

Architecture that Speaks
Edward Hopper's *Cottage, Cape Cod*

Edward Hopper's paintings examine problems facing man in the twentieth century – alienation and dehumanization. Today, perhaps more so than when they were painted, his works are relevant in the post-industrial age of rapidly advancing technology. Hopper's *Cottage, Cape Cod*, (Figure 1), 1942, is similar to other paintings throughout his career. The cottage is grey and cold while the environment that surrounds it is full of life and movement. The only movement in the cottage are the billowing curtains in the empty windows. Hopper's ability to communicate a mood of isolation is realized through his concern for geometry and by the role of light.¹

As a young man Hopper made three sojourns to France between 1906 and 1910. After his final return to America he significantly lightened his palette in response to the work of the Impressionists.² After ten or fifteen years Hopper's style changed, taking a direction away from the European tradition. This change is easy to read when comparing works from the twenties such as *House by the Railroad*, (1925), *Early Sunday Morning*, (1930), *Cottage, Cape Cod* (1942) and *High Noon*, (1944). In all these paintings architectural motifs dominate with few or no human images. *House by the Railroad* was painted when the artist was still influenced by Impressionist color and light which he moves away from in a work like *Early Sunday Morning*, where the color is muted. The palette became darker in *Cottage, Cape Cod*, achieved through the dark red-brown underpainting that is visible around the edges of the canvas.

An artist, much admired by Hopper is Charles Meyron, a nineteenth-century etcher, who produced views of Paris emphasizing the play of light on architecture.³ He also admired the etchings of Rembrandt and Goya for their dramatic use of chiaroscuro. Hopper remarked: "I think I'm not very human maybe. I didn't want just to paint people gesturing and grimacing, what I wanted to do was paint light on the side of a house."⁴ This is clearly what he does in *Early Sunday Morning*, perhaps his best known work. The light enters from the right and casts



Figure 1. Edward Hopper, *Cottage, Cape Cod*, 1942, oil, Arizona State University Art Museum. Gift of Oliver B. James.

strong shadows on the street facade. The direct light in *Cottage, Cape Cod*, although partially obscured by clouds, is still an integral part of the composition. It actually obliterates as is done in *House by the Railroad*. There are a few crucial incidental details, (like the tracery under the roof in *Cottage, Cape Cod*), that emphasize the starkness of the scene.

Geometry is used to capture the viewer's attention. Hopper prefers to arrange objects horizontally. He also adds a wedge-like element to draw our eyes to the painting. This is clearly visible in *Cottage, Cape Cod* where the road in the foreground forms a V-shape that extends into the viewer's space breaking the picture plane. The wedge is re-echoed in the oblique angle of the cottage. The ground line of the cottage is obscured by the grassy field making it difficult to ascertain its precise position in space. Are we looking down from a bird's-eye view? This ambiguity of the viewer's position is also evident in *Early Sunday Morning* where the top of the building facade and the bottom are viewed head on simultaneously.⁵

Lack of spatial orientation creates an uneasy sensation. Hopper deliberately manipulates this confusing perspective. Logically, perspective is intended to extend our space into the picture but here just the opposite occurs.⁶ The viewer is set apart from the scene, exaggerating the sense of alienation inherent in Hopper's work.

The artist made many sketches on location before synthesizing his ideas on canvas. There are no human figures in *Cottage, Cape Cod*, only the wind blowing through the open windows of a house. These windows are our only access into the house which is otherwise sealed from scrutiny. The stark simplicity, so evident here, is part of Hopper's depiction of an America void of strong cultural traditions.⁷ He is showing a culture through the symbolic use of architecture – buildings say more than the human figures in some paintings. In *Cottage, Cape Cod*, a feeling of alienation from humanity and from nature can be distinctly felt by everyone. Beneath the cold architectural images, lay the tragic poignancy of Hopper's vision, sincerely felt and keenly observed.