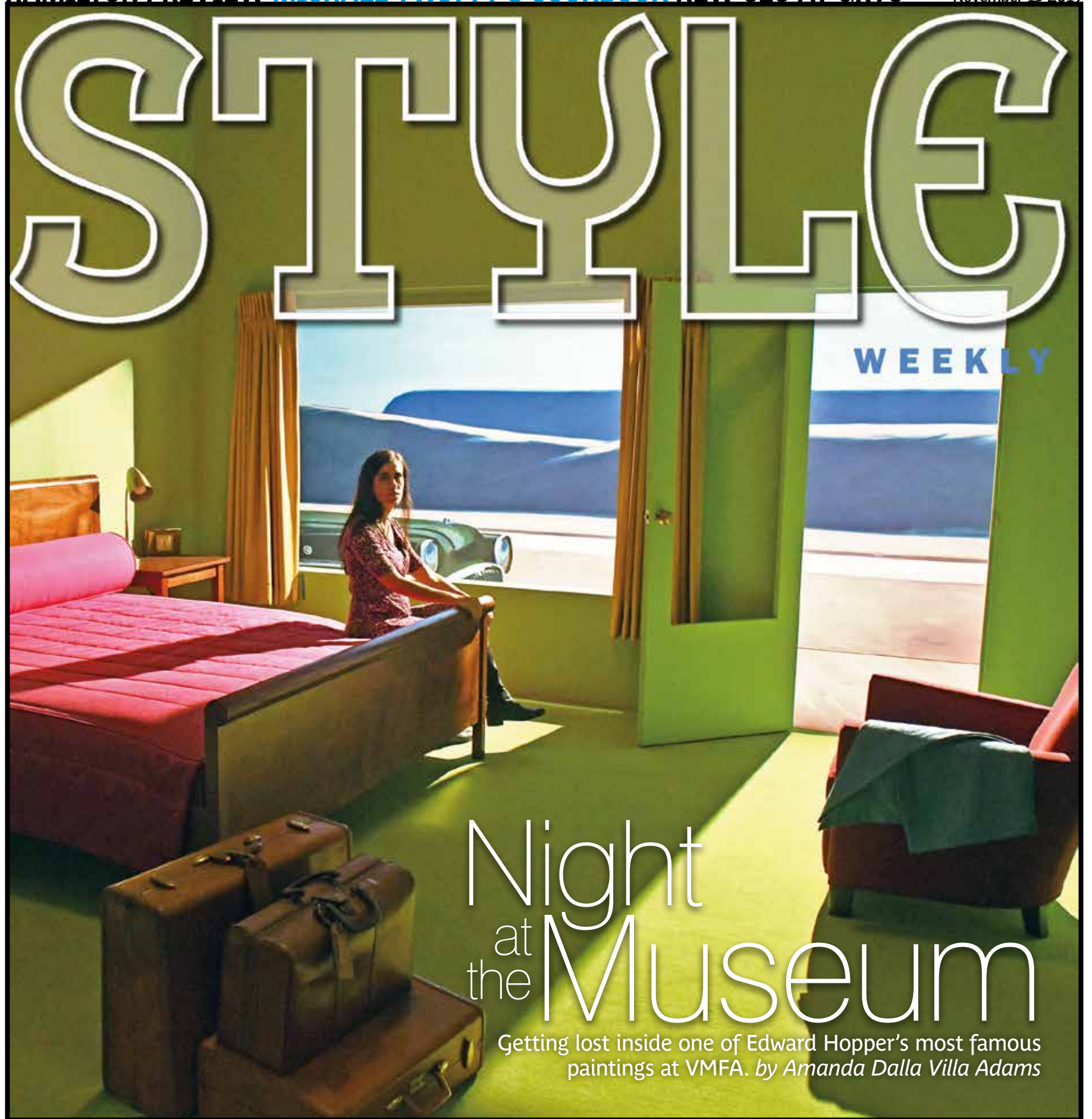


# STYLE

WEEKLY



## Night at the Museum

Getting lost inside one of Edward Hopper's most famous paintings at VMFA. *by Amanda Dalla Villa Adams*

# NIGHT AT THE

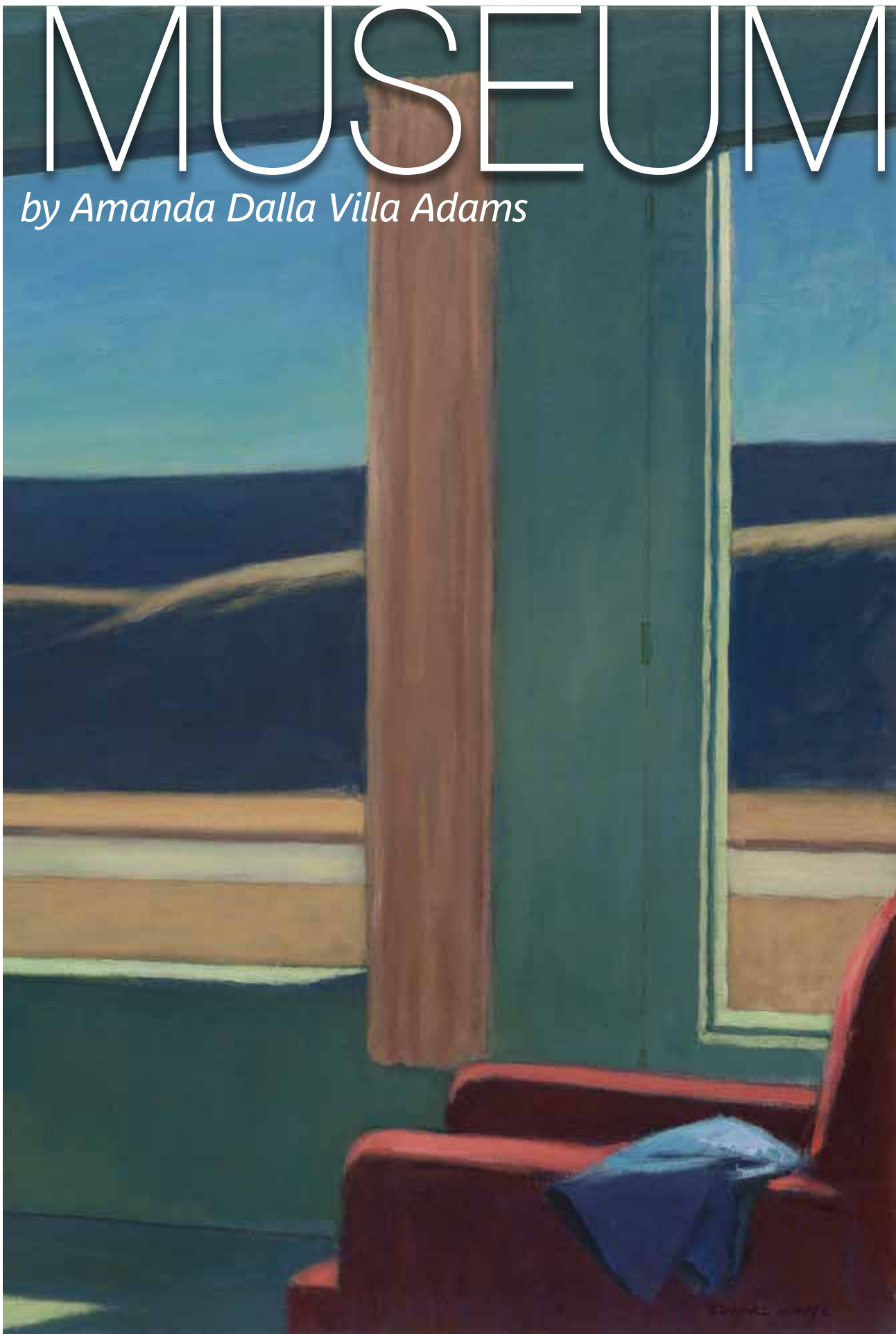
A writer recounts her overnight stay at VMFA's "Hopper Hotel Experience."





# MUSEUM

by Amanda Dalla Villa Adams



VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

With three days to go, I was beginning to second-guess my decision to spend the night alone at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

In October, the museum had announced the “Hopper Hotel Experience”— an overnight stay in a three-dimensional version of Edward Hopper’s “Western Motel” (1957) — unusual immersive programming added to its current exhibition, “Edward Hopper and the American Hotel,” which runs through Feb. 23.

Hearing this, I immediately contacted organizers.

Not only was I a fan of Hopper’s work, but spending the night in an art museum has been on my

**Edward Hopper’s painting “Western Motel” (1957) shows a lone woman, modeled on the artist’s wife, Josephine Hopper, sitting by an open window.**

bucket list since 2008, when New York magazine’s senior art critic, Jerry Saltz, wrote about his overnighter in the Guggenheim Museum. After his stay, Saltz saw the museum in a fresh way that made him fall in love with a place that had become all too familiar to him.

Having grown up going to the VMFA, interning there in graduate school and visiting countless other times, I was curious to see if a sleepover at the museum could prompt a similar, renewed affection.

But as the date grew closer, I started reconsidering. Maybe it had to do with the fact that whenever I shared my plans with others, I usually encountered strange looks or the offhanded “only you, Amanda.” Even my editor remarked that I was brave.

After confirming with organizers that it would be just me in a windowless room on the lower level of the museum for an entire night, my feet officially got cold.

Cue the person who has bailed me out of many harebrained art schemes in the past. My husband, Derrick, thankfully, came to my rescue ... again.

We secured a babysitter, tucked in the kids and headed to our night at the museum.

Edward Hopper is one of those painters whose work most of us know.

Many people recognize his 20th-century paintings, which scholars describe as American realism, partly because they have been parodied in pop culture: Alfred Hitchcock's Bates Motel in "Psycho" was a riff on Hopper's "House by the Railroad" (1925) while a cartoon version of "Nighthawks" (1942) has appeared on "The Simpsons."

Hopper studied with the realist painter Robert Henri, the founder of the Ashcan School, but was widely influenced by the French impressionist artists, especially Claude Monet, and their exploration of the effects of light.

His interest in hotels and the hospitality industry began while he was working in the 1920s as an illustrator for hospitality trade magazines, including *Tavern Topics* and *Hotel Management*. During the early 20th century, the hotel industry arose alongside the emergence of the middle class, automobile industry and leisure time. Hopper experienced all this firsthand.

The exhibition offers 60 works, ranging from paintings and drawings to illustrations and etchings by Hopper, alongside 35 works by other American artists that explore themes related to the hospitality and travel industry as well as Hopper's influence.

Leo G. Mazow, the Louise B. and J. Harwood Cochrane curator and head of the department of American art, organized the exhibition, which he first pitched during his job interview in 2015. Mazow



VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

had been working since 2013 on a book about Hopper's hotel and transportation imagery. Influenced by a visit to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, he also suggested the hotel room re-creation during his interview.

As Mazow explains: "Viewers exit through the actual Lorraine Motel, where

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was staying when he was assassinated in 1968. You walk through the suite or rooms ... a sort of hallway ... with Dr. King's bed and working materials more or less intact."

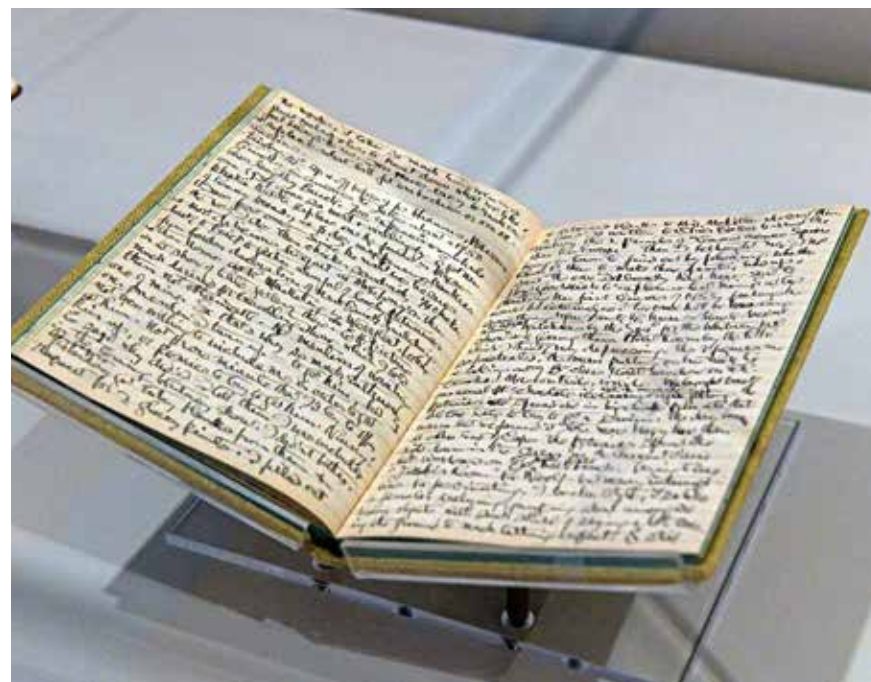
He says the idea opened his eyes to all kinds of possibilities, "ways to understand historical events and cultural phe-

**Edward Hopper visited Richmond in 1953 to serve as a juror for a VMFA exhibition. Here he discusses his famous painting "Early Sunday Morning" with local artist Belle Worsham. Hopper also served as chairman of the jury for the museum's first biennial exhibition in 1938.**



VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

"Room in New York" (1932) was inspired by the lighted interiors in Washington Square, near where Hopper lived.



SCOTT ELMQUIST

An image of the travel journals kept by Hopper's wife, Jo.





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**Amanda Dalla Villa Adams looks at "Room in New York" with Sarah Powers, a curatorial research specialist.**

nomena, pushing the limits of what a museum is and can be."

He clearly hit upon an idea that was intriguing to visitors.

The \$150 "Hopper Hotel Experience" at the museum sold out in an hour and the remaining overnight stays, which included a variety of add-ons costing as much as \$500, were purchased within a week.

**W**e arrived to the museum at 6:30 p.m. on a Thursday and were greeted by the deputy director of communications, Jan Hatchette, who was excited to show us the overnight lodging.

But first we made a beeline to Hopper's famous "Western Motel" (1957) painting. You know the one: the dignified image of a woman sitting on a hotel bed by an open window that reveals a shadowy landscape. The painting offers a stark sense of anticipation.

In this exhibit, a glass window to the left of the painting looks into the re-created room of the same image — minus the central blond woman who was originally modeled after the artist's wife, Josephine "Jo" Hopper.

Although I knew what to expect, the visual slippage from a two-dimensional painting into a three-dimensional space was disorienting. The raking, cinematic lighting perfectly mimicked the painting, which clinched the entire effect. For Hopper, varying light sources — raking light, artificial light, shadows, sunlight — were tools he manipulated to set a mood and provide subject matter. Often times his background images become geomet-

ric shapes.

Until the museum closed, we could only peek into the space.

Next was a private tour with curato-

rial research specialist Sarah Powers. She is the person who hunted down much of the visual culture on display: vintage postcards, Tavern Topics and Hotel Managements illustrated by Hopper, as well as the artist's correspondence and his wife's personal diaries. Jo kept over 60 diaries chronicling their road trips across America and Mexico, sometimes writing her descriptive prose as Hopper drove, preserving an accurate daily log of their accommodations, experiences and Hopper's subjects. The attention to detail in the exhibit humanizes the Hoppers, who met in 1923 and married a year later.

I must admit that I am especially fond of Hopper's architectural paintings, such as "House at Dusk" (1935), which the museum acquired in 1953, or the nearly humanized "Room for Tourists" (1945). Both possess a warmth that belies the fact that they're just buildings.

I find the figures, especially "People in the Sun" (1960) to be less appealing but there are exceptions, as evidenced by the powerful "Room in New York" (1932), an incongruent series of juxtapositions: The complementary color palette sets the room in tension while the man and woman — presumably a couple — sit dis-

engaged from one another.

Yet as I looked at more of Hopper's paintings, they left me uncomfortably aware that the characters are almost always white and middle or upper class. I knew this beforehand, but viewing so many of the works in a large exhibition made it doubly noticeable.

"What kind of speaks loudest in Hopper sometimes are the absences—what's not in the painting," Power says. "In exhibitions of hotels, we see that as well. We see white figures. ... We don't see African-American figures. They're very few."

But other works in the show offered balance: Local artist Susan Worsham's "Marine, Hotel Near Airport, Richmond, Virginia" (2009), a photograph of an African-American Marine, hangs opposite Hopper's "Hotel Room" (1931), his first and largest hotel painting, of a woman seated on a bed. The pairing of a lone black man and a lone white woman, both in cinematic depictions of hotels, is a perfect complement: Hopper's woman is downcast and partially clothed while Worsham's fully dressed serviceman looks defiantly outward. There is an uneasiness in both that presents them as vulnerable characters.



**"House at Dusk" (1935) was purchased by the museum for \$4,000 in 1953.**

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**"Hotel Room" (1931) is often associated with solitude.**

Derrick Adams' "Beacon 3" (2018) is one of the few sculptures and the only piece that emits light. Based on the Negro Motorist Green Book, used by African-Americans to find safe lodging during segregation, Adams' white, glowing building stands out as a beacon of hope next to a string of colorful paintings by Stuart

Davis, Ed Ruscha and other white men.

Even though the tour lasted over an hour, we gossiped over the art at the end because we were late for dinner upstairs. I longed to spend more time looking at the Joseph Cornell pieces, the David Hockney photograph and the room full of lovely watercolor paintings that Hopper made in Mexico.



**"Study for Hotel Lobby" (1942) is one of 10 preliminary sketches 10 for the 1942 oil painting "Hotel Lobby."**

After a late dinner of crabcakes at Amuse, we checked in to the "Hopper Hotel Experience" at around 9:30 p.m. The museum was empty of guests but there still were a few security guards milling around. Glenn Ligon's neon sculpture "A Small Band" (2015) was still blinking its "blues, blood, bruise" words onto Arthur Ashe Boulevard. The museum was fully lit giving the impression that visitors had simply not yet arrived.

For someone who prefers to see art without crowds, it was inviting.

Walking into the space felt like entering the back stage of a temporary movie set. The hotel is an approximately 800-square-foot temporary walled-off section of the special exhibition galleries. However, the illusion of the room from the viewpoint of the exhibit was instantly destroyed as the tricks became apparent: a plywood backdrop — painted by local muralist Emily Herr — and big, blinding cinematic lights.

This feeling was underscored by a private lounge area, composed of a table and four chairs under a low-hanging light and metal lockers with vintage games like Yahtzee, Life magazines, blankets,

snacks, towels, a mini fridge and complimentary robes. Actually it resembled a break room rather than lounge.

Guests are restricted to the hotel space and the bathroom down the hall. There's no wandering around the museum or the exhibit — sadly, we didn't get to run like Ben Stiller through the Egyptian galleries to see if the mummies came to life, or wander the halls alone as if we were the only people left alive on Earth.

We did have our own guard, R.J., who was parked all night outside the door. An artist who brought his art supplies to work overnight, he was hospitable and friendly, waving or asking if we were comfortable whenever we walked by his desk on our way to the bathroom.

Before leaving around 9:45 p.m., *Style* photographer Scott Elmquist snapped a few photographs of the space and exhibition without visitors. It was his idea for me to pose in the hotel room. Initially I hesitated, thinking it presumptuous to assume the role originally played by Hopper's wife. I wondered if I was taking this whole immersive experience too far by recasting myself into a glorified, fine-art selfie — was I becoming a promotional tool?

But, after a little convincing from Scott, I played along. You can judge the results.

Suddenly at 10 p.m. the stage lights blinked off, which we welcomed because they radiated heat and would've made sleep impossible. We shut the mustard-yellow blinds that reminded guests, "Galleries under 24-hour surveillance. Close shades for privacy." Ironically, the win-



**"Hotel by a Railroad" (1952).**





SCOTT ELMQUIST

A black-and-white image of Edward Hopper greets visitors near the entrance to the exhibit, which runs through Feb. 23.

dows were curtained but the front door didn't have a shade or glass. We both felt like the blinds and instructions were putting us at ease while the surveillance cameras continued to track our movements through the windowless door.

The bathroom down the hall is one I have used countless times when visiting the museum. But this time, I was cloaked in a museum robe and disposable slippers that resemble ones given out on trans-Atlantic flights. I stood there brushing my teeth and glanced at my reflection in the bathroom mirror when I noticed the long line of empty stalls with doors slightly ajar behind me. This was the only time I was truly creeped out.

By 10:30 p.m. my husband was asleep and I set to work writing.

Unsurprisingly, the museum is a quiet space at night: the faint hum of the fridge, the elevator ding from the overnight guards roaming the building, but mostly

silence pierced by the clacking of my keyboard. The silence was nice, but I have grown accustomed to working under pressure: noisy children, a cramped workspace and many interruptions. What I longed for was a unique writing experience.

In the back of my mind, I had imagined writing in the galleries and wandering uninterrupted staring closely at works of art, moving back and forth, focusing and returning for deep looking. I had hoped with the luxury of an overnight stay, I might finally have time for a one-on-one, intimate experience with Hopper's works. This was wishful thinking.

I called it quits at midnight and groped around in the pitch-black dark for the bed while trying to avoid the prop suitcases. Sometime during the night, the lights in the galleries had been cut off leaving the room as dark as a cave.

At 4:37 a.m. my phone began blaring — a family member didn't realize she was calling instead of messaging. Of course, now I needed to use the restroom.

A shower wasn't included, so my husband left at 5 a.m. to get ready for work.

I went back and laid down on the bed alone. Really, I hadn't spent much time alone inside the actual bedroom. Staring at the blank green walls that extended around the entire perimeter to the door frame, and the white elevated ceiling, I felt like artist Cindy Sherman, playing out one of her "Untitled Film Stills" (1977-1980), which hung right outside the curtained window. A clock sat on the bedside table but it didn't work, instead frozen.

Was it 12:35? I can't recall. In the painting, Hopper doesn't include a clock face. For me, the broken clock is a reminder that inside the green room, time stands still.

I found myself thinking back on the whole overnight experience. Except for the few pieces viewable from our window for a short while, we were cut off from the artwork. Instead, we viewed only facsimiles: Herr's mural that re-created Hopper's background, a re-created room with us as the characters, the exhibition catalog in the lounge with its reproduced images.

As more museums move to immersive experiences to attract guests, will the art itself find a larger role to play somehow?

Around 6 a.m. I change clothes, pack up my things to greet the guard, who escorts me upstairs. An officer meets us at the front door to unlock it.

"Goodnight," I say to him, before correcting myself, "I mean good morning."

He shrugs and says flatly, "It's all the same." **S**

*"Edward Hopper and the American Hotel" is on view through Feb. 23. For information, see [vmfa.museum](http://vmfa.museum).*



SCOTT ELMQUIST

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A view through the window of writer Amanda Dalla Villa Adams in her overnight accommodations at VMFA.