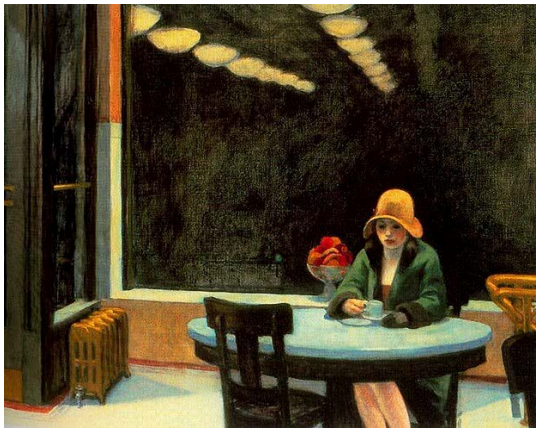
Dining Together, Dining Alone:
Individual Urban Identities Through Art and Photography of the NYC Foodscape

Some of the most iconic imagery of modern American urban life in the first half of the twentieth century are the paintings of American realism painter Edward Hopper. His most recognizable work, *Nighthawks* (1942), depicts four customers and a waiter inside a brightly lit New York City diner at night. Another well-known painting from earlier on in his career is *Automat* (1927), where a woman is sitting alone with a cup of coffee in an automat at night. While the urban settings of Hopper's paintings are central locations of human gatherings, like restaurants, movie theaters, and public transit cars, there is a strongly present overtone of loneliness and melancholy. The paintings provide a glimpse into contemporary life and hint at the social milieu, where "unconsciously, probably, [Hopper] was painting the loneliness of a large city" (Hopper). Especially in an era marked by the boom of urban culture in the 1920s, a sudden crisis during the Depression, and the revitalization in subsequent decades, this transitory nature of personal identity in a city draws attention to how urban spaces developed to accommodate these interactions between residents. Food settings are strong examples to illustrate features of social norms because of the intricate communal and hierarchical nature of dynamics embedded into the act of a meal.

Edward Hopper, *Nighthawks,* 1942.



Edward Hopper, *Automat,* 1927.
This image is in the public domain.

Food establishments underwent a significant transformation in the span of just a couple of decades. Berenice Abbott, a prolific photographer in the 20th century known for her focus on street life, architecture, and portraiture, documented the rapid transformation of New York City and its built landscape. Her black-and-white images of modernizing New York capture constantly changing sites like bridges, subways, and construction sites (Halpern 2023). Abbott described the significance of the medium of her work by remarking that "the camera alone can catch the swift surfaces of the cities today and speaks a language intelligible to all" (Abbott 1929). Her images of Lower Manhattan around Greenwich Village in the 1930s exemplify the diversity of the food market with an infusion of human sentiment and an up-and-close vantage point for the viewer. In two examples shown below, Abbott captures the storefronts of a Jewish meat store and an Italian immigrant-owned bakery. With their clearly specialized foods and unique store owner identities, shops like these add to the variety of food options available for the New York City consumer and also serve as gathering places for residents sharing similar culinary backgrounds.

Left: Berenice Abbott, *Chicken Market,* 1937.
Right: Berenice Abbott, *Bread Store. 259 Bleecker,* 1937.
Courtesy of The New York Public Library
These images are in the public domain.

Taken only a year apart but providing a stark contrast to the rustic streetscapes is Abbott's *Automat*, where a figure is standing in front of gleaming, almost clinical, rows of glass cabinets, each offering meals from which customers could choose.

Berenice Abbott, *Automat*, *977 Eighth Avenue*, 1936.
Courtesy of the New York Public Library
This image is in the public domain.

Unlike the personal atmosphere of small business storefronts, the automat offered a streamlined and impersonal dining experience that attempted to mirror the urban expectations of efficiency.

The automat could be seen as the predecessor of fast-food restaurants. Customers could insert nickels into a slot next to the cabinet of their choice and take the food behind the window. The cafeteria format was necessary for a new fast-paced lifestyle, especially for individuals who were working during the day. Workers without spouses could save time previously used on packing lunches. Automats touted their food as a competitive alternative to diners and street food vendors with claims that they were healthier while still being cheaper. By cutting out the customer-to-waiter interactions, customer-to-chef acknowledgments, and other formalities that come with a traditional restaurant, the primary goal was to eat for sustenance rather than have the restaurant experience itself be the major drawing point. This was a novel concept because customers could recount a "vivid recollection of the first time that [they] ever went into a restaurant by [themselves]," but it took off in popularity in New York (*Newsday*, April 11, 1991).

The absence of labor in automats was an illusion by design. Behind the "high-tech facade" of the glass cubicles, automats presented "a fantasy of mechanized food delivery" in which workers were pushed "beyond the margins and completely out of the frame" (Halpern 2023). The lack of direct human connection in the context of serving food that was prepared by another individual but disguised as a mechanized process was a shift in how individuals engaged with public spaces and each other. The preference for the monotonous and sterile environment carried over from other mass-production industries over the previous two decades, and this wave of urbanization ultimately reached the very human-centered industry of food. In exchange for the relief of not having to interact with waiters, customers were now more isolated from each other and the rest of the city.

Automats had almost an "obsession" with standardization and predictability (Bromell 2000). Every dish, down to the eggs, bacon, and beans, was prepared in the exact same manner

under the same recipe. Coffee was examined under high quality control standards and brewed several times a day to maximize freshness. The reassurance against the food contamination scares of the time contributed to the automat's popularity for providing fresh and healthy food. However, the trend towards uniformity as the most convenient way of fitting into a city challenged the uniqueness of individual identities. While automat menus offered a dazzling array of dishes, they were designed to cater to a more standardized palate without any customizations. The effects were felt in the broader New York community when small shops and family businesses, like the kosher chicken shop or the Italian bakery in Abbott's images, faded away as the food supply became more homogenous and food establishments became more centralized. In parallel, New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia was waging a "war on pushcarts," believing public food markets were a "menace to traffic, health, and sanitation" (*New York Times*, 1938). In one of the largest metropolises of the world of the era, one's lifestyle melded into the high-speed life around them.

Alongside the blur between individual and city-wide identities, the rapidly changing foodscape brought into question the distinction between the public and private spheres. Customers in an automat could sit wherever they chose, and it could so happen that a white-collar businessman and a blue-collar laborer could sit at the same table. The round-table style layout facilitated interactions between diners to create a space for socialization, whether they were voluntary or not. One diner recounts there were "no private tables. You shared… not only your space but your new dining partner's health problems, financial worries, and marital difficulties" (Bromell 2000). Within a community as large as New York, the sense of the private sphere inevitably changed. It was impossible to know everyone and while these fleeting moments of camaraderie were not long-standing connections, urban dwellers continued to seek

human connection. The paradox of city life was that amidst the constant interactions with other people and the formation of communities, there were more moments of solitude and emotional distance, similar to what Edward Hopper references in the detached atmosphere of his paintings.

Left: The interior of the Horn & Hardart Automat branch at 1165 Sixth Avenue, circa 1912. This image is in the public domain. Right: 115 East 14 St. Automat, 1935. © source unknown. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/. Courtesy of Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library

Especially through the Depression in the 1930s, class consciousness was a prevalent issue within public spaces. Despite the widening gap between the wealthy and the poor and food scarcity for the latter group, automats thrived during the Depression by offering a space that challenged norms regarding who could occupy a public dining establishment. The affordable price, discreet payment through machines, and the assortment of menus were designed to appeal to people of all economic classes. The anonymity of individuals in the city meant that no one knew them personally and created a sense of loneliness, but also came with the reassurance that nobody would judge them. Automats also took steps to create this sense of homogenized class anonymity. To establish a respectability that would reflect on their clientele, owners invested significant sums of money into upgrading the interior of their property. By “grac[ing] their

establishments with white-tiled floors, white marble tabletops, crystal chandeliers, and a five-piece orchestra" characteristic of the Art Deco style, they could "show the class and health-conscious public that they were unlike the traditional low-cost eating establishments" (Bromell 2000).

In a radical move for the time, the opening of these public dining spaces extended to women as well. The mechanized service systems and the high-end design of the interior convinced the public that automats were socially acceptable locations for women to frequent. Prior to this era, a woman being alone in the city at night like the subject in Hopper's *Automat* would have been unthinkable. As women entered the public sphere as shoppers and workers, food spaces evolved accordingly. Gender roles have been heavily entrenched in food, and traditionally women were held responsible for the purchase and preparation of meals at home. A 1921 advertisement for Campbell's soup in the *Ladies' Home Journal* proclaimed the advent of convenience food as a "modern way of 'making' soup," with the original quotation marks implying a shift from older norms (Parkin 2001). Other contemporary advertisements appealed to women who desired to be more modern and progressive while fulfilling the expectations of providing food as a display of their care towards their spouses and children. Automats adopted the slogan "Less work for mother" to brand themselves as family-friendly establishments, as yet another example of standardizing the dining experience in New York City.

Even though automats were established in other cities in the United States, they were only able to thrive in New York (*Newsday*, Sept. 12, 1988). Most automats were in Manhattan, and this can be attributed to the subway system infrastructure. The distribution of subway stops provided pedestrian traffic in dense business districts like Midtown, Garment District, and Financial District (*NYC, Manhattan Telephone Directory,* pg. 1485, 1955). Clusterings of meal

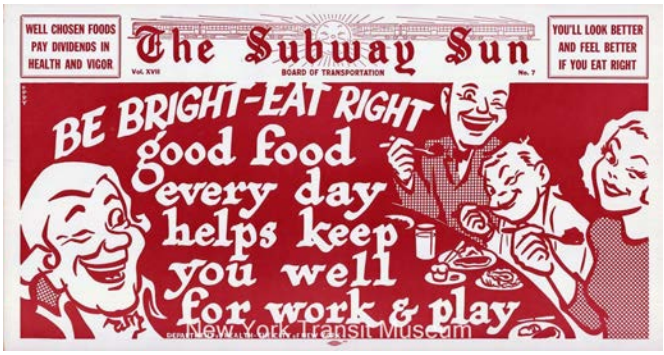
spots in these areas made them easily accessible to and from work, which drew in people commuting during the day.

A key feature within subways was the advertisements on platforms and in cars. These visual components contained ideas of food and uniformity that followed New Yorkers on their way to and from work. Advertisements at the time "tapped a very deep American insecurity and deadly pressure to conform by equating consumption of an article with social status and approval" (Norris 1990). By constantly being surrounded by imagery dictating proper food norms, riders on public transit systems would inevitably be influenced into making choices similar to others. Mass-produced pre-packaged food took off at the beginning of the 20th century, offering urban dwellers options that appealed to their desires for convenience and social acceptance.

Food advertising posters, New York Transit Museum Archives. Photos © New York Transit Museum; left advertisement © Kraft Heinz; right advertisement © Procter & Gamble. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.

Even though riders in a subway are strangers to each other, their coexistence in a public space necessitates that they acknowledge guidelines for proper behavior. *The Subway Sun*, a poster series fictionalized as newspaper headlines, was drawn by Amelia Opdyke "Oppy" Jones and featured throughout New York subway cars. Launched in the 1930s amidst the rapidly changing city, messages on these posters ranged from encouraging riders to explore attractions throughout the different New York boroughs, to the do's and don'ts as a subway passenger. The emphasis on the individual's role in keeping a city functioning smoothly became more relevant

as the city grew larger and order needed to be enforced. The playful cartoon format that delivered instructions that riders were expected to obey was not from a direct boss or superior but was still agreed upon by the public. These messages extended into the private life as well, as in the example below where adults and children alike were taught that food was essential to be a healthy and functional being for “work and play”.



The Subway Sun, Vol. XVII, No. 7: *Be Bright - Eat Right*, 1950

The first few decades of the twentieth century were marked by rapid changes in infrastructure and lifestyles that defined interactions in urban public spaces. Food establishments encapsulated human activities by allowing, or diminishing, individual identities. From street food stands to automats, food spaces of every variety were portrayed in visual media by artists to document this transition in New York. The growth of the city came with a blurring of the private and public spheres, bringing along emotions of loneliness and detachment.

Bibliography

Abbaspour, Mitra. "Berenice Abbott." *MoMA*, MoMA, 2014, www.moma.org/artists/41-berenice-abbott.

Bromell, Nicolas. "The Automat: Preparing the Way for Fast Food." *New York History*, vol. 81, no. 3, 2000, pp. 300–12. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23182270.

Digital Collections, New York Transit Museum, nytransitmuseum.catalogaccess.com/home.

Halpern, Rick. "New York Palimpsest: Berenice Abbott's Depression-Era Foodscape." *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2023, pp. 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2023.23.2.1.

Hopper, Edward. *Automat*. Oil on canvas, 1927.

Hopper, Edward. *Nighthawks.* Oil on canvas, 1942.

Humphrey, Espranza. "The Subway Sun: A Discussion with the Curator." *Poster House*, Poster House, 17 Apr. 2025, posterhouse.org/blog/the-subway-sun-a-discussion-with-the-curator/.

Murphy, Jessica. "Edward Hopper (1882–1967)." In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hopp/hd_hopp.htm (June 2007)

Norris, James D. *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865-1920.* Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1990.

Oehler, Sarah Kelly. "Nighthawks as a Symbol of Hope." *The Art Institute of Chicago*, Art Institute of Chicago, 24 Mar. 2020, www.artic.edu/articles/808/nighthawks-as-a-symbol-of-hope.

Parkin, Katherine. "Campbell's Soup and the Long Shelf Life of Traditional Gender Roles."

Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race, edited by Sherrie A. Inness, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, pp. 51–68. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16xwbbc.5.

Smith, Andrew F. *Savoring Gotham: A Food Lover's Companion to New York City*. Oxford University Press, 2016.