Hopper Essays-11 / Mike Witte

NIGHTHAWKS

In one of his preliminary sketches for "Nighthawks," Edward Hopper represented his all-night diner's stool seats not as the shallow ovals of the finished painting but as shallow rectangles, closely resembling the rectangular railroad ties supporting the tracks in his "House by the Railroad." [See p. 2 for images.]

For Hopper, the diner's stools are metaphorical railroad ties, the counter a railroad track. In an all-night diner in which time seems to have stopped, Hopper has ironically installed a "track of time."

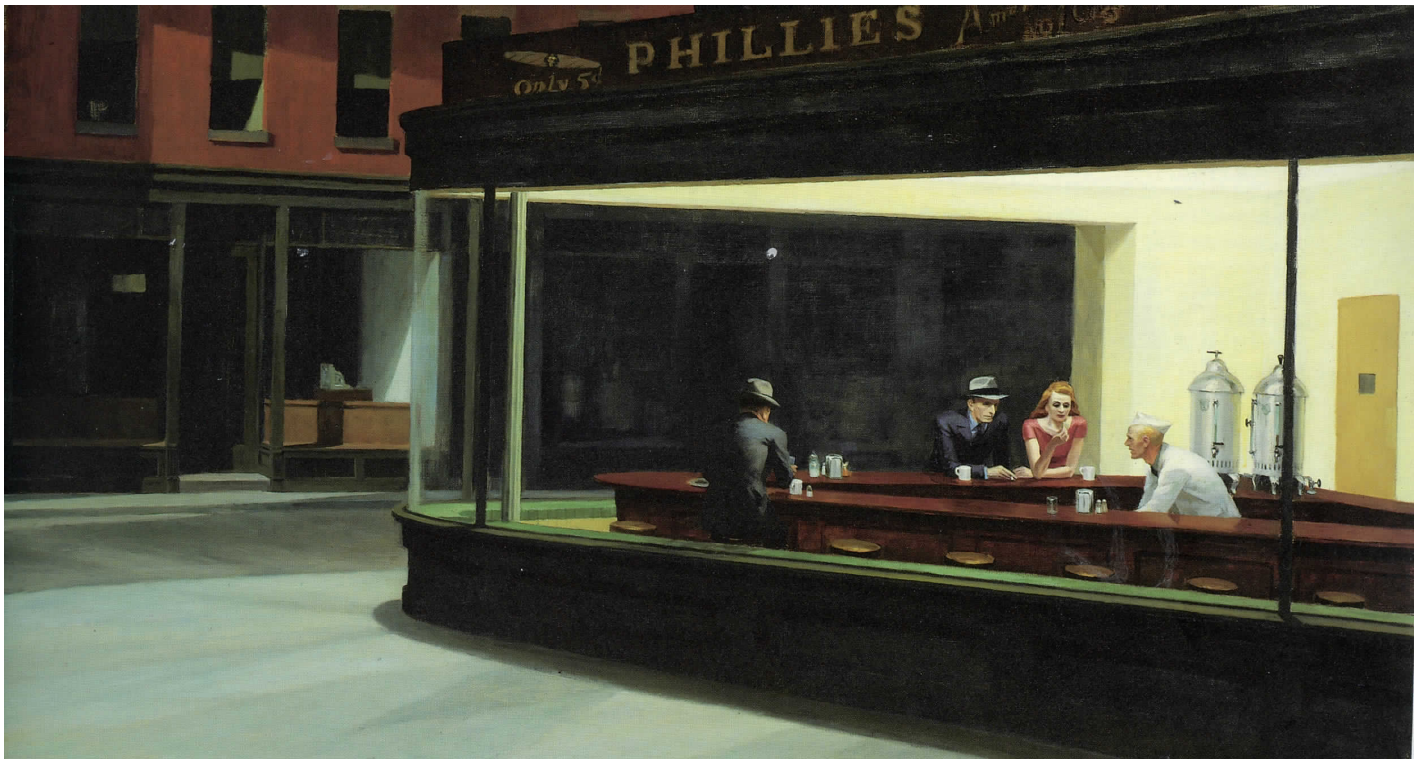
And Hopper is a subtle manipulator of time; the four incidental diner companions share a common late-night hour but each moves through time at his/her own speed.

Start with the man with his back to the observer. Clues are provided that identify him as Hopper, himself. To the left of the "Phillies" cigar sign, two windows are visible. The first can be read as an Art Deco "E," the second as an Art Deco "H." EH is literally in the picture, his time in the diner – and in life — measured in decades and perhaps running out.

Track the back and front countertops to an imagined convergence to the right, outside the picture frame. Ample imaginary space exists for an additional stool. Counting from that hypothetical stool in decades (1-10, 11-20, 21-30, etc.), one can date the age of the man near counter's end at sixty. That's Hopper's exact age when, in 1942, he painted "Nighthawks." The empty stool to his left suggests a hope that at least one stool/decade remains on his "time track" journey through a biblical lifespan of "threescore and ten."

For the moment, however, he stares across the counter past a man and woman whose time in the diner will shortly end. They are not a couple but they soon may be. The male of the pair apparently sits with both hands on the counter. In fact, his "left" hand belongs to the woman, who has extended it under her elbow with an overly long forearm. It's not a gesture of affection; it's a classic Hopper misdirection to conceal the location of the man's actual left hand, which is moving behind and below the countertop clutter toward a manual under-the-counter offer. The cash register in the window across the street, the phallic Phillies sign ("Only 5 Cents"), the man's unlit cigarette and the small match book in the woman's right hand suggest that a financial transaction is under way and a momentary match will be struck. Frozen diner time will yield to heated, frenetic time in the darkness beyond; the man's cigarette will be lit; the two will uncouple and travel through time in separate directions.

The waiter? "Nighthawks" was painted in a time of desperate war. The diner stands as a defiant island of light in the middle of an enforced city

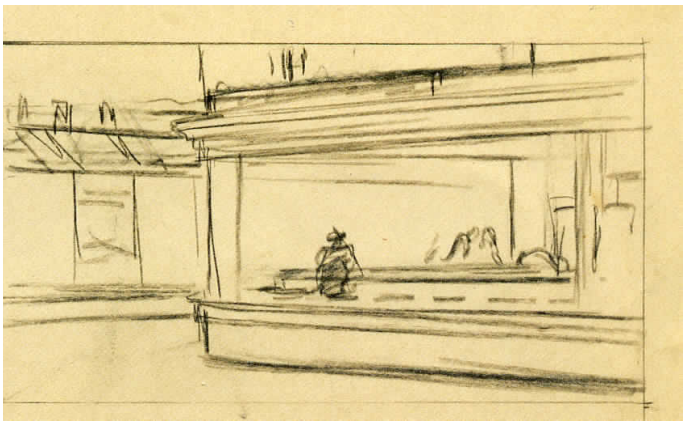


Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks," 1942.

blackout. The waiter wears a food-service hat that resembles caps worn in the military. The diner's shape suggests the prow of a ship, perhaps a submarine. The waiter loads something beneath the counter, perhaps a torpedo-shaped sugar dispenser. He looks across the way, not at his customers but at a dark negative space beneath a cash register, perhaps the moustache and nose of Adolph Hitler.

The waiter's destiny? He stands between the "twenty" and "thirty" stools on Hopper's "time track" (Hopper at the "sixty" stool, the man of the couple hovering above "forty," the woman above "thirty-five"). Will the waiter survive his uncertain time of war? If so, will he arrive at his "forty" life-stool desperate for intimate human connection?

Only time will tell. ■



In this preliminary sketch for "Nighthawks" Hopper drew the bar stools as shallow rectangles resembling the railroad ties in his "House by the Railroad," from 1925.

