

**Telling Stories: Edith Halpert & Her Artists**

October 9 – December 18, 2020



Stuart Davis (1892-1964), *Nu*, 1953, oil on gessoed panel, 8 x 6 in.

Modest in size but bold in statement, Stuart Davis's *Nu*, 1953, was chosen by Edith Halpert to announce the Downtown Gallery's 28th Christmas exhibition, "Art Gems for Christmas." A work that packs a punch by Davis, a well-established American artist, was the ideal lure to get new and old collectors alike in the door. The promotion was a success. The Downtown Gallery sold more than sixty works during the 1953 Christmas show, including Davis's *Nu* which was purchased by Mrs. Ira Herbert along with a drawing by Ben Shahn.

By 1953, the Christmas exhibition had become a staple of the Downtown Gallery's season. When Halpert started them during the gallery's inaugural season in 1926, advertising works for \$10 to \$50, the idea of giving a work of art as a Christmas gift was novel. Halpert featured smaller scale artworks for reasonable prices in her Christmas shows, a sales strategy learned during her time working in department stores. She understood the importance of bringing people into the gallery to engage with the avant-garde and contemporary American works that at the time were not widely popular.

# MEREDITH WARD FINE ART



Press for the Downtown Gallery's 1953 Christmas show. Courtesy of the Archives of American Art.

However, the annual Christmas exhibition was more than an innovative sales strategy. In the 1953 press release, Halpert was not shy in crediting herself for introducing the concept of a Christmas exhibition to the art world and proclaiming its conceptual and practical merits:

*Despite the importance of the artists represented and of the examples displayed, the prices range from \$100 to \$500, carrying on the democratic idea of making truly fine works of art accessible to those with good taste and limited budgets. Since 1926, when The Downtown Gallery introduced the Christmas show in the art world, the event has become a tradition and has been adopted by other galleries and by museums. It has been responsible for creating many new collectors and has stimulated others into more daring directions by making it possible to indulge their adventurous spirit within an experimental price bracket...Although the paintings and sculpture are relatively modest in size, the statement is complete and the quality equally high. This exhibition is a further effort to establish a closer rapport between the American artists and the increasingly receptive American public. (Downtown Gallery Records, AAA)*

Halpert took every opportunity to advocate for American art as a perpetuating cultural identity. Her Christmas exhibitions aimed to make high-quality, modern works attainable for the middle class and attractive to new collectors who were hesitant to foray into the world of contemporary American art. Often during the Christmas exhibition, contemporary works and folk art pieces were shown together. She noted in the 1953 press release, “the nineteenth century art serves as a natural background for the contemporary art, and demonstrates the continuity of the American Idiom” (Downtown Gallery Records, AAA). Halpert’s commitment to the Christmas exhibition was another facet of her dedication to American art as a thriving legacy and the very American, “democratic idea”, that this cultural heritage be accessible to the greater public.

A M E R I C A N A R T				
THE DOWNTOWN GALLERY, Inc.		DATE <u>December 17</u> 195 <u>3</u>		Nº 6398
32 EAST 51 STREET - NEW YORK 22		NAME <u>Mrs. Ira Herbert</u>		
TELEPHONE - PLAZA 3-3707		ADDRESS <u>Park Lane Hotel</u>		
		802 Park Avenue		
		PKG. TO <u>New York, N. Y.</u>		TAKEN <input type="checkbox"/>
		BILL TO		
		CASH <input type="checkbox"/>		CHARGE <input type="checkbox"/> N. A. <input type="checkbox"/>
MEDIUM	ARTIST	No.	TITLE	PRICE
Oil	Stuart Davis	72	Ma - 1953	400 00
Draw	Ben Shahn	196	The Porch with Two Figures	165 00
			Sales Tax	10 75
				575 75
				540 75

Downtown Gallery invoice for Mrs. Ira Herbert’s purchases during the 1953 Christmas exhibition. 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.