

House by the Railroad, 1925

The sunlight illuminating *House by the Railroad* is bright enough to cast deep shadows on the stately Victorian mansion, but not to chase away an air of sadness. The painting expresses Edward Hopper's central theme: the alienation of modern life. Instead of happy, anecdotal pictures celebrating the energy and prosperity of the Roaring Twenties, Hopper portrayed modern life with unsentimental scenes of either physical or psychological isolation. Most are set in the city, where people often look uncomfortable and out of place. Others, like *House by the Railroad*, picture solitary buildings in commonplace landscapes. Hopper's *House by the Railroad* is symbolic of the loss that is felt when modern progress leaves an agrarian society behind.

The single focus of the painting is a large gray house in an imported French style. Although Hopper customarily worked from life, he invented this house based on some he came across in New England and others he may have seen on Paris boulevards. This architectural style became fashionable in America during the mid-nineteenth century. Its hallmark is a double-pitched roof pierced with dormer windows that give height and light to the attic level. From this we might assume that the once-grand Victorian house in Hopper's painting had been built for a large family with the means to construct a residence in the latest style. If to our eyes these antique features lend the house a certain charm, in Hopper's time it would have appeared a clumsy relic from an awkward era — “an ugly house,” as one critic phrased it, “in an ugly place.”

Like the house, the site once may have been more attractive. The tall, hooded windows must have overlooked a landscape; the double veranda and tower were presumably positioned to

take advantage of a view, probably over miles of lush countryside. Now the many windows appear tightly closed, with shades mostly drawn, as if they have become obsolete for a landscape that holds little to admire. It is possible that the house has been deserted; in any event, nature's absence is also pronounced, similar to the industrial scene in Charles Sheeler's *American Landscape* (see 15-A). *House by the Railroad* might even be considered the domestic complement to Sheeler's work, although Hopper seems not to have felt Sheeler's contradictory attitude toward modern life. Whether he regarded the house as lastingly beautiful or hopelessly old-fashioned, Hopper presents it as an enduring emblem of the past.

The two themes of modern progress and historical continuity come together in the second man-made feature of the painting, a railroad track running so close to the house that a passing train would have rattled its windows. From our curiously low viewpoint, the track appears to slice through the lower edge of the structure — or, to regard it in a different way, to become part of the house itself, a new foundation for American life. An enduring sign of progress, the railroad was the primary agent of industrial change. It enlarged existing cities and created new ones on the frontier. It also provided Americans with unprecedented mobility, allowing them to explore other regions of the country. But as Albert Bierstadt (see 8-A) observed in the previous century, the railroad came at the cost of the American wilderness. Even earlier in the nineteenth century, Thomas Cole had considered the consequences of American migration from the early settlements on the East Coast. As *The Oxbow* (see 5-A) suggests, a well-tended countryside held practical and aesthetic advantages but forever altered the unspoiled landscape that was America's pride.

Hopper rejected European influences, maintaining that American art should capture the character of the nation. Like Cole and Bierstadt, he expresses the tension between nature and culture. Although railroad tracks are typically associated with the noise, speed, and rapid change of modern life, this scene is curiously still and silent, as if the rush of industrialization has passed it by. Hopper, working in the period between the two world wars, appears to have found little to celebrate in the urbanization of America, which had destroyed its original, pastoral aspect. Here, the railroad track is the color of earth, taking the place of the stream, valley, or farmland that once formed the background of American culture.



16-A Edward Hopper (1882–1967), *House by the Railroad*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 24 x 29 in. (61 x 73.7 cm.). Given anonymously (3.1930). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, New York.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at this painting and imagine whether anyone lives in the house.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

M | S

Ask students to describe the mood of this painting. Students may see it as lonely, empty, bleak, or barren. Ask them to explain why it seems like this.

The dull gray color of the house, its deep shadow, windows with nothing visible inside, empty porch, and lack of vegetation all contribute to the lonely mood. Even the railroad track separates the viewers from the house, hiding the steps to the porch and making it seem even less accessible.

E | M | S

Where is the sun? *It is on the left.*

Where are the darkest shadows? *They are on the right, under the porch overhang.*

Ask what these dark shadows suggest about the house.

E | M | S

Have students describe the architecture of this house. What shape are its windows and roof?

It is of ornate Victorian style with arched windows; the house has porches, brick chimneys, and an extremely steep, curved Mansard roof. The main body is three stories tall and the tower section has four stories.

S

Ask students how a real estate agent might write an ad for this house. What are its strong features? How could its location be described positively?

INTERPRET

E | M

Ask students to imagine how this scene would change if a train went by on this track.

It would be noisy and the house might shake. At night, lights would shine in the windows.

E | M | S

Ask students what they think was built first, the house or the railroad track. Ask them to explain why they think this.

Because this is an old-fashioned house with dated architectural features and it is too close to the railroad track, the track was probably laid after the house.

M | S

Have students think of a building in their community that seems old, outdated, and ugly, but not so old that it is a treasured antique. Explain that this is how Hopper probably felt about this house. Its Victorian architecture was dated and out of style in 1925, but today that style has regained some of its popularity.

S

What elements in this painting help convey a sense of loneliness?

The empty track and the lack of any activity enforce a sense of loneliness.

Why might many people come near this house each day? What might they think about the house and its inhabitants? Will they probably ever meet the people who live in this house?

Train passengers come close to the house each day but speed past it. They might even see people behind the windows or on the porch but cannot meet or talk with them. The speed of modern life sometimes isolates people even when it brings them physically near each other.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: railroads in the United States

Geography: Midwest region; the changing landscape of rural America during the early twentieth century; urban sprawl; the effect of industrialization on rural America

Science: advances in transportation

Literary Connections and Primary

Documents: *Our Town*, Thornton Wilder (middle)

Arts: Victorian architecture