Edward Hopper is one American painter who is admired by painters, critics, and enthusiasts of every artistic persuasion, from the most avant-garde to the most securely traditionalist. Modernists admire the clarity and simplicity of his compositions, while conservatives see in the specific portrayal of mood and locale the continuity of American realism. Hopper achieves this broad appeal, however, without sacrificing the unity of his style. He has been a gentle force in American art for forty years, and is notable for the integrity and internal logic of his attitude and technique. His transcription of American life through a personal, literal poetry has remained astonishingly contemporary, even through the years of the great postwar revolution in both the style and size of American painting.

The recent purchase of one of Hopper’s greatest and most often reproduced paintings, The Lighthouse at Two Lights of 1929 (Figure 1), through the Hugo Kastor Fund, adds one of the painter’s own favorite works to an already considerable representation in the Museum’s collections, a total now of four oils, four water colors, and fifteen etchings. These works have been acquired over a period of thirty-seven years and reflect an enduring interest in his work.

Edward Hopper was born in Nyack, New York, in 1882. In the early years of this century, as a student at the school founded by William Merritt Chase (later the New York School of Art), he studied with the painters Robert Henri and Kenneth Hayes Miller. These active interpreters of the American scene were surely the most influential teachers in this country between Chase himself and Hans Hofmann. Among Hopper’s classmates at the Chase School were George Bellows, Guy Pène du Bois, Walter Pach, Gifford Beal, Glenn O. Coleman, and Rockwell Kent; the full list of Henri’s and Miller’s students would include many more of the prominent painters of Hopper’s generation.

About the older of the two men, Hopper himself was to write: “Of Henri’s resources as a teacher everyone knows; of his enthusiasm and his power to energize his students I had firsthand knowledge. Few teachers of art have gotten so much out of their pupils, or given them so great an initial impetus as Henri.” The influence of the teacher was twofold: he exposed his students to the work of such masters as Velazquez, Hals, and Manet, whose works are characterized by rapid, almost notational brushwork, at the service of an objective vision of reality. He also made them aware that the high purpose of art was to describe the everyday, commonplace life around them. Both these lessons were to prove of key importance in the development of Hopper’s art.

In the years 1906 to 1910 Hopper made three trips to Europe, spending most of his time in Paris. These were, of course, years of great excitement there, of the most intense revolution, and it is typical of Hopper that he was not pulled into the almost irresistible whirlpool of innovation and invention. It was in Paris, however, through Patrick Henry Bruce, a former Henri student who was to become one of our leading modernist painters, that Hopper was brought into contact with that earlier excitement, impressionism, and particularly the works of Sisley, Pissarro, and Renoir.
Thus by 1910 most of the elements of Hopper's style are accounted for: the brushwork of Manet—rather loose when studied closely, but always giving the effect of realism—a palette lightened by contact with impressionism, and the desire to depict the life he saw about him. As Hopper was to write, in a famous statement of 1933, "My aim in painting has always been the most exact transcription of my most intimate impressions of nature," and this aim arose not only from his own predilection, but from his background as well.

He sold a work out of the famous Armory Show of 1913, but it was his only sale until 1923. After 1915 he earned a living through commercial art and by illustrating. He was not happy with this work. "What I wanted to do," he has said, "was to paint sunlight on the side of a house." In 1919 he took up etching and completed twenty-five plates within a relatively short time. These were shown successfully at the Whitney Studio Club, ancestor of the Whitney Museum of American Art, in 1920, and it was from this time that his work was noticed favorably. Hopper's earliest works in our collections are a group of etchings of the early 1920s, works of high quality that, while true to their medium, have a style consistent with his other works. By 1925 he had given up commercial art completely and was largely devoting himself to oils and water colors.

The earliest of these in our collections is the water color Locomotive, D & RG (Figure 2) of 1925, a closely observed and boldly rendered work typical of his best in this medium. It was executed in New Mexico, one of the areas of the country we have come to associate with Hopper's name; Maine, Cape Cod, and New York City are others that he has taught us to see anew, in terse, light-filled pictures, at once specific and yet typical of their locality.

Another work in our collections, House of the Foghorn (Figure 3), painted in Maine in 1927, establishes Hopper even more firmly in the front

1. *The Lighthouse at Two Lights, 1929, by Edward Hopper (born 1882), American. Oil on canvas, 29 1/2 x 43 3/4 inches. Hugo Kastor Fund, 62.43*
ranks of American water-colorists. Homer, Eakins, Sargent, Prendergast, Marin, Davies, Dove, Demuth, and Hopper form a continuous tradition in this underappreciated medium, one of the great strengths of American art. House of the Foghorn, making a powerful contrast between mass and space through clearly defined planes of light and shadow, anticipates our newly acquired Lighthouse at Two Lights, painted two years later. So does one of Hopper's etchings, also of a lighthouse, entitled Maine Coast (Figure 4). That Hopper can achieve similar effects by different means in different mediums is one proof of the unity of his vision and the control of his art.

This results in part from a unity of subject. The range of Hopper's subject matter is wide: the Atlantic coast, city tenements, Victorian architecture, bleak offices, the movie house or all-night restaurant, the quiet emptiness of a small-town Sunday morning or of a rural gas station—all these are evoked by Hopper's paintings and live in his images in our minds. But despite this variety of subject matter there is in all Hopper's work a continuity of subject. His subject is, first of all, light—the depiction of light and the definition of scene and mood by light. This is his strength, as he has long realized. Hopper's subject is also the detached observation of life, a detachment that often expresses isolation and loneliness.

Both these themes, the depiction of light and the sense of isolation, are dominant in The Lighthouse at Two Lights, as in others of our oils, notably From Williamsburg Bridge of 1928 and Office in a Small City of 1953. There is no change in subject, mood, or style over the years. Even in a painting of New York streets of 1913 these elements are present. Like certain other American painters—Edwin Dickinson, Stuart Davis, Milton Avery—Hopper has followed his own course, clear of movements and schools. He seems always to have been himself.

There is one further quality that distinguishes
3. House of the Foghorn, 1927. Water color on paper. 12 1/2 x 19 1/2 inches. Bequest of Elizabeth Amis Cameron Blanchard, 56.216


Hopper’s painting: the impression of tremendous attention to outline and crispness of detail. His works appear to be “hard-edge” paintings, but on closer examination we see this is an illusion created by the sureness of his touch. The brushwork is loose, but the placement is so exact, the light portrayed so effectively and with such economy, that the whole becomes sharp and controlled. It is not tightness of technique, but clarity of composition, in the classical tradition of Poussin, David, and Cézanne, that gives such firmness and presence to his work. It is in fact the tension between the intimacy of his subject matter and the calculated, concealed geometry of his composition that produces the atmosphere of stillness and isolation peculiarly Hopper’s own.

This tension is strikingly demonstrated in our
largest, and, in a sense, most ambitious Hopper oil, the well-known Tables for Ladies (Figure 5) of 1930. We look through a window that is not there into the interior of a very ordinary restaurant (one would be tempted to say cafeteria, were it not for the tablecloths). The eliminated plate-glass window is implied by the distance and remoteness that pervade the scene. There are effective passages of bravura painting, in such details as the vitrine of the cigar counter next to the cash register, which seems realistic from a safe viewing distance. There is also, for Hopper, a wider than usual range of color. But the vigorous, realistic elements are held in check by the primary concern for total composition. The figures are simplified, somewhat in the manner of Guy Pène du Bois (a friend and fellow student who published an essay on Hopper in 1931). They are defined as mass by light, with little regard for special characterization. This generalizing attitude toward the figure, as merely an element of a painting and not the point of a painting, is characteristic of all Hopper’s work and is part of his constant concern for ordered composition. His inhabited paintings have the same sense of isolation as the uninhabited ones, and, if anything, the distance is increased with the inclusion of human beings.

In Hopper we have the continuity of the American tradition of objective painting, the matter-of-fact quality of Homer and Eakins, but it is expressed in the broader, more simplified terms of contemporary painting. It is gratifying that he is so well represented in our collections.

5. Tables for Ladies, 1930. Oil on canvas. 48 1/4 x 60 1/4 inches. George A. Hearn Fund, 31.62