



# CAR PAINTING IN AMERICA

## Edward Hopper's Visions of the Road

*Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,  
Healthy, free, the world before me,  
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.*  
–Walt Whitman

Not many things render the horizon more American than the vast black ribbon of a road. After all, each country has its own metonymic symbol, be it Dutch windmills or Australian plateau. But once seen, they entail a specific set of associations. Being on the road is inextricably linked with the United States of America and the values that are commonly ascribed to its people; after all, the nation's founding document from 1776 praises independence as the superior merit. A car facilitates an ease of travel and, therefore, increases the sense of independence and liberty.

Perhaps such a bold link between a car and country's crucial principles seems all too radical, yet it would be difficult to question it as the theme of a road trip reverberates through the country's vast historical catalogue of movies, songs, literature, and visual arts. The abundance of inspiration may surprise when one couples it with a relatively short history of the country; however, even in its early years the American nation emphasized movement. Walt Whitman in his 1819 poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* addresses the nation: "O resistless restless race!" demonstrating that being 'on the go' has always been of paramount importance. A few decades

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later, the American (Prussian born) painter John Gast produced one of the most recognizable allegories of the country's spirit—*American Progress*—that manifests state's expansion westward and celebrates the journey. The vastness of the land invites roads, carriages, trains, and eventually, cars. The ever-moving machines found its match in restless people who may treat life as a quest. One of the iconic lines in American literature is Kerouac's credo: "The road is life" (2019: 48), a statement illuminating how driving became an identity-forming experience.

Industrial development has certainly contributed to the betterment of the individual's life. The benefits of technological advancement allowed for the mass production of cars which resulted in a higher level of comfort of living and travelling. Such convenience while in transit was a novum and a trigger for exercising one's freedom. The producer of the first mass manufactured automobile, Henry Ford, promised:

I will build a motor car for the great multitude. It will be large enough for the family, but small enough for the individual to run and care for. It will be constructed of the best materials, by the best men to be hired, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise. But it will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one—and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces. (Ford 1922: 76)

Car owners depended neither on bus schedules nor bus routes which gave them liberty in designing their own destination; such an ability to choose one's own path (also *par excellence*) is a pivotal American value. Singularity and individualism are perfect concepts to exert for a private car owner. Moreover, thanks to a car, the transit between the public sphere and a private one has become imperceptible. One can pack their favorite belongings and set off on a journey while retaining a feeling of home. A person immersed in their vehicle transforms it from a nameless unit manufactured in a factory to a house on wheels, decorated with trinkets, stickers, and oftentimes littered with personal items. Campers and travel trailers constitute an even stronger example of a car 'domesticated' that offers a feeling of a settlement without the threat of constraint.

Cars have irreversibly transformed the American lifestyle and, subsequently, American culture. The automobile industry ushered and spread social and spatial changes. The more accessible cars became, the more they were romanticized. It created a kind of a car folklore that entailed a dedicated infrastructure of motels, gas stations, parking lots, and drive-thrus that all found their reflections in various texts of culture, thus becoming a part of culture themselves. A nation formed in motion has ceaselessly expended its horizons and the ubiquity of car travels and their relentless popularity triggered nothing short of car mythology in the United States. A similar observation has been made by Roland Barthes, who connected human nature and its will to conquer with a vehicle that enables the conquest. In *Mythologies*, Barthes writes on a model of a Citroën, whose name in French is more than appropriate when discussing car mythologies, i.e., Déesse—a goddess. He claims:

We are therefore dealing here with a humanized art, and it is possible that the Déesse marks a change in the mythology of cars. Until now, the ultimate in cars belonged rather to the bestiary of power; here it becomes at once more spiritual and more objectlike, and despite some concessions to neomania (such as the empty steering wheel), it is now more homely, more attuned to this sublimation of the utensil which one also finds in the design of contemporary household equipment. The dashboard looks more like the working surface of a modern kitchen than the control-room of a factory [...] the very discreteness of the nickel-work, all this signifies a kind of control exercised over motion, which is henceforth conceived as comfort rather than performance. (1991: 46)

Such mysterious, if not mystical qualities are equally present in the canvases of the American Master, Edward Hopper; therefore, the aim of this article is to analyze modernist representations of car culture as seen by the painter.

Edward Hopper is one of the major realist painters of the twentieth century America. He was intrigued by the ever-elusive human condition and, as an avid observer of his own milieu, was no stranger to reporting scenes from American life and meticulous portraits of people's behavior. As cars were part and parcel of reality, they became a subject matter for him as well. The works selected for discussion share a common denominator—they portray elements of car culture: *Gas* from 1940, *Jo in Wyoming* from 1946, and *Western Motel* from 1957. Hopper's paintings often depict lonely

people in transit outside of their domestic environment, as well as vast, empty spaces. His protagonists wait in a lobby, enter a hotel room, or a restaurant and evoke a sense of anticipation and a detachment from their surroundings. Another characteristic of Hopper's painting is a distinctiveness, made evident by a certain lack of details, that renders the works universal, similarly to myths.

The first painting to be discussed is *Gas* (1940), an oil on canvas with dimensions of 26 1/4 x 40 1/4" (66.7 x 102.2 cm); the work belongs to Museum of Modern Art in New York.



Fig. 1. Edward Hopper, *Gas* (1940). Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hopper-Gas-1940.png> (CC0).

*Car Culture(s)*  
*Machines, Roads*  
*Mythologies*

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The painting demonstrates the artist's attraction to places suspended between one's point of departure and destination. It depicts a common sight in the 1950s in the United States—a lone man working at a gas station situated in a rural area. Upon closer examination, two parts of the painting can be noticed: there is a forest dominating the left side of the picture and it becomes dark, almost black, as it reaches the middle of the work to where the depicted road leads. The right portion features fewer trees and the space is occupied by two white buildings and a 'Mobilegas' signpost. The stillness of the trees set against the built establishment lends psychological depth to the painting; it could be read as an ambiguous portrayal of the country's ever-present conflict between nature and civilization.

The stark contrast of energies between the two sides is enhanced by the peculiar portrayal and proportions of the captured elements. The forest is dense and with identical trees and it invites neither the man in the picture nor the audience. The signpost is as tall as the highest tree and the gas pumps reach the roof of the store and tower over the man. The latter, working in the middle of nowhere, is dressed in a shirt, a waistcoat, and a tie. Such panache is at odds with his surroundings but, also, pales in comparison to both—the mystery of the forest and the power and redness of the gas pumps. Hopper is considered to be an expert in creating light and its sources in his works. The light in this work is twofold—it comes from the settling sun and from the inside of what resembles a convenience store. The two kinds of light merged whereas the two worlds remain apart. The reduced number of objects in the painting makes it a synthesis of the American gas stations rather than a portrayal of a specific enterprise. The objects are familiar and prosaic but somewhat opaque and that aligns with what has been repeatedly said about Hopper's oeuvre: "The combination of arrangement, illumination, stillness, and bareness that he paints are seldom to be found in life, though the paintings are lifelike" (Anthony 1985: 174); it is the mimetic quality of the canvas that makes one search for the very reason for a gas station, i.e., the car. The lack of car at gas station creates tension: has a car just driven away? Has there ever been a car? The pristine conditions of the station and the crisp clothes of the man suggest rather a readiness for car's arrival than a rest after one. A curatorial research specialist Sarah Powers who is a guide at Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and offered private tours of the museum in 2019 when "Edward Hopper and the American Hotel" exhibition opened, says the following about the painter's works: "What kind of speaks loudest in Hopper sometimes are the absences—what's not in the painting" (Dalla and Adams 2020). The lack of car shows the manner in which the roads and the infrastructure, together with the people working there, is ever anticipating. It is noted that in the contemporary landscape, where the self-service gasoline stations, or "self-serves," are growing in popularity, the gas jockeys have become obsolete thus emphasizing the car's dominant position. Therefore, even though the painting does not depict a car,

the machine is an invisible agent dictating the pace of the narrative and, paradoxically, constitutes a kernel of the canvas.

Interestingly enough, *Cas*, as explained by Gail Levin, the painter's biographer, came to life during painter's holiday in 1940 which he spent, as he used to, in Truro, Massachusetts. Hopper and his wife Josephine had a summer house neighboring Cape Cod Bay and, as Levin stated, the artist used to go for long rides in his car and looked for inspiration in his environment (1995: 77). Hopper was fascinated with the development of automobile industry; he was a keen driver and understood that travelling changes one's state of mind. Together with Josephine, Hopper traveled across the States and many times stopped to capture a sight. In one such circumstance, the second analyzed work of art was created: *Jo in Wyoming*, from 1946, is a 50.8 x 35.43cm (20"x 14") water-color presenting a still frame from one of the couple's road trips.

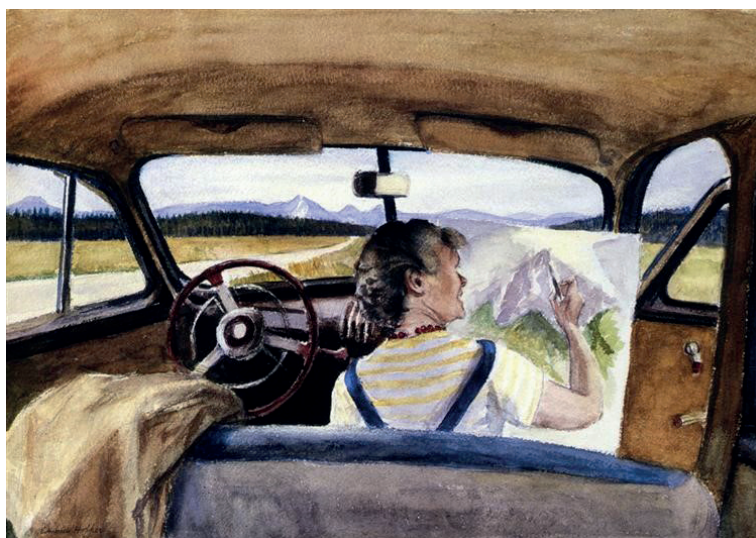


Fig. 2. Edward Hopper, *Jo in Wyoming* (1946). Source: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/edward-hopper/jo-in-wyoming>. © Edward Hopper (Fair Use).

The work shows Jo in the passenger's seat in their car painting a mountain range. The space is confined to the car interior and, although passenger's door is open, the car top overwhelms the viewer and flattens the perspective. The latter is a peculiar one: is the painter standing behind the vehicle with the trunk open? Or maybe he is on the back seat? Either way his position seems

impossible to capture Jo in her artistic activity. The way she is working is also unique. She chooses to sit in a car, with the door ajar and lets the machine intervene with her art. The viewers do not even see the peak she is capturing; their experience of the outside, in this case, the mountain tops, is second-hand. What the audience can see is what the driver is exposed to: the road through the windshield. Because of this frame, the unlimited space before them is a subject to fragmentariness.

The couple is seemingly outside, as indeed, they are not *in* a building but, at the same time, they experience nature by proxy, as if the windshield was a screen onto which landscape is projected. When compared to *Gas*, from just a few years before *Jo in Wyoming*, a shift of focus is noticeable; the previous work showed a deep abyss separating the nature on the left and human culture on the right, and a car was not even in the painting. Here, however, the car is the focal point and is also the point of view imposed by the painter. It is the car that devours the canvas and the perspective. It is a man-made confinement of nature's unlimited space. Jo is connected to both: she is in the car but her subject matter is beyond it. She does not seem to be aware of being observed, and is immersed into a process that is fleeting, for the driver will soon take his seat and move on. The elusiveness of the road trip is not lost on the Hoppers. They both understood the pensive mood triggered by travelling. In a conversation with his biographer the painter admits that: "[t]o me the most important thing is the sense of going on. You know how beautiful things are when you're traveling" (Levin 1995: 166), further revealing his fascination with roads and their escapist character. A car not only improves the quality of life but also adorns it with possibilities. Jo, who at times was a self-proclaimed cartographer for their journeys, called the land "open country" (Levin 1998: 98). A similar description was given by Owen Wister, a writer recognized as the father of the western genre. He, in *The Virginian* (or *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*), provides the following depiction of, surprisingly enough, Wyoming: "a land without end, a space across which Noah and Adam might come straight from Genesis. Into that space went wandering a road, over a hill and down out of sight, and up again smaller in the distance, and down once more, and up once more,



straining the eyes, and so away” (Wister); both Jo Hopper and Owen Wister share the myth of unique journey one makes through, in this particular case, Wyoming territory. Furthermore, Jo would often draw maps with her comments on them so the car trip was personalized: “From the lower left corner of this map, Jo drew a red line on the route leading from the highway, on South Truro Road, across the dunes to their home on its high ridge above the bay. She noted on the map the words, ‘car tracks, home-made shortcut’” (Levin 1998: 98), making their outings align with the American attachment to individualism. The Hoppers’ private encounter with the country is facilitated by their car, they observe their America from its inside. Such a strong relation to a vehicle was echoed in 1964 in a book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* by Marshall McLuhan. In the volume he defines technologies as extensions of a human being: “During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space” (1996: 5) and, in so doing, McLuhan reinforces Barthes’s take of the myth of velocity that he describes the following way: “mythology of speed as an experience, of space devoured, of intoxicating motion” (37).

The social and psychological implications and consequences of technology that has gradually become domesticated raised the fears of relishing it and becoming subservient to the machine. McLuhan was concerned that, by ascribing such importance and meaning onto technology, a human being risks becoming ‘numbed.’ Moreover, the writer claimed that the human body will form certain defensive mechanisms in response to the new stimuli that is offered by technological development or, as he labels it, “various pressures” (42). The scholar believed that technology is an extension of the human body (e.g., limbs), but also of the nervous system. All these advancements are regarded as threatening phenomena—in the chapter “The Gadget Lover,” he compares each form of the body’s extension to self-amputation. Such a radical standing lends a rather dire undertone to technological developments. McLuhan even goes further in his judgement for he writes: “Self-amputation forbids self-recognition” (43), which seems to ignore any beneficial aspect that machines, cars included, may have offered.

Both McLuhan and Barthes see the new role technology assumes in one’s life and its undoubtedly paradoxical character: on the one hand,



a car is a tangency point between the outside world and the inside, familiarized space. On the other hand, it separates its passengers suspending them in a fragmented reality of limbo. Driving in a car could be therefore seen as a truly overwhelming activity when read through McLuhan's take on mechanisms: "What makes a mechanism is the separation and extension of separate parts of our body as hand, arm, foot, in pen, hammer, wheel. And the mechanization of a task is done by segmentation of each part of an action in a series of uniform, repeatable, and movable parts" (218); the danger of such fragmentariness could be all together avoided by what Barthes likens to exorcism. Although Barthes speaks of a ship, the solution's functioning remains the same—it aims at eradicating the human desire to control the mechanism. He writes:

In this mythology of seafaring, there is only one means to exorcize the possessive nature of the man on a ship; it is to eliminate the man and to leave the ship on its own. The ship then is no longer a box, a habitat, an object that is owned; it becomes a travelling eye, which comes close to the infinite; it constantly begets departures. (1991: 35)

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An entirely different perspective is offered in the last of the selected paintings by Hopper. An oil on canvas from 1957 titled *Western Motel* is a depiction of a woman sitting on the motel bed, anticipating.<sup>1</sup> The room seems silent and motionless, with two rectangular windows permitting the entry of light. Everything in the room is organized, controlled, and geometric. The inside is filled with vertical and horizontal lines rendering the room bleak, if not hostile. The woman is looking at the viewer; the pensiveness of her stare and her tense posture accentuate the sense of some impending movement or event. She appears to be waiting: the luggage is packed, the room is devoid of personal objects, the bed is made, and a car is parked outside the window. The woman is alone but her gaze is directed at the viewer, inviting them in. She is oblivious to the landscape encompassing her location; she turns her back on it and for a good reason—there is nothing the scenery can offer, for it is plain and bleak. The road, on the other hand, tempts with meaningful possibilities as the destination is of secondary importance. Driving is a goal in itself as any route is a valuable

1. See the image at <https://www.artrenewal.org/artworks/western-motel/edward-hopper/5486>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2021.

encounter. In *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*, Ronald Primeau writes that a car in the US “has always been more than just transportation: it is status, success, dreams, adventure, mystery and sex” (1996: 56), suggesting adventures that await one on the road.

Clearly, a motel is a place of passage and is strictly linked with cars. Roadside diners, hotels, and caravan parks are all creations that are complementary to car culture. America’s greatest transport hub was formed just a year before the painting was created: the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways (Interstate Highway System) required (and still does) countless road-houses, inns, motels, and gas stations. However, it was by no means the first such momentum in American infrastructure. Before the Interstate Highway System, the legendary “Mother Road” as John Steinbeck referred to Route 66 (1939) was driven by millions of people seeking a better life for themselves. The magnitude and popularity of the route paved the way for prosperous businesses along the road and a certain cult status of car travels for they ceased to be an activity for the chosen few: the US 66 allowed the small-town Americans to become connected to the main American highway and, in so doing, it promised an opportunity, liberty, and, in a way, equality. As the route made the journey across the country swifter and therefore more desired, it became a fixture within American culture. Songs, TV series, and movies portraying Route 66 are reminders of the road’s paramount importance.

Few places are more inspiring to contemplate the ever-elusive *conditio humana* than such places of transience. The train of thoughts changes together with each new sight. Kerouac summarizes it thus: “Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road” (2019: 49). And, even though the woman in Hopper’s painting is static, the possibility of movement is vivid as the car is an *extension* of her body. The way Hopper painted it makes their bodies touch. It begs the question as to why he decided to unite them as the outside is vast and there is plenty of space to park the car. It builds tension between the woman and the vehicle as they head the same way. In lieu of the problematic division between the public and the private, Hopper resolves the conundrum by making the woman and the car, one.

This trick also makes the journey easier as there are no conflicting voices of which Owen Wister wrote: “The spirit will go one road, and the thought another, and the body its own way sometimes;” the picture becomes a double symbol of mobility as it takes place in a motel, an epitome of being on one’s way, and the car/woman is just one key turn away from moving forward. This movement is also triggered on two levels, the literal one as a car makes travelling possible, and a more abstract one, as it represents social progress (only four years before Hopper painted *Western Motel*, the first woman broke the sound barrier. Two years later, Rosa Parks sparked a national civil rights movement by protesting her relegation to the back of a city bus).

All three of Hopper’s works offer freedom that is directed outward and experienced by means of automobility. This liberty however cannot take place without a particular, free state of mind. Even the painter himself recognizes the profound origins of one’s journey: “the inner life of a human being is a vast and varied realm” (Lowry, 2013–2014) and a car is an excellent tool to transfer the inner existence into the vast realm of outside reality. The latter was at the time turned towards a new philosophy that had absolute freedom at its core—existentialism. When Jean-Paul Sartre, probably the most acknowledged proponent of existentialism, visited the United States of America for the first time in 1943, he was not met with the recognition and admiration he had thus far enjoyed in Europe. The initial reviews of the doctrine were questionable and the media had their doubts: “no matter how Jean-Paul Sartre tries to wriggle out of the accusation, his existentialism is a philosophy of despair” (Fulton 1999: 29), which may be a surprising interpretation as for the thinker it was a human being that constituted the center of the universe, removing the idea of God or any other superior force deeming it useless. For Sartre, each person was free to choose and needed to be aware of this empowerment. With time, however, his theories gained appreciation in the US and the interest in existentialism increased and, eventually, Sartre’s thought was seen to have “demonstrated its relevance to American culture” (Cotkin 2003: 104). Even though Sartre and Hopper never met, their outlook on an individual and their place in the universe seem to overlap, especially

in their view that human existence could be perceived as a series of movements and motions. Both were keen observers of their surroundings and reviewed them in their respective fields. Hopper's artistic expression as well as Sartre's philosophy treat human being and their innermost self in relation to reality.

Thus, the echo of Sartre's existentialism can be found in Hopper's usage of a car that provides one with enhanced energy and power to move farther and further in one's existence. The individual agency achieved when driving resonates with one's will and desires that were key factors for the French philosopher. It is also not accidental that there is no interaction depicted in the paintings, each person is alone, inwardly focused. The only object with which they can interact is (or, could be, as *Gas* alludes) a car. Interestingly enough, Hopper's works could be summarized by Sartre's own perspective on art, of which he viewed: "as a creative activity in the service of freedom and control for a good life" (Fulton 1999: 256). The two sensed the meaning individualism, personal drives, and autonomy have in an era so thoroughly altered by technology.

Without a doubt, the United States has embraced the invention of the car and, as it entered all areas of one's life, it has become an icon that reflects national values. Initially, the purpose of a car was to make one's life more comfortable and efficient. With time, its significance has been enriched by visions of freedom and myths they have inspired. Cars have helped to reevaluate the questions of identity and one's roots and in so doing, they have become such a pivotal part of reality it reached a cult status and has been celebrated (and critiqued) in countless texts of culture. The emergence of the American nation stems from the Declaration of Independence, a document that emphasizes freedom and the right to pursue happiness; a car is indeed a carrier and facilitator of these values. The three paintings show that a car is an outward expression of one's inner mobility. Hopper, uses cars as protagonists of his works and grants them importance equal to people for his art is a reaction to dynamic changes that occur within a society and within an individual.

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