

## As in a mirror

He has been defined the painter of “solitude and silence”, and many critics have recognized him the credit of having interpreted the soul of 20th-century America by representing, through his artworks full of emotions, the ugliness and the beauty of everyday life. From 15 October 2009 to 24 January 2010, a large exhibition held in Milan at Palazzo Reale, runs through Edward Hopper's long career offering, with more than 160 artworks, an important overview of his work.

### Nico Zardo

Edward Hopper was born on the banks of the Hudson River in Nyack, New York, on 22 July 1882 into a family of English origins. Since he was a young boy, he shows an interest in drawing, producing landscapes and caricatures, and his parents encourage this passion by enrolling him in an art school. In 1900 he moves to New York city to attend the New York School of Art where avant-garde artists such as William M. Chase, Robert Henri and Kenneth Miller initiate him to the principles and techniques of the new realism based on the strong cultural influences coming from France, transmitting to him a taste for a clean type of painting and an orderly composition. “My objective” - Hopper writes - “is to always use nature as a tool to fix on canvas my most intimate reactions for the object as it appears to me in the moment in which I love it most.”

**THESE ARE YEARS OF GREAT ARTISTIC FERMENT:** on the wave of the enthusiasm for European modern art, the attention of American avant-garde artists shifts from the romantic formal idealism to the harshness of everyday life in high pace developing cities, of which it represents poverty and misery.

Between 1906 and 1910 Hopper makes three trips to Europe, staying mainly in France where he has the chance to experience impressionism. He is fascinated by Manet and Degas, from whose techniques he draws the material taste of treating surfaces and the photographic cut of representing things on canvas.

Assiduously visiting exhibitions and museums - also in the Netherlands and in Belgium - he has the opportunity to appreciate first-hand the “luminosity” of the artworks of Goya and Vermeer. On the contrary, he remains unaffected, or most probably annoyed, by the rising trends of abstractionism, confirming in this way his choice based on a realist perspective.

Once back in New York, he works hard to shake off the deep influence of his European experience. To make ends meet, he draws illustrations for advertising agencies and newspapers: a work he deeply detests. For his pleasure he paints etchings that he sells for 10-20 dollars each. The subjects he favors are semi-deserted street corners giving off long shadows (Night Shadows, 1921), solitary persons reading a newspaper in the park by the light of a streetlamp (Night in the Park, 1921), a young woman at a sewing machine looking at the light coming from the window, as if waiting for something which... we as well would like to know (East Side Interior, 1922). In 1913 he sells his first painting during a collective exhibition, but he will have to wait another 10 years to sell the second.

**BETWEEN 1923 AND 1928 HE SPENDS A SUMMER IN GLOUCESTER,** a village of fishermen situated in Cape Cod, Massachusetts (USA). Here, particularly inspired by the light and agility of watercolor painting, he portrays landscapes, lighthouses and homes. This activity marks the start of Hopper's professional career: in November 1923 the Brooklyn Museum purchases one of his watercolors (The Mansarda Roof) and the next year (October 1924) Frank Rehn, Fifth Avenue art dealer, organizes a personal exhibition which allows Hopper to concentrate himself full time on art. Important supporter is Josephine Verstelle Nivison, an artist he meets in Gloucester whom he will marry in July 1924 and who will model for him her whole life. He calm and silent, she outgoing and fond of making conversation, they will constitute a not very tranquil but surely resistant couple.

But even with the advent of success and economic security, his habits do not change. He continues to live in his home in Washington Square where he settled in 1913 and where he will remain until his death in 1967. In 1927 he purchases a second hand car on which he will go as far as to explore the coasts of Maine, looking for his favorite subjects for his artworks: lighthouse towers, landscapes of coastlines, solid Victorian houses, sailing boats, the rail-

way. From 1930 Hopper and his wife Jo will spend their summers in Cape Cod, where the couple builds a house in the city of Truro.

**IN NEW YORK, HOPPER'S ATTENTION GOES AGAINST THE MAINSTREAM WITH RESPECT TO HIS COLLEAGUES.** No skyscrapers, no moving crowds but deserted streets with old, low buildings, coffee shops and restaurants frequented by few people, often only one. And then, apparently indiscreet visions stolen by framing a cut of the building in front: open windows from which you catch a glimpse of people busy with simple daily gestures. Actions that would be of no importance if Hopper didn't make us notice them by suggesting hypothetical mysteries no one would ever be able to reveal.

His invitation to stop and focus on scenes and situations that are apparently banal but curious and stimulating has inspired more than one film director: Hitchcock drew on "Night windows" (1928) for the "Rear window" and he used the image of "House by the railroad" (1928) to remake the mysterious house of "Psycho" (1960).

The cinema loves Hopper and Hopper loves the cinema: it allows him to frame his favorite situations as if they were still shots in a noir film. But he also frames the movie theatres themselves, dedicating many works to them, transforming these places - typically associated with a multitude of people - in a rarefied environment with few, normal people. But, in his interpretation, these normal people immediately become actors living disquieting stories. (Two on the aisle, 1927; New York movie, 1939; First row orchestra, 1951).

**AT THE END OF THE 1930S, HOPPER CHANGES HIS METHOD OF WORKING.** He abandons open-air painting: he collects sketches and detailed impressions of places, people and distinctive features that impress him, and he elaborates them in his studio. In 1933 the Museum of Modern Art of New York dedicates to him the first retrospective (the second one will be organized by the Whitney Museum in 1964), conferring him a recognition rarely attributed to a contemporary artist.

Considering etchings, watercolors and oils, in his sixty years of activity, Hopper produced almost eight hundred artworks. In the course of these years, his style has not shown any signs of softening; on the contrary, as time goes by, his compositions become more intransigent both in structure - characterized by a balance between horizontal and vertical lines - and in the research to represent the elements that count most for him: light and empty spaces (Sun in empty room, 1963). To the journalists asking for explanations of his works, Hopper replied simply: "You can find all the answers on the canvas."