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Art History 1

Professor Baldasano

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Term Paper #1 Assignment



The work of art I decided to write my essay on is “Western Motel” by Edward Hopper. The medium is oil on canvas, and it was painted in 1957. Currently it is a part of the Yale Art Galley collection and its accession number is 1961.18.32.

Its size is 30 1/4 x 50 1/8 inches, which is kind of a big painting, but not huge. The canvas is longer in width than height, so it is sized for a landscape rather than a portrait. The painting appears to depict a motel room either in the morning or the evening, because of the long cast shadows along the wall and floor. If it was in the afternoon, then the sun would be high in the sky and there would not be such dramatic shadows. The room is plain looking, and the only pieces of furniture visible are a bed, chair, and bedside table with a lamp. There are three other objects that belong to the people occupying the room (two suitcases and a towel or piece of clothing draped over the chairs arm). There is a woman sitting on the bed wearing a dark red dress and heals. She is looking towards the viewer, which pulls us into the painting and makes us apart of the scene. The expression she has on her face makes her look content, but not exactly happy. Through the window into the background, there is a green car parked outside and some dark silhouetted hills.

The inside of the room has lots of shapes that are rectangular, like the bedframe, the chair, the suitcases, and the shadows all have pretty sharp edges, while the background has smoother, rounder edges on the car and the hills. I like the contrast this creates between the foreground and the background. Everything feels very sharp and angular inside the room, while the outside is flowing and natural.

Hopper does a good job of creating space. The painting would not be the same if there were no large windows that allow us to see into the distance. That is one of the things I really like about the painting, how it feels like we are in the room with this woman, but it does not feel tight or confined, instead it feels open because we can see so much of the outside. Another way Hopper creates space is by positioning the woman almost in the back corner of the room, and he puts the chair, which is the closest object to the viewer, in the opposite corner. If there were no foreground object like the chair, it would not feel like that much space is between us and the woman.

The next thing I notice is how Hopper skillfully creates various forms that truly feel three-dimensional. One of the things that help create this feeling is his use of shadows. Without the shadows, the room would appear flat and dull, but because of these long dramatic dark areas along the wall and floor, the room feels real. The way he has the woman positioned also makes her form feel very three dimensional, because her head is facing us but her body is almost in profile. If her whole body was facing towards us then it would not be as effective, it would feel much flatter.

The artist’s choice of color is another thing that works really well. The walls and the floor of the room are a greenish color, which contrasts with the red from the chair, bed, and the woman’s dress, because red and green are complementary. Also the yellow-orange drapes and the yellow dried up grass in the background work well with the blue sky and the dark blue silhouette of the hills, because orange and blue are also complementary. Another thing I like is how the shadows in the room create a nice contrast with the lighter colored areas. If the painting did not have these nice shadows then it would feel dull because there would not be any change in color of the walls and floor. The intensity of the colors really pops out where the highlights are, while the majority of the paintings foreground is somewhat dark in value.

The composition is balanced asymmetrically. The woman is sitting off center to the left but the red chair balances her out. If I cover the chair with my thumb then the painting feels significantly less balanced. Our eyes are drawn to the woman but because the chair is the closer object, it also draws our attention. Another thing to point out is how the slanted lines from the window and the wall creates movement, which helps bring us from one side of the room to the other. Overall everything goes really well together, like the contrast in lights and darks, the complementary colors, and the different use of forms all work together to achieve unity.

The thing that drew me to this painting was the atmosphere and the mystery of it. I really like how Hopper has chosen to include the viewer in the painting, by having the woman be looking right at us as if we are her significant other. This grabs our attention and makes us want to know more about what is going on in the scene. At the beginning of my essay I pointed out how it appears to either be the morning or the evening because of the long shadows, but because the woman is dressed up, I would assume it is the evening. Maybe they had just arrived after a long day of driving and are about to go get something to eat. Or maybe they are packing up and getting back on the road, it is hard to tell but I like how he has left it up to us to make our own interpretation. Another thing I like about the painting is the story it seems to be telling about two people travelling together. The room and the landscape look very plain and simple, yet the woman is full of life and she brightens the room just by being in it. The way she looks towards us and the expression on her face seems to say, “this place is boring, but at least we have each other”. Hopper could have painted her looking out the window but his choice to have her facing the viewer makes it personal, and adds great depth to the scene.

In conclusion, I think Edward Hopper did a great job of creating lots of contrast among the different shapes, colors, and overall content. The way the shadows fall across the walls and the floor help create space, while adding different values to the painting, which prevent it from feeling flat. He also uses complementary colors throughout the painting and sets the background and foreground apart by using primarily sharp hard edged shapes in the motel room, and soft round edges in the scenery outside. I had a good time going to the Yale Art Gallery to look at this and other paintings. We really are lucky to have a gallery like this be available to the public for free. Getting up close and looking at these works of art is ten times better than looking at them in a book. It really is amazing how much you miss out on when you are not able to examin the real thing.