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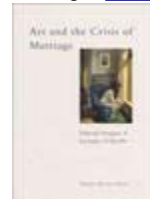
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Vivien Green Fryd

Art and the Crisis of Marriage: Edward Hopper & Georgia O'Keeffe

Chicago: [University of Chicago Press](#), 2002. 278 pp.; 14 color ills.; 127 b/w ills. Cloth \$40.00 (0226266540)



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Edward Hopper and Georgia O'Keeffe hold an exceptional status as two of the most prominent figures in twentieth-century American art. Notwithstanding the shared distinction of their canonical positions, their art could not be more different. While Hopper produced striking iconic images of the American scene, O'Keeffe's paintings are associated with the modernist, abstracted aesthetics of the first American avant-garde. In their own day, the artists themselves moved in distinct professional circles that did not overlap. Yet when viewed comparatively, Hopper and O'Keeffe's images exhibit some surprising thematic commonalities, particularly concerning issues of gender and embodiment, intimacy and identity. As Vivien Green Fryd demonstrates in *Art and the Crisis of Marriage: Edward Hopper & Georgia O'Keeffe*, these leitmotifs also relate centrally to the shifting conceptions of marriage and the family that were prevalent in the years between the two World Wars (ca. 1920–50) and are evident in the individual biographies of the artists themselves. By viewing Hopper and O'Keeffe's art collectively through the lens of marriage, Fryd traces a larger pattern of conflict and collaboration as being at the heart of their work and those of their spouses, the artists Josephine Nivison Hopper and Alfred Stieglitz.

The study is organized into four parts. In a broad introductory discussion, Fryd situates Hopper and O'Keeffe's marriages within changing trends in interwar marital dynamics. This analysis is followed by individual sections devoted to each artist. The book concludes by examining the "resolutions" that both couples reached in their art and in their lives after the Second World War. The book is thus organized through a framework that alternately examines the comparative, individual, and comparative treatment of its themes; in turn, this rhetorical pattern traces the joining, separation, and joining of its principal subjects. In pursuing such an interpretive approach, Fryd has produced a clearly written and highly readable study whose appeal is substantially enhanced by the fourteen vivid color images that accompany the text.

Fryd prefaces her initial discussion of Hopper and O'Keeffe by reconstructing the social and historical contexts that underpinned the shifting attitudes toward marriage and the family. During the interwar years, these institutions were perceived to be under threat due to factors such as increased urbanization and industrialization, the changing social status of women, the greater availability of contraception, the increase in divorce rates, and the proliferation of public forms of leisure. At the same time, progressives rejected the oppressive constraints that were traditionally placed on sexuality and advocated instead for "companionate marriage," an arrangement that emphasized mutual sexual gratification and greater freedom for women. This chapter provides a helpful backdrop that situates Hopper and O'Keeffe's marriages. As Fryd shows, the Hoppers experienced a more traditional albeit conflicted marriage, as Josephine Hopper (who was known as Jo) gave up her artistic career in order to support her husband's activities by serving as his model and his business manager. In so doing, she simultaneously assumed roles that empowered her and that she reportedly resented. Stieglitz and O'Keeffe's situation was somewhat more complex, as they "practiced the more radical, bohemian lifestyle whose attitudes toward sexuality had filtered into the middle class and begun to erode Victorian notions of marriage. Yet O'Keeffe could not accept her husband's free love with another woman [i.e., Dorothy Norman] or allow herself to act on her own intense feelings for another man [i.e., Jean Toomer] because of her marital status and tenuous emotional state" (49). This contextual

section provides a useful background for the analyses of the images that follow.

For Hopper, the home, hotel, road, and automobile often serve as emblems of isolation and emptiness; Fryd relates these themes to the larger social conception of marriage in crisis and to the Hoppers' own relationship. During the interwar years, hotels, boarding houses, apartment buildings, and even public amusement places such as the theater and dance hall were seen as contributing to the erosion of the family. Fryd persuasively draws on these themes in her reading of Hopper's *Rooms for Tourists* (1945), an ambivalent image that potentially evokes notions of alienation, prostitution, and extramarital affairs. Yet the author is less successful when she attempts to identify the motif of the estranged couple as an analogue to the Hoppers' own conflicted marriage. Very often the evidence that would support such a direct biographical reading is too tenuous to be more than speculative. As Fryd states, "The tranquility of Edward Hopper's images, whether they include Victorian homes, automobiles, or roads, belies the turmoil of their creation and of the artist's life. They project a calm façade that hides the reality of his own marital discord" (83). Thus, the author acknowledges that the pictorial evidence of Hopper's artwork does not conclusively support the more troubled biographical reading that she wishes to attribute to it. Fryd's case is considerably stronger when she relates the larger social and contextual discourses on marriage, sexuality, and leisure to Hopper's well-known images of burlesque shows, modern office environments, and nudes who appear in nonnarrative genre scenes. She also skillfully reconstructs the Hoppers' own fascinating collaborative efforts to produce the fictive, typological identities of the women depicted in Hopper's paintings, imaginary personas for whom Jo served as the model following their marriage in 1924. As these paintings clearly demonstrate, the physical appearance of the women in Hopper's images is shifting and unstable. Thus, rather than a secure biographical reading being uniformly applicable to all of Hopper's paintings, the creative range of female presences who populate Hopper's paintings indicates the dynamic mobility of the gendered performances that the Hoppers created together.

A highly suggestive sense of gendered ambivalence is also evident in Stieglitz's composite photographic portrait of O'Keeffe. Fryd situates these representations within the expanding sexual openness of the era, and she sees both Stieglitz and O'Keeffe as contributing to the new cultural emphasis on passion and eroticism. At the same time, Fryd is careful to acknowledge that O'Keeffe remained equivocal about the sexual connotations of her artworks. The author also traces the relationships between her early nonobjective images and her romantic feelings for the political-science professor Arthur Macmahon and the photographer Paul Strand, although it is again unclear whether O'Keeffe's flower paintings of the early 1920s, as Fryd asserts, "had been created partly in response to her romantic feelings toward Strand" (131). Furthermore, as Fryd acknowledges both in the body of the text and in the footnotes, much of her analysis of the artist is indebted to the scholarship of Barbara Buhler Lynes. Yet when the author approaches O'Keeffe's monumental painting *The Radiator Building: Night, New York* (1927)—an emblematic portrait of Stieglitz himself—her analysis is nuanced and original. Fryd interprets the towering phallic skyscraper as being at once a humorously subversive parody and a tribute to the photographer. As she points out, O'Keeffe aptly captured in this image the ambivalence of consumer culture, since the Radiator Building stood as a veritable advertisement for the products manufactured by the corporation that commissioned the building. While Stieglitz openly professed disdain for such commercialism, he aggressively and cannily promoted the artists of his inner circle within the New York art market. Fryd reads *The Radiator Building* as O'Keeffe's exposure of Stieglitz's hypocrisy regarding the issue of commodification. She also sees the painting as a powerful example of symbolic reversal, as the artist turned the Freudian symbols of phallus and void into an emblematic yet unstable portrait of Stieglitz himself. O'Keeffe thus successfully appropriated masculine typological imagery in order to gain a sense of authority and "establish her own identity, which Stieglitz's photographs too coded as both masculine and feminine" (178). In so doing, O'Keeffe was able to construct a highly ambivalent image of Stieglitz that empowered her professionally.

In the final section of the study, Fryd offers a telling account of the ways in which Jo Hopper and Georgia O'Keeffe consolidated their husbands' posthumous reputations through the strategic donation of their archives and artworks to prominent institutions, thereby ensuring their husbands' legacies while asserting final control over their identities. This is an appropriate conclusion to a book that is dedicated to reconstructing the ambivalent patterns that underpinned both Hopper and O'Keeffe's pictorial and marital dynamics. In producing such a thematically oriented study, Fryd has expanded our understanding of these mutually inflecting domains within the artistic and private lives of two of the most compelling figures in twentieth-century American art.

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