

Telling Stories: Edith Halpert & Her Artists

October 9 – December 11, 2020



Marsden Hartley (1877-1943), *New England Sea View – Fish House*, 1934, oil on academy board, 18 x 24 in

As soon as Edith Halpert added Marsden Hartley to the Downtown Gallery roster, she set about retooling his image. Less well-known than his fellow modernists, Hartley had spent much of his adult life abroad and was deemed “too European” to be added to the American canon. Hartley, like John Marin, had started his career in 1909 with Alfred Stieglitz and his famed “291” gallery. By 1932, frustrated with providing Hartley financial assistance due to lack of sales, Stieglitz lamented to Halpert, “for 22 years I paid off storage for Hartley!!—I can’t do it anymore” (Downtown Gallery Records, AAA). Halpert recognized Hartley as one of the most talented painters of the day and gladly took him off Stieglitz’s hands.

In the spring of 1932, Halpert mounted Hartley’s inaugural show at the Downtown Gallery, *Marsden Hartley: Pictures of New England by a New Englander; Recent Paintings of Dogtown, Cape Ann, Massachusetts*. The exhibition’s title makes clear Halpert’s intention to market Hartley as a New England artist. Reorienting Hartley as a regionalist, the dominant wave during the Depression years, was key to the acceptance of his work by the American critics and public. In the exhibition press release, Halpert firmly places Hartley’s work in the American idiom:

MEREDITH WARD FINE ART

After many years of travel abroad, Marsden Hartley has “come home,” home to New England, the place of his birth. And one feels in these paintings of Cape Ann the identity of the artist with his subject. Hartley has felt and portrayed the character of New England, its rugged outlines, harsh tones, bleak mood... This series of paintings are a great contribution to the American tradition. (Downtown Gallery Records, AAA)

Halpert actually says very little about Hartley’s work in the catalogue, instead allowing the artist to introduce himself with the raw authenticity of a New Englander through his poem, “Return of the Native.” Despite exhibition reviews that praised Hartley’s shift to American subjects, sales did not materialize. A year later, Halpert updated Hartley:

This really has been a frightful year for us and the struggle of running the gallery has been pretty terrible... New York was about the most depressing place in the universe with everyone weeping bitterly, the ex-millionaires more so than the starving unemployed. I heard more tales of woe than the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem but in spite of all am still optimistic about the future when art must and will take its proper place in the social scheme. (Downtown Gallery Records, AAA)

Despite the steady patronage of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, who purchased four of Hartley’s paintings in 1934, Halpert was unable to keep him through the Depression and nudged him to another gallery. Nevertheless, the Downtown Gallery show provided the foundation for Hartley to be perceived as a homegrown American modernist. In 1937, he moved to his native Maine and wrote the introduction to his

final solo exhibition at Stieglitz’s gallery, An American Place. Stepping into the identity Halpert had created for him five years earlier, Hartley announced, “I wish to declare myself the painter from Maine.”

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.



Review in The New York Sun of Hartley’s 1932 exhibition at the Downtown Gallery. Courtesy of the Archives of American Art.

M A R S D E N H A R T L E Y

RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Rock, juniper, and wind,
and a seagull sitting still,
All those of one mind—
He who finds will
to come home,
will surely find old faith
made new again,
and lavish welcome.
Old things breaketh
new, when heart and soul
lose no whit of old refrain;
It is a smiling festival
when rock, juniper, and wind
are of one mind:
A seagull signs the band,
makes what was broken, whole.

MARSDEN HARTLEY



Open Daily 10 - 6; Sunday 3 - 6; Wednesday Evenina 8 - 10

CATALOGUE

- 1 SUMMER EN ROUTE, MORaine
- 2 WHALE'S JAW—DOG TOWN
- 3 JUNIPER DOWNPATH—DOG TOWN
- 4 FIRE EARTH—DOG TOWN
- 5 FLAMING POOL—DOG TOWN
- 6 BLUEBERRY HIGHWAY—DOG TOWN
- 7 MOUNTAINS IN STONEY
- 8 WINTER AND NO SUMMER
- 9 JUNIPER AND S.E.E.T
- 10 CYNICAL BLUE JOVIAL BROWN
- 11 GRANITE AND JUNIPER
- 12 WINDBITTEN MOODS
- 13 EMBITTERED AFTERNOON OF NOVEMBER
- 14 ROCK DOXOLOGY
- 15 IRON IN THE ROCK
- 16 ALTAR BOULDER
- 17 IN THE MORaine
- 18 SUMMER OUTWARD BOUND
- 19 BEAVER LAKE, LOST RIVER REGION
- 20 NEW ENGLAND STILL LIFE

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Downtown Gallery exhibition catalogue for Hartley’s 1932 show. Courtesy of the Archives of American Art.