

Sept. 14, 2009

Transcending the light

By Arthur H. Gunther

NYACK, N.Y. – For most of this year I have been a trustee of the Edward Hopper House Art Center in this Hudson River village of the American painter's 1892 birth. That position, and the activities it affords, continue to be a trip into the famed realist's mind.

In the past 20 years or so, especially, Hopper's work – "Nighthawks" as among his most recognizable – and his method of "painting sunlight on a building" have become almost a religion to some. His oil paintings of urban (New York City) and Nyack scenes and the watercolors from Cape Cod and Maine bring fantastic prices, if any ever make it to the market since most works are held by the Whitney Museum in New York and at other venues. In Hopper's lifetime (1892-1967), very little money, relatively, was realized though his fame was certain from the 1940s at least.

I've had "Nighthawks" on a wall of my home office for years, originally because the artist is a native Rockland Countyite, and that drew this hometown boy to him. I have looked at it many times, but only in past months have I stared INTO this painting of a late-night diner scene in Greenwich Village. Now I see that it is all about the light that paints itself on the buildings, on the diner, on the three patrons and the counterperson. The light is transcendental – beyond ordinary perception – a realism that we normally do not notice. Even the shadows are functions of the light. So are the diner patrons and the counterperson. You can see what you wish, and for some that is urban loneliness, others the film noir of

a city in the 1940s. Hopper did not analyze his works, though he said, “The inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm.” My own take is that he let the light in any scene – day or night – speak for him. I never see loneliness.

In this past year as a Hopper trustee, I have studied many of the artist’s works and have been privileged, as a professional photographer, to interpret some of the Rockland locations that inspired the artist, such as the old shop, still standing at School Street and Broadway in Upper Nyack, which is portrayed in spareness and transcendental light in “Seven A.M.’ (1948).

The Hopper House Art Center, at 82 North Broadway, will soon include eight interpretative photographs in its hallway, on a “living wall” meant to demonstrate how Hopper’s birthplace village influenced his art. It is hoped that photographs, paintings, collages, etc., from others will follow my limited run in a continuing exhibit for years to come.

Entitled “Hopper’s Rockland Inspiration ... Interpretations in Photographs,” this hall of Edward’s “reach” could prove unique in art centers/museums because it will attempt to have living artists continually re-examine and reinterpret a master. It will also bring Edward Hopper home to a house long recognized for its art shows and events but not necessarily tied to the artist who ran down this hallway as a youngster, who saw the light play out when the front door was opened and rays of early-morning brilliance shot up

Second Avenue from the Hudson River. In that, a life was changed forever. As was American art realism.

I write this piece not because I am a plausible interpreter of Edward Hopper's work, his being, his absorption in light – I am merely a neophyte study, perhaps with great limits. I pen this essay because I am a Hopper House Art Center trustee who wants to promote one of its exhibition ideas, yes, but much more than that. I want as many people as I can reach to feel as I do about this giant of a man, who was quite tall and whose long fingers pushed a very long brush that took the light God made and magically stretched it onto canvasses that transcend, that are outside consciousness.

May many see that light and take a journey with it.