

The following article pertains to four pieces painted by Edward Hopper and how they relate to the counterculture of the 1920s. Two pieces depict rural life while the other two focus on a more modern urban setting. This article also includes how the project itself was made and the key aspects of it. Lastly, it discusses hardships faced in this project as well as methods I used that worked.

How Edward Hopper Represented the Counterculture of the 1920s

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Throughout his work through the 1920s, Edward Hopper truly represents the counterculture of his time. He did not favor the technological advance of his time. He also did not support city life and instead chose the rural lifestyle. In the following I shall discuss four major paintings he did during the 1920s. At the end I also note how I created my project and include how I presented the information

Art Analysis

“Automat”

Hopper’s first piece, *Automat*, is in clear opposition to city life. In fact, it is considered to be a “hallmark” of his style (“Automat - Edward Hopper”). The painting contains a solitary woman sitting in a cafe late at night. The echoing theme in this work of art is that of loneliness. When first looking at this painting, the viewer is first drawn to the vastness of the background. There is nothing to the outside except darkness. The woman in the scene has nowhere to go once she leaves the cafe (“Automat - Edward Hopper”). In this painting there is no hope. Had Hopper created a bright and busy scene outside, perhaps it would contain an entirely different theme. Another aspect to keep in mind, is how there is only one figure and the actions of said figure. There is no one else in the cafe. Unlike a usual city, there is no movement or rush present at all. Even the sole figure is at a standstill. She looks down at her cup, a frown forming on her face. The viewer can believe that she will not be moving anytime soon.

Throughout the entirety of it, Edward Hopper uses abstraction and discoloration to heighten the ambience of loneliness (“Automat - Edward Hopper”). All the colors are muted including the fruit bowl behind her. Nothing in the color scheme is happy. A viewer can clearly see his opposition. Had Hopper enjoyed living in the city this composition would be entirely different. The piece would be the complete opposite. *Automat* is a perfect example of urban alienation, or being isolated in a city (“Automat - Edward Hopper” 2016). By looking at the canvas, the viewer can clearly see this theme. It is evident in a vast majority of Hopper’s paintings that involve cities.

“Night Windows”

Another piece of his that involves cities is *Night Windows*. The composition consists of a single woman moving about her apartment during the dead of night. Although it reflects many of the themes in *Automat*, but it is much less personal and more removed. The overall composition is unhappy. By looking at key parts of the painting Hopper’s distaste for the city becomes very evident Hopper’s distaste for the city. The woman is a bit different than the one featured in *Automat*. She has her back to the viewer, keeping her identity completely anonymous (“Edward Hopper. Night...” 2016). This makes her a bit unrelatable. The viewer is unable to any

emotion she might have. Is she upset? What exactly is she doing? Hopper creates a disconnection here purposefully. Both the woman and the viewer are separate and alone.

Another trick Hopper does with this painting is the “battle” between light and dark (“Edward Hopper. Night...” 2016). Once again exterior is hardly lit and in some parts of it almost completely black. The apartment is illuminated by artificial light that slightly spills to the outside. Between the lines of light that spills over, the viewer can see both sides.

While Hopper creates these two sides, he also does something quite interesting with the point of view. From where the viewer is technically positioned, it is impossible to get inside of the apartment. No doors are visible anywhere within the painting. In fact the woman technically cannot get out. There is no escape from the place in which Hopper has put both the viewer and the woman. Any “warmth” that is provided by the apartment is unattainable by the viewer (“Edward Hopper. Night...” 2016).

It’s quite interesting to see two of his city paintings share many of the same qualities. In each he portrays city life in a negative aspect. Neither of the paintings leave the viewer excited or feeling good. His thoughts about a more urban lifestyle are clearly evident in his work. Moving past that it is key to look at Edward Hopper’s other spectrum of work; his rural landscapes. With these Hopper creates a whole new tone and theme. They tended to be much more lighthearted and welcoming. Generally, they contained no real dark spaces. For the purpose of this paper, his two biggest rural paintings are *Light At Two Lighthouses* and *Railroad Sunset*.

“Light at Two Lighthouses”

The first piece, *Light At Two Lighthouses*, is a celebration of rural life. The canvas contains a large lighthouse basked in natural sunlight. Behind it the sky is blue and even the grass below is colorful. This piece directly correlates with Hopper’s childhood because his family spent a lot of time by the sea (“Edward Hopper”). Edward Hopper was extremely passionate about the sea. When asked about this painting Hopper remarked, “(it is) the plight of the solitary individual stoically enduring the onslaught of change brought about by the 20th century” (visual-arts-cork n.d.). Hopper understood the changing times, but he still believed in supporting what he loved. This painting was a part of Hopper’s everyday life.

Aside from what Edward Hopper said himself, the composition shows a more positive scene than his city paintings. The color scheme is both warm and bright (visual-arts-cork n.d.). There is hardly any dark colors at all, the exception being the dark windows. It is also important to notice that no one is in this piece. It is completely empty in that regard. There is a stillness to it but nothing that would make the viewer uncomfortable (visual-arts-cork n.d.). It like a relaxing day at the beach. By keeping people out of it, Hopper can have the viewer becoming one with the painting. The most interesting thing about Edward Hopper’s *Light at Two Lighthouses* is that it takes place during the day. Unlike the other two previously discussed, there is no artificial light. The brightness is a natural occurrence and is all encompassing. Hopper is making a statement here that rural life is both happy and there is no real bad side to it (visual-arts-cork n.d.).

Railroad Sunset (Creative Commentary)

The last painting that is also takes place in a rural setting is Hopper’s *Railroad Sunset*. In this piece the focus is on the colorful sky. The viewer can also see a simple landscape and a train track running alongside it. It is very similar to the other rural painting, but can be considered a bit more surreal. This piece was inspired by Hopper’s many trips from city to city with his wife. After doing it for so long, Hopper began to grow a love for traveling mirroring his emotions towards the sea. The Whitney Museum of Art argues that this said traveling enhanced Hopper’s

love of rural areas throughout the United States ("Railroad Sunset." n.d.). While traveling, Hopper rarely painted the cities he went to. Rather he seemed to prefer the land in between. Just like *Light at Two Lighthouses*, these painting is filled with an explosion of color. Edward Hopper creates a rainbow sky that moves from very cool colors to a much warmer palette ("Railroad Sunset." n.d.). This beautiful scene could not be seen from any city, mainly because of the buildings blocking the view. Only in an intermediate land could the viewer see a sunset of this kind. This kind of sunset is unique just to Hopper's own style. The painting is a watercolor, a technique Edward Hopper hardly ever used (*Modernist Art Analysis* 2014). Automatically, the artist is given a much lighter palette. The use of water colors is slight, but very evident in the sky. Thus he can blend and layer making it more translucent and light.

Lastly, the overall composition is extremely simplistic (*Modernist Art Analysis* 2014). Not much is going on, in fact there is absolutely no obvious action in the painting at all. By keeping it plain, Hopper makes it very easy for the viewer to connect. This "plot of land" could be in any state, so any viewer could have the possibility of seeing it (*Modernist Art Analysis* 2014). This helps keep the theme nostalgic and relatable. By keeping in mind his audience, Hopper creates an engaging scene.

Project Analysis

As you can see, Edward Hopper truly represented the counterculture of the 1920s. Unlike many people of the time period, he yearned for a more simplistic life in a rural setting. It's quite interesting to see an artist's perspective on the world merely by looking at their art.

This project was one part of a larger project. I created this for English Composition, and it consisted of a paper and a visual aspect. The paper was about twelve pages and went into much more detail on Edward Hopper and his work. Most of the initial research was mostly online sources, but many were databases. It is also interesting to note that some sources consisted of analyses from the museums which showcase the paintings today. After constructing the paper, I used it as an outline for my visual project.

For the visual, it was required to contain much of the same information, but be presented in a shorter time and with the audience in mind. Unlike the paper, its target audience was my freshman peers, not academic scholars. I slightly switched my vocabulary and made a simple script.

Recording was done in one take without a stop for the visual aid. By using a simple application on an Apple laptop, I was able to read directly from my script. I had several slides set up and during the speech I would move from one to the other. I also used the mouse as a pointer to better explain the pictures and point out key parts of the painting.

After this was completed, I had one of my peers, Ben Vlam, listen to it through the entirety. He had no previous knowledge of the topic and is a college freshman. Ideally, he was my target audience. This allowed for several revisions until he understood completely. My main issue was word choice. I chose words a bit too complex for my audience. Once this peer editing was complete, my project was ready to present.

This project had many advantages to it. Firstly it is very versatile. Technically speaking, it can run on its own. Since it comes with recorded audio I am not necessary to be there. It can be played by anyone I would share it with. It works almost as a movie. Personally, recording it was

much more relaxing than presenting in front of a class. If there was any mistakes, it could easily be redone. I also felt comfortable speaking alone. This way seemed a bit more creative too. The information was presented in a way that most students are not used to. I was inspired to do my project this way because my English 110 professor did a lecture similar to this. I found myself intrigued and wanted to do the same thing.

With that in mind, the project did have a few disadvantages. As previously mentioned, recordings were done in one take. I did not have the proper tools to splice clips together. (i.e. iMovie) Thus if I made a mistake, the entire project had to be redone. The project also requires electronic devices to be presented. Any malfunctions or unavailability would make my project obsolete. Looking back, I wish I had more resources. With more time, I would have conducted more research and perhaps even try to obtain an interview or something of that nature. Overall, I am very happy with the turnout.

I believe Edward Hopper's work was key to understanding the counterculture of the 1920s. Just like all art, it makes a statement that is more than just colors on a canvas. Art is key to understanding ourselves and the ideals of the past.

Work Cited

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