**Painting:** The Nighthawks

**Artist:** Edward Hopper (1882-1967)

**Year Painted:** 1942

**Medium:** oil on canvas

**Background Information on the artist:**

Edward Hopper was born in Nyack, New York in 1882. His father was a general store owner and constantly supplied the young boy with paper and colored pencils. He spent most of his childhood reading, sailing and drawing. The young Hopper was a loner and remained one throughout his life. One of the things that singled him out the most was his height. By the age of twelve, he was 6 feet tall. By the time he was full grown, he stood a whopping 6 feet, 5 inches!

When Hopper was 18, he attended the New York School of Art. After five years there, he began working as an illustrator for an advertising agency, however he longed for a more creative outlet. In 1906, with his parents help, he moved to Paris. He did not share the Bohemian lifestyle of other artists, but lived in a Baptist mission. He would sketch as he explored the city, and was fascinated by the people and architecture he found there. “I do not believe there is another city on Earth as beautiful as Paris.” He is quoted as saying.

After a year of living abroad, he returned to New York. He struggled for years to sell his artwork, but in 1924, he sold 16 paintings in a single show! Edward Hopper had arrived! That year he also married the love of his life, fellow art student Josephine (Jo) Nivison. She is featured in many of his paintings.

Edward and Jo led a very simple life. They bought a house in Cape Cod, Massachusetts and would summer there. They spent the rest of their time in their apartment on Washington Square in Manhattan. They also owned a car and would drive all over the United States.

When the stock market crashed in 1929, Edward was thriving as an artist. In 1933, he was so famous that the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) ran a retrospective of his life’s works. During a time in American history that so many people were struggling, he was flourishing.

Hopper’s later years brought more achievements: prizes, awards and a major retrospective. At age 83, he painted his final painting “Two Comedians” in which he depicts himself and his wife as two performers bowing before an audience. It is his farewell to the world. He died less than two years later in 1967, with Jo following him a year later.

The best place to see works by Hopper is the Whitney Museum in Manhattan. Jo Hopper bequeathed all her husband’s works to the Whitney after he passed.
THE STYLE OF REALISM:

Edward Hopper is considered one of the leading American Realist painters. The style is defined by drawing and painting in a realistic manner. There are no melting clocks, no Picasso-style cubist renderings, no impressionist starry nights. In art terms it refers to a 19th century French movement that rejected idealized style and subject matter in favor of everyday themes shown just as they are. Hopper painted unglamorous scenes of modern life and treated them in an honest and personal way.

ABOUT THE PAINTING:

“Nighthawks” is Hopper’s most famous painting. The word “nighthawks” is more similar nowadays to the word “nightowls.” The painting combines some of Hopper’s favorite themes: solitary people, the loneliness of city life and the menace of nightfall. In Hopper’s own words, “Nighthawks was suggested by a restaurant on Greenwich Avenue where two streets meet. I simplified the scene a great deal and made the restaurant bigger. Unconsciously, I was painting the loneliness of a large city.”

There is the usual sense of estrangement that we feel when viewing Hopper’s works. The couple at the counter has little to say to each other. They look straight ahead, lost in their own private world. The figures themselves seem seedy and sinister. The men sit with their hats pulled low over their ears. The woman appears tough and disinterested. The figures seem held in dramatic tension. The scene looks almost gangster-like, evoking a sense of film noir. One would not be surprised if the man across the counter pulled out a gun and shot someone.

The eerie glare from the obscured neon light casts an artificial glow over the scene. There is no warmth in it. It is stark and institutional. Hopper uses light to concentrate our attention on the essentials, eliminating extraneous detail, casting the unimportant into the shadows. The darkness and light serve to communicate the emotional tone of the entire piece. The restaurant seems to be rather ghostly.

The viewer is an outsider to the scene in the diner. We are not invited into the space, but rather view it from afar. It is like we are a nighthawk, wandering the streets of New York, and happen upon this depressing scene ourselves.

Hopper often used long, horizontal lines. The use of these lines suggests that a whole world exists out of view, beyond the edges of the canvas. (You might want to see how many horizontal lines the kids can point out). These horizontal lines emphasize the insignificance of the people inside. The buildings, street and sidewalk dwarf the figures. Hopper wants us to know that people are small and inconsequential.

The viewer looks into the all-night diner as one would look at an aquarium – through a wall of glass. The diner is encased in windows. There is no question left as to the emptiness inside. Imagine if there were walls and a door through which we could see the couple inside with the clerk. There would be the possibility of something more, but the way Hooper painted the restaurant leaves no question that the place is quiet and empty.
Outside the diner, there is literally nothing on the sidewalk or street; no people or vehicles, no mailboxes, parking meters, cars, fire hydrants, not even a scrap of trash. In the shop window across the way, there is nothing of interest, no name in the shop window, no manikins or items for sale. Everything outside the diner is dark and empty.

The only lettering we see is the sign above the diner advertising Phillies cigars. Hopper was one of the first artists to include lettering in his work and considered advertising signs and billboards worth painting. The inclusion of the mundane is a prominent symbol of Realism. “Nighthawks” is one of the most important works in American Realism.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE KIDS:**

- **What time of day is it, and how do we know?** *It is night because of the darkness. The only light is the artificial glow from the diner.*

- **What kind of sounds do you expect to hear?** *Not much, the clinking of coffee mugs or the sounds of washing dishes from the counter boy. It’s a very quiet painting.*

- **Where is the focal point of the painting?** *It’s where the man, woman and counter boy are situated. They are in front of the bright wall. We can see their faces and they are turned toward each other.*

- **What colors do you see?** *Muted, dark tones of blacks, blues, dark reds, browns, industrial yellows and greens.*

- **What mood does the painting create? How does it make you feel?**

- **Would you like to be in this painting, sitting at the counter? Why or why not?**

- **Why did Hopper paint the people so small?** *This isn’t a photograph. He could’ve painted them much larger. Why didn’t he? Because having the people small, creates more of a sense of isolation and disconnect from the viewer. This is not an intimate landscape. The viewer doesn’t feel like a welcome part of the scene, but rather more of an interloper, observing everything from outside.*

- **How could you change the painting so that it wouldn’t be so lonely?** *What could you add to the color or composition?*