

**Edward Hopper's *East Wind Over Weekhawken* (1934),
a Depression-era masterpiece, to be sold
by the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts**

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Before pondering the controversy, consider the painting itself. At least as I can best represent it here.

The houses at first glance appear solid as bulwarks, strong and permanent, fixed forever. Each piece of property has a house or apartment complex planted on it, and all are raised high above the sidewalks by heavy retaining walls and stone stairs. Even the lawns of many of the properties are at the eye-level of a pedestrian, not at their feet. The overall effect is to make these buildings seem formidable and unmovable presences.

Then the viewer, surprised, notices *absence*: the view is almost entirely devoid of people. (A few figures may be on the sidewalk at the far left.) No one on the sidewalks in the painting's middle, no traffic on its streets, no sign of life either on the porches or in the many windows of the buildings—all of which have their shades drawn down precisely halfway, as if done mechanically and systematically to make a uniform opaqueness.

The colors of the buildings are rather dull, under a cloudy sky with very diffuse or wan sunlight. Dark browns, dusty beige, charcoal greys, dirty rather than bright reds. No plants in the heavy decorative plant pots placed by stairs or on corners.

Even the lawns themselves partake of dullness, not green but a kind of tired sand color—and they are long and overgrown, as if untended. Could some of these buildings be abandoned?

The only primary human presence in this painting is implied—the painting’s point of view is loosely that of someone standing on the edge of one of the sidewalks by the street, gazing at the scene before us.

To the right, a For Sale sign looms, its feet planted in a sea of overgrown and possibly dead grass. The sign’s lettering touts property we can’t see and is itself basically illegible. Yet the red letters advertising this unknown property are in fact the brightest, strongest colors in the entire painting, the one color-note that is not drab and tired.

There are a few other touches in *East Wind Over Weehawken* that make everything seem to be decaying slowly, not stable. The painting has no regular horizontal or vertical lines anchoring what’s seen to a fixed visual grid (even though these streets and blocks are laid out as a grid if seen from a bird’s eye view). Instead, everything’s akimbo, angled at various crazy diagonals, just like the For Sale sign.

The streets slope, the heavy retaining walls converge on each other via different diagonals, and most unsettling of all the streetlamps and telephone poles, which otherwise might give a sense of connection, communication, safety, and stability—the lamps themselves are especially elegant and beautiful—teeter each at different angles off the vertical. Instead of fixing the image in place via normal vertical and horizontal coordinates, these strong lines suggest that the image is slowly and gradually being rent apart and drifting away.

The sky—the weather itself—participates in this imagined undoing of the world before us. A break in the clouds in the middle of the painting is filled with diagonals, a kind of zig-zag blue-sky opening that’s rather also like a tear or rip starting at the top of the painting and edging down toward its middle.

In short, Hopper’s stolid and rather formidable painting depicting severe and heavy buildings and unwelcoming streets actually may be about transience itself, about the cold east winds of change.

Remember the year *East Wind Over Weehawken* was painted: 1934. It was a year in which for the majority of Americans the Depression became much worse. Jobless people losing property they owned, or unable any longer to afford their rent. Cities like Weehawken suddenly under stress. What seemed solid melting into air. All these instabilities Hopper suggests with the subtlest of means. Yet in many ways the painting’s subtlety makes the forces causing change to feel all the more emphatic and irresistible. They’re hard to see at first but then, once seen, loom before us as intimidating and unstoppable as melancholy itself, or impending ruin.

PAFA (the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia) owns two excellent Hopper paintings, *Weehawken* (bought in 1952 from Hopper’s dealer) and the earlier *Apartment Houses* (1923). They’re the only Hoppers in Philadelphia. But soon PAFA will have just one to exhibit: *Weehawken’s* going up for sale.

Apartment Houses first appeared to the public in a show arranged by PAFA in 1923, as part of PAFA’s prestigious Annual Exhibition of contemporary art. The painting was purchased immediately after the show—Hopper’s very first sale to a museum. Hopper must have been very honored, for PAFA was and is the first academy and school

dedicated to art in the United States, and it is the institution at which Thomas Eakins taught. Here's a reproduction of *Apartment Houses*:



So why has PAFA decided to sell *East Wind Over Weehawken*? In order to raise funds to continue PAFA's tradition of supporting contemporary work and artists. *Weehawken* is attractive bait to use to raise quick funds because Hopper paintings are relatively rare—he painted just around 360 in his lifetime and most have long since been bought by institutions or are in private hands. The few that do appear for sale now routinely fetch huge prices.

Through this sale the Academy promises to quintuple its funds dedicated to having regular shows supporting contemporary art and artists and to purchasing contemporary work. Plus PAFA promises that with the proceeds from the sale of *Weehawken* it will hire a contemporary art expert and do many other things that are essential to increasing its “presence” in the art world and the Philadelphia scene.

PAFA pitches this *Weehawken* sale as honoring its traditions, not damaging them. As David R. Brigham, President and CEO of PAFA, has stated, “As America's oldest art museum and school, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts has a responsibility both to augment its historic collection and to remain current with new developments in art. This endowment will give us resources to do both, in keeping with the Strategic Plan that we are now finalizing after a year of input and planning by our faculty, staff and stakeholders.”

Well, let me give PAFA different “input,” from a different kind of “stakeholder.” (I'm a Philadelphia resident, an art lover, and have been to PAFA many times, even

taking some of my students there.) I don't mean to argue against supporting contemporary art, or that an institution never has the right to sell works in their collections when they have good reasons for doing so. PAFA may very well be right that it can't really achieve the impact it needs to without raising major new funds.

Yet PAFA has many contemporary works on display in its collections, and has bought them using current resources. If it wants to honor the tradition of its Annual Exhibitions of contemporary art, is putting *East Wind Over Weehawken* on the auction block really the best way to do it?

Why not raise the twenty to thirty million PAFA says it needs via conventional fundraising, or selling other work(s) in its collection, rather than sacrificing one of Philadelphia's only Hopper paintings?

How well were any of these possibilities explored in the discussion PAFA's board and leadership? None of these questions have been straightforwardly addressed in public, much less satisfactorily answered.

My hunch is that once the powers that be at PAFA saw selling this "second" Hopper of theirs as a solution it proved impossible to resist. Since they bought *East Wind Over Weehawken* with their own funds in 1952, they are free to dispose of it as they wish.

Some media coverage of this impending Hopper sale—especially that of Artdaily.org, "the first art newspaper on the net"—implicitly abets PAFA's utilitarian logic by suggesting that *Apartment Houses* is a much more "important" Hopper than *Weehawken*, both for its history and as a painting in its own right.

It's true that *Apartment Houses* has a unique history with PAFA that makes it an indispensable part of the Academy's collection. *But it's not right to assume that it's the far better painting.* Hopper did many other better voyeuristic painting-views of scenes glimpsed through apartment or office windows, playing with how modernity mixes public and private in unprecedented ways. *Apartment Houses* is demonstrably an early but rather minor and cautious instance of his exploration of this common motif.

Hopper was also drawn to the theme of transience and loss and did many paintings on this subject throughout his career, such as *House by the Railroad* or *Rooms by the Sea*, two of the greatest paintings in all of American art. *Weehawken* is an undeniably important variation on this theme, and thus important to Hopper's overall oeuvre. I'd argue further that Hopper's *East Wind Over Weehawken* is one of the best paintings done during the Depression and engaging with its effects on everyday Americans. It's far more subtle than many Depression-era works, and its stoic sense of tragedy arguably increases its potency and its timelessness rather than diminishing it.

The Academy of course is gambling that the painting's high quality—not just the Hopper name or the rarity of a Hopper on the market—will bring lots of money into its coffers.

Here's that bitterest irony of all: in the name of supporting contemporary art PAFA is eviscerating one of its own best examples of its honorable *past* support for contemporary art—in this case, their decision in 1952 to buy a fine Hopper from Hopper's own dealer. Instead, in the name of supporting contemporary artists, PAFA is choosing to put a For Sale sign on their Hopper with a For Sale sign in it.

No doubt *Weehawken* also proves an easy sacrificial offering because (I'm guessing here) it's just not that popular with PAFA visitors. It's obviously not that popular with

PAFA's board and other powers that be. *Apartment Houses* is a much easier painting to understand and enjoy, beginning with its brighter colors and its rather titillating view of a maid's bosom as she makes a bed. *Weehawken* seems in comparison too drab, too opaque and fortress-like, very much like the formidable houses it depicts. Plus there's something also rather depressing and unsettling about *Weehawken*: it suggests that everything we take to be solidly here before our eyes might soon be up for sale, vanishing in an instant. Rather than think how the painting in an eerie way seems to be prophesying its fate, why not just unload it while looking instead toward the dazzle of the art market and all the glittering possibilities it may unleash?

What is the long-term cost to PAFA's reputation, the unintended ironies and consequences here? Do they outweigh the immediate gains? Who knows? We won't know for years. Should we really measure the potential "value" of this sale primarily in market terms, hinting that future works that PAFA buys may very well "appreciate" as much as *Weehawken* did and therefore will justify this act?

Ahead the sale goes: it's slated for December 2013, at Christie's.

In the circular logic of the market, even praising *East Wind Over Weehawken* as I have raises its "value," negating in the eyes of many any arguments to keep it in PAFA's collection. Yet if my arguments are instead rejected and the painting judged minor and disposable, then once again (I told you market logic is circular) here too we find an open-and-shut case for getting rid of this drab old thing and getting valuable cash instead.

The auctioneer's spiel to customers is now being polished, his hammer getting ready to fall. *East Wind Over Weehawken* may very well end up in the well-manicured hands of a private billionaire, since these days they have far more funds to deploy than the museums that compete with them, especially art museums in northern New Jersey (where *Weehawken* is) or even New York City, which can be seen to the east of *Weehawken*.

Meanwhile, in storage, unavailable to anyone who might want to see it and say goodbye, the best Hopper in the Philadelphia area silently awaits its fate. *East Wind Over Weehawken* remains Hopper's own Depression-era ode to loss, to how things that once seemed substantial and welcoming, full of confidence in our future, may come apart right before our eyes.

Caveat emptor, caveat venditor.

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