

Commentary

Paul Martin Lester, Editor

Every time I visit Chicago for any reason I try to make it to the Art Institute. The most recent excuse was for the Association for Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Conference.

After a ticket is purchased and the noisy crowd of information desk questioners and gift shop patrons are left behind for the reverent hushed tones of fellow art strollers, I meander without a guide or a folding map. I play a game with myself. As I silently pass through the various galleries, with only a vague memory of where I want to end up, I eventually surprise myself as I turn a corner and rediscover the object of my quest—Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks." With its four dreary characters in a well-lit diner, seen through spotless windows, within a corner of New York City at one forbidden and bare, Hopper manages to exude a colorful and lonesome "Twilight Zone" sensibility.

Ignoring the passersby, I stand in front of the painting for several moments, just long and close enough, in my imagination, to attract the disinterested interest of a nearby security guard who is no doubt pleased by my out-of-the-norm attention to detail. It is only by standing in front of the work itself and not printed, no matter how respectfully and faithfully, within the pages of a book or website, that its five foot wide fluorescent glow invites me to come in from the lonely, eerily

scrubbed-clean sidewalks and empty shops to sit on a stool and share a cup of coffee with my fellow group of wandering souls.

I learned this trick in mental projection because of my father, Tom. When I was a boy, around 10, my father was a traveling hat salesman. He drove for days to worn out hardware and drug stores to sell cowboy hats. "Texas Hats Shade the Nation," was the slogan for the Laredo, Texas company. He sometimes asked me to ride with him and dress up in my boots, jeans, white shirt, frilly western vest, and white straw kid's hat and model his line to mostly disinterested shop owners. Traveling on the back roads through the stifling Texas summer heat without air conditioning in an old Buick for seemingly endless miles sounds like a dream come true for a boy who was too young not to worship his father, but the novelty wore off after the first

300 miles. Once, we passed a white, two-story, wood clap-board house. The large family was out in front, sitting on chairs, enjoying the evening shade and each other. I longed to be with them rather than in this hot, dusty car that smelled of unfiltered Camel's my dad smoked. I suddenly imagined I was there, drinking a sweaty iced tea and laughing at a joke told by an uncle.

Over the years I have practiced this technique and so I become a fellow nighthawk. Next to me is an older man with glasses and a suit that is too tight. He clutches tightly a glass of water, finished with his coffee, an unread newspaper by his side. Slumped slightly, he stares blankly at the empty space above the sugar shaker and napkin holder as he attempts to decide on his next move. Across from me is a world-weary couple with their bony frames almost showing



Edward Hopper, American 1882–1967, *Nighthawks*, 1942. Oil on canvas, 84.1 × 152.4 cm, Friends of American Art Collection, 1942.51, Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

through their skin. They are too self-absorbed to notice my curious concentration. The man is all in blue with a mouth as straight and noncommittal as the top of the diner's counter. He holds an unlit cigarette between his fingers while the woman in red—hair, lips and dress—casually plays with a green matchbook, marginally interested in its advertising message. Finally, the dishwasher, a young man with blond, thinning hair picks up dirty dishes set under the counter in front of two large coffee urns that resemble silver space ships. One is empty while the other has enough brown java to satisfy an early morning rush. With his white coat and cap, he mimics a

sailor. Why is he not in the Navy during wartime?

The Art Institute's website describes the players in this photo-realistic tableau thusly, "The four anonymous and uncommunicative night owls seem as separate and remote from the viewer as they are from one another" (Edward Hopper).

Staring at this painting and sitting with its quartet of coffee addicts, I notice something I never have before—the man who wants to smoke and the younger man behind the counter are sharing a conversation. For a brief moment, they look into one another's eyes as the customer asks for an ashtray.

For this issue of *Visual Communication Quarterly*, I encourage you to study closely the photographs of Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison for their respectful look at post-apocalyptic cultures. If you look hard and long enough, you too will be projected into other, equally alien worlds as you sip your cup of coffee and wonder how it ever got this late.

Reference

Hopper, E. (2008). The Art Institute of Chicago. Retrieved September 14, 2008, from <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/hopper/artwork/111628>.

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