

The Case for Regional Museums Sparking Social Impact:

Communities Touched by the Edward Hopper & Cape Ann Exhibition

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At the entrance to the Cape Ann Museum in Gloucester, Massachusetts, seagulls squawked overhead and a brisk gale caught the banner announcing the opening of the exhibition, *Edward Hopper & Cape Ann: Illuminating an American Landscape*, on July 22nd, 2023 as reported in [The Boston Globe](#). Just after the show closed in October of 2023, Oliver Barker, Director of the Cape Ann Museum, known as “CAM,” described several of the ways that the exhibition delivered outsized results beyond what are generally considered key performance indicators for art museums.

As institutions devoted to social enterprise, art museums commonly use metrics that can be easily enumerated. *Edward Hopper & Cape Ann: Illuminating an American Landscape* achieved stellar numeric metrics. The show attracted the highest attendance ever recorded (36,538 visitors) and net revenues (\$1.96MM through the show’s close on October 16, 2023) ever achieved since the museum was founded in 1875. While this approach validates the economic impact of the institution, it fails to address sufficiently critical aspects of social impact that are more qualitative. And, even tracking basic metrics associated with exhibition costs against net exhibition revenue is challenging at many museums because these figures are often not available or transparent to internal staff or board members.

Regional art museums like Cape Ann have the capacity to build stronger and wider communities through arts engagement, as well as to use their institutional platforms, often

considered one of the most trusted public resources, for forging stronger ties with marginalized communities, and in the process build a sense of civic pride. In so doing, they are fulfilling the basic human rights for all, as adopted by the Nations General Assembly in Paris on December 10th, 1948, “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.” [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), (Article 27, Section 1.)

At the heart of the Cape Ann, a peninsula jutting into the Atlantic Ocean about an hour’s drive north of Boston, [Gloucester](#) is the nation’s oldest, active fishing port. The area’s four towns--Gloucester, Rockport, Essex, and Manchester-by-the-Sea--offer spectacular scenery captured by distinctive light, created millions of years ago by retreating glaciers that left flecks of mica in the granite forming the seabed. Italian and Portuguese immigrants found work supporting Gloucester’s fishing and packing industries, and established vibrant communities during the early twentieth-century when laws against foreign immigration and fear of Italian Americans as anarchists were at their peak. Artists also flocked to Cape Ann, drawn to its beauty and authenticity, along with its accessibility by railroad, the local trolley system for getting around, and affordable lodgings. Edward Hopper made his first visit to Cape Ann in 1912 at the invitation of artist, contemporary, and later Cape Ann resident, Leon Kroll. By the time Hopper returned in 1923, after spending six summers on the coast of Maine, John Sloan quipped that there were so many artists in Gloucester, “the cows themselves were dying from eating paint rags.” [[Davis, Edward Hopper & Cape Ann, Rizzoli/Electa, 2023](#), p. 19.]

[The Cape Ann Museum](#), founded in 1875 as the Cape Ann Literary and Scientific Association, houses important archives and artifacts from the region’s seafaring, cultural, and

artistic history, including paintings by Fitz Henry Lane, Winslow Homer, Virginia Lee Burton and the circle of Folly Cove Designers she established, as well as many other notable American artists who lived and worked on Cape Ann, often arriving as summer residents. The Museum's mission, as Barker noted at the outset of our conversation, "is to illuminate the stories of this singularly unique place, and the role that it has played and continues to play in shaping both the course of American art and American art history." (Oliver Barker, Interview Transcript, November 9, 2023, line 82.)

As for any multi-year project of this scale, building a strong coalition to fund the exhibition and related programming was Barker's first priority. Barker explained that he already reached out to the Gloucester 400+ Committee, as well as the tourist organization, [Discover Gloucester](#), to share his broad vision for celebrating earlier Indigenous contributions to Cape Ann settlement, as well as Edward Hopper's 1923 summer at CAM during the 2023 season. As Barker hails from Australia, where Indigenous art is regularly part of museum programming, his deep appreciation for Indigenous art may come naturally. During our interview, he observed, "The original vision for this [Hopper] show was that 2023 had been the 400+ anniversary for Gloucester, and whilst that's a wonderful anniversary to be acknowledging, I was aware that there was a much longer history here of indigenous engagement on Cape Ann, and I wanted the Museum to be part of those 400+ celebrations, but do something really distinct in our own right." (Barker, Interview, November 9, 2023.) Appearing in 2023, Barker ensured that Hopper coincided with artistic contributions by Indigenous communities that had been previously excluded from the milestone celebrations honoring Gloucester's history. Since then, the Museum has formalized the [Cape Ann Museum Native Initiative](#). Recent and ongoing projects in

collaborations include: Native Waters: Native Lands; Contemporary Art Wetu; and Teaching the Wampanoag Experience, reflecting a sustained commitment to the Native American community.

During COVID, the Cape Ann Museum also launched a new, four-acre Cape Ann Museum campus, the [William Ellery & Janet James Center at the Cape Ann Museum Green](#), with a new collections facility and 2,000 square-foot space Barker calls the “new possibilities gallery.” (Barker, Interview Transcript, November 9, 2023.) Central to the 400+ Celebrations, local Indigenous communities erected a [Wetu](#) at the Cape Ann Museum Green. In our interview, Barker described the collaboration with local Wampanoag curatorial team, [SmokeSygnals](#), to introduce Indigenous stories and voices into the Museum. That work, begun as part of the 400+ celebrations, have “brought to life” the collections by taking some of the fishing weights [and] putting the nets that would have been so important to their use back on those objects.” Now, as Barker notes, in addition to more recent fishing narratives, “We also have an example of how indigenous peoples for 12,000 years prior would have actually fished here themselves as well.” (Barker, Interview Transcript, November 9, 2023.)

Given Article 27 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “freely to participate in the cultural life of the community,” and “to enjoy the arts,” social impact for art museums can be measured by the important role of art to inspire younger generations in the community to create art. For the *Edward Hopper & Cape Ann* exhibition this dimension of social impact took shape in various formats that have come to light so far, knowing that artistic formation and early impact often plays out over decades. Local schoolchildren learned about Edward and Josephine N. Hopper’s visits to Cape Ann through a project called [“A View from My](#)

[Window](#),” led by CAM’s Head of Education and Community Engagement, Miranda Aisling. Inspired by the Hoppers’ scenes, over 625 eighth grade students were encouraged to gaze through their own windows, producing images of their hometown on plexiglass that glowed from the walls of the Museum’s galleries through back lighting. The resulting exhibition was visited by 34 school groups for a total of 574 student interactions. (Miranda Aisling, Email with author, January 30, 2024). Hearing, as Barker noted, “anecdotally from the teachers, but also from the students,” he said “What tremendous sense of pride! [Knowing] that their stories were just and relevant to us as an institution as those that within the celebrated summer appeared in the form of Josephine and Edward Hopper’s work.” Some of the works by those young artists appeared prominently in the background during Anthony Everett’s [Chronicle segment](#), filmed for television audiences at the Cape Ann Museum before the Hopper show opened. Barker concluded by reflecting that, “To me, when we think about social impact it’s about using art, and inviting the local community to express their own views about this place. And that was just a really, really meaningful [example].” (Barker, Interview Transcript, November 9, 2023.)

Art making is known to be effective for cultivating greater well-being among visitors to museums, as described by [Susan Magsamen and Ivy Ross, *Your Brain on Art. How the Arts Transform Us*](#), 2023, p. 28.) At CAM, this dimension of social impact was available to visitors who could try their hands making art inspired by the Hopper exhibition on site or off, under the direction and public outreach of CAM Education Manager, Cathy Kelley. In the CAM Studio during museum hours or at various special events, visitors of all ages could try art-making activities “designed to foster an understanding of the Hoppers’ work through discovery and

support them in making meaningful connections to the artworks through art marking.” (Email from Cathy Kelley to author, January 30, 2024). They could use cardboard to create sculptures inspired by the carved wooden brackets called “corbels” supporting many of the porticos over the doors of houses painted by Edward Hopper, or just color or watercolor a printed sheet reproducing the outlines of one of the Hopper buildings shown in the exhibition.

Encouraged by Barker, and supported by CAM staff, especially Miranda Aisling and Cathy Kelley, I developed a set of [FEELS Art Prompts](#) for works by the Edward and Josephine N. Hopper using the format I created, tested, and copyrighted as a 2022 fellow in Harvard’s Advanced Leadership Initiative. With Kelley’s collaboration, members of CAM’s Teen Art Council tested the Hopper FEELS Art Prompts during the fall of 2023. Their feedback noted they most enjoyed the opportunity to engage with the Hoppers’ art in ways that provided opportunities to express their own emotions and to share their feelings. The teens shared remarkably vivid descriptions of the paintings. For Edward Hopper’s oil, [Gloucester Harbor](#), (1912, Whitney Museum of American Art), one student wrote, “It reminds me of a spring sunrise with birds chirping and crickets hopping. It gives me a sense of nostalgia for spring/summers from when I was young.” About Edward Hopper’s watercolor, [The Mansard Roof](#), (1923, Brooklyn Museum of Art), another observed, “I can smell pollen and salt air. I can feel the sunlight on my skin, warm, but not too hot.” In response to Josephine Nivison Hopper’s watercolor of [Our Lady of Good Voyage](#), (1923, Whitney Museum of American Art), a student described feeling a sense of awe in front of a building, “Occasionally, yes, I have looked at an object and felt something supernatural come of it, usually when I need it most. Churches can also elicit a sense of awe from me, since the architecture is often intricate and beautiful. Sometimes, seeing what

humans can create gives me hope.” (Hopper FEELS Art Prompts Responses from CAM Teen Art Council Members, Given to Author by Kelley, October 13, 2023.)

As for economic impact, which has direct social impact in terms of providing work for the community, Gloucester businesses within walking distance along one of Cape Ann’s most charming Main Streets and down to the nearby waterfront reported a significant boost during the run of the Hopper exhibition. A smaller community like Gloucester is uniquely positioned to excavate these metrics of social impact that would be far harder to track in larger, more urban settings. In December 2023, Barker reached out to local merchants, who experienced substantial increases in foot traffic and sales as a result of the show. The Greater Cape Ann Chambers replied, “Our membership specifically Gloucester businesses, reported a significant improvement in visitation and sales which they perceived be directly connected to the exhibition.” The Gloucester 400+ organization observed that “Most people stopped by the G400+ Visitor Center saying they had been or were going to the exhibition.” A local shoe store, Mark Adrian, was very specific about the effect of the Hopper show, stating, “We were amazed at the increased traffic from the exhibit. We speak to every customer, and so we have a good anecdotal sense that many visitors came to Gloucester specifically because of the show. October is almost always slow for us, but the first two weeks of October we were still very busy. It dropped off almost immediately when the exhibit closed.” Local hotels and restaurants like the Beauport and Minglewood noted that patrons were there for the show. In Minglewood’s case that meant increased hours, “staying open for lunch longer this season,” as well as helping keep “season staff employed longer than the usual Labor Day cut off.” The local purveyors of olive oil and flowers noted many more sales, customers “impressed by the exhibit,” and those

that “came for the show and stayed to shop Main Street.” One of the local galleries, Jane Deering Gallery, wrote that the exhibition had dramatically expanded her email list, even if increased visitors hadn’t boosted sales. Deering, the owner of the gallery also offered the following insight: “A key aspect of the exhibit was its “manageability.” Exhibitions at larger museums can be—usually are—exhausting and difficult to explore in one visit. CAM’s Hopper exhibit was spot on in terms of how much to show and where to put the emphasis.” And for Julianne White, a first time owner of Source Bakery, noted that while “It’s hard to say just exactly how much the exhibit impacted our sales for the duration, because it is our first year in business, [I] know that the exhibit positively impacted our sales just by the sheer number of people who came in talking about the exhibit or with brochures in their hands.” And, perhaps as the newest business on the block she appropriately summed up her experience in Gloucester, “A rising tide lifts all boats—that was definitely true for us!” (Comments Provided by Excel Spreadsheet, Emailed by Oliver Barker to author, December 9, 2023.)

The impact of the Hopper exhibition continues to roll out, as Barker launches strategic planning for the Cape Ann Museum’s 150th year, highlighted CAM’s next large loan exhibitions in 2026 devoted to [Milton Avery, Adolph Gottlieb, and Mark Rothko](#). Beyond the Cape Ann Museum, new projects continue to expand upon the important role of Josephine Nivison Hopper in producing the successful career of Edward Hopper, as put forth in the exhibition and its accompanying publication. On January 2, 2024, PBS aired the first episode of the *American Masters* series. Titled [An American Love Story](#), the highly acclaimed British filmmaker, Phil Grabsky, brought the Hoppers’ Gloucester years to an international television audience. As

Barker is proud to say, the Cape Ann Museum is now known as a gem, but no longer a hidden one.

By sharing stories of their qualitative benefits for local, national, and international communities, regional museums like Cape Ann can produce impressive results, while also building deeper connections throughout their many communities, inspiring new art forms, and ultimately generating lasting social impact for greater good.