

# Modernity's Progress and Discontents: Analyzing Edward Hopper's Hotel Room

Rui Liu

Keystone Academy, Beijing, 101300, China

## Abstract

Edward Hopper's *Hotel Room* (1931) skillfully captures the alienation of modern urban life and the evolving role of women through its palette, composition, and realist techniques. This essay situates the work within its historical context, exploring its commentary on the societal anxieties of the Great Depression, the transformative impact of urbanization, and the emergence of the independent "New Woman" during the first wave of feminism. Aside from an historical approach, this study analyzes the artistic formal qualities of the painting to reveal how Hopper constructs a narrative of isolation and emotional detachment. Interweaving artistic expression with social observation, *Hopper's Hotel Room* serves both as a reflection of 20th-century American modernity and a critique of its psychological toll on individuals.

## Keywords

Edward Hopper, Interwar period, Realism, Modernism, Feminism.

## 1. Introduction

Edward Hopper (1882–1967), a pivotal figure in American Realism, is renowned for his melancholic depictions of urban environments and the quiet tensions of solitude in modern life. *Hotel Room*, an oil painting created in 1931 during the Interwar period, exemplifies Hopper's ability to create an emotional visual narrative. The work portrays a lone, half-naked woman in a transient space, surrounded by angular lines and cold colors that evoke sadness and discomfort in the viewer. Hopper's formal choices—such as the interplay of light and shadow, the contrast between geometric and organic lines, and the restrained color palette—amplify the painting's themes of emotional isolation. Furthermore, analyzing the turbulent historical-economic landscape, rapid American urbanization, and progressive feminist movements of the 1920s and 1930s will shed light on Hopper's dual role in the artwork as a documenter of his era and a subtle critic of its discontents.

## 2. The Artist's Background

Edward Hopper was an American artist born in the late 19th century. He was born in Nyack, New York, in 1882, into a middle-class family (Edward Hopper, 2025). He lived in New York for most of his life, which would have helped him better observe changes in American society throughout the years. Hopper's relatively high socio-economic background allowed him to study and work in wealthier, city environments, such as receiving education in New York School of Art and traveling abroad to European metropolises like Paris. The artist's living environments likely influenced the setting of his paintings to be set in urban surroundings. In his trips to Europe in the decade leading up to 1910, Hopper found interest in works by French painters Edgar Degas and Édouard Manet. These artists utilized composition skillfully and depicted modern urban life (Murphy, 2007). This inspired both the subject matters and formal qualities of Hopper's works.

### 3. Medium

Hotel Room was created using oil on canvas, a medium with a long history in the Western world. Oil painting first became a dominant medium in European art in the 15th century during the Renaissance period (Britannica, 2023). Throughout the centuries, the presence of oil paint remained in European art movements such as Baroque, Impressionism, and Modernism (Education Bureau, 2025). America's adoption of oil paint started ever since the colonial period, as American artists incorporated European techniques into art. Oil paint is a conventional Western medium, hence suggesting the culture of the art is Western. Furthermore, oil paint is composed of pigments suspended in drying oils (Britannica, 2023). It allows for a wide range of techniques, and dries slowly, allowing artists to mix and build layers over time. For Hotel Room, this allows Hopper to skillfully blend colors to create exquisite and detailed light and shadow and achieve a realist effect. Thus, the medium also contributes to the visual effect of the artwork.

### 4. Public Reception

The 1920s to 30s, around the time when Hotel Room was created, was a highlight in Hopper's artistic career in terms of public reception. He was celebrated for his distinctive style, which he had never deviated from ever since it developed, in which urban interiors are permeated by a feeling of silence and estrangement. Starting from 1920 when he received his first one-person exhibition, his work rose drastically in popularity among the American audience. He was able to, at his second solo exhibition at the Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries in New York, sell every painting on display (Murphy, 2007). Aside from commercial success, Hopper also gained recognition in the profession: In 1930, his painting House by the Railroad was the first work to be acquired for the Museum of Modern Art collections (Murphy, 2007). This artwork was an embodiment of Hopper's style. Just like Hotel Room, it has a strong lighting, a thoughtful composition with an almost "cinematic" viewpoint, and a mood of eerie stillness. Hence, Hopper's works as a whole, likely including Hotel Room, received high public acclaim.

### 5. Analysis of Formal Qualities

#### 5.1. Line

The artist uses different types of lines to enhance the visual and emotional complexity of the scene. The painting applies both geometric and organic lines, though it uses predominantly geometric lines (Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2025). They are more rigid, and can be seen by the long, vertical straight lines that serve as contour lines indicating the edges of walls, window, and furniture, and the horizontal lines of the window ledge and headboard and footboard of the bed. Even the contours of the shadow of objects, such as of the curtain, bed, sofa, and the wall behind the figure, are straight lines. These structural lines of the setting highlight the architectural structure of the room and create a sense of enclosure, hinting at a feeling of confinement for the viewer. The prevalent perfect, regular lines visually contrast with the contour of the female figure, one of the few places on the painting where organic lines are used. These types of lines are natural. Thus, the nuanced curves in the figure's head, shoulders, arms, and legs makes her appear delicate and mortal, visually more comfortable than the setting. The contrast of strong and soft lines in the painting creates two diverse visual effects for the audience and elicits dichotomous sensations of confinement and comfort.

#### 5.2. Color

The piece utilizes color to add emotional resonance within its realistic scene. Realism art portrays everyday life in an accurate way, looking almost photographic (Tate, 2017). Colors

used in the painting contribute to the artist's realistic depiction, especially through the relationship between light and shadow. The light source, which comes from above but is not seen, is an intense, cold, artificial light. Such can be inferred from the strong contrast between the taupe shadow obscuring the figure's lowered head and hunched torso, and the pale beige areas—her nape and thighs that are illuminated. The colors further a realistic depiction of the interior lighting of a room at night, making the scene appear naturalistic to the viewer. Aside from using color to establish realism, the artist uses subjective renders to engender the emotion of melancholy. The painting is composed of a mostly muted palette and dominated by flat expanses of cold, greyed tones, such as the livid color of the left wall and bed, sage green of the carpet, pale lemon yellow of the blinds, and pearl white of the back wall. According to color psychology, cool colors commonly inflict feelings of tranquility and sadness (Domicile Jonauskaitė, et al., 2019). The choice of a cold and grey color palette sets a peacefully melancholic mood. In contrast, the tones on the woman figure like her beige skin and coral vest are intentionally warmer than her surroundings. The tonal choice makes the artwork appear well balanced in terms of color, yet also differentiates the human figure from her inanimate environment, conveying a detached and isolated feeling to the audience. Through color, *Hotel Room* adds the artist's own artistic renders to a realism style, engendering emotion.

### 5.3. Value

Furthering his realism style, the artist uses value in the painting to convey a feeling of realness and therefore sympathy. Macroscopically, the artwork varies from very light tints such as the near-white of the bedsheets and curtains to dark shades like the near-black Prussian blue of the night sky outside the window. Such is reminiscent to how lighting creates diverse differences in value of real-life objects, creating an illusion of reality. The realistic modern urban setting and objects may conjure familiarity in today's audience, creating an emotional link between the painting and the audience's own life. Furthermore, highly contrasting values are placed in proximity to each other, like the curtain draping in front of the window, which becomes visually impactful to the viewer and holds their attention. Microscopically, the painting displays nuanced tonal differences by using techniques such as blending and hatching to produce a visual effect similar to real life. Brush strokes on the shoulder and thigh of the figure are blended so that value transitions subtly from beige to light beige with a more saturated tendency. Differently, in areas like the woman's calf and feet, brush strokes are more defined and resemble hatching, as with the brick red shades down her knees that define her muscles. The figure's realness easily arouses empathy in the viewer as she looks like she is a genuine person (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2025). Both overall and the fine distinctions in value of the painting contribute to the realistic style of the painting, making it almost photographic to prompt affinity with the audience emotionally.

### 5.4. Emphasis

The artist uses compositional and color strategies to focus the audiences' attention to the female figure with the intention to emphasize her, as it is evident that the focal point makes her the center of interest. The artist utilizes the Rule of Thirds compositional strategy to create a natural focal point (BBC, 2017). If the canvas is separated into a 3x3 grid, the figure is situated exactly along the left 1/3 line, with the back of her head and elbow on the points where the vertical and horizontal lines of the grid intersect. Because of the artist's understanding of the locations that the human eye is naturally drawn to upon first glance of an artwork, the female figure demands the viewer's attention. Aside from attraction of the eye, emphasis is reinforced by color choices. The woman's head, bathed in dark shadow, is positioned among the pearl white of the background, so that it becomes naturally striking. Furthermore, the colors on the woman, such as the beige of her skin and coral vest, are not utilized anywhere else on the

painting and contrast from the cold palette of her surroundings. The unusualness in color choices command the viewer's observation and sparks natural fascination.

### 5.5. Space

While the focal point directs the viewer's attention, a sense of space through perspective is employed to guide the viewer's attention across the canvas, strategically adding narrative profoundness to the painting and engaging the audience. Space can be differentiated into three layers in the painting, namely the foreground, middle-ground, and background. Depth is constructed within these layers mainly by the receding diagonal line established by the bed, starting from the bottom left corner of the painting and ending at the 1/2 point of the right frame. It is the only visually prominent line in the composition that is not vertical or horizontal and engenders movement within the composition (Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2025). While the natural focal point of the painting is on the female figure, who is situated in the middle-ground, after inspecting her, the viewer's attention is directed, by the diagonal line of the bed adjacent to the figure, towards the window at the innermost corner of the room. One-point perspective is employed to further the illusion of depth as the sofa at the foot of the bed appears smaller than the woman as it converges towards the vanishing point. The construction of depth creates an impression to the viewer that they are physically entering "into" the painting. This creates a bond between the viewer and the story being told in the painting, stimulating their curiosity about the narrative.

## 6. Purposes of the Artist

### 6.1. Purpose of Self-Expression and Reflection of the Artist's Emotional Experience

Regardless of its public reception, art is firstly meaningful to its creator. One of the main purposes Hopper created the *Hotel Room* for is to self-express, through a painted reflection of his emotional landscape. In notes on his retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1933, of which includes *Hotel Room*, Hopper wrote that he paints to record his emotions onto the canvas (MoMA, 1933). As he has a habit of reflecting on his works, his personal records prove that this aim is consistent throughout his art. For instance, in a letter he wrote to Charles H. Sawyer, director of the Addison Gallery of American Art in 1939, Hopper states "My aim in painting is always [...] to try to project upon canvas my most intimate reaction to the subject as it appears when I like it the most" and that "I select certain subjects because I believe them to be the best mediums for a synthesis of my inner experience" (Koob, 2004). The artist's statements throughout his life makes it clear that his works are intensely self-referential and self-expressive. The melancholy that the painting evokes through color are likely indicative of the artist's mood; the woman figure in the painting a self-insertion of the painter himself on an emotional level.

### 6.2. Purpose of Depicting a Real-Life Scene Realistically

One of the more visually evident purposes of the artwork is to realistically portray a scene from real-life as a documentation of the American and her living environment at the time. While painting this artwork, the artist used his wife, Josephine Nivison, as a real-life reference. Such is evident in her diary in 1924, where she wrote that she posed as Hopper's model for the pose and manner of the woman figure in *Hotel Room* (Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 2025). Using a real person as reference indicates that Hopper based *Hotel Room*'s human body off real life observations, attempting to capture the likeness of the person and perhaps the scene. Furthermore, Edward Hopper was known for being a realist artist, the definition of which requires the artist to portray their subjects in an accurate, detailed, and unembellished way (Edward Hopper, 2025). Hopper likely had the purpose of creating a believably realistic scene

in mind when he created the artwork, thus using his observations to replicate the lifelike colors of the human skin and show how lighting and shadow illuminate and darken soft surfaces.

## **7. Functions of the Artwork**

### **7.1. Function of Commentary on the Coldness of Modern Life**

Hotel Room was completed in 1931, just after the 1920s. Drastic lifestyle changes occurred in this period in America as people moved into cities. Hopper, who lived through this time of rapid urbanization, both extensively and exclusively painted artworks on the topic of malaise in modern living. His works show a similar pattern in their use of color and lighting to create mood and use of body language of human figures to display discomfort. For example, in his most famous painting, *Nighthawks*, Hopper uses a cold color palette and deliberately arranges the gestures of the people in the artwork so that though they share the same space, no one is physically touching or looking at one another (The Art Institute of Chicago, 2015). American Art historian Milton Brown commented that Hopper's works generally "express the isolation and loneliness of the individual in modern life" (Brown, 1977). This general preference of Hopper is visible in *Hotel Room*. Hopper portrays the subject as an isolated woman in a room by herself. Her body language of hunched shoulders signify insecurity and her nudity maybe a symbol of vulnerability, especially with the artist's choice of placing her unclothed in a cold-colored room, inflicting a sensational chilliness to the viewer. Although her urban living conditions look relatively well-off, she seems ill at ease. *Hotel Room* provides insight and criticism on how the modern lifestyle makes people feel lonely and empty.

### **7.2. Function of Transforming Perceptions on the New American Woman**

The 1920s was especially significant for feminism. Changes to women's rights and roles in society are subtly embodied in *Hotel Room*. The painting portrays a young woman who is traveling solo, as, suggested by the small bed, she stays in a single room. She also seems relatively wealthy, as she brought two suitcases with her on her journey. These symbols represent independence; she is likely unmarried and traveling by her own means. Her fashion is also a symbol: She dresses in the "garçonne look" fashion, hinted by her short bob hairstyle, cloche hat, and short dress on the sofa. This style was invented by French designer Coco Chanel around 1923 and is known for being androgynous and loose-fitting, a rebellion against conventional corsets at the time that restricted women's bodies (Britannica, 2024). It was especially popular among young intellectual "flappers" with financial independence. Hopper's "flapper girl" figure in the painting was a new representation of women at the time as a wave of feminism empowered women to step out of the household to travel, earn money, and live on their own. Through the artist's choice of painting an unconventional woman in terms of appearance and lifestyle, the painting functions as challenging traditional images of womanhood.

## **8. Varied Context of the Artwork**

### **8.1. Historical-Economic Context: The Great Depression**

*Hotel Room* was created during the Interwar period, which lasted from 1918 to 1939 and is the short span of time after World War I and before World War II. It was a period of great dichotomy between optimism and pessimism in the western world because of a drastic fluctuation in economy. For the most of the 1920s, peace from war led to the Roaring Twenties as western countries were able to sustain economic development in the reinstallation of social stability. Especially in America, the second Industrial Revolution transformed the country into a main world power. Technological advancements such as the popularization of new energy resources like electricity, along with the invention of the assembly line, expanded capitalism and



consumerism, characterizing the first decade of the Interwar period as economically prosperous. Between 1922 and 1929, the country's gross national product (GDP) increased by nearly 40% (Cunningham, 2024). However, starting from 1929, stock market crashes led to the Great Depression, a long period of economic downturn marked by failed businesses and rising unemployment rate (Pells, et al., 2025). As an artwork completed in 1931, *Hotel Room* could reflect a sense of loss in society, as the peace, security, and hopeful spirit in America was broken by economic depression.

## 8.2. Social Context: Urbanization of America

*Hotel Room* was completed in 1931, just after the 1920s. During the period when Hopper was creating this artwork, drastic lifestyle changes occurred in America because of urbanization. In a move to modernity, urban cities became industrialized and centralized locations with growing economy, and the advancements in technology due to the Second Industrial Revolution reduced labor demands in agriculture. Hence, America became increasingly urbanized. The 1920 census revealed that 51.2% of Americans were living in cities, which means that for the first time in U.S. history, more people lived in urban than rural areas (United States Census Bureau, 2021). This transition of social environment was an extensive change that was likely emotionally overwhelming as it altered people's lifestyles, living conditions, and relationships. Hopper, who lived in America for his entire life, would have been able to identify these nuanced anxieties and depressions for the average American, and portrayed such emotions in his art.

## 8.3. Political Context: First Wave of Feminism

Many important things changed for the American woman by the 1920s, especially with rights and empowerment. Social changes were set in motion that would free women from the previously inescapable fate of housewifery and lead to more gender equality. Starting from the 1805s, after a century of suffragette protests and feminist activities, which is a period of what is called First-wave feminism, the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave women suffrage (U.S. Constitution, 2025). This new change not only gave women political representation, but also indicates the direction towards which the social opinion is progressing, which recognized women as taxpayers and wage workers in society. Though as of 1920 only 20% of the workforce were women, they started working in increasing numbers (Women's Bureau, 2024) and becoming self-dependent. The political context of reforming, feminist ideals might have affected Hopper's choice in portraying the subject matter of a traveling, independent young woman in this painting.

## 9. Conclusion

*Hotel Room* showcases Edward Hopper's ability to synthesize complex social and emotional realities into a single, powerfully silent image. Through his masterful attention to formal qualities, Hopper visualizes the paradoxes of modern life to the viewer: both cultural prosperity and loneliness, progress and alienation. Considering its historical context, the painting reflects the anxieties of the Great Depression, the anonymity of urban living, and the nascent independence of women challenging traditional norms. Yet, *Hotel Room* ultimately transcends its era, resonating with the modern viewer with its portrayal of the tensions between individual identity and societal transformation.

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