



Leilani Morell  
20th Century Dress  
and Culture

# NIGHTHAWKS

Cultural Research Analysis

In American art, few works are as emblematic and enigmatic as Edward Hopper's masterpiece, "Nighthawks." Hopper's creation, painted in 1942 during a turbulent historical period, has transcended its era to become an enduring symbol of urban solitude and existential reflection. Through his keen observational skills and masterful manipulation of light and space, Hopper crafted a scene that speaks to the universal human experience, capturing a quiet yet powerful moment in a late-night diner. As we dive into the layers of meaning and emotion in this iconic painting, we explore the complex interplay between isolation, connection, and the ever-shifting dynamics of the modern urban landscape. In this exploration, "Nighthawks" emerges not only as a product of its time but as a timeless reflection on the enigmatic nature of the human condition.

Edward Hopper was born in 1882 to a middle-class family in Nyack, New York. He was the youngest of two, with an older sister named Marion. Their parents introduced them to art very early; they regularly attended cultural events such as theaters and concerts; they also frequented the museum—Hopper's father owned a dry goods store where Hopper would work as a teen. Both of Edwards's parents supported his artistic gifts. He started showing artistic promise around five years old and began to sign and date his work at around ten years old. Hopper spent much of his time with his books and sketchpads, sitting close to the Hudson River, observing and drawing boats during his early. He illustrated numerous drawings of ships and several handmade models of boats. As a teen, Edward considered being a naval architect and creating ships in the future and even built a full-size catboat. Hopper was observant and reserved; he grew over 6 feet tall as an early teen. (*Biography of Edward Hopper | The Art Story.*

<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/hopper-edward/> )

Edward Hopper graduated from high school in 1899 and began college at the New York School of Illustration in Manhattan before transferring to the New York School of Art. After school, he began working as an illustrator for a New York City advertising agency. He did not like illustrating, and he craved his need for freedom. This feeling of emptiness helped create one of his famous paintings called “Office at Night” he was quoted *“The picture was probably first suggested by many rides on the "L" train in New York after dark, and glimpses of office interiors that were so delectable as to leave fresh and vivid impressions on my mind. My aim was to try to give the sense of an isolated and lonely office interior.”* (Office at night | The Art Story. - <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/hopper-edward/>)

Edward Hopper sold his first painting in 1913, titled “Sailing,” created in 1911 at the Armory show in New York for \$250. It would be 11 years till he sold another painting.

(Biography of Edward Hopper | The Art Story. <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/hopper-edward/>)

Edward Hopper decided to settle and live permanently in Greenwich Village after traveling to Europe between 1906 and 1910. Edward went to Europe three times and found influence in the art and culture he encountered overseas; going to Europe helped him become a better artist.

In 1924, Edward Hopper married a previous classmate named Joanne. Harper and Jo lived a frugal lifestyle, allowing them frequent trips to watch the theater and films. Edward Hopper stated, *“When I don’t feel in the mood for painting, I go to the movies for a week or more. I go on a regular movie binge.”* (“Nighthawks” Edward Hopper – The Lonely Diner at Night | Art In Context- <https://artincontext.org/nighthawks-edward-hopper/>) Edwards's artistic process took a long time, and finding the right topic or inspiration took him a while. He was a conscientious artist who frequently used his wife’s input and ideas for his paintings; she was one of his biggest inspirations.

The Nighthawks' painting was during the American realism and Socialism art movement during World War Two. The painting was completed in January of 1942 and sold to the Art Institute of Chicago a few months after its creation, valued at \$3000; the image was considered the embodiment of existential art, capturing the alienated loneliness in modern-day living.

The painting was given its name because of the sharp shape of the man's nose, resembling a bird's beak, sitting next to our sole female figure. Edward Hopper's wife, Joanne, suggested this title and inspired our female figure in the illustration. Hopper created numerous preparatory. Hopper stated that the diner that inspired this painting was on "*Greenwich Avenue, where two streets meet.*" ("*Nighthawks*" Edward Hopper – *The Lonely Diner at Night* | *Art In Context*-<https://artincontext.org/nighthawks-edward-hopper/>) However, the exact diner was never found nor credited and is believed to have been based on various restaurants.

The illustration's third-party view is at an angle outside the diner from an unknown viewer. No apartments or commercial stores have lights on around the surrounding areas of the restaurant. World War II was in full effect during this period. The painting was released the year that Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. To prevent bombings from enemy aircraft, cities and towns across America practiced "blackout" drills. All businesses and residential homes shut off their lights and hid in their areas to avoid becoming a target seen by a low-flying aircraft.

( "*Nighthawks*" Edward Hopper – *The Lonely Diner at Night* | *Art In Context*-<https://artincontext.org/nighthawks-edward-hopper/> )

We can see the eeriness of uncertainty within the faces of the characters, almost as if they forgot to shut the lights off. Fluorescent lights were new popular lights during the 1940s; the lights created a warm lighting effect, giving the characters a subtle, washed-out look. The lighting from the restaurant leads out onto the sidewalk surrounding the diner. The bright lighting of the restaurant is surrounded by darkness, illustrating lifelessness without light. The

oddest thing about this image is that the establishment has no door or entrance; this can represent a no in or out of the situation. You can see a representation of this worry in the facial expressions of three out of the four figures.

This element or emotion is depicted within the two individuals sitting next to each other, seemingly a couple; they sit very close with both left arms almost touching. The gentleman is holding a cigarette in his left arm. The woman's left arm rests close by while eating a sandwich with her right. It feels as if the individuals are close to connecting if it weren't for a thin invisible wall creating distance and disconnection between them; both men and women seem uncomfortable.

When we speak about the four main characters in our focus, the one that stands out most is our female figure inspired by Edward Hopper's wife, Josephine Hopper. Although the couple is sitting close, we can see the distance between the two with their hand almost touching but not. Our female character is eating a sandwich, staring at it in thought while her male counterpart smokes a cigarette.

During World War II, the government collaborated with cosmetic companies to market makeup and grooming as part of women's patriotic duty with advertisement slogans like "*Keep your beauty on Duty.*" (*The Patriotism of Beauty, Grooming & Fashion during WWII.* | *DesignWorks Creative, Inc., & Warhawk Air Museum.* - <https://warhawkairmuseum.org/blog/the-patriotism-of-beauty-grooming-fashion-during-wwii/> )

During an interview with Vogue magazine, a soldier said, "*To look unattractive these days is downright morale-breaking and should be considered as treason.*" (*Lipstick Case.* | *National Museum of American History.* (n.d.-a). - [https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/nmah\\_687177](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/nmah_687177))

Women had a societal obligation to "upkeep" their image to keep the economy and their soldier's

spirits lifted. Maintaining your appearance was seen as honorable in a time where in a time of worry. Along with this beautiful red lipstick, the public census was that women had to have “well-groomed” eyebrows that were relatively thin with a high arch and mascara.

In the 1940s, red was a signature color for American freedom, strength, and independence. Makeup was a symbol of a “free society worth defending.” Women were issued a military kit with a “Montezuma” red lipstick, cream, blush, and nail polish to match military uniforms. In 1943, Constance Huhn, the head of the house of Tangee, stated lipstick “*symbolizes one of the reasons why we are fighting...the precious right of women to be feminine and lovely under any circumstance.*” (*The 1940s War and Recovery | The history of modern fashion from 1850 (p. 588) - Laurence King Publishing.*)

Hair was also a crucial aspect of this appearance, worn in numerous ways. Generally, women’s hair is pinned away from the face in loose curls pinned in place called “Victory Rolls. Our female figure wears a bright red crimson dress with a classic swoop dress and cap sleeve. Garments during this period adopted a more simplistic look to save resources for the war. The most important thing when analyzing our female figure is the color of her garment.

The following figure that stands out is our server, dressed in all white; the element that stands out the most is the server’s hat. This hat had an iconic impact on American restaurant culture and is called the Soda Jerk. This name was a play on words from soda to clerk to soda jerk; employees would have to operate the machine by “jerking” the soda machine while using the soda machines. Soda jerk’s had numerous levers that they would “jerk” back and forth, creating various soft drinks for customers. (*Soda jerk. | Wikipedia. - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soda\\_jerk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soda_jerk) )* Operating soda fountain machines began in the 1920s through the 1960s; the soda machine hit its popularity during the 1940s. The expectation was for clerks to entertain guests with conversations

while serving drinks; we can see this slightly depicted within our image. The server is leaning into the counters near the couple as if they were in the middle of a conversation but with a slight hesitation of thought.

Since we are looking at the clerk's side profile, it is hard to see if his chef's coat is open. At the top of his neckline, we can see the beginning of his necktie and that the server is wearing a traditional dress shirt and tie with muted colors. It was typical for most soda clerks to wear a bowtie; we see this gentleman wearing a tie. We can tell our server is a little older due to his receding hairline.

Our primary male customer is the only face visible of the two male customers illustrated in this image. He has a charcoal hat with a thicker band of fabric wrapped around the hat. This fabric matches the color of his suit, which is a dark navy blue. His dress shirt layered underneath his suit is a lighter blue. We can tell that the suit is tailored to the male figure's body, reiterating the theme of saving fabric for war efforts. Government programs restricted some aspects of menswear, like vests, pockets, and trouser cuffs, to support war efforts. (*The 1940s War and Recovery | The history of modern fashion from 1850 (p. 631) - Laurence King Publishing.*)

The gentleman with his back facing our third-party viewer is infamous for supposedly being Edward Hopper himself. This man has a charcoal blue suit oddly close to the same hue of the still and vacant background outside the restaurant. He has a grey top hat on with a band matching the color of his suit. His glass of water was in mid-motion, slightly above the counter, as if he was returning the glass to rest or picking it up. There appears to be a folded newspaper underneath his left elbow. Neither man has visible cuff links in this illustration.

In conclusion, Edward Hopper's iconic painting "Nighthawks" is a timeless representation of urban isolation and the complex interplay between light, shadow, and human emotion. Through

his meticulous attention to detail, masterful use of color, and the evocative composition of the scene, Hopper invites viewers to contemplate the solitude and detachment pervasive in modern urban life. The haunting beauty of "Nighthawks" lies in its ability to resonate with individuals across generations, sparking introspection and prompting a deeper understanding of the human experience. As one gazes into the quiet night scene captured by Hopper's brush, the enduring power of "Nighthawks" continues to captivate, inviting us to explore the nuanced narratives hidden within the seemingly ordinary corners of our existence.



Sources:

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