946), pl. 59. ND205, showing the original color of the pigment in the locust trees

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The conservation files attribute this lining to Jean Volkmar in New York City. There is another treatment listed in the Whitney files that was done by Mme. Testut in 1957, but no details are given.

[2] The priming covers all of the tacking margins, indicating that the canvas was primed before painting. This usually indicates that the priming was commercially prepared, rather than applied by the artist.

[3] Infrared examination was conducted with the Kodak 310-21x, a platinum silicide camera with a 55 mm macro lens and a 1.5–2.0 micron filter.

[4] The painting's frame is original and was chosen by Edward Hopper. His wife, Jo, objected to it: "A beautiful frame—but deadly on that picture." Jo Hopper diary entry, January 9, 1940, as quoted in Gail Levin, *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (New York, 1995), 321.

PROVENANCE

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(Frank K.M. Rehn Gallery, New York), at least in 1943.[1] Encyclopaedia Britannica Collection, New York, by 1945;[2] purchased 1948 by William Benton, New York; purchased 14 September 1950 by John Hay Whitney [1904-1982], Manhasset, New York; deeded 1982 to the John Hay Whitney Charitable Trust, New York; gift 1982 to NGA.

[1] The painting was lent by the Rehn Gallery to a 1943 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

[2] The painting is included in the 1945 catalogue of the Encyclopedia Britannica Collection.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1943 American Realists and Magic Realists, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1943, no. 18.

1950 Edward Hopper Retrospective Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Detroit Institute of Arts, 1950, no. 51, pl. 17.

1955 National Institute of Arts and Letters, New York, 1955.

1960 The John Hay Whitney Collection, Tate Gallery, London, 1960-1961, no. 34, repro.

1963 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1963.

1964 Edward Hopper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Art Institute of Chicago; Detroit Institute of Arts; City Art Museum of St. Louis, 1964-1965, no. 35, repro.

1980 Edward Hopper: The Art and The Artist, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Hayward Gallery, London; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Stadtische Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf; Art Institute of Chicago; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1980-1982, unnumbered catalogue, pl. 418.

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1983 The John Hay Whitney Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1983, no. 70, repro.

1989 Edward Hopper, Musée Cantini, Marseille; Fundación Juan March, Madrid, 1989-1990, unnumbered catalogue and repro. (Marseille), no. 18 and repro. (Madrid).

1992 Edward Hopper 1882-1967, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 1992-1993, no. 68, repro.

1992 Edward Hopper und die Fotografie, Museum Folkwang Essen, Germany, 1992, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1995 Edward Hopper and the American Imagination, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1995, unnumbered catalogue, pl. 38.

1998 American Light: Selections from the National Gallery of Art, Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, May-August 1998, no catalogue.

1998 Gifts to the Nation from Mr. and Mrs. John Hay Whitney, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1998-1999, no catalogue.

1998 Treasures of Light: Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis, March-April 1998, no catalogue.

2004 Edward Hopper, Tate Modern, London; Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2004-2005, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

2006 Full House: Views of the Whitney's Collection at 75, Whitney Museum of Art, New York, 2006.

2007 Edward Hopper, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Art Institute of Chicago, 2007-2008, no. 93, repro.

2012 Hopper, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; Réunion des Musées Nationaux and Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, 2012-2013, no. 51, repro.

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1945 Pagano, Grace. *Contemporary American Painting: The Encyclopedia Britannica Collection*. New York, 1945: 57, color repro.

1971 Goodrich, Lloyd. *Edward Hopper*. New York, 1971: 129, repro. 136.

1984 Levin, Gail. *Edward Hopper*. New York, 1984: 57, color repro.

1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 571, no. 870, color repro.

1987 Hobbs, Robert C. *Edward Hopper*. Washington, D.C., 1987: 107-110, color repro.

1988 Liesbrock, Heinz. *Edward Hopper: Vierzig Meisterwerke*. Munich, Germany, 1988: 25-26, color pl. 21.

1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 180, no. 67, color repro.

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 206, repro.

1992 Liesbrock, Heinz. *Edward Hopper: Das Sichtbare und das Unsichtbare*. Stuttgart, Germany, 1992: 47-52, color repro.

1992 *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 251, repro.

1993 Little, Carl. *Edward Hopper's New England*. San Francisco, 1993: xv, repro.

1994 Strand, Mark. *Hopper*. Hopewell, New Jersey, 1994: 21-22, repro.

1995 Kranzfelder, Ivo. *Edward Hopper, 1882-1967: Vision of Reality*. Cologne, 1995: 95, color repro. 96-97.

1995 Levin, Gail. *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonne*. 4 vols. New York, 1995: 3:264, repro.

1997 Lyons, Deborah. *Edward Hopper: A Journal of His Work*. New York, 1997: 51, repro.

2000 Kirsh, Andrea, and Rustin S. Levenson. *Seeing Through Paintings: Physical Examination in Art Historical Studies*. Materials and Meaning in the Fine Arts 1. New Haven, 2000: 164-165, color fig. 170.

2004 Hand, John Oliver. *National Gallery of Art: Master Paintings from the Collection*. Washington and New York, 2004: 405, no. 336, color repro.

2011 Little, Carl. *Edward Hopper's New England*. San Francisco, 2011: 18, 82-83, color plate 31.

2012 Brock, Charles. "George Bellows: An Unfinished Life." In *George Bellows* ed. Charles Brock (Exh. cat. Washington 2012). Munich, 2012: 26, color fig. 20.

2016 National Gallery of Art. *Highlights from the National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Washington, 2016: 306, repro.

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