

As Life Moves Through Glass: The Window in Art History

In 1818, journalist Kurt Waller visited Caspar David Friedrich in Dresden. Upon entering the German painter's studio, he found "a slender man with a large, thin, and worn face, bushy blond eyebrows, and a thick reddish beard". He also found a pair of modest sepia paintings of the Elbe River, as seen through the studio's arched windows. The sibling paintings, *View from the Artist's Studio (Right-hand Window)* and *View from the Artist's Studio (Left-hand Window)*, each of which was completed around 1805, are framed by the room's interior architecture: light moves through glass and feels its way into dusty corners. But through the windows, we glimpse a different world: boats drift, hills roll, trees rise and fall away. Life at a distance but life all the same.

Art historian Sabine Rewald credits these sepias with establishing of the motif of the open window. The trope prefigured Friedrich and his Romantic counterparts. During the Renaissance, painters including Albertinelli, Caravaggio and Sanzio used panoramic windows to initiate spiritual contemplation (in Leonardo's *Madonna Litta*, c.1490, the blue of the Virgin Mary's robes echoes that of the sky, an ode to heavenly intervention), while it was 15th-century academic Leon Battista Alberti who first likened canvas to an open window. But for the Romantics, the window came to represent a reliable symbol for the threshold between inside and out: for separation, distance, unfulfilled longing. As life moved through glass, it was literally reframed as something deeper, something with poetry.

"Through the poet's window", writes philosopher Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (1958), "the house converses about immensity with the world"; through the painter's, this immensity can bring about a feeling of isolation. Few exemplify this more than American painter Edward Hopper, who made images of solitude his life's work. In Hopper's paintings, lonely figures sit behind windows as days and nights pass them by. They are enclosed, weary, removed from it all. (Alfred Hitchcock, director of the 1954 film *Rear Window*, itself a drama through glass, was an admirer of Hopper's work.) In *Morning Sun* (1952), a woman sits on her bed and gazes across the city below. While she is in shadow, the outside world glows; while her bedroom is washed thin – greys, whites, the tired pink of a nightgown – the sky holds its colour. As is often the case with Hopper's paintings, this is a tale of unrequited attention: as the woman looks over her city, her city overlooks her.

But windows do not symbolise separation alone. They are transparent, of course; they can be thrust open; they allow for the passing of light, laughter and, if needed, clambering bodies. In Henri Matisse's *Interior at Collioure* (1905–06), a domestic scene painted during the warm summer of 1905, external and internal swirl like ingredients in a bowl. Soft greens float from the hills; orange warms the floorboards; pinks rise from the bed to meet with the bluest of skies. (Fellow painter André Derain described the colours of Matisse's Collioure paintings as "sticks of dynamite"; surely, they explode.) With the window thrown wide, the vivid hues of nature flow into the unbridled bliss of a life well lived and the two worlds achieve harmony. "When I put a green," Matisse once said, "it is not grass. When I put a blue, it is not the sky." Nor hills, nor floorboards, nor beds, nor the distant trace of a passing cloud. Everything is everything at once; nothing kept apart.

At times, however, we need to hold the world at a distance: while physical detachment can rouse feelings of solitude, so too can it foster intimacy, closeness, love. Draw the curtains and the outside ceases to exist, to progress. Privacy is complete. Wolfgang Tillmans' photographs of windows capture this sense of privacy, or the traces of those who linger inside with us. Much like Friedrich's depictions of the Elbe, the works are bordered by the frame's internal structure, but they are disinterested in what lies beyond. (External life, here, is all foliage, passing cars, tedium.) Instead, they document the gentle lives of things on sills: plant cuttings in water, paint cans, coffee in a makeshift filter; dust as it falls upon glass. For Tillmans, the window represents a permeable yet permanent threshold between intimate life and the depersonalising effects of society; the point at which reverie succumbs to responsibility and "we" meet "them". As architectural theorist Beatriz Colomina writes in *Privacy and Publicity* (1996), "Shelter, separation from the outside, is provided by the window's ability to turn the threatening world outside the house into a reassuring picture." In Tillmans' *Window Caravaggio* (1997), postcards of the eponymous painter's works rest against sun-kissed panes: the "Master of Light" standing guard at the edge.

A window will always show you somewhere else, something else, some other space that is close to, but is notably not, your own. Just as this adjacent space can rouse concern, so too can its proximity bring comfort. (In the artist book *My Window*, 2020, David Hockney finds solace in the view of his garden in bloom: "Do remember they can't cancel the spring".) The beauty of windows is that they present us with a choice: we can venture out into the scenes that they frame, or we can turn our backs, retreat into familiarity. Whether we long for or loathe that which our windows depict, they permit us to see beyond ourselves and, as such, allow us to gain a more rounded appreciation of our immediate situation. When we look out, we look in, reflections in glass.