

PAINTING

FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE SHELDON MUSEUM OF ART

Edited by Brandon K. Ruud and Gregory Nosan

With an introduction by Jorge Daniel Veneciano

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS

LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Photo research by Ashley Hussman and Jaclyn Siemers.

Photographs of works in the collection of the Sheldon Museum of Art by John Nollendorfs and John Spence, coordinated by Genevieve Ellerbee.



Publication of this volume was assisted by a gift from the H. Lee and Carol Gendler Charitable Fund and by a grant from the Friends of the

University of Nebraska Press. Major support for the catalog provided by the Sheldon Premier Anniversary Sponsors: Assurity Life Insurance Company, Cooper Foundation, Duncan Family Trust, Kathy and Marc LeBaron, in honor of Beatrice “Mike” Seacrest by the Seacrest family, James C. and Rhonda Seacrest, Lisa and Tom Smith, and the Wake Charitable Foundation.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Sheldon Museum of Art. Painting from the collection of the Sheldon Museum of Art / edited by Brandon K. Ruud and Gregory Nosan; with an introduction by Jorge Daniel Veneciano; contributions by David Anfam [and 28 others]. pages cm. — (American transnationalism:

perspectives from the Sheldon Museum of Art) Includes bibliographical references and index. ISBN 978-0-8032-4869-4 (cloth: alk. paper) 1. Painting, American—Catalogs. 2. Painting—Nebraska—Lincoln—Catalogs. 3. Sheldon Museum of Art—Catalogs. I. Ruud, Brandon K., 1968– editor of compilation.

II. Nosan, Gregory, editor of compilation. III. Title. ND205.S44 2014 759.13074782293—dc23 2013025827

Designed and set in Lyon by Nathan Putens.

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AMERICAN TRANSNATIONALISM

Perspectives from the Sheldon Museum of Art

JORGE DANIEL VENECIANO, series editor

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EDWARD HOPPER

American, 1882–1967

Room in New York, 1932

Oil on canvas

74.4 × 93 cm (29 5/16 × 36 5/8 in)

Signed, lower right, in black paint:

EDWARD HOPPER

University of Nebraska, Anna R. and Frank M.
Hall Charitable Trust, H-166

Edward Hopper, a modern American flâneur, painted important observations of the everyday lives of city dwellers throughout his career. Many of his most important compositions, *Sunday* (Phillips Collection, Washington DC), *Automat* (Des Moines Art Center), *Night Windows* (Museum of Modern Art, New York), and *Room in New York* were painted between 1926 and 1932. In these canvases, the artist made use of single figures or couples to create a sense of thoughtful, introverted reticence and solitude.

Windows figure prominently in Hopper's work, providing the vertical and horizontal structure for his pictures and illuminating layers of viewing. We watch these people through windows or within lit interiors framed by windows, which give a sense of distance to the subjects. We see them as a voyeur might, but the protagonists are oblivious to being watched. We see glimpses of life, as though we pass on the street and happen to look in or catch a fleeting snapshot view from the window of a moving elevated train. In August 1935 Hopper said that the idea for *Room in New York* "had been in my mind a long time before I painted it. It was suggested by glimpses of lighted interiors seen as I walked along the city streets at night . . . although it is no Particular Street or house, but is rather a synthesis of many impressions."¹

In *Room in New York*, two figures seated in a lighted interior are seen through the window. Returning home at day's end, the man has removed his jacket and is reading the newspaper. The woman, in a posture of casual boredom, plucks at the piano keys with a single finger and is turned away from her companion. The figures sit at opposite ends of the room and are separated by a table, which accentuates their psychological solitude; the door, which has no knob for entry or exit, acts as a further barrier between them, and the artist initially painted a decorative bowl on the table to emphasize their separation, an element he later removed. The room is simple, plain, but tasteful, with art upon the walls. Seemingly a simple subject, like all of Hopper's paintings, its geometry and construction are carefully composed: window frames echo door panels and pictures; the round chair back repeats the circular table; and the deceptively simple yet visually complex red shades of the chair, dress, and lampshade balance and unite the structure. An inventive and sensitive colorist, Hopper painted acid-green walls that are further offset by these intense crimson-based accents that lead the viewer through the composition.

Hopper was a famous moviegoer, sometimes sitting through two or three shows a day. In some of his compositions, including this one, movie stills might have suggested his topics. Popular gangster films such as *Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932) made use of angles, shadows, patterns of light, and scenes shot through windows and framed by architectural elements—all essentials of Hopper's visual vocabulary.

Eschewing the picturesque or the literal, Hopper's pictures remain unexplained, without narrative, instead invoking a hermetically sealed world of emotion not unlike the paintings of some of the artist's European surrealist contemporaries, particularly the architectural compositions of Giorgio De Chirico. In fact, in 1941 André Breton identified Hopper as one of the few American painters working "outside of Surrealism" who approached the mood, introspection, and "dream-like qualities" of the European movement.²

Hopper delivered *Room in New York* to his dealer, Frank Rehn, in February 1932. It was shown in the Whitney Biennial that year and was purchased by the University of Nebraska in 1936. JAB

1. The Editors, "Such Is Life," *Life* 102, no. 2, 605 (August 1935): 48.
2. Charles Henri Ford [Nicolas Calas], "Interview with André Breton," *View* 1, nos. 7–8 (October–November 1941): 1.

