

WINDOWS AS EXPRESSIVE ELEMENTS  
IN THE ART OF  
EDWARD HOPPER AND FAIRFIELD PORTER

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EDWARD HOPPER AND FAIRFIELD PORTER

Both Edward Hopper and Fairfield Porter employed a visual language peculiarly American. Both were New Englanders, painters of realism with a strong affinity for light, atmosphere, season, and time of day. For these elements they are known. Their works, also, often include the architectural element of windows. But, oh, with such divergent purpose and effect!

Hopper's windows carry an emotive import directly related to the human condition as he experienced it.<sup>1</sup> This writer feels they serve as symbols of man's state of mind and his need to control, as well as be controlled.

Porter's windows are, first, formal units to create rhythm, pattern, and compositional structure. Their expressivity rarely functions as a physical or emotional barrier. Instead, they become vehicles to fuse exterior and interior into a whole. Nature, not man, exerts its influence as people and spaces happily acquiesce, and move to its cadences.

HOPPER'S WINDOWS

Hopper's paintings are suffused with psychological implications. Weather, light and shadow, architecture, and people play off one another to create a sense of loneliness and alienation. The dark tonality reinforces this tension.

It is relevant, in exploring the particular emotive value of windows in his work, to consider three distinct uses of them. Each

usage depends on the position that we, as viewer, are forced to take in relation to the scene at hand.

### Window-as-Eye

The first category is the "window-as-eye." Here the painting often presents itself as a portrait of a house or other building. The structure is rarely on the same plane as is the viewer. It may rise above or sit below eye-level. The placement seems calculated to increase the viewer's anxiety. The building itself almost assumes an entity, human or animal-like; and the window becomes a telling feature.<sup>2</sup>

As we move up the bank to the rails, the "House by the Railroad" emerges looming above, solitary and ominous. The turret has a periscope thrust with a 360° view. The few uncovered windows have partially pulled shades. They are lower to the left and rise on the right, giving the unsettling impression of a sidelong glance in the viewer's direction (Fig. 1).

The turbulent sky, the yellow light and dramatic black shadows create a sense of impending storm in the painting, "Captain Upton's House." The windows echo the sky. They are unfathomable pools, reflecting that sense of foreboding, and refusing to reveal their depths. They look out but deny entry. They act as a barrier to the viewer (Fig. 2).

The house with "The Mansard Roof" (Fig. 3) is a broad, matronly aunt. Canvas porch awnings become her skirt, a sensible if dull material, caught in the breeze. Again, note the raised elevation of the house and its effect. One particular window dominates by virtue

of its yellow shade. It seems to look down, conveying a scolding through its jaundiced eye.

"Haskell's House" is a grand house, superior in position and decoration. There are physical and psychological barriers to gain entrance. One does not casually visit this house. There is a precipitous, narrow, and prescribed climb; while a multitude of window-eyes, elegant, arched and proud, close themselves to our approach (Fig. 4).

"Adams's House" is a simple and unpretentious Yankee. Its face is washed in late-afternoon sun, creating long shadows. Structural elements, such as the white picket fence, the stoop, windows toward the street and the short walk-up, could easily read as "All-American-Hominess." But, this house is neither terribly forbidding nor particularly welcoming (Fig. 5).

It's, however, a self-consciously narrow house on a narrow lot, with carefully marked boundaries. Windows are located only street-side, reinforcing its emotionally restrained content.<sup>3</sup> There can be no visual intercourse with neighboring houses. Shades are drawn to block the intrusion of nature and any participation with the life of the street. This house closes its windows and door in self-containment, and turns its eye inward (Fig. 5).

Two public buildings in this category of "window-as-eye" are seen in "New York Pavements" and "Custom House."

In "New York Pavements," the scale, its key provided by the nurse in the foreground, and the angle, both enhance the sense of size. The yellow of half-pulled window shades in an overall gray composition become points of focus. The windows are low and bordered with large

stone, like a tough, scale-pattern, giving the overall effect of a blinking reptilian giant (Fig. 6).

"Custom House" takes on the character of its function. It is proper, a bit imposing and self-important--a good government edifice. The shaded windows appear as heavy-lidded and somewhat condescending eyes. They peer out, a touch disinterested, offering no internal information. The viewer is induced, not to ask what activities take place within, but rather what thought, what state of mind, or what is the intent toward him (Fig. 7).

In each of these cited works, the building maintains a measured distance from the viewer. Hopper's positioning of the viewer is never dominant, but often subordinant and subtly threatened. Also used are the devices of awnings, shades and curtains, and deliberately elongated windows<sup>4</sup> to produce an anthropomorphic and psychologically rich result. Thus, windows become veiled glances or hostile stares. We have heard that the "eye is the window of the soul." So, here, the window becomes the eye, which in turn becomes the soul. It acts as a metaphor for its own metaphor. As symbols of a psychological state, buildings with "eyes" assume character qualities. This is the first function in this double role for the window. The second is in engaging the viewer to imagine the actual individuals behind these windows, protected in their enclosed darkness.

#### The Individual Behind the Window

This leads to a second category. Here, the viewer enters these interiors, public and private, or shares outdoor spaces. We watch the

scene at an emotional distance and encounter the individual behind the window, whose presence we have sensed all along. And we notice powerful relationships set up between Hopper's people and windows.

Who are these people behind shades and shutters? As we enter their spaces, that sense of people enclosed, keeping to their private little boxes, is confirmed. The window is their eye on the world,<sup>5</sup> behind which they can safely hide. They are not required to participate anymore than if they were watching the evening news on the television screen.

In "Hotel by a Railroad," we see such a couple in their room. There is no communication between them or with us. The man maintains a protective distance from the window as he looks down at the street. He is far enough removed to prevent being seen from below or from other hotel windows. He may be described as the secretive presence behind the window as mentioned in the previous category.

The window of the "Hotel Room" (Fig. 8) is a mirror of the viewer, taking the same voyeuristic stance at the opposite end of the room. In this sense, it becomes an eye looking in upon a young woman reading on her bed. In another sense, it provides the woman with an emotional escape outward from this chest-tightening, confining space. Through the avenue of the window, she can play both roles: the spied-upon and the voyeur.

In "Chair Car" (Fig. 9), the windows function as compartments, defining the space. Each person has a seat and a private screening of life as it goes by. Windows and seats organize people so they do not have to interact.

"Summer Evening" adds a new twist to the window's role. The viewer is positioned in the dark. Two young people are spotlighted as if onstage, contained within the boundaries of the porch and its light. Their behavior is also contained, as they place as much possible distance between themselves and their two "chaperones." The very felt presence of Mom and Pop is represented by the window and door, respectively (Fig. 10).

More specific is this gender identification in "Cape Cod Evening." The husband sits with back to the door, and the wife leans against the windows. Their dogs may venture into the fields, but people remain intrinsically bound to architectural structures of windows, doors and porches--physically and psychologically. This is very typical of Hopper, as evidenced again in "Sunlight on Brownstone" and "Four Lane Road" (Fig. 11).

#### Viewer-Voyeur

The third category occurs when Hopper uses the window to showcase an interior scene. It serves as a barrier between those inside and we, the viewer, outside. We can never participate, only watch.

The viewer's position as voyeur is often enhanced by value contrasts. We may be shrouded in darkness outside, while cafe patrons drink coffee inside under harsh fluorescent lighting, as in "Night Hawks" (Fig. 12). In "Guest House," individual rooms light up. We stare, positioned in the dark out of the street lamp's exposure. Hopper is well able to make the viewer feel like a prowler in the night. If it is day, and the viewer is in the light, the interiors may be darkened to silhouette the figure behind the window (see "New York

Office"). The show continues for us, but the sun is high, the place is public and we have license to view. We need not hide in the dark to watch. The window is a viewing screen, directing the eye. It contains others while excluding us, thereby removing once again, any chance of human interaction.

## PORTER'S WINDOWS

What I hate is the Puriticanical idea that light is of no account, that pleasure condemns you to hell, that life is empty of daily significance; everything has to be essential.<sup>6</sup>

This quote by Porter tells much about how he experienced his world. One could have come to the same conclusion about the man by "reading" his paintings.

In many respects, Porter's uses of windows communicates a personal view poles apart from that of Hopper. They carry no heavy psychological baggage (which, in Hopper's work, serves to distance). Not on a mind-level, but through sensual evocation, and formal order, he induces the viewer to participate.

"Columbus Day" and "Island Farmhouse" contain structures, the clapboard variety with which Hopper was well acquainted. The windows speak matter-of-factly of human presence. Their purpose is strictly formal. In "Columbus Day," they take their place in the abstract patterning of values and similar shapes in negative spaces and the shadows of trees and bushes (Fig. 13). In "Island Farmhouse," the windows again repeat nature's patterns by reflecting the sky and tree shapes. The blue of the top window provides an intense color key to this painting, echoed in the shadow of the smaller house's roof. Window shadows are saturated cadmium yellow, which disallows introspective or psychological inference. Color usage is gay. Nature sings, and man's world is in accord (Fig. 14).

Windows as compositional components are consistently noted. The foreground and background are interconnected by the windows' verticals

and horizontals in the cheerful interior of "Apples and Roses." The windows and corresponding light of "Still Life" of 1975 (Fig. 15) set up a rhythm of value patterns which play across the whole surface, like a polished keyboard.

#### Windows--Synthesizers of Nature and Man's World

This formal use of windows is very common with Porter's interiors. It is clearly apparent in "October Interior" (Fig. 16) and "Still Life with White Boats" (Fig. 17). Windows are also employed to bring nature and man together, creating ". . . an intimism with an American spaciousness, a color-drunk hymn to (in his phrase) 'things as they are.'"<sup>7</sup> There is no slit-eyed view of the world here. Man's spaces are infused with nature's hues, heat and patterns to form a holistic experience for the viewer.

The screened vistas of "Iced Coffee" and "Armchair on Porch" (Figs. 18, 19) call forth piney smells from the woods. Screens delineate "people areas" and keep out insects. But they also allow for complete exchange in every other way with the out-of-doors.

And Porter's people are simply part of the whole. Occasionally they notice the viewer, but often they are absorbed in their activities. Absorption is not interpreted as remoteness or inaccessibility, however. It is a corporate, social moment as people, nature, windows and we, as viewer, function in harmony.

Note, too, how window casements are cast wide to embrace nature. This gesture of unrestricted exchange is repeated in "Persian Rose Bush" (Fig. 20). Again, the sensation of smell is evoked as shutters open to the flowery perfume of lush roses run rampant.

As a woman lies on her bed in introspective repose, the windows of "July Interior" (Fig. 21) pull in a cool breeze and northern light from the shady side of the house. Another quiet moment is experienced in an "Interior with a Dress Pattern" (Fig. 22). The golden-red effects of a large bank of "implied" windows result in a familiar, warm hominess.

## CONCLUSION

Hopper and Porter have presented us with two completely personal and contrasting worlds through their painterly expressions. Their uses of the architectural element of the window have become vehicles to communicate their particular sensibilities toward life.

Some of Hopper's windows are emblematic of a human feature, the eye, in the face of a building. They are protective and suspicious. Window treatments, such as shutters and shades, provide secrecy and closure.

Others serve as a transparent wall between those inside and out. They are the voyeuristic eyeglasses through which the viewer stares. They are also a barrier to nature. When light is allowed access to human spaces, it has shallow penetration, regulated by narrow openings under man's control (see "Rooms by the Sea").

In every case explored here, Hopper's windows are intrinsically associated with man. They pull at us with a psychological undertow as they speak of loneliness and separateness. They tell us there is no emotionally safe place of belonging. Many windows are in public buildings or the transient settings of hotel rooms. Even houses do not feel as havens, but represent the uncomfortable amalgamation of rooms and individuals with little to share. Accordingly, the viewer-voyeur is also assigned an alienated stance. In a sense, these windows tell all that is wrong with the world.

And Porter's windows may be said to speak of all that is right with the world. Their formal function connotes a happily ordered rhythm to life. His expansive banks of windows bathe interiors with

welcomed light. The window provides an avenue for intercourse as nature actively penetrates man-made spaces. Porter's windows convey intimacy, openness and the fullness of everyday life. The viewer participates. One is never placed outside a window-wall, but included spatially and emotionally by way of the sensate evocation of the "homey" and the familiar.

Hopper and Porter were able to create unique and different languages through their windows. And beyond those specific expressions, their windows grant us an internal view on their personal worlds.

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- Fig. 2. "Captain Upton's House," 1927. Oil on canvas, 28 1/2 x 36 inches.
- Fig. 3. "The Mansard Roof," 1923. Watercolor on paper, 13 3/4 x 19 inches. The Brooklyn Museum, New York.
- Fig. 4. "Haskell's House," 1924. Watercolor on paper, 14 x 20 inches.
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- Fig. 6. "New York Pavements," 1924. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29 inches. Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia.
- Fig. 7. "Custom House, Portland," 1927. Watercolor on paper, 13 3/4 x 19 1/2 inches. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.
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- Fig. 11. "Four Lane Road," 1956. Oil on canvas, 27 1/2 x 41 1/2 inches.
- Fig. 12. "Night Hawks," 1942. Oil on canvas, 33 1/4 x 60 1/8 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago.
- Fig. 13. "Columbus Day," 1968. Oil on canvas, 80 x 80 inches. Tibor de Nagy Collection.
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- Fig. 15. "Still Life," 1975. Oil on canvas.
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- Fig. 19. "Armchair on Porch," 1955. Oil on canvas, 37 1/4 x 45 inches. Tibor de Nagy Collection.
- Fig. 20. "Persian Rose Bush," 1975. Oil on canvas.
- Fig. 21. "July Interior," 1964.
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Fig. 1. "House by the Railroad," 1925.



Fig. 2. "Captain Upton's House," 1927.



Fig. 3. "The Mansard Roof," 1923.



Fig. 4. "Haskell's House," 1924.



Fig. 5. "Adam's House," 1928.



Fig. 6. "New York Pavements," 1924.



Fig. 7. "Custom House, Portland," 1927.



Fig. 8. "Hotel Room," 1931.



Fig. 9. "Chair Car," 1965.



Fig. 10. "Summer Evening," 1947.

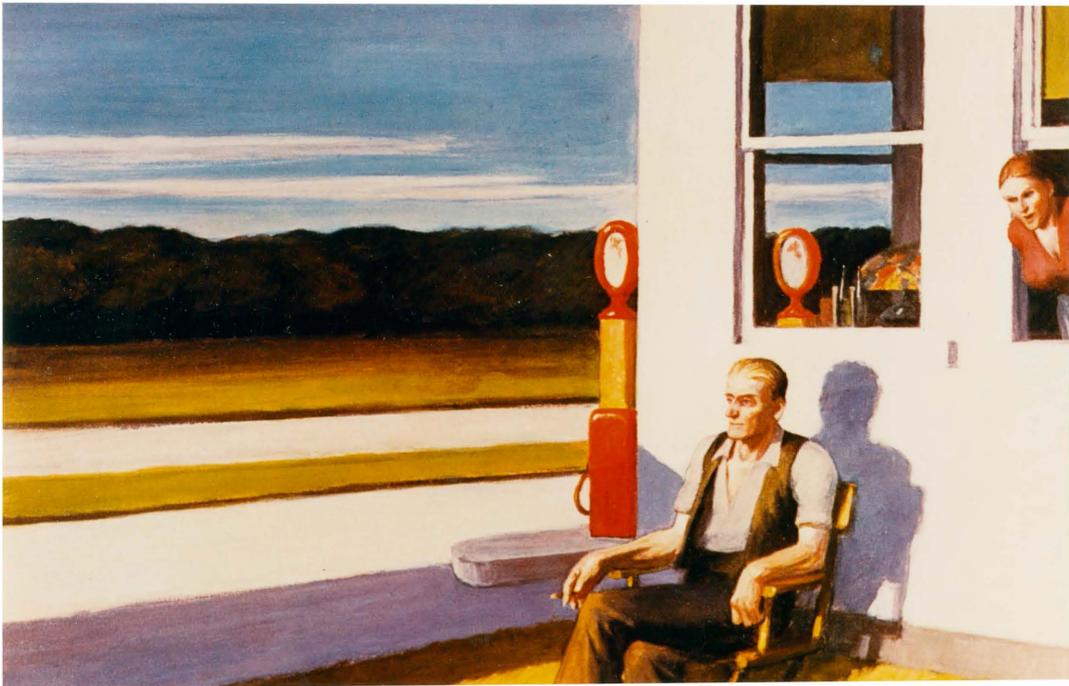


Fig. 11. "Four Lane Road," 1956.

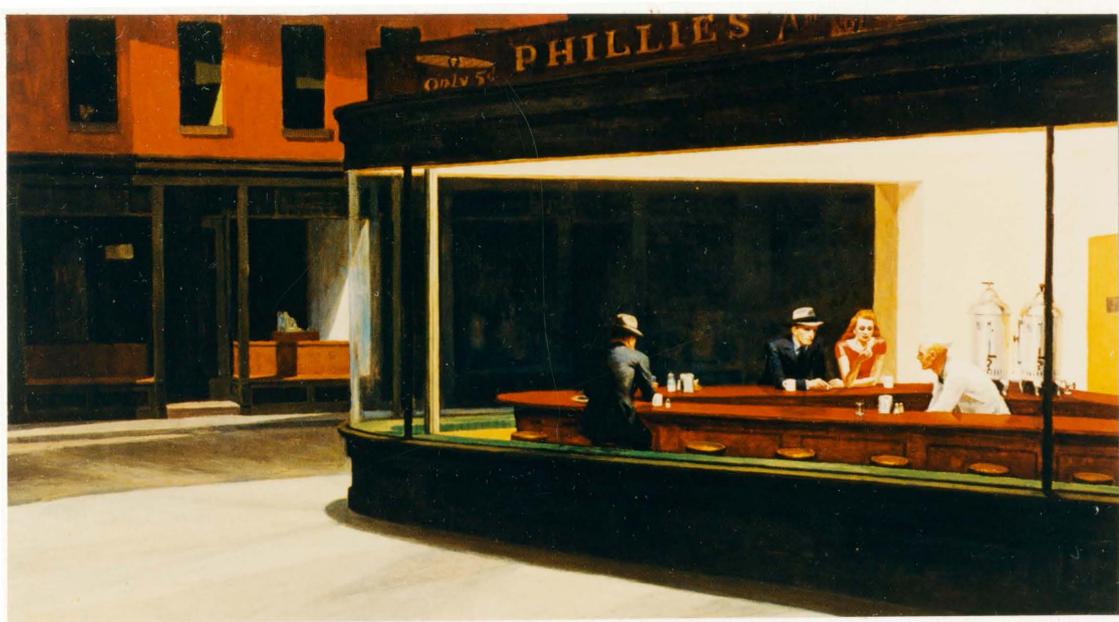


Fig. 12. "Night Hawks," 1942.



Fig. 13. "Columbus Day," 1968.



Fig. 14. "Island Farmhouse," 1969.



Fig. 15. "Still Life," 1975.



Fig. 16. "October Interior," 1963.

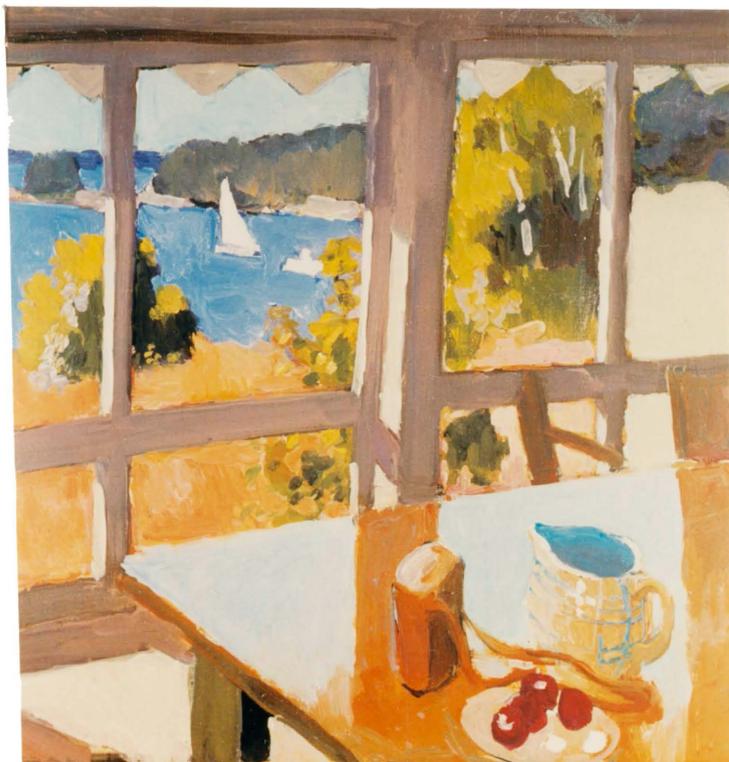


Fig. 17. "Still Life with White Boats," 1968.



Fig. 18. "Iced Coffee," 1966.



Fig. 19. "Armchair on Porch," 1955.



Fig. 20. "Persian Rose Bush," 1975.



Fig. 21. "July Interior," 1964.



Fig. 22. "Interior with a Dress Pattern," 1969.

## ENDNOTES

1. Levin, Gail, Hopper's Places, p. 6.  
As to his work, he was quoted: "It's probably a reflection of my own, if I may say, loneliness . . . It could be the whole human condition."
2. Levin, Gail, Edward Hopper, The Art and the Artist, p. 44-45.
3. Hopper apparently chose to omit side windows per photo of the actual house. See: Levin, Gail, Hopper's Places, plate 17.
4. An example of altering architectural structures by elongation for effect is evident on the house purported to be the model for "House by the Railroad." See: Levin, Gail, Hopper's Places, Fig. 6, p. 17.
5. The notion of the window as an eye on the expansive world beyond, as well as functioning as a barrier, was a common theme in 19-century Romantic art. However, this writer feels that Hopper's people consistently lack that vicarious and dreamlike longing, which would emotionally tie them to the scene beyond the window. They look out but do not engage with any world beyond themselves.
6. Ashbery, John, and Kenneth Moffet, Fairfield Porter, Realist Painter in an Age of Abstraction, p. 38.
7. Updike, John, Just Looking, Essays on Art, p. 12.

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3. Levin, Gail, Edward Hopper, the Art and the Artist (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1980).
4. Levin, Gail, Hopper's Places (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1989).

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1. Berlind, Robert, "Fairfield Porter: Natural Premises," Art in America, Vol. 71, No. 8 (Sept. 1983), 136-143.
2. Mathews, Margaret, "Fairfield Porter Introspective," America's Artist, Vol. 47, No. 486 (Jan. 1983), 34-41, 84.
3. Meyer, John Bernard, "Fairfield Porter: Poet of the Commonplace," Portfolio, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1983), 54-61.