

Approaching a City by Edward Hopper

Print Facts

- Medium: Oil on canvas
- Date: 1946
- Size: 27 1/8" x 36"
- Location: The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C.
- Style: New Realism
- Genre: Urban scene
- Hopper said his intention in this painting was to express the 'interest, curiosity, fear' one feels when entering a strange city by train for the first time. Hopper convinces the viewer to see it truthfully.
- Approaching a City depicts an arrested moment on a trip: a wide-angle view of railroad tracks and an underpass that evokes the sensation of the train's deceleration as it moves toward the city. The unseen traveler (and the viewer) is in a curious limbo, neither completely in the city nor outside of it. A massive wall separates the foreground from apartment buildings in the distance, contributing to the sense of isolation. Hopper compels the viewer to focus on the bleak setting and prepare for what lies beyond the tunnel. Using a somber palette—grays, browns, and ochres—Hopper emphasizes the uncertainty of the journey, completely eliminating bright colors that might convey the excitement and energy that one associates with the modern city. Instead, the painting evokes feelings of both anxiety and curiosity. Ultimately, Approaching a City conveys a paradox of contemporary life. The railroad made faraway places accessible to ordinary people, but it also made those places less distinctive. Reducing the scene to basic forms without distinguishing details, Hopper made the view anonymous. It might be any American city on a rail line. Hopper, by asserting the anonymity of the place and obscuring the train's destination, suggests a future that is both predictable and unknown. (PhillipsCollection.org)

Artist Facts

- Born July 1882 in Nyack, NY
- Died May 1967 (age 84)
- Hopper came from a well-off middle class family. His father was a dry goods merchant.
- He was one of two children.
- Hopper was a good student in school and showed promise in drawing by age five.
- By his teens, he was working in pen-and-ink, charcoal, watercolor, and oil—drawing from nature as well as making political cartoons.
- At approximately age 13, he created his first signed oil painting, *Rowboat in Rocky Cove*.
- Edward studied at New York Institute of Art and Design for six years. Early on, Hopper modeled his style after Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas.
- He married Josephine Nivison, who helped launch his artistic career by helping to get his artwork in shows and galleries.

- Hopper made a living as a free-lance illustrator, but he didn't care for it and only did it as a source of income. In 1923, when he was 41, things changed and his paintings began to sell.
- In 1927 he sold a painting for \$1,500.00 enabling him to buy an automobile, which he used to travel around New England.
- Travel is a recurring theme in Hopper's artwork. He traveled in New England, the South, Mexico and Europe and often emphasized the journey instead of the destination.
- Hopper also worked in watercolors and etching.
- His paintings were known for being sparse and calculated.
- He was a slow, methodical artist. It took a long time for him to think of an idea to paint and then he would ponder about it and create studies long before going to the easel.
- He died in his art studio in 1967.

Key Technique to Teach

- **Perspective** is a technique of visually suggesting a feeling of depth in a flat presentation, by using points or lines that disappear at the vanishing point in relationship to pictured objects as the objects recede. Color can also be used, along with lines, to create perspective. The closer the image is, the more detailed it will appear and the larger it will be.

Possible Questions and Suggestions to Teach Perspective

- What is a vanishing point? (It is the point on the artwork that all the lines begin at, meet, end, or vanish at.)
- Where is the vanishing point in this painting? (Off the canvas on the left-hand side.)
- Place paper strips or strings on the paper to help students see the lines and how they all meet at the vanishing point. The wall, the windows, the rooflines all lead to the vanishing point. It might work well to show the vanishing point on a large piece of paper and put it behind and next to the painting. Already have strings attached at the vanishing point. As you teach, just place the other end of the strings at the correct places to teach/show how all the lines all meet at the same point. (A paper with strings should be in the packet.)
*Note: Only the top track lines up with the main vanishing point. The other tracks on the railway have a vanishing point inside the tunnel, because they are headed a different direction.
- People and animals are included in the packet. There are two of each – one is exactly twice as big as the other. Help the children know where they could place the animals and people along the wall using the strings you have attached to show vanishing point. Show how they have to be placed in the right place to have an accurate, life-like size. A big cat can't stand next to a small person, etc.

Keywords

- Perspective, line, shape, contrast

Other Possible Questions

- What do you see in this painting? Would you say there are lots of details or not very many?
- Do you see people in this painting? Animals? Plants?
- What do you think you would see on the other side of this tunnel?
- What colors do you see in this painting? How would you describe them? Bright, happy, dull?
- What shapes do you see in this painting? Do you see any shapes repeated?
- What lines do you see in this painting? Are they straight or curvy?
- What is the mood of this painting? How does it make you feel?
- Where do you see dark in this painting? Light?
- Does this painting feel roomy or crowded?
- Does this scene seem still or busy?
- Do you think people live in the buildings? What clues does the artist give that people might live in the two buildings on the right? (Notice the curtains.) Would you want to live here?
- Travel was important to Hopper. Remember that when he finally sold a painting for enough money he bought a car so he could travel around and get ideas for his paintings. Notice that the additional Hopper painting in the packet also has a travel theme.