

The Hopper Wars

The great American painter strove with all, but chiefly with his equally vigorous wife.

EDWARD HOPPER

An Intimate Biography.
By Gail Levin.
Illustrated. 661 pp. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf. \$35.

By Michael Kammen

READERS of this masterly but chilling book will never again view with quite the same feelings a picture by Edward Hopper, perhaps the most powerful American "realist" painter of the 20th century. Yet this is a study of Hopper's actual work only by indirection, mainly through extensive extracts from the copious journals kept by his wife and sole model, Josephine Nivison.

Gail Levin, a professor of art at Baruch College and the Graduate School of the City University of New York, has already done the *catalogue raisonné* of Hopper's works and five other books on his art. Here she offers his life (1882-1967) along with Jo's, whose candid chronicle of their 43-year marriage provides the most significant source for a nearly flawless account of a remarkable artist scarred by an absolutely dismal temperament.

"Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography" should reach a wide readership for many reasons: it is a compelling and accessible narrative for anyone even remotely interested in modern American art. It is also virtually a clinical case study of a certain kind of marriage — deep mutual dependence hideously marred by Hopper's almost pathological need to repress, abuse and virtually extinguish his wife's blithe spirit and artistic aspirations. (Jo was no saint, however, and James Thurber, were he alive, might script this tragic battle of the sexes into a ghastly but uproarious comedy.) Finally, the book should be read by anyone who loves Cape Cod, where the Hoppers summered, and by people who feel an abiding sense of affection for the physicality of Manhattan. They lived for more than four decades at 3 Washington Square, the historic home of many other famous artists and writers. In 1939 Jo's diary refers to her husband's love of "roving about the city, with the noises of the city, boats tooting, trucks rumbling, etc. E. so crazy about the great beauty of this city."

Despite the temptation to be judgmental, Ms. Levin mainly allows her material to speak for itself — and at times the marital relationship becomes almost unbearable for the reader, as it did for Jo. The temperamental qualities that friends, interviewers and acquaintances used to describe Hopper — he was introverted, laconic, introspective, taciturn, melancholy — were not merely critical in his marriage, they made him barely tolerable. After beginning a portrait of Hopper at age 80, Raphael Soyer wrote in his diary: "There is a loneliness about him, an habitual moroseness, a sadness to the point of anger. His voice breaks the silence loudly and sepulchraly."

Michael Kammen, the president of the Organization of American Historians, is the author of "Meadows of Memory: Images of Time and Tradition in American Art and Culture."

The echoes of Soyer's words in Jo's diaries are numbing. In 1950, after a long summer at the small, inaccessible home they built at Truro on the Cape, Jo inscribed this passage about the puritanical, sexually faithful, nonalcoholic husband she had come to regard as a monster: "Tonight E. said he was a watcher, I a participant. Oh no, no one could keep me from participating. Well 4 months on a remote sand hill with a watcher could explain why I'm the wild cat that I've become. One has to make so much of little — oh not little — the house, the hill, the thrilling sea, sunsets, flights of gulls, winds — but E. so silent, so absorbed & elsewhere & knowing he thinks only of himself, won't give any of his thought, his concern. Said he's a hermit & hermits are never hospitable. He got that all settled, he recognizes no obligations. He accepts himself & upholds his conception. He doesn't want partnership, doesn't want sharing. Each get his own."

Other passages graphically describe the physical abuse that compounded his psychological spite. When he cuffed her repeatedly, she retaliated by scratching, biting and looking for any device that would give her some leverage and equalize the height discrepancy between her (barely five feet tall) and him (almost six feet five). Here is a representative account from their early 60's: "So the dyna-

mite went off — & plenty. . . I kicked, he swatted, I stretched for a weapon to augment the length of my arm reach & he dragged me across studio by my wrists & continued to swat while I struggled & bit, bit hard right into one of the 2 hands that held me tight & bit til he let go. I drew blood before he'd let go, he'd rather be bitten than let go, so my teeth went right on in & nothing else would convince him of my utter exasperation & determination to uphold a principle. All very exhausting this interruption. So it was with a bandaged hand that he packed the car & I can't see yet how it could have been otherwise. No one who sees him, so saintly so patient could realize what straights he could drive a person like me thru."

The nastiest of these episodes seemed to occur when Hopper underwent a crisis of creativity, which became increasingly frequent during his 50's and 60's. Often he produced only two or three pictures per year, and he spent months brooding about possible subjects. Hopper suffered severely from the artist's equivalent of writer's block. When he did get started on a picture his spirits would lift. He might even become playful; and once, at the age of 70, lustfully affectionate. On the day that he started a new canvas, Jo commented, he "gave me a pinch on the bottom thru my corduroy slacks & said 'You certainly are

some baby.' " She was 69, and relished the unexpected attention.

Between battles — verbal, visual and visceral — they read "Hamlet" aloud together; he read Ernest Renan's "Life of Jesus" to her, as well as songs from Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot's essays, Robert Frost's poetry (which they both loved) and Paul Valéry's poems in French. Jo and Edward were both fluent in French, and sharing French poetry had been a bonding element during their courtship in 1923-24. Is it any wonder, then, that Jo vacillated between bitterness and submissive supportiveness? Here is an absolutely representative sample, taken from her diaries in 1954:

"I never dreamed competition was to enter in our lives. I so deeply grateful for everything vainglorious that came his way & did everything to further his interests. What a blow to have it slowly dawn on me, he couldn't trump up any live interest in anyone but himself. In summing it all up, I realize with much bitterness I've been swindled of all the deeply human values. . . Take[s] me & my efforts in his behalf entirely for granted. And in my own eyes, I'm humiliated. . . The sum total of his success is so without warmth, that the chill is destroying me — the chill of this realization. Some one of the I suppose lesser critics said his light had brilliance — but no warmth. This understanding struck me as psychic. Oh, I should bring him warmth, should I? And why? . . . Such thought of generosity outrages me — why ever breathe into such monster that which he is incapable. He is capable only of taking, other wise the line is dead."

YET after he died she remarked that "what was perfection together is a heart break alone," and (more ambiguously) that life with Hopper had been "perfection (of its own snappy kind)."

Ms. Levin does little to explain Hopper's quirkiness — psychobiography this is not — though she alludes to his overwhelming mother and his browbeaten father, his sadistic teasing of girls when he was growing up in Nyack ("Teasing the beginning of sadism. Egotism, sadism, domination of its own furtive kind. He loves no one."), his incapacity to share his feelings openly with his closest friends, and Jo's occasional doubts about his masculinity: "He isn't male at all," she wrote in 1953. "He couldn't get anywhere on his male qualities, he'd measure well below par. Is that why he must prove to himself he is male, getting back at me that never did have the physical strength of a husky male."

Ms. Levin repeatedly observes that in many scenes by Hopper the viewer is actually a voyeur staring intently at a couple, or more often a woman alone in a room (wearing only a slip). These strangers do not know that they are being observed by a cold yet sensuous eye. Hopper claimed that these were glimpses of common life that anyone might catch while riding on the elevated train at night and peering into an illuminated office, apartment or hotel room. Be that as it may, they are scenes of unconsummated temptation, lust or isolated sexuality.

Much less obvious as a theme in Ms. Levin's book, though a subtext nevertheless, is the frequency with which Hopper painted a man and a woman whose rela-

Continued on next page



Edward Hopper in a self-portrait, painted 1925-30.