

On my Residencies in Edward Hopper's Painting Studio

When I was first drawn to painting in the late 1960s, I worked abstractly as did all the other students in my painting classes. My early work was full of promise, but looked like a lot of other art students' paintings. What really lit a fire under me was stumbling across a book of reproductions of Edward Hopper's paintings. In his work I found a soulful intensity with its dazzling highlights and long moody shadows. I knew immediately that I had to switch to working in a realist direction. He has remained for me something of a hero and guiding star for my own painting.

Hopper and his wife built a studio on the then remote dunes along Cape Cod Bay in South Truro, MA, and lived there half the year for the next 30 years. Many of Hopper's most important canvases were painted there. In the early 1980s the family that had inherited the studio saw Hopper's influence in my paintings and began collecting my work. They generously invited me to come and work in his studio. I just about fell over at the offer.

The studio itself is spare and built with many windows to capture the marvelous Cape Cod light. It still contains Hopper's easel and equipment along with a steady echo of his personality. I have learned much from the example of his paintings. Perhaps his best lesson is his insistence on utmost selectivity in the choice of subject. He literally went way out of his way to find just the perfect source material. It had to speak directly to a deep place in his psyche or he wouldn't paint it. A concrete example is the huge 10-foot-tall north window in his painting room. While it offers a commanding panorama of distant Provincetown, it is a view that looks a little too much like those chosen by less insightful painters for their landscapes. For Hopper, it wasn't special enough and he overlooked the convenience of working through that window in favor of more arduous and less ordinary Cape views. Hopper found less predictable material to work from that in the end expressed his and our experience of the Cape more deeply.

For a realist painter in our time, the challenge is to find a way of painting our experience of nature as she presents herself to us in this contemporary moment. In addition to his unique selectivity, I think Hopper was an extraordinary colorist. I have always been dumbfounded when I inspect the surface of his famous long shadows and see the unexpected colors he employs to make the shadows come to life. It seems to me, as I get older, that color is the key to creating the special emotions I want to achieve in my landscapes. And as I methodically mix the chords of hues on my palette, I reflect on Hopper's remarkable inventiveness with color. He set the bar high.

Since 1983 I have been to the Hopper studio to paint 10 times. Over those decades the style of my paintings has evolved away from an obvious influence of Hopper's style. These days I focus on the theme of primordial wilderness that Hopper never did. But I think that is exactly the way to honor the spirit of his wonderful and uniquely individual vision. Hopper is the sort of painter whose work gives courage to other painters to go forward on their own new paths.

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