The origins of Edward Hopper’s earliest oil paintings

Hopper’s earliest surviving oils have long been valued as his first original works, and a number have been interpreted as scenes near his childhood home in Nyack, New York. The identification of one, ‘Old ice pond at Nyack’, as a copy of ‘A winter sunset’ by the Tonalist painter Bruce Crane has revealed that most if not all of these works are copies after paintings illustrated in popular American periodicals for amateur artists.

by LOUIS SHADWICK

Relatively Little is known about Edward Hopper’s youth in Nyack, New York, despite various attempts to piece together the story of the formative years he spent in the town where he was born in 1882. In large part, clues have had to be inferred from his few paintings and numerous drawings that depict local scenes and subjects, from boats along the nearby Hudson River to sketches of fishermen, trains and local churches; as Gail Levin wrote in her 1995 biography of the artist, these drawings ‘document a childhood that Hopper barely referred to in interviews and for which there are few written records’. Once Hopper had moved permanently to New York City in 1910, he never again sought out subjects in his hometown.

For these reasons, Hopper’s early landscape Old ice pond at Nyack (Fig.1) occupies a significant place in his work. Dated c.1897, it is thought to be one of his very few undoubted depictions of oil of the Nyack of his youth and one of his first signed paintings. The title refers to the old skating pond in Nyack, known by locals as ‘the ice pond’, which until 1950s – when it was drained and replaced by the existing Thruway – was at the top of Main Street, only a short walk from the Hopper family home at 82 North Broadway. Postcards and photographs of the skating pond reveal its placid beauty in warmer weather and frenetic activity in the winter season, when it froze over and was thronged with skaters and ice cutters. Hopper’s 1899 illustration A pair of skippers suggests his participation in this annual tradition, since it portrays two boys – one of whom may represent the artist – slipping about on a frozen pond.

It is uncertain precisely when the title Old ice pond at Nyack was given to the painting, although there is no evidence that it was provided by the artist. There is a parallel case in Hopper’s first signed oil, now known as Rowboat in rocky cove (Fig.3), which the artist inscribed with the date 1895, when he was only thirteen years old. As with Old ice pond at Nyack, this painting has also been related by some commentators to Hopper’s formative years spent in Nyack beside the Hudson River; indeed, after Hopper’s death, the work was originally given the title Rowboat on Hudson.

Throughout Hopper’s lifetime, both Old ice pond at Nyack and Rowboat in rocky cove formed part of an extensive collection of his early paintings, drawings, letters and other material stored in the attic of his childhood home in Nyack, where Edward’s sister Marion lived until her death in July 1965. After she died, Edward and his wife, Josephine (Jo), spent a month sorting through the house. Although they decided to retain the house and the family heirlooms, the meticulous record books of her husband’s work maintained by Jo Hopper do not mention the works in the attic, with the exception of a group of oil studies of Paris made between 1906 and 1909 that Edward had given her for Christmas in 1918, many of which had remained in the Nyack house. At the time of Marion’s death, or shortly thereafter, Old ice pond at Nyack, Rowboat in rocky cove and Hopper’s other pre-art school oils – which to our knowledge number as many as six – were found in the attic by the preacher of the local Nyack Baptist Church, Arthayer R. Sanborn (d.2007), who had assisted Marion during her final years alone

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2 There is evidence that Hopper had made New York his ‘winter home’ by 1908; from a later correction the artist made to a biographical record of his life, see Levin, op. cit. (note 1), p.590; note 1; Hopper’s one later painting made in Nyack is the commissioned Pretty Penny (1933; Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton MA), see G. Levin: Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné, New York 1999, Ill, p.268, no.311, which depicts the house of actress Helen Hayes; see Levin, op. cit. (note 1), p.318.
3 Levin, op. cit. (note 2), Ill, p.2, no.0-2.
5 This illustration by Hopper has never been published. An auction record documents its having passed through Kennedy Galleries, New York, see Frick Art Reference Library, New York, Frick Digital Collections, available at https://digitalcollections.frick.org/digicoll/Archive/Photoarchive, accessed 7th September 2020.
6 Levin, op. cit. (note 2) p.1, no.0-1. The painting was sold by Kennedy Galleries, New York, c.1968, as Rowboat on Hudson, see Frick Art Reference Library, op. cit. (note 5). It is described as ‘a small rowboat on the Hudson River’ in H. Teschke: Edward Hopper: realist and melancholic’, Manc 32 (February–March 2010), p.86.
7 Provincetown Art Association and Museum, J. Hopper: Diary, entry for the year 1965.
9 Edward Hopper Record Book, Ill, p.21.
1. *Old ice pond at Nyack*, here identified as *A winter sunset*, after Bruce Crane, by Edward Hopper. Here dated 1898–1900. Oil on canvas, 29.8 by 50 cm. (Heather James Fine Art).

in the house. He became a friend of hers, and by extension of Edward and Jo’s, driving them between New York and Nyack and later officiating at Edward’s funeral. Sanborn was eventually included in Jo’s will as one of six beneficiaries who were to divide between them the residue of her estate that had not been bequeathed elsewhere. When Jo died on 6th March 1968, only ten months after Edward, Sanborn continued to tend to the house in Nyack on behalf of her estate until 1970, when it was sold. During this period he acquired the contents of the house, including Old ice pond at Nyack, Rowboat in rocky cove and Hopper’s other earliest oils.

Sanborn’s claim to the items in the Nyack house has been the subject of dispute. For the purposes of this article, however, it is certain that Hopper’s earliest oils remained in the attic until some time between late 1967 and June 1968, when Sanborn retrieved them and that not long afterwards the works entered his collection. It is equally certain that none of them had been intended for the art market during the Hoppers’ lifetimes. It is for this reason that the paintings had remained unтиed and, with one exception, undated, and were never included in the record books that Jo Hopper produced to document her husband’s output.

Old ice pond at Nyack was first exhibited in 1968, when it was included with this title alongside two other early oils in a touring show of items from Sanborn’s collection, Edward Hopper: The Early Years, which travelled to over ten galleries between 1980 and 1985. In 1982 Sanborn published an article about Hopper’s ancestry and boyhood in Nyack, in which he used the painting and several other early works to document the artist’s connection to the town. In Levin’s Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné (1999) it was given the title [Old ice pond at Nyack], the brackets indicating that this title was a late addition. The painting then returned to its original home in Nyack – now the Edward Hopper House Museum and Study Center – and was featured in two exhibitions, Prelude: The Nyack Years (2011) and Edward Hopper: Early Nautical Scenes (2012), for both of which the brackets were dropped. Both exhibitions drew attention to thematic and stylistic parallels between Old ice pond at Nyack and Hopper’s mature oils. In 2019 the painting was listed for sale by Heather James Fine Art, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where it was exhibited alongside other items previously owned by Sanborn, with the brackets once again omitted from the title. Rowboat in rocky cove, which was sold by Kennedy Galleries, New York, in the late 1960s on behalf of Sanborn, has never been publicly exhibited.

It is clear that the title and date of Old ice pond at Nyack were provided by Sanborn, who made the visual link to the skating pond in Nyack and used the painting to evoke Hopper’s boyhood in exhibitions, articles and talks. He evidently was also responsible for the original title of Rowboat in rocky cove, which was called Rowboat on Hudson when he consigned the work to Kennedy Galleries – again making a link to the Nyack scenery of Hopper’s youth.

In fact, neither Old ice pond at Nyack nor Rowboat in rocky cove bear any relation to Nyack since both, can now be revealed, are copies of paintings by other artists. Old ice pond at Nyack is a copy of A winter sunset (Fig.2) by the Tonalist artist Bruce Crane (1837–1937), while Rowboat in rocky cove is a copy after a watercolour titled Lake view by an unknown painter (Fig.4). The first of these depicts a landscape in Long Island or Connecticut, and the second is inscribed Athelstane and so possibly depicts one of the lakes in the vicinity of Athelstane, Wisconsin. These discoveries open up fresh lines of enquiry concerning Hopper’s youth and early development.

Both of the works that Hopper copied were reproduced in the early 1890s as collectable colour plates in a widely read periodical for art amateurs and students, the Art Interchange. A winter sunset appeared in December 1890 and the watercolour titled Lake view was printed in February 1891. In both cases, the colour plates were accompanied by comprehensive sets of instructions for art students for making copies. This probably explains the existence of several other contemporaneous copies of A winter sunset. The instructions for copying were probably provided by Crane himself, since the text accompanying a reproduction of another of his works in a similar journal for art students, the Art Amateur, in March 1897, stated that we asked Mr Bruce Crane, in giving directions to copy W.H. Adam’s ‘Rowboat on Hudson’ as a result of Jo Hopper’s final bequest to the Whitney, which gave all of her and Edward’s remaining works of art to the museum, save for specific exceptions named in her will. See R. Pogrebin and K. Flynn: ‘Hopper expert questions how minister got an art trove’, New York Times, 20th September 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/21/arts/design/gail-levin-hopper-expert-questions-sanborn-claims.html, accessed 3rd March 2020.

18 On Sanborn, see Levin, op. cit. (note 11), p.577.
19 WMMA, will of Josephine Hopper, Box 4, Folder 4.040.

4. *Lake view ('Athelstane').* 1880s. (Repr. The Art Interchange, 14th February 1891; photograph the author).
The origins of Edward Hopper's earliest oil paintings

for the copying of his spirited sketch reproduced as a [colour] supplement this month, to say something of what had specifically attracted him. His advice ranged from the type of canvas the artist should use to tips on drawing, paint application, colour mixes and drying methods. Crane was nearing the height of his popularity when the reproduction was published, and at least twelve further colour reproductions of his work appeared in art journals for students between 1880 and 1900, attesting to his reputation and visibility during Hopper's youth. The precise date of Crane's A winter sunset is uncertain, but the artist likely painted it during the early 1880s, following his return from Europe to New York in 1881. An 1885 article in the journal Art Age referred to the 'broad stretches of snowy landscape' in Long Island and Connecticut that Crane was known to paint regularly. Several of Crane's many other winter landscapes date from this time and it was a subject he returned to in the late 1880s and beyond. A founding member of the Society of American Artists, an art teacher and a member and eventual president of the Salmagundi Club, Crane was well-known and respected within New York's art circles as a leading representative of the Tonalist generation that dominated American painting during the late nineteenth century. His work remained popular throughout the 1890s and early 1900s and regularly appeared in New York exhibitions and auctions alongside that of other prominent Tonalist painters such as George Inness and Crane's former teacher Alexander Wyant. According to an anonymous profile of Crane published in the Art Amateur in 1894, his work was 'in great demand', and an unnamed reviewer for Brush and Pencil declared in 1899 that 'Bruce Crane is so well-known, and his exhibition is so much like other things of his, that it would be repetition to say much'. The fact that the two plates that Hopper copied were published within months of one another strongly suggests that his family bought or subscribed to the Art Interchange during the early 1890s. The magazine regularly advertised its subscription rates, and in 1890, for example, it offered annual subscribers a collection of twenty-six of the colour plates, which would have included both the reproductions that Hopper copied. In her biography Levin writes that Hopper was given books or magazines of drawing instruction by his parents to study and we can now posit that such materials were available to him from as early as 1890, when Hopper's parents could also have purchased reproductions from illustrated catalogues of the Art Interchange's published colour plates, but these individual reproductions lacked the written instructions included in the magazine and not all previously published colour plates were made available through these catalogues. Another reproduction that Hopper copied suggests that the Hoppers may have subscribed to the Art Interchange from as early as 1886, when

5. Ships, here identified as A marine, after Edward Moran, by Edward Hopper. c.1898. Oil on canvas, 30.5 by 50.8 cm. (Foosaner Art Museum, Melbourne FL).
7. Church and landscape, by Edward Hopper. c.1897. Oil on canvas, 25.4 by 35.5 cm. (Heather James Fine Art).
The origins of Edward Hopper’s earliest oil paintings

Edward was only four years old. Hopper’s early oil Ships (Fig.5), painted c.1898, can be revealed to be a copy after A marine (Fig.6) by the well-known American painter Edward Moran (1829–1902). This painting had appeared as a colour reproduction in the Art Interchange in August 1886, again with copying instructions. If the Hopper family had already subscribed to the Art Interchange by then, this was probably not solely for the benefit of young Edward; the entire family was steeped in art and culture and Hopper’s mother, Elizabeth, in particular encouraged both Edward and Marion to be creative from a very early age.31 An amateur artist herself, Elizabeth would likely have been inspired by the Art Interchange, which was advertised as the ‘most progressive art and household monthly magazine’.32 Enjoying a middle-class, home-owning and predominantly female readership, the Art Interchange is now acknowledged to have played an important role in the democratisation and feminisation of art in America during the late nineteenth century. In addition to being one of the few American art magazines that printed good-quality illustrations and colour plates, it would have appealed to Elizabeth through its atypical focus on the decorative and domestic arts.33

Hopper would, of course, have been too young to have painted his oils when the prints he copied were first published, explaining why several years passed before he produced his 1897 oil Rowboat in rocky cove. Presumably it was only when he had the confidence to work in this medium that he turned to the reproductions, which must therefore have been retained by his family. Tellingly, the instructions that the Art Interchange provided for artists to accompany Lake view stated that the painting was ‘a very simple subject and well adapted to beginners’.34 There is little mystery, then, as to why Hopper copied it for his first attempt at oil painting; indeed, his beginnings as a painter seem to have been more tentative than has previously been imagined.

In all three paintings, the artist made no acknowledgment that they were copies, signing Rowboat in rocky cove and Ships ‘E. Hopper’ and Old ice pond at Nyack with the initials ‘E.H.’ Rather than an attempt to mislead, however, the signatures seem merely to suggest the artist’s youthful pride in his earliest achievements in oil. Only one of Hopper’s early oils from the Nyack attic, titled Winter scene by Sanborn and Church and landscape (Fig.7) in the catalogue raisonné, was unsigned.35 Although its precise source remains unknown, Church and landscape can also be revealed to be a copy of an existing painting thanks to the discovery of a Victorian porcelain plaque on which the same scene has been painted (Fig.8).36 It certainly does not portray ‘snowy Nyack Baptist church’, as has been claimed.37

Two other oils from the period before Hopper attended art school – both also likely to have been stored in the Nyack attic – Country road (Fig.9) and Clipper ship being towed by tug must be regarded with similar suspicion.38 Country road is reminiscent of late-nineteenth century landscapes of the kind produced by American followers of the Barbizon school such as John Francis Murphy and Leonard Ochtman; works by both these artists were reproduced as colour plates in the Art Interchange and the Art Amateur. Clipper ship being towed by tug – like Ships – was likely copied from a contemporaneous illustration or marine painting. It is possible, therefore, to advance the new conclusion that Hopper did not produce a single original oil painting until he enrolled at the New York School of Art in the autumn of 1900 and that no boyhood oils of Nyack by him exist.

Painted in 1895, Rowboat in rocky cove is the only one in this early sequence of oils that Hopper dated. Like Old ice pond at Nyack, both Country road and Church and landscape are dated c.1897 in Levin catalogue raisonné, which also dates Hopper’s Ships to c.1898. The c.1897 dating of Old ice pond at Nyack is brought into question, however, by a drawing that Hopper made c.1900, later titled Artist’s studio (Fig.10).39 This drawing depicts the completed Old ice pond at Nyack sitting on an easel in Hopper’s attic studio in Nyack – where it would remain until 1968. Details of Artist’s studio may confirm the c.1900 date the drawing has been given. The portrait of a woman that hangs on the wall behind Old ice pond at Nyack, for example, suggests the emphasis on portraiture in Hopper’s work from mid-1900

25 ‘The wreck near the lighthouse’, The Art Amateur 26, no.3 (March 1897), p.63.
27 The following identified colour plates by Bruce Crane appeared in art journals 1881-1902: the Art Interchange published A spring morning (March 1881), November study (November 1885), Lily pond (March 1897), Winter landscape (January 1900) and Winter moonrise (January 1902), and the Art Amateur published Sunset in the village Luna 1889, Winter landscape (December 1891), Apple blossoms (July 1895), Indian summer (January 1897) and Wreck near the lighthouse (March 1897).
29 See H. T. Lawrence: ‘A painter of idyls: Bruce Crane’, Brush and Pencil 11, no.10 (October 1902), p.10. Crane published a number of articles in art journals of the period, see, for example, B. Crane: Landscape sketching and painting’, The Art Amateur 31, no.4 (September 1894), p.72.
30 ‘Bruce Crane and his work’, The Art Amateur 31, no.4 (September 1894), p.70; ‘The Society of Landscape Painters; Brush and Pencil 4, no.2 (May 1899), p.126.
31 See, for example, The Art Interchange 25, no.4 (16th August 1890), p.1.
32 Levin, op. cit. (note 1), p.16.
33 Colour reproductions could be purchased for between 20 and 30 cents each. See, for example, The Art Interchange Co.: Catalogue and Illustrated Price List, New York 1895, which offered none of the plates that Hopper copied from the 1886, 1890 or 1891 issues.
34 See Levin, op. cit. (note 2) p.4
35 ‘Instruction Department’, op. cit. (note 26), p.54.
36 See Levin, op. cit. (note 2) p.3, no.0-3.

9. Country road, by Edward Hopper. c.1897. Oil on canvas, 23.5 by 33 cm. (Private collection; courtesy Mark Murray Fine Paintings, New York).
The origins of Edward Hopper's earliest oil paintings
The origins of Edward Hopper's earliest oil paintings

The origins of Edward Hopper's earliest oil paintings

...c.1900 onwards, seen in paintings of his mother, sister and other female models. This portrait and the picture of a ship on the adjacent wall evoke Hopper's evolution from the nautical themes of his pen and ink illustrations (and two nautical oils) of 1898–99 to portraiture in 1899–1900.

The presence of Old ice pond at Nyack in the drawing suggests that its dating to c.1897 is too early and that it was probably completed between 1898 and 1900. Such a dating may be supported by the close visual match between the slanting 'E.H.' signature on Old ice pond at Nyack and that on Clipper ship being towed by tug, which has been dated to c.1900.44 It may also be corroborated by the propped canvas with its back to the viewer in Artist's studio, which appears to be Church and landscape, judging from its relative dimensions and from the rough sketch of the stamp on the reverse of its canvas (Fig.n).45 This is the palette-shaped stamp used by the New York art supplier FW. Devoe & Co. from the early 1890s and since it does not appear on the back of Old ice pond at Nyack it is possible to infer, together with Hopper's proud display and more confident handling of paint in the latter canvas, that Hopper painted Old ice pond at Nyack after Church and landscape.46 Yet Hopper's decision to feature Old ice pond at Nyack on the easel in Artist's studio is significant for more than just the work's date; it also suggests the symbolic value that the canvas held for the artist at this moment. Although Hopper may have intended the open paint box and easel in Artist's studio to indicate that the painting had recently been completed, the drawing's highly choreographed nature implies that its details are contrivances. Indeed, the work proudly and purposefully illustrates Hopper's art as transformed into a painting studio, with an easel, palette, brushes and a canvas propped up on the floor, together with such accoutrements as books, a mahi stick, a small figure sculpture and a pipe resting on the table. The scene appears manipulated specifically to evoke Hopper's self-image as a sophisticated artist in training. With, it now seems likely, no original oils to his name at this early stage, the prominent display of his copy of Crane's painting therefore functions as a manifesto of sorts, revealing his grand painterly ambitions shortly before he enrolled at the New York School of Art in autumn 1900.

The school was then still referred to by its original name, the Chase School, after its founder and – Hopper's first painting teacher from 1901 onwards – William Merritt Chase (1849–1916). Hopper's classmate and friend Clarence K. Chatterton recalled that in 1900 Chase was still 'the dominant figure in the New York art world as he was at the school'.47 It may be telling that Chase was also a well-known representative of the Tonalist or aestheticist artistic philosophy and that as a teacher he played an important mediatory role between Hopper's generation and that of several major Tonalist artists.48 Crane was one of these artists; Crane and Chase knew each other, were members of the same clubs and societies and regularly exhibited together. In Artist's studio, then, Hopper awarded pride of place to his copy after a Tonalist painter whose style was indicative of the pioneering aesthetic philosophy embodied by the Chase School, where Hopper would soon begin his training as a painter.

Hopper's implicit association of the Tonalist landscape style with his vision of his future career reflects the great popularity of Tonalism and its hold over the American art market at the turn of the twentieth century.49 During this period Tonalism was recognised as a style in all but name, defined by its non-narrative emphasis on the intimate, often pastoral American landscape, prioritisation of the artist's subjective response and close attention to atmosphere over detail.50 The impact of the Tonalists upon American modernism is a subject that is still being recovered by scholars, but Hopper's canvas provides a compelling example of the way he and his generation formed some of their earliest understandings of the American landscape genre through the prism of the Tonalist vision. In Hopper's recreation of Crane's frozen twilight landscape, here surely exists one of the clearest indications of his early engagement with American painting of his time. Moreover, the Tonalists' explicitly personal approach to the American landscape, so strongly evident in Crane's painting, would become a hallmark of Hopper's work throughout his career.

Hopper's earliest paintings require further investigation, since the evidence presented here suggests an openness to a wider range of artistic sources than has typically been recognised. Indeed, the often-inflexible categorisations of Hopper's work – perpetuated by his early literary champions and critics – have left little room for the myriad and often incongruous influences of his early career. As such, the rather constrictive prevalence of the realist paradigm in categorisations of his work has obscured the untidier truths of the origins of Hopper's idiosyncratic style. It becomes increasingly clear that his eventual, mature conception of realism was a composite derived from a broad spectrum of styles and movements. Perhaps the apparent incongruity of these early influences can help to explain the unfixed, disparate and dislocated sense of Americanness that so haunts Hopper's work.

44 Clipper ship being towed by tug has been dated to c.1900, 'according to subject matter used by Hopper around 1900 and also by style [...] related to the pen and ink drawings before he entered the New York School of Art', see Frick Art Reference Library, op. cit. (note 5), auction record. The work may, however, have been completed around the same time as Ships, c.1898, as Hopper produced many nautical-themed drawings and illustrations between 1898 and 1900.

45 Having been acquired by Sanborn, Church and landscape was, like Old ice pond at Nyack, listed for sale by Heather James Fine Art, which exhibited it in 2019. See note 19 above.


49 Ibid., pp.xxiii–xxix.

50 For the original definition of American Tonalism, see W.M. Conn: exh. cat. The Color of Mood: American Tonalism 1880–1910, San Francisco (M.H. De Young Memorial Museum and The California Palace of the Legion of Honor) 1972, pp.1–3. David Adams Cleveland has since developed and refined the definition of the Tonalist movement, see Cleveland, op. cit. (note 48), p.xxv.