Edward Hopper and Rockwell Kent

Consider Rockwell Kent’s paintings of land and sea as modern American mindscapes—poetic distillations of remote places that probe the mysteries of life. Kent hoped viewers would lose themselves in contemplation before his haunting visions. Essentials only ought to go into painting,” he insisted. “I want the elemental, infinite thing; I want to paint the rhythm of eternity.” He perceived the earth and heavens as psychological force fields imposing their nature upon man to make him what he is. Critics recognized a “stark strength” and “mystic imagination” pulsing through his paintings of Monhegan Island, Newfoundland, the Alaska Territory, and Tierra del Fuego.

Edward Hopper also painted scenes of hushed silence where the real and imagined meld into enigmatic realms of the mind. The poet Mark Strand regarded the “emotional weight” of Hopper’s work as the force that lifted his paintings “into the suggestive, quasi-mystical realm of meditation.”

By Jake Milgram Wien

Looking out, looking within


Fig. 2. Blue Lookout by Rockwell Kent (1882–1971), 1945. Signed “Rockwell Kent” at lower right. Ink on paper, 8 ⅝ by 11 inches. Private collection. Unless otherwise noted, all Kent images, rights reserved, Plattsburgh State Art Museum, State University of New York, Rockwell Kent Collection, bequest of Sally Kent Gorton.

Fig. 3. A Young Sailor by Kent, c. 1914–1917. Oil on canvas, 36 by 30 inches. Private collection.
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Kent and Hopper shared a predilection—rarely mentioned and never examined—for scenes of isolation intended to move rather than console. When the two artists appear on the same art historical page, the topic of discussion is invariably their kindred origins: born a month apart and within miles of each other, they grew up in white, Christian, upper middle-class families, studied painting under William Merritt Chase, Kenneth Hayes Miller, and Robert Henri, and often shared classes and exhibited early works in the same group shows in New York. Occasional mention is made of their overlapping worlds, including Maine and Vermont (where both painted) and New York (where Kent lived next to Hopper for a short time and engaged the same dealer, Frank K. M. Rehn, to handle his paintings). Rarer still are comparisons of the laconic styles and techniques that produced pictures with few moving parts.

Yet lifelong visual correspondences can be seen when their signature works are selectively paired. Consonances spring from a likened natural aptitude for illustrating American and world classics that won him critical and popular acclaim. Their figurative compositions reveal a kindred intensity in art meant avoiding certain genres and modes of painting: still life and Flower paintings, for instance, but also society portraiture, decorative landscapes, fashionable color theories, and pure abstraction. They each sometimes waited for months to find worthy subject matter. Paradoxically, stints as professional illustrators honed their abilities to convey subjectivity. Hopper trained and worked in the field for many years, while Kent developed a natural aptitude for illustrating American and world classics that won him critical and popular acclaim. Their figurative compositions reveal a kindred interest in body language, as in Kent’s Man at Mast (see Fig. 6) and Hopper’s South Carolina Morning (Fig. 5), where contrasting states of reverie and guardedness are distinguished by the gestural rise of a head.

“I’m after me.” Kent’s directive harkened back to Goethe, whom Hopper quoted: “the beginning and end of all literary activity is the reproduction of the world that surrounds me by means of the world that is in me.” Kent, who modeled his late-in-life autobiography after Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, also revered Goethe and sang his poetry.

The emotive force that became the hallmark of both artists’ creative introspection is forecast in two pivotal, contemporaneous paintings: Kent’s A Young Sailor (Fig. 3) and Hopper’s Soir Bleu (Fig. 4). (So comfortless were these works that neither sold in the artists’ lifetime.) These disquieting dramas informed by the aesthetics of symbolism express a shared unease over the human condition. When studying with Henri, Kent and Hopper were exposed to currents of fin-de-siècle symbolism—particu-
In remarkably similar ways the two artists framed the outer world to give shape to the inner world. For example, in Hopper’s modestly scaled study for his painting *Morning Sun* (Fig. 7) and Kent’s ink drawing *Shooting the Sun* (Fig. 8), solitary figures are flanked by a quadrilateral patch of white-hot sunlight. Each takes measure of the vast beyond and is separated from what is observed by a central vertical divide. The many antipodal components convey distinctively different moods: Hopper’s reclusive woman sits passively confined to her urban space while Kent’s upright man actively navigates the windswept sea. As expressions of the modern experience, the narrative fictions these images convey typify what is Hopperesque and Kentian.

If one could press the modern American spirit into a coin, Hopper and Kent would be its opposing sides. Frail and often suffering from chronic fatigue, Hopper recoiled from physical challenges. By contrast, Kent apprenticed with fresh air fanatic Abbott Handerson Thayer and relished the wilderness. He broke free from urban life and considered his voyages symptomatic of the “contemporary American character.” Feelings of unrest and love of adventure are American and “very human,” Kent contended. McBride agreed and granted America’s most widely traveled living painter the indulgence allowed to “inertic and dazzling visitors to these shores.”

Kent and Hopper’s contrasting mental and physical temperaments are reflected in *Greenland Gothic* (Fig. 10) and *House by the Railroad* (Fig. 9). Kent traversed Arctic wilderness and found mythic strength in primordial rock formations. His figure conveys the serenity of isolation rather than loneliness; its subtext corresponds with the sentiment shared by Kent’s circle of outdoorsmen and explorers: “I am least alone when I am all alone.” Hopper’s austere Victorian mansion is emblematic of his fascination with vernacular, often outmoded architectural forms laden, for him, with symbolic meaning. The spatial treatments in these works are related: vertical forms loom over tracks stretching horizontally—organic (Kent) as opposed to man-made (Hopper)—and they align thematically by alluding to the intersection of the past with the present. Perceived by one art historian as a dour grande dame, Hopper’s house brings to mind the title subject of Kent’s Vermont painting *Puritan Church* (Fig. 11). By renaming it *Mother and Chicks*, Kent drew attention to the religious structure’s maternal and facial resemblance.

As these paintings demonstrate, Kent and Hopper orchestrated the dramatic effects of light to convey personal visions. Memory and imagination lurk in the shadow.
Hopper is famously known as a composer of shadows, and Kent made shadow-play the title subject of such early paintings as Winter, Monhegan Island (Fig. 12), a touchstone of early American modernism. The painting was originally titled The Shadows of Evening, in reference to the fluid, slanting purple and blue forms brushed across the snowy foreground.\(^\text{20}\) The title was soon transferred to Kent’s Vermont painting Shadows of Evening (1921–1923, Whitney Museum of American Art), which explored the mystery and menace of the gloaming.

While each artist was in his stride in the late 1920s and early 1930s, their subjects almost make it seem as if each was reading the other’s mind. Kent’s Abandoned House, Greenland (Fig. 13) and Hopper’s contemporaneous House with Dead Trees (Fig. 14) are conceived with expert draftsmanship. Kent honed his abilities as an architect at Columbia University and landed construction jobs in the 1910s with a printed calling card touting his expertise in architectural design and rendering. And yet architecture enthralled Hopper more than Kent, who traveled great distances in search of the elemental landscapes that would allow him to convey his sense of cosmic timelessness and human insignificance.\(^\text{21}\)

Kent and Hopper also composed pastorals of similar design. Summer, Greenland (Fig. 16), which Kent conceived on an overland journey, portrays a schoolhouse bathed in the clarity of Arctic sunlight. Its slanting rooftop shadows and mysterious reflection animate a stark setting of undulating hills and sparse vegetation. Abbreviated dashes of lime green, pink, ochre, purple, and blue applied with bravura brushwork bring to mind the late landscape paintings and pastels of William Merritt Chase. Hopper’s Cobb’s Barns and Distant Houses (Fig. 15)—with its angled roofs, panoramic sweep, high horizon line, and dramatic, crosscutting shadows of the title subjects—aligns with the pictorial strategies of Kent’s hushed bucolic setting.

The clarity of sunlight sharpens the unbroken silence of Hopper’s urban pièce de résistance, Early Sunday Morning (Fig. 17). An interlocking series of rectangular forms—storefronts beneath curtained habitations—stretch laterally behind a hydrant and barber pole, character actors grounded in concrete. (Hopper painted a figure in one of the windows.)\(^\text{22}\) Trees and stumps grounded in the earth are the seven dramatic personae of Kent’s Alaska Winter (Fig. 18). (Kent painted in the distant specter of a tiny figure in silhouette.) The backwoods counterpart to Hopper’s...
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Hopper’s cityscape compositions—whether Snapshots of Being (1920), Nighthawks (1942), or New York, New York (1962)—are aspirational canvases that express the American experience. In contrast, Kent’s paintings and prints, such as The Way It Was (1930) and A Rolling Pasture (1939), celebrate the agrarian life and the beauty of the American landscape. Hopper’s urban landscapes and cityscapes often depict the isolation and alienation of modern life, while Kent’s depictions of rural America offer a sense of stability and continuity.

Hopper’s paintings often feature solitary figures in urban settings, emphasizing the loneliness of the human condition. Kent, on the other hand, portrays the natural beauty and tranquility of rural life, offering a contrast to the more chaotic and complex world depicted in Hopper’s works. The two artists, despite their different approaches, shared a commitment to capturing the essence of American life and the spirit of their time.

Kent’s paintings often feature isolated figures in stark, geometric landscapes, evoking a sense of desolation and solitude. Hopper’s compositions, on the other hand, are characterized by their clarity and precision, with a focus on the details of urban life.

In conclusion, Hopper and Kent represent opposing forces in American art, each offering a unique perspective on the modern American experience. Hopper’s urban landscapes and cityscapes offer a critical view of modern life, while Kent’s depictions of rural America provide a sense of peace and tranquility. Together, they offer a comprehensive view of the American spirit and its evolution over time.