Early Sunday Morning 1930
Oil on canvas, 89.4 x 153 cm
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

EDWARD HOPPER

'To see a landscape as it is when I am not there': the words are from the French religious thinker, Simone Weil, and the thought may sound impossible. For when I see a landscape, I am always there. I'm the person having the view, the person through whose eyes the scene is seen. I cannot see what a landscape would look like when I myself am not present and looking.

In fact, Weil meant her words to express a spiritual goal. I must empty and annihilate my self, and become a pure selfless viewpoint – and then I *can* see a landscape without *me* being there. Or better still, God can see it through me. The whole true purpose of human beings, Weil thought, was to stop blocking God's view. 'I cannot conceive the necessity for God to love me . . . But I can easily imagine that he loves that perspective of creation, which can only be seen from the point where I am. But I act as a screen. I must withdraw so that he may see it.'

And she developed this into a theory of art. 'All great painting gives the following impression: that God is in contact with its point of view regarding the world, with the perspective of it, without either the painter or the person admiring the picture being there to disturb the *tête-a-tête*. Whence comes the silence of all great painting.' When we look at such pictures we are in a sense not there. We are only eavesdropping (the visual equivalent of eavesdropping) on God's view of the world.

Weil gives no examples. Her favourite painter was Giotto. She would probably not have had any time for the art of Edward Hopper. But if you're after a view of the world that seems undisturbed by a human viewer, his work is certainly a candidate.

Hopper's *Early Sunday Morning* shows a stretch of street. It's a terrace of two-storey properties, with a line of shopfronts running beneath a line of red-plastered apartments. It may be a street in New York, where the artist lived. The row is viewed flat-on. From the kerb of the pavement to the guttering of the roof, it becomes a formation of straight parallel bars. With no dramas of near and far, or of up and down, the scene runs levelly across the picture.

The shape of the picture, low and long, emphasises the ongoing length of

the street. The doorways and windows make a regular and almost uniform series. It's not quite uniform – there are small variations among the blinds, curtains, awnings, hanging signs, the lettering on the shop windows and the pilasters between them. But there are no big surprises in this sequence, and no surprises are implied beyond the picture's edge. The scene says 'etc.' The sky continues clear from left to right. Only a perfect square of featureless brown in the top right corner, presumably some higher-rising building behind, punctuates this continuousness.

The lighting tells the time. A cool light casts long shadows across the pavement from the fire hydrant and the barber's pole. It is early morning. These shadows add extra horizontals. A third very long shadow falls down the middle of the pavement, going right across the picture, suggesting that a tall lamppost stands off-scene, somewhere to the right – or is it a step in the paving? Either way, the thin bar only ups the sense of continuousness.

Nothing happening. That's the visual message of the image, with its parallel horizontals, its repetitive sequence of units, its long stretch. It's also the narrative message. The light declares early morning, and the title specifies early Sunday morning. No one is around. No one is up and about. No one is awake. The street is empty. The people in the apartments sleep. The only visible event is the steady fall of the light. You're looking at a scene without consciousness.

And maybe you aren't there either. 'When we were at school,' Hopper remembered, 'we debated what a room looked like when there was no one to see it, nobody looking in even . . .' This is the strangest effect in his paintings. He can depict individuals sitting by themselves, or empty rooms, or deserted streets, and he can suggest that the individuals are absolutely alone, the rooms and the streets absolutely empty. There is no one else on the scene at all – no one there to see it, even. What the picture shows is something that isn't being looked at. Its viewpoint is unoccupied. It is a view without a viewer.

How's it done? How can this sight suggest that it's not being seen by anyone? Well, there is sheer probability. At this time of day and week there would likely be nobody around. This particular moment of lightfall must often pass without any witnesses. (Part of the magic of a clear early morning is that the world is so intensely visible – never more so – but that very few people are there to see it.)

But it's more than that. *Early Sunday Morning* has the look of a scene that isn't being looked at. It's without any particular focus. The eye just scans along it; and nothing in it suggests a human eye observing, noticing, taking an interest. The pole and the hydrant, things that might stand out as creature-like – a man and a dog, almost – refuse to become protagonists. They are merely two inanimate interrupting fixtures that catch and break the light. The rendering of everything is even, solid, not too sharp. There is no point at which the picture gets excited. Nor is it assertively blank, in a surreal or alienated way. It is simply, calmly there. With you or without you, the silent street goes on.

Edward Hopper (1882–1967) was once a dubious figure. In the century of distortion and abstraction, he steadily pursued an atmospheric realism. He spent many years as a commercial illustrator. His work was popular. Was he just a poster artist? Now that his standing is established, the question can be safely answered: yes and no. Some of his pictures, including the most famous (*Night Hawks*, *Office at Night*), are indeed better in reproduction. While others, which you might flip past in a book, are miracles of subtlety on canvas. And some, like *Early Sunday Morning*, are wonderful both ways.
