Edith Halpert and the Rise of American Art
The Jewish Museum
October 18, 2019 - February 9, 2020
Exhibition Wall Texts

EDITH HALPERT AND THE RISE OF AMERICAN ART

Few people have been so important to the story of American art, and yet so little-known, as Edith Gregor Halpert.

In 1926, at the age of twenty-six, Halpert (1900–1970) founded the Downtown Gallery in New York City. From a modest space in Greenwich Village she propelled modern American art to the forefront of public attention, at a time when the European avant-garde still enthralled the world. The list of exceptional artists she championed is long: Stuart Davis, Jacob Lawrence, Georgia O'Keeffe, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Ben Shahn, Charles Sheeler, and dozens of others.

Halpert—herself an immigrant, a woman, and a Jew—saw the diversity of American artists and their eclectic creative styles as powerful expressions of the nation's democracy. Embracing the idea of pluralism, she forged a radically inclusive definition of American art that is still in use.

Halpert also mined the country's past for hidden treasures. She rediscovered many neglected painters of the nineteenth century who are now considered canonical, including William Michael Harnett, Edward Hicks, and Raphaelle Peale. Perhaps most unexpected was her delight in the genre of folk art, then almost unknown. Its popularity today is due in great part to her enthusiasm.

But Halpert had more than just a good eye for overlooked talent. She was also a pioneer in art marketing. By cultivating patrons with an interest in culture and the means to support it she influenced many of the nation's great public art institutions. Today her entrepreneurial spirit is present in the collections of museums across the United States, even if her name is absent from their walls.

With her endless energy and her extraordinary business acumen,
Halpert inspired generations of Americans to value the art of their own country,
in their own time.

Rebecca Shaykin
Associate Curator

Edith Halpert was always full of ideas and projects. She didn't have to depend on anyone. She did not follow in the footsteps of others; she did not take the easy way of promoting and selling European art where the path was clear and well trodden. She set out to promote American art because she believed in it and realized that if this country was ever to have an American art it had to come out of American artists.... This she made her goal and she has stuck to it with a single-minded devotion. American art owes her a great debt. — William Zorach

OURGALLERY

In 1926, when Halpert opened the Downtown Gallery at 113 West Thirteenth Street, most New York art galleries were in Midtown Manhattan. Furnished in red plush and mahogany, they catered to an elite clientele, primarily showing old masters and French Impressionists.

Halpert preferred bohemian Greenwich Village, where artists lived, and where customers of all income levels would feel welcome. Her gallery was different in other ways, too: its rooms were modern and stylish, and the artists she showed were often young and radical. At first she simply called her venture Our Gallery, signaling the democratic nature of her enterprise. Her motto was simple: "Our gallery has no special prejudice for any school. Its selection is directed by what's enduring—not by what is in vogue."

At twenty-six, Halpert was already a successful businesswoman with a background in marketing at Macy's department store and a lucrative career as an efficiency expert at a bank. With her experience, the Downtown Gallery quickly attracted serious collectors, most notably Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. Under Halpert's direction, many of her patrons went on to build new museums or donate major collections of American art to public institutions across the country.

Although she enjoyed these relationships, Halpert never lost sight of her most important clients: everyday men and women who simply loved art and wanted to live with it. She set affordable prices and offered installment plans—sales strategies familiar in merchandising but unheard-of in the rarefied art world. She refused to perpetuate the snob appeal of collecting; American art, she believed, belonged to the American people.

ART FOR EVERYBODY

exhibition of American printmakers. In keeping with her vision of the Downtown Gallery as a community, she worked with a committee of artists to choose each year's prints. Her own mainstay painters and sculptors participated, as well as invited guests such as Edward Hopper and Thomas Hart Benton. In this way, artists were able to share what they saw as the best new printmaking. The resulting showcases were remarkable, presenting a cross-section of the era's artistic trends, from Regionalism to Cubism.

Scheduled in December, at holiday gift-giving time, these popular bargain shows encouraged first-time buyers, while thrifty veteran collectors enjoyed acquiring inexpensive works in bulk. Even during the Depression the formula worked, putting art into homes and bringing income to struggling artists. Looking back years later, Halpert explained, "You had to attract clients with ideas. Nobody ever dreamed of giving a work of art for Christmas. That was a new idea. They'd come in, they'd look around, and they'd see a print, a lithograph, and for twenty-five bucks they could give somebody a gift and prove that they were very cultured people."

AMERICAN ANCESTORS

— Halpert's boundless interest in American culture led to her passion for folk art. In the 1920s she was one of the first to see the beauty and charm of the antique portraits, trade signs, and weathervanes still found in homes, shops, inns, and farms. She soon began to hunt for these, and to show them in her gallery.

At first she mixed folk art in with modern paintings and sculptures, mainly as decor. When it proved popular with shoppers, she formed the idea of opening a gallery dedicated to it. In December 1931 she launched the American Folk Art Gallery on the second floor of her Thirteenth Street brownstone, above her modern-art showroom. Its first exhibition, *American Ancestors*, offered work by obscure and self-taught painters of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Halpert presented these works not as sentimental heirlooms or historical curiosities, but as fine art.

In the dozens of folk-art exhibitions that followed, she resurrected many long-forgotten figures and established them as the forebears of her modernists. American artists, she argued, owed no debt to Europe; rather, they had their own rich vernacular traditions from which to draw inspiration.

Halpert saw no conflict between folk and contemporary art. Modern artists and folk artisans often used similar visual strategies: strong silhouettes, flattened perspectives, and a deliberate crudeness of form. For visitors perplexed by modernism, folk art was a "puller inner." Halpert taught Americans to see both as real art, worthy of aesthetic contemplation and museum display.

THE PICTURE BOOM

— Halpert's success in selling folk art gave her the funds to move uptown, closer to where many of her clients worked and lived and to the established galleries clustered around Fifty-Seventh Street. In 1940 she relocated to East Fifty-First Street, retaining the Downtown Gallery name while asserting her arrival among the leading dealers of New York.

The 1940s marked a general shift in the city's gallery scene. During World War II and in the prosperous years after, everyday Americans began to purchase contemporary art regularly. Young professionals with progressive tastes and disposable incomes appeared; many were Jewish. In 1944 Halpert reported that almost half her sales were to clients making a first art purchase, a major change from the early days, when she had had to rely on the generosity of a few open-minded heiresses and industrialists. By the 1950s new trends were also emerging in American art, especially Abstract Expressionism and Pop art.

Halpert maintained her relevance in this changing landscape by expanding her program in surprising directions. Significantly, she broke down racial barriers, becoming the first mainstream dealer to regularly promote the work of African American artists, especially Jacob Lawrence and Horace Pippin. After the esteemed dealer Alfred Stieglitz died in 1946, Halpert capably courted his circle of American artists: Arthur Dove, John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe. Despite the prestige these names brought to her business, she never allowed her gallery to become elitist or intimidating. In her later years she frequently mounted concept shows that appealed directly to housewives, office workers, young married couples—the full panoply of the middle class.

ADVANCING AMERICAN ART

American art was bound up with American democracy took her into the realm of international politics. She became a powerful advocate for free creative expression during the oppressive years of McCarthyism and the Cold War.

In 1946 the United States government created the Advancing American Art collection to promote the country's values abroad. One-quarter of the 152 works of contemporary art were acquired from the Downtown Gallery.

The collection was sent to countries considered vulnerable to the sway of Communism, but the tour was canceled when conservative newspapers and politicians denounced it as dangerously radical, implying that the artists themselves—a mix of immigrants, Jews, blacks, Communists, and homosexuals—were un-American. The artworks were sold, despite heated protests.

Halpert did not mince words: "Works of art are not a dispensable luxury for any nation," she declared. "We will have Communism in art if Congress can control what we paint, and free and individual expression is stifled."

In 1959 Halpert was invited to serve as art curator for the *American National Exhibition* in Moscow, part of the Eisenhower administration's cultural brinkmanship with the Soviet Union. Once again conservatives in Congress attacked the artworks as subversive. True to form, Halpert turned the controversy into a marketing coup, using the attention of the press to insist publicly that free expression and diversity of opinion were the defining features of American art and culture.

THE HALPERT INFLUENCE

— Throughout her career Halpert collected works of American art for herself. In the end she owned nearly five hundred works by some fifty modern artists and close to five hundred pieces of American folk art. Still, she admitted, "There are lots of gaps. You see, I've only bought the things I loved."

In the 1960s Halpert wanted to donate her art to a public institution, preferably in Washington, DC, but died before she could come to an arrangement. Three years later, in 1973, her collection was dispersed at auction. Fittingly, the sale was one last marketing sensation for the gallerist, earning a record-breaking \$3.95 million. The auction house attributed this spectacular success to "the Halpert influence." Her name added value: a work with her provenance was recognized to be of high quality.

The continued strength of the American art market, nearly one hundred years after Halpert opened the Downtown Gallery, is a testament to her extraordinary vision and steadfast belief in the value of American art. But Halpert's true legacy lies in the dozens of artists she discovered and sustained, who were able to live and make art because of her; in the many women in the arts—dealers, curators, patrons, and artists—whom she inspired; in her fierce support of artists who fell outside the mainstream; and perhaps most significantly, in the thousands of artworks that found their way through her into American public collections, usually without her name attached.

If today our understanding of American art is eclectic, diverse, generous in its parameters, and infused with idealism, we may in some part have Edith Halpert to thank.

EXHIBITION DESIGN

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GRAPHIC DESIGN

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LIGHTING

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BLANKSTEEN CURATORIAL INTERNS
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Edith Halpert and the Rise of American Art is made possible by

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National Endowment for the Arts

A gift from the estate of Gaby and Curtis Hereld

Alice L. Walton Foundation

Wyeth Foundation for American Art

Marina and Andrew Lewin

Additional support is provided through

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In-kind support is provided by Christie's.







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