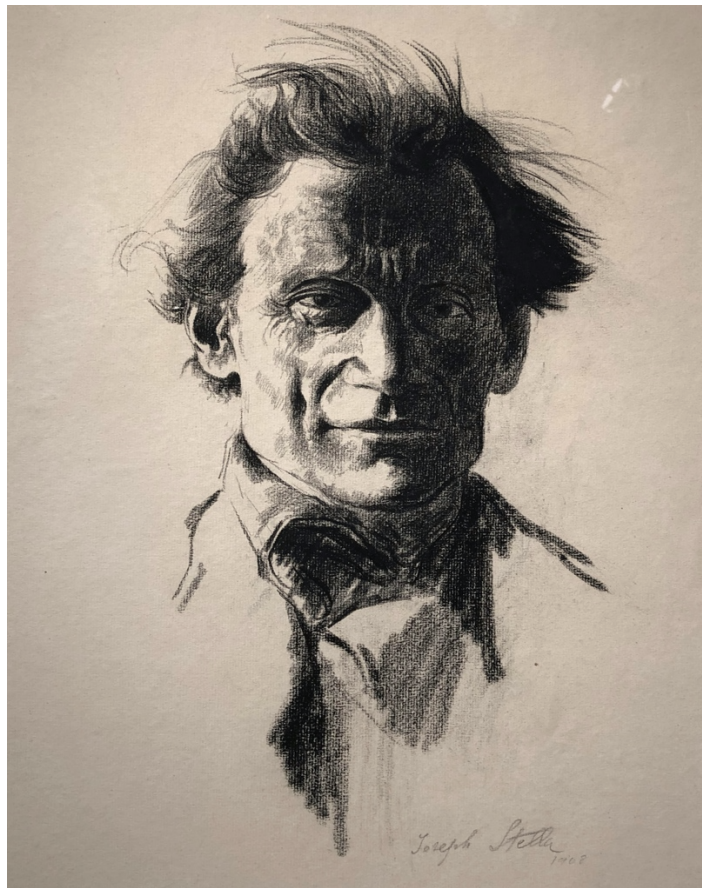


Telling Stories: Edith Halpert & Her Artists

October 9 – December 11, 2020



Joseph Stella (1877-1946), *Pittsburgh II: Italian Labour Leader*, 1908, crayon on paper laid down on board, 23 1/2 x 19 3/8 inches

According to Edith Halpert, the Downtown Gallery began handling Joseph Stella's work after he chased Stephan Bourgeois down Fifth Avenue with a knife. Bourgeois Gallery was one of a handful of established galleries showing modern American art in the early 20th century, and had even held a Stella retrospective in 1920. Several New York galleries that sold European and Asian art would use less expensive American art as "puller inners." Halpert recalled how Stella had discovered this after sending a buyer to Bourgeois Gallery:

In Stella's case it was pretty rough because Stella needed the money. He went up there and grabbed a knife—he was going to kill Bourgeois for killing this sale. Stella had a readymade sale. This man came to his studio to buy a Stella, and he sent him up to Bourgeois who switched him to Chinese paintings, and he didn't buy anything. He told Stella, so Stella went up there with a knife, and Bourgeois ran out of the gallery and down the stairs with Stella after him...A few weeks later, after I heard this

MEREDITH WARD FINE ART

story, Stella comes into the gallery, and he says, "You will handle my work." I didn't want his work. He was then painting still lifes and so on, but what he was painting then I did not like. I looked at him. He pointed his finger, and I could see the knife coming at me, and I said, "All right." This was one time I took an artist when I didn't want him, but I did want him later. (AAA interview, 1962-63, p. 120)

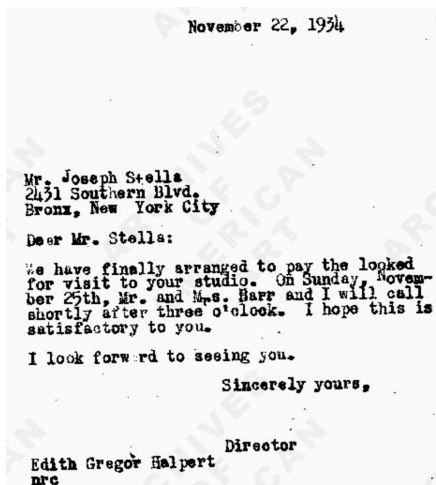


Joseph Stella, *Tropical Fruits*, c. 1929, Meredith Ward Fine Art

Despite her claim to not like Stella's still lifes, Halpert ended up with three of them in her personal collection. She certainly recognized Stella's place in American art history, as an important member of the New York Dada circle and the Société Anonyme. Halpert also understood the plight of the financially strapped and underrecognized American artist. Perhaps this is why she agreed to handle Stella's work but did not consistently include him in group shows at the Downtown Gallery until the 1950s, after his death.

To support Stella, Halpert arranged for Alfred H. Barr Jr., director of the Museum of Modern Art, to visit his studio in November 1934. Although she had assured Barr that, "Mr. Stella understands very

definitely that there is no business associated with this visit and that there will be no obligation involved other than looking at his work and occasionally saying a word of admiration," undoubtedly she hoped Barr would be interested enough to buy (Downtown Gallery Records, AAA). While a museum acquisition did not immediately materialize, Halpert was determined to make the most of Barr's visit. In a letter to her reliable client Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Halpert wrote, "we now have in the gallery a group of paintings and drawings by Joseph Stella...Mr. Barr had seen the Stellas at his studio and I chose all those which he had liked particularly" (Downtown Gallery Records, AAA). Two months later, Mrs. Rockefeller purchased two Stella oil paintings.



Halpert's letter notifying Stella of Barr's impending visit. Courtesy of the Archives of American Art.

Sources

Downtown Gallery Records, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Oral history interview with Edith Gregor Halpert, 1962-1963, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Lindsay Pollock, *The Girl with the Gallery: Edith Gregor Halpert and the Making of the Modern Art Market* (2006).

Rebecca Shakin, *Edith Halpert, The Downtown Gallery, and the Rise of American Art* (2019), Exhibition catalogue, The Jewish Museum, New York.