

Telling Stories: Edith Halpert & Her Artists

October 9 – December 18, 2020



Charles Sheeler (1883-1965), *Home Sweet Home*, 1931,  
conté crayon and watercolor on paper, 11 x 9 in.

For Edith Halpert, no passion was merely a hobby. Inspired by the collections of artists like Elie Nadelman, Robert Laurent, and Hamilton Easter Field, Halpert’s interest in American folk art quickly became a part of the Downtown Gallery’s ethos. From the start, she furnished the gallery with folk art to highlight the “Americanness” of her artists. Halpert stated, “the fascinating thing is that folk art pulls in cultures from all over the world which we have utilized and made our own...the fascinating thing about America is that it’s the greatest conglomeration” (AAA interview, p. 172).

Halpert shared her love of folk art with Charles Sheeler and curator Holger Cahill, who was the original owner of this watercolor, *Home Sweet Home*, 1931. The Sheelers filled their home with early American rugs and Shaker furniture, some of which are depicted in *Home Sweet Home*, and helped Halpert find a saltbox summer home nearby, which she also filled with folk art. As Halpert recalled years later, Sheeler joined her on trips to Bennington cemetery to look at tombstones she considered to be the “first folk art”:

## MEREDITH WARD FINE ART



Sheeler and Halpert in 1953, photographed by Musya Sheeler. Courtesy of the Archives of American Art.

*I used to die. I'd go to the Bennington Cemetery. Everybody thought I was a queer duck. People used to look at me. That didn't bother me. I went to that goddamn cemetery, and I went to Bennington at least four times every summer...I'd go into that cemetery and go over those tombstones, and it's great sculpture. Well, Charles Sheeler got interested too. He had a big love for such things, so he made me a whole portfolio of these photographs. (AAA interview, p. 173)*

Halpert established the American Folk Art Gallery with Cahill, her friend and former romantic partner. Together they curated two folk art exhibitions at the Newark Museum and Cahill, as Acting Director at the Museum of Modern Art, curated a seminal folk art exhibition there in 1932. The first commercial gallery to sell folk art, the American Folk Art Gallery opened in 1931. In a quintessential marketing move, Halpert used Sheeler's 1931 inaugural exhibition, which included the oil version of *Home Sweet Home*, to prime buyers for the new venture. She wrote in the press release:

*Mr. Sheeler's paintings and drawings show a distinct connection with the work of the Colonial and early American painters, and the Folk Artists of the early 19th century. That coupled with the sophistication of a mind attuned to the spirit of the world today, makes him an important figure in our native contemporary art. His is the art of today, and today in America. (Downtown Gallery Records, AAA)*

Halpert's first major show of folk art paintings, *American Ancestors*, opened a week after Sheeler's show closed. This cross-fertilization between folk art and modernism would help Halpert establish a continuum from an American art tradition of the past to her contemporary artists. Fittingly, Cahill purchased this watercolor, *Home Sweet Home*, from the Downtown Gallery's annual Christmas sale in 1938. The work was included in a Sheeler retrospective held at the Museum of Modern Art the following year, organized by Cahill's wife, curator Dorothy Miller.



Charles Sheeler, *Home Sweet Home*, 1931, oil on canvas, Detroit Institute of the Arts.

| PAINTINGS - SCULPTURE - ETCHINGS - LITHOGRAPHS - ART BOOKS  |                 |  |  |                                |
|---|-----------------|--|--|--------------------------------|
| <b>THE DOWNTOWN GALLERY</b>                                 |                 | DATE <u>Dec. 5, 1938</u> 1938  |  |                                |
| 113 WEST 13 STREET - NEW YORK<br>TELEPHONE - WATKINS 9-1338 |                 | MR. <input type="checkbox"/>   | BILL TO: <u>Mr. Volger Cahill</u>          |                                |
|   |                 | MRS. <input type="checkbox"/>  | ADDRESS <u>115 West 11th Street</u>        |                                |
|   |                 | MISS <input type="checkbox"/>  | <u>New York City</u>                       |                                |
|   |                 | PKG. TO <input type="checkbox"/> <u>be delivered at close of exhibition</u> <input type="checkbox"/> |  |                                |
|   |                 | BILL TO: <input type="checkbox"/>  |  |                                |
|   |                 | CASH <input type="checkbox"/>  | CHARGE <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | N. A. <input type="checkbox"/> |
| MEDIUM  | ARTIST          | NO.  | TITLE                                      | PRICE                          |
| W.C.  | Charles Sheeler | 56   | "Home Sweet Home"                          | 100.00                         |
|   |                 |  | 2% Sales Tax                               | 2.00                           |
|   |                 |  |  | 102.00                         |

Downtown Gallery invoice for Cahill's purchase of *Home Sweet Home*, dated a day before the Christmas exhibition officially opened. 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.