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:
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
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]

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. 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


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).


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

[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).


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
eyearly conservators. In 1980, Robert Wiles relined it with the same adhesive and
re stretched 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.
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.


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]


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.


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


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.


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