

Edith Halpert and the Rise of American Art

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1. INTRODUCTION

CLAUDIA GOULD:

Hello, I'm Claudia Gould, Director of the Jewish Museum. Welcome to *Edith Halpert and the Rise of American Art*, the first exhibition to explore the remarkable career of Edith Halpert.

Born in 1900 to a Jewish family in Odessa, Russia (now Ukraine), Halpert immigrated with her family to New York City at the age of six. She was drawn to the city's thriving art scene as a young woman. Eventually, in 1926, she opened the only commercial art space in Greenwich Village, the "Downtown Gallery".

Rebecca Shaykin is an associate curator and the organizer of this exhibition.

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

Part of her mission at the Downtown Gallery was that American art had to be pluralistic, just like American society was multifaceted and very diverse.

She was a Russian immigrant, she was Jewish, she was a woman. There was a lot about American culture and society that really was not hers. But with that kind of outsider perspective, she was able to look at these objects with fresh eyes in a way in which she really saw what was special about it.

CLAUDIA GOULD:

For the next 40 years, Halpert would champion Stuart Davis, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Jacob Lawrence, Georgia O'Keeffe, Ben Shahn, Charles Sheeler and others. She also fostered a new appreciation for American folk art. By introducing mass-marketing techniques to the art world, she encouraged both wealthy collectors and those of modest means to expand their artistic horizons.

She worked behind-the-scenes with patrons, philanthropists, museums and public art institutions around the country to help ensure that American art, in all its forms, took its rightful place alongside the art of European masters. Halpert's trailblazing legacy and inclusive vision has never been more timely or more relevant.

In this guide you will hear from Rebecca, along with archival audio of Edith Halpert herself. I hope you enjoy it.

2. PORTRAIT OF EDITH HALPERT, SAMUEL HALPERT, 1928

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

This portrait by Edith's husband, Samuel Halpert, captures her right at the beginning of her career as an art dealer, about two years after she opened the Downtown Gallery. She's 28 years old in this painting. The couple met when Edith was 16. He was 32, twice her age. At that time, Edith was herself an aspiring artist, taking whatever art classes were open and available to her.

Eventually, she became involved with the People's Art Guild, a progressive artist cooperative. So the People's Art Guild was how Edith came to meet Samuel Halpert. They were both members; both Russian-Jewish émigrés.

He was pretty famous at the time. For an American artist. His work was included in the groundbreaking Armory Show in 1913 in New York City, so it's no wonder that Edith fell for him.

Edith later recalled the moment she first saw his work on view in New York City.

EDITH HALPERT:

There was a painting by Sam Halpert in the show, Toledo Cathedral.

I said, "I think this is a great picture. How much is it?"

He said, "Six hundred dollars."

I said, "Well, I'll never be able to afford that. I said, "Is he single? Is the artist single? Maybe I'll marry him for the picture."

Well, then I met Sam about six months later, and when I heard that he was the artist—I think that really is what inspired it. I thought that he was one of the greatest artists in the world, but the joke on me is I never got that picture.

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

After they married, Edith quickly abandoned her own dream of becoming an artist.

Instead, for a time she assumed the classic role of artist's muse. She became Samuel's main model pictured at a distance or from the back. So this straight-on, rather traditional portrait of Edith is actually quite anomalous for Samuel. It really shows, I think, her spirit of determination. Eyes staring straight ahead, focused on the future.

You'll hear more about the Halperts, as well as the seeds of Edith's early business acumen, in the next track.

3. PORTRAIT OF EDITH HALPERT, SAMUEL HALPERT, 1928, PART 2

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

Despite the fact that Samuel was considered a successful artist in his time, his paintings earned at best \$800 a year. It was hardly enough to sustain him and Edith. So Edith became the breadwinner in the couple.

She had an incredible knack for business. She had worked in several department stores as a teenager. Then in 1920, she began to call herself an efficiency expert. She landed a lucrative consulting position at an investment bank called S.W. Straus & Company. By the age of 25, she was making \$6,000 a year and held a seat on the company's board of directors. She was one of the few female executives at the time.

Her husband ought to have been pleased, but he was miserable, suffering from chronic tinnitus, among other ailments. So, Edith did what she thought best. Here's Edith.

EDITH HALPERT:

I sent him to an analyst.

The analyst insisted that I had to give up the job, that I was emasculating him.

The analyst insisted that we had to go abroad, go away but in any event, spend all the money, come back, and Sam would be the man of the family.

Only, the analyst didn't figure out how Sam was going to support us. That hadn't come to him.

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

Edith and Samuel followed the doctor's advice and they did live abroad for a time. But when they came back to New York, Edith was restless. She soon hatched her plan to open the Downtown Gallery with the money she had saved from her bonuses.

Samuel himself would only live to see the first four years of Edith's flourishing career. He died suddenly in 1930. His ailments, it turned out, had been caused not by his wife's professional ambition, but from a case of undiagnosed meningitis.

4. EGG BEATER NO.1, STUART DAVIS, 1927

EDITH HALPERT:

Well, the first show I had of Stuart Davis' work was not 'til '27, and people wanted to break the windows. People would come in from the street and scream and you know, say, "This is indecent, having these crazy pictures!"

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

The exhibition Halpert's talking about here was a real breakthrough moment for Stuart Davis. It was his first solo exhibition at the Downtown Gallery, and this is where he debuted his first purely abstract painting.

This was the first of four still lifes he made based on an odd jumble of items: an electric fan, a rubber glove and an eggbeater.

Davis insisted that his work was not abstract, but the public still found his paintings to be "difficult." Critics, too. The New York Times, for instance, called this painting "quite Incomprehensible." Halpert really believed in Stuart Davis and supported him for years with exhibitions and a weekly stipend, despite his lack of sales.

As Halpert put it to the artist bluntly in a letter: "The type of painting produced by you may be first rate, but it is not a popular commodity."

Davis, too, was grateful. In 1932, he wrote to Halpert: "I appreciate the way you have taken the pictures as I have made them without any hollers. When people say that association with a picture dealer makes a potboiler out of an artist, I cite the case of Mrs. Halpert. I feel it was fortunate to have gotten into the clutches of a dealer like you."

Ultimately, their mutual trust in each other really paid off. Davis would go on to become one of her top-selling artists in the 1940s, and today he is recognized as a canonical American modernist.

5. *SPIRIT OF THE DANCE*, WILLIAM ZORACH, 1932

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

Throughout the lean years of the Depression, Edith Halpert found ingenious ways to support her artists. This work in particular tells a story about her savvy maneuvering. When the Rockefeller family began making plans for Radio City Music Hall in midtown Manhattan, Halpert worked her connections to secure commissions for several of her artists. This flashy new art deco building boasted impressive murals, wallpaper and sculptures by many artists, but it was William Zorach's *Spirit of the Dance* that garnered the most attention.

Here you see a smaller version of the monumental figure that the artist produced for Radio City Music Hall. The kneeling woman portrays a dancer at the finale of her number, just as all movement has come to a close and the audience is about to burst into applause. She simply radiates with potential energy. Her head turned proudly to the left. She also holds a bit of drapery behind her, calling attention to the fact that her naked body is on full display. Perhaps it was this shameless nudity that caused the theater's owner, Samuel Rothafel, better known as Roxy, to demand that the sculpture be removed just a few weeks before the grand opening.

The hypocrisy of his censorship did not go unnoticed. After all, Roxy was a purveyor of racy vaudeville acts, and the founder of The Rockettes, the leggy dance troupe that would soon call Radio City Music Hall home. Many artists banded together in protest. There was a major publicity storm. But in all this, Halpert very calmly worked the situation to her advantage.

She placed the original plaster version of the controversial statue on view at her gallery and opened her exhibition a few hours before curtain time the night of Radio City's debut. The show drew significant crowds downtown to see what all the fuss was about. Eventually, *Spirit of the Dance* was returned to the grand lounge, and you can still see it there today.

6. SPRING, TYROL, JOHN MARIN, 1910

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

This watercolor was included in the exhibition that would become Edith Halpert's first runaway success. It was a 1928 exhibition of American landscapes going back to 1848. Her intention was to demonstrate that younger painters could hold their own against venerated, American masters of the 19th century.

Halpert sought loans from friends. Here she tells the story of how she came to unwittingly borrow a Winslow Homer from Abby Aldrich Rockefeller.

EDITH HALPERT:

By this time, Candler and I got very friendly I said, "I've got to get a Homer. I've got to have a landscape show."

He said, "I'll get you one. I have a friend who has a Homer." And the next day he came down and he brought me this perfectly beautiful Winslow Homer watercolor."

I hung the Homer in the middle and the Marin watercolor on one side and the Zorach on the other, and it was a fantastic wall!

About ten people came dashing in to see the Homer and began asking price and I said, "This belongs to a collector. Well, who is it?" I said, "I haven't any idea. One of the clients borrowed it."

I called up Duncan Candler, and I said, "Good God, somebody came in and offered ten thousand dollars for the Homer." I said, "Why don't you tell your friend to sell it." And he said, "It's not for sale."

So one afternoon a woman comes in, very prim, very respectable looking and so on. And she looked expensive.

And she said, "What is the price of that Marin? What is the price of the Zorach?"

She said, "I'd like to take them."

I said, "Oh, no, Madame, I'm sorry."

I said, "I will not break up that trio. I'm waiting for that idiot who owns the Homer to come in."

So she looked up and said, "I am the idiot!" She patted me on the shoulder and said, "That's all right."

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

Rockefeller became the patron saint of the Downtown Gallery in its early years. In turn, Halpert became her most trusted art advisor

Halpert soon began to encourage Rockefeller to turn her personal passion for collecting into a public good. Rockefeller was already thinking along those lines, and in 1929 she cofounded the Museum of Modern Art. Ultimately, the bulk of Rockefeller's modern art collection, a staggering 2,000 works, was given to the museum. Of these, more than 500 had been purchased from Edith.

7. THE INAUGURAL EXHIBITION AT OUR GALLERY

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

This photograph depicts Halpert's inaugural show in 1926, at what was then called "Our Gallery." It featured works by artists who were part of Halpert's circle, including Marguerite Zorach and Elie Nadelman.

In 1927 the space was renamed. Here's Edith on the impetus behind the change.

EDITH HALPERT:

I wanted to make this an intimate thing, so it was "Our Gallery" and I called it that. Then I decided that I didn't like, after a while, Zorach came in. I said, "I've got to change the name of the gallery."

He said, "Why don't you change the name to Downtown Gallery." I couldn't think of anything more divine than that. It was the only gallery downtown.

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

That's where all of the artists were living. And so Edith really wanted her gallery to be part of the action, where the artists were, and to encourage her clients to go downtown and to visit the artists in their studios and see their work in that context.

Other gallerists were uptown and they really catered to a very elite clientele. They made their galleries, very posh and they made art seem like something very exclusive, that only the wealthy could afford.

Halpert was super-different. Her gallery itself was meant to be a very welcoming environment for people of all classes; wealthy people, but also, working class, middle class people who lived downtown, who could come in and see art on the walls, sculptures on the mantelpiece and say: Oh, I could see a piece like that in my own house.

She had Christmas sales, she had end-of-season sales at the end of spring. She said, you know, if you can buy a couch or a TV set on a monthly plan, you should be able to do the same thing with art.

It was incredibly effective, and she was able to lure in a good number of clients who would come in and pay, \$50 a month and amass these incredible collections.

8. HORSE WEATHERVANE, ROCHESTER IRON WORKS, C. 1850-75

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

In the 1920s, the notion of folk art, work made by untrained, self-taught, often anonymous artists, was beginning to circulate. Trade signs, weathervanes and so-called 'naïve' painting had long been considered strictly for their historical value as artifacts, or as sentimental family heirlooms. But a few prescient collectors, including many of Halpert's artists, were beginning to appreciate the beauty of these mundane objects.

Halpert began selling American folk art in earnest in 1931. Her sensitive displays of Americana did much to re-cast folk art as real art, worthy of aesthetic contemplation and museum display. A gesture as simple as placing a weathervane, like this one, on a pedestal designed for a modern sculpture, did much to change the public's perception of this type of utilitarian object.

Suddenly, one wasn't thinking of what type of building or barn a horse like this might have adorned, but rather one might notice the animal's elegant pose and the artist's skillful execution.

Halpert's promotion of folk art served several purposes. The work was enormously popular. Folk art sales essentially kept her gallery afloat during the Depression. It also acted as what she called a 'puller-inner.' If she could get clients in the door with folk art, she might then be able to interest them in her modernists. Furthermore, folk art established a new context for thinking about contemporary art.

At the time, modern American art was often considered to be a poor imitation of the European avant-garde. With folk art, Halpert convincingly argued that American artists owed no debt to Europe. They had their own rich vernacular traditions from which to draw their inspiration.

9. (LAYER) HORSE WEATHERVANE, ROCHESTER IRON WORKS, C. 1850-75

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

Early on in her career, Halpert was personally responsible for finding a lot of the folk art she sold at her gallery.

She spent weeks driving through the unmapped roads of New England and Pennsylvania looking for homegrown treasures in the countryside.

As William Zorach once said: Hunting antiques was great sport and lots of excitement. Here's Halpert describing the thrill of the chase.

EDITH HALPERT:

And I toured around the country, and for a thousand dollars, I was loaded, and I bought quite a lot. ... I had cigar store Indians, figureheads... I had weather vanes, paintings in every medium.

This girl and I we passed a firehouse. The firemen were sitting outside gabbing, and we came by, and there was the biggest whistle you ever heard this girl said, "Now, really!" I said, "You never know when people can be useful to you."

Driving along and I see the most wonderful deer, it's the first time I had seen a deer weather vane, and there was a man, a farmer outside, and I said, "Do you raise deer?"

He said, "I've got cows.

I said, "Why do you have a deer weather vane?"

He said, "It's always been up there."

I said, "Look, how would you like to trade?" I just bought this absolutely fabulous cow weather vane. I said, "I'll trade you this cow for the deer, and I'll give you twenty-five dollars."

And he said, "Okay. Go and get it."

I remembered the fire department. I went back, and they were still sitting out there. I said, "Look you guys aren't doing anything. You got a ladder?"

So I gave them twenty-five bucks, and they got the hook and ladder out. They climbed up and I have the deer, it's now in Williamsburg.

10. MISS VAN ALEN, THE GANSEVOORT LIMNER (POSSIBLY PIETER VANDERLYN), 1735

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

In the 1940s, a new crop of clients filled the place left vacant by Rockefeller. Chief among these were Edgar and Bernice Chrysler Garbisch. Garbisch was director of a grocery products company. His wife's father had founded the Chrysler automobile corporation. Initially they chose artworks to decorate their country home, but their collection grew at an exponential rate, eventually totaling more than 2,600 objects.

In addition to their major gift of over 300 folk artworks to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., of which *Miss Van Alen* is a prime example, they also made donations to major museums in Philadelphia, Detroit, Baltimore, New York, and San Francisco. Like the Rockefellers a generation earlier, they were an extremely wealthy society couple with an interest in the arts. But, unlike Abby Rockefeller, who had shared Halpert's conception of folk art as being by and for the common man, the Garbischs viewed the genre as an exclusive cultural inheritance, suitable to ornament an elite home.

Oddly, the humble objects that had once been ignored by society collectors were now prized as emblems of their privilege.

Halpert liked to say that folk art was art of the masses and not the classes. She recalled with glee:

EDITH HALPERT:

It always irritates the rich collectors beyond words! Every time I use that expression, Garbisch gets absolutely violent! He always calls me a communist.

11. *VENUS RISING FROM THE SEA – A DECEPTION*, RAPHAELLE PEALE, C. 1822

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

This painting has a remarkable backstory which you're about to hear Halpert tell in her own words. You'll also learn how she transformed a fledgling Midwest museum into one of her biggest clients.

In 1933, during the depths of the Depression, word got around that a new museum, now the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, was opening in Kansas City.

It was assumed they would, like other encyclopedic museums at the time, only purchase work by artists who had been dead for at least 30 years. Here's Edith.

EDITH HALPERT:

I was walking down 57th Street, and there was one guy who disliked me more intensely than most of the others, and ... he said, "Well, my dear, this is one institution that you can't put your hands into because you have all living artists." So, I said, "Even if I killed one right away, I can't pre-date him." So, I went home, and in the middle of the night I woke up, and I thought, "Good God, I've got folk art! the deadest artists in the whole world."

One day this little character came in with three of the biggest men I ever saw. They all wore big hats, you know, like cowboys, ten-gallon hats, big burly guys, very impatient, said, "All right! Let's see your art!" ... I started with the weather vanes, and I began making these glowing remarks about the forms, "And these flowing forms of this cow," and I went on talking about this cow specifically.

And finally, one of them drew himself up, and he said, "look here young woman, you can tell me this is sculpture, and I'll have to believe you, but for Christ's sakes stop calling this a cow. I'm Secretary of Agriculture, and this is a steer!"

Later on the president of the Museum really got the biggest hoot out of the whole performance. I sold the entire group/including some paintings.

From there on I did quite a bit of selling, and when I discovered this absolutely fabulous Raphaelle Peale. I didn't know what it was. It was perfectly black, and it looked absolutely fabulous to me. It was almost incised with dirt, so I bought it for seventy-five bucks ... and I sent it to David Rosen to have cleaned.

He called me up right in the midst of the dinner party, and he said, "You must come over right away. It is important! It is exciting! You will die!" The only thing he had cleaned was the bottom, and it had a signature.

I died laughing... Raphaelle Peale, 1821. That was what he had cleaned, and I still didn't know what the picture was. As I say, the outline of a toe was there and the band across it. I said,

"Hurry up! Clean this thing!" It's a hell of a Peale! It's a great picture! So I sold it to them for five thousand bucks, and I have a very, very soft spot for them because that folk art sale meant a great deal to me and to my artists at that time, and the profit on a five thousand dollar number meant even more, but what meant the most to me was that I burned up every antiquarian in New York City.

12. *THIS IS HARLEM*, FROM THE HARLEM SERIES, JACOB LAWRENCE, 1943

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

In the early 20th century, racial segregation was as much the norm in the cultural sphere as in American social and political life, in general. African-American art was all but absent from major art institutions in the United States, including the Downtown Gallery. Halpert had been a champion of racial diversity at her gallery from its earliest days, if in a limited way, showing work by José Clemente Orozco and Yasuo Kuniyoshi.

Early in her career, she came to know Alain Locke, a leader of the Harlem Renaissance. It wasn't until Locke sent Halpert a copy of his groundbreaking 1941 book titled, *The Negro in Art* that she seriously considered African-American art for the Downtown Gallery. She wrote to Locke with a sense of urgency.

"Because so much of this was news to me and to other persons in the art world, it occurred to me to introduce Negro art in a large inclusive exhibition in our new quarters. Following the outline in your book."

Locke agreed to help organize the exhibition. *American Negro Art* was the most comprehensive survey of African-American art New York had seen, with works by over 50 different artists.

An important objective of the exhibition, was the establishment of a fund to place works by black artists in prominent American museums. Halpert also hoped the exhibition would convince her fellow American art dealers to add African-American artists to their rosters, creating systemic change within the overwhelmingly white art world. Halpert led the charge, selecting a young Jacob Lawrence. Lawrence would go on to debut some of his best work at the Downtown Gallery, including *The Harlem Series*, selections of which you see here. Her support jumpstarted his career, catapulting him to national fame practically overnight.

The *American Negro Art* show opened the day after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. America's entry into World War II naturally shifted attention away from domestic cultural concerns. Halpert's ambition to promote racial integration in the gallery system had a limited impact. Still, she played a crucial early role in establishing black art as integral to the American art canon.

13. *ORE INTO IRON*, CHARLES SHEELER, 1953

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

Ore into Iron is a 1953 painting by Charles Sheeler. It is a classic example of his precisionist style. Like so many of his paintings, it began as a photographic study.

When Sheeler joined the Downtown Gallery in 1931, he was best known as a commercial photographer. He liked to exhibit his paintings and photographs side-by-side. But this confounded his audience and led some critics to describe his paintings as little more than tinted photographs. It was Halpert who persuaded him to stop exhibiting his photographs publicly.

Sheeler became one of Halpert's most successful artists. His work attracted the attention of private collectors, including a Massachusetts businessman William H. Lane. Lane shared Halpert's enthusiasm for American modernism, and he began coming to New York City in the early 1950s to buy art. He was limited only by what he could fit in the trunk of his station wagon for the drive home.

She was an impresario, guiding and shaping her clients' tastes. She forged Lane's passion for art into a world-class collection. She encouraged him to buy artists across the arc of their careers, creating what she called 'evolutions' within his collection.

Toward the end of his life, Lane gave his Sheelers, along with 60 additional artworks, to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Halpert also entrusted Lane with the artist's entire photographic estate, until they might be properly appreciated. These also were ultimately given to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

Today, Sheeler's incredible photographic output is beginning to receive its due. Because of Halpert and Lane's careful planning and the management of Sheeler's legacy, the Boston museum is the epicenter of Sheeler studies.

14. BARE TREE TRUNKS WITH SNOW, GEORGIA O'KEEFFE, 1946

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

Today, Georgia O'Keeffe is one of the most widely-recognized American painters of the 20th century. But in the 40s and 50s her reputation had waned enough that younger collectors were unfamiliar with her work.

The 1946 death of O'Keeffe's professional and personal partner, gallerist Alfred Stieglitz, offered a unique opportunity. As a businesswoman who had long resisted the pressures of masculine authority in her field, Halpert saw a chance to rewrite the sexist narrative surrounding O'Keeffe's earlier work, including the claim that her paintings of flowers and landscapes were erotically-charged.

Halpert disapproved of Stieglitz's encouragement of this reading.

EDITH HALPERT:

All that sex business that was built up by her pictures. There was an old, old man with a young bride. I'm not being malicious about this, am I? I just think that it's factual, and it's funny, that, you know, all the sex that was brought into O'Keeffe's pictures by everybody. He started it.

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

But O'Keeffe was difficult to woo. She was financially independent and reluctant to show her work, living in a kind of semi-retirement in New Mexico. She was also, perhaps, wary of Halpert's more commercial approach to art dealing. It wasn't until 1955 that O'Keeffe agreed to a major exhibition of paintings at the Downtown Gallery.

The series of solo shows that Halpert helped produce at the Downtown Gallery in the 1950s and 60s reinvigorated interest in O'Keeffe's work, and introduced her to a new generation.

15. *WELCOME HOME*, JACK LEVINE, 1946

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

The story behind Jack Levine's *Welcome Home* illuminates Halpert's role as a leading advocate for free expression.

In 1959, she was invited to serve as curator of the art section of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, part of a cultural exchange program arranged between the U.S. and the USSR at the height of the Cold War.

Trouble began before the show was even installed. The House Committee on Un-American Activities alleged that nearly half the artists had affiliation with communist fronts and causes. President Eisenhower commented that one painting in particular, *Welcome Home*, by Jack Levine, was, quote, "Lampoon more than art."

Halpert shot back at Eisenhower, who was known to be a Sunday painter. *She said: "Some people think his paintings aren't so good, either. The Levine painting," she added wryly, "is not anti-American. It's just anti-pompous general."*

The artist, who had painted it shortly after returning from military service in World War II, expressed the draftee's contempt for the officer class: *"Armies," he asserted, "are a continuation of class snobbery."*

The painting became such a lightning rod of controversy that the American press avoided any coverage of the art exhibition. And when Vice President Richard Nixon visited Moscow, he refused to enter Halpert's gallery.

Halpert became something of a celebrity in Russia. When Soviet journalists came to view the exhibition, they were stunned to see that the offending painting had not been removed from the show. Nor had she been punished for her critique of the President. Halpert said: *"Anybody can say anything they want in America. We all do it, every day of the week."*

The United States Information Agency, which organized the project, eventually acknowledged that Levine's *Welcome Home*, by virtue of not having been censored, had become, by a strange turn of fate, a symbol of freedom in contrast to a closed society. Halpert was awarded the agency's Citation for Distinguished Service, and the Merit Award Emblem.

16. *LITTLE JOE WITH COW*, YASUO KUNIYOSHI, 1923

REBECCA SHAYKIN:

Throughout her career, Halpert had been steadily building a collection of American art herself. In the end, her personal trove included works by some 50 modern artists, and close to 500 American folk art objects. Still, she admitted, “there are lots of gaps. You see, I’ve only bought the things I loved.”

In the 1960s, she sent works from her collection on tour around the country for the education and delight of the American public. Halpert had initially wanted to donate her art to a public institution, preferably in Washington, D.C. where, remarkably, there was still no national collection of Contemporary American art. Ultimately, those plans fell through.

Halpert passed away in 1970, and three years later, Sotheby Parke-Bernet organized an estate sale that was fittingly one last marketing sensation for the gallerist. If early in her career the folk art had carried her business, now her modern artists triumphed, bringing in a record-breaking \$3.6 million. Kuniyoshi’s *Little Joe with Cow* was the painting that commanded the highest price of the evening

The auction house attributed the spectacular success of the sale to what was called ‘the Halpert influence.’ Her name added value. A work with her provenance was recognized to be of high quality and could be sold as such.

Today, the continued strength of the American art market nearly 100 years after Halpert first 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. And the many women art dealers and curators she inspired. 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.