

Jo Hopper watercolors shed light

By Kaimi Lum
BANNER CORRESPONDENT

Among the 22 works in the exhibition, "Reminiscence: Watercolor Paintings by Josephine Nivison Hopper," opening Sunday at the Truro Historical Society, is a lively portrait of an apple tree. The story of the tree goes something like this:

In the late 1800s, when a French ship wrecked on the Truro shore, a package of seedlings was salvaged from the splintered hull by John Lewis, a farmer. Lewis used the seedlings to plant an orchard of apple trees, which retained a permanent air of mystery because no one could properly identify them — except to say that they had come from France and produced a rather bitter fruit.

As recounted by Dan Sanders, a Truro resident whose home lies on the old Lewis property and whose family was friendly with Josephine and her more famous husband, the celebrated American artist Edward Hopper, the tale takes an interesting turn when it intersects with the Hoppers' daily lives. The twist is simple enough: Jo made pies from the French apples.

But add the historic bit about how Edward Hopper fell in love with Josephine Nivison over French poetry, and you have a wealth of symbolism on your hands. Accord-

ing to Elizabeth Thompson Colleary, curator, that is what the exhibition is all about. The word reminiscence was chosen, she says, "because it refers to 'memories awakened, experiences recalled, and impressions revived.'" Later in her life, according to Colleary, Jo looked back on her watercolor paintings as "sacred relics of a 'grace de coeur' (grace of heart)," evidence of a time when she could find the "inner gladness" she needed to paint.

Although the role Jo Hopper played throughout most of her conjugal life was as satellite to her husband's brighter shining star, she had, in fact, established herself as an artist in New York long before her marriage. As early as 1914 she was showing her work in group exhibitions with prominent artists. In 1922, her watercolor paintings were part of an exhibition that included works by Pablo Picasso. And in 1923, a year before her marriage to Edward Hopper, her work was shown alongside her future husband's in a watercolor exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.

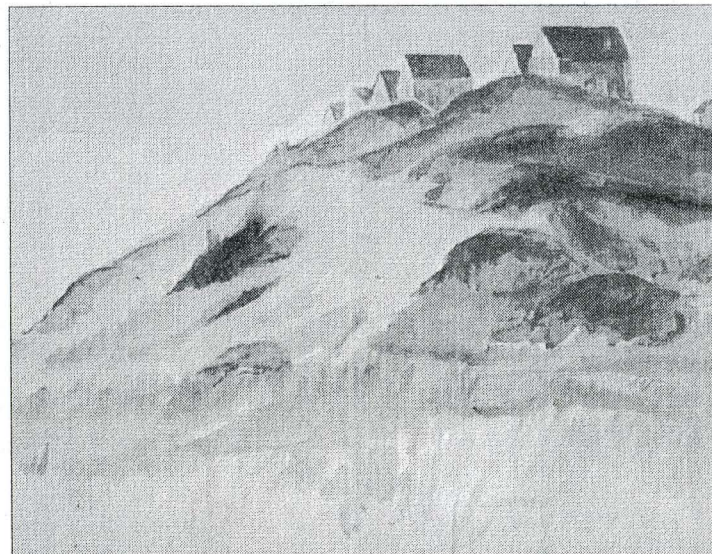
Matrimony, however, while providing the backdrop for Hopper's most successful years, produced bitter fruit for Jo. A 1995 biography of Edward Hopper by Gail Levin portrays the relationship as a psychologically abusive one, to which Jo, in her diary entries, attributed the

stifling of her creative aspirations. At one point, she wrote, "For the female of the species, it's a fatal thing for an artist to marry, her consciousness is too much disturbed. She can no longer live sufficiently within herself to produce." Hopper allegedly told his wife, "Nobody likes your painting," and complained that she didn't spend enough time in the kitchen.

Since her death in 1968, Jo's work was thought to have been dispersed or lost. But a recent visit paid by Colleary, an art historian and Hopper scholar, to the Florida home of the Rev. Arthayer Sanborn, a family friend of the Hoppers, unearthed 30 of her watercolors. Now Colleary hopes the exhibition of 22 of those paintings will help prove Jo's contribution as an artist in her own right.

"The bottom line is that they're good paintings," says Colleary. Although Jo displayed minimal skill as an oil painter, Colleary points out, "She was an exceptionally good watercolor painter. She was clearly a competent technician, and she showed considerable skill as a colorist."

According to Colleary, Jo's palette — what Colleary calls "the whole key to her personality" — distinguishes her from her husband's work. In Jo's watercolor of roofs in Gloucester, a scene which Edward Hopper also painted, she used arbitrary rather than realistic colors, painting with lilac, salmon and turquoise where her husband applied earthier tones. "His palette is dour," Colleary says. "His colors look dark and dreary next to hers." Jo's palette "gives her work an expressive quality — expressive in a different way."



"Cornhill," watercolor by Josephine Hopper.

Despite the inevitable comparisons drawn between Jo and her husband, Colleary hopes the exhibition will show that Jo's work could stand on its own, "irrespective of who she was married to." Above all, Colleary wants to isolate the objects from preconceptions about Jo Hopper — particularly the notion of Jo as an irretrievably embittered housewife suffering in the shadow of her spouse.

"My main point is that the paintings are gleeful. There's a real joyfulness in them. Someone so chron-

ically bitter and despondent could not have produced paintings like that," she says.

And if the paintings' artistic value is questioned, at least their historical significance remains certain. A "sacred relic," they show the fixtures, props and moods of the Hoppers' life together: a woodstove that was central to their Washington Square studio, a basket of fruit, a self-portrait. Like the apple tree, they tell stories. Says Colleary, "They're a part of the history and culture of their lives."