

EDITH HALPERT AND THE RISE OF AMERICAN ART VERBAL DESCRIPTION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Hello, I'm Samantha Schott, Assistant Manager of Gallery Programs. Welcome to the Verbal Description tour for Edith Halpert and the Rise of American Art. This show explores the remarkable career of a pioneering gallerist whose vision continues to inform our understanding of American Art today.

In this tour, you'll hear vivid descriptions of five works of art in the exhibition, about one per room. This tour will focus on the formal qualities of the works, which means focusing on line, shape, color, and other aesthetic qualities. If you'd like to learn more, we have a second audio tour, led by Rebecca Shaykin, the show's curator. You'll find it on the Home screen.

If you would like a full screen image of an artwork, tap the red square button. It's located near the top-right corner of the screen. You can pinch and zoom the image for further close-ups. The first stop is located in the first gallery, which is entitled, "Our Gallery." Enjoy the tour!

2. *SPIRIT OF THE DANCE*, WILLIAM ZORACH

Welcome to the first gallery in *Edith Halpert and the Rise of American Art*, entitled “Our Gallery”. This room contains sculptures and paintings along the walls. We’re going to start with

William Zorach’s *Spirit of the Dance*. This sculpture is on a pedestal and placed in front of an elaborately carved marble fireplace. Made in 1932, *Spirit of the Dance* is a bronze sculpture with a brown patina. It is 26 inches tall, 17 inches wide, and 11 inches deep.

This sculpture depicts a nude female dancer at the finale of her performance. She is kneeling; her left knee rests on the ground, and her right leg is bent at the knee with her foot firmly placed on the floor. Her left foot is arched. Pressure is on her toes. She turns her long slender neck to look over her shoulder, eyes cast slightly to the ground. She holds onto a piece of draped cloth that falls gracefully to the floor. Her torso is long and slender with high breasts. Her hair tumbles down her back in glossy waves. She has a narrow, high-bridged nose and high cheek bones. Her expression is at rest as she completes her dance. Light reflects off of the geometric forms of her body. Though the surface is mostly smooth, marks from the artist’s tools are visible, lending the work a slight texture.

Here is what Rebecca Shaykin, the show’s curator, has written about the piece:

Produced for the 1932 opening of Radio City Music Hall, *Spirit of the Dance* depicts a dancer at the finale of her number, just as all movement has come to a close and the audience is about to erupt in applause. Although female nudes in art were hardly new, this one offended the theater’s owner, Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel, who demanded that it be removed just a few weeks before the grand opening of the music hall. Zorach, together with many artists and arts organizations, protested this act of censorship, and a publicity storm ensued. Edith Halpert, for her part, worked the situation to her advantage, placing the original plaster version of the controversial statue on view at her gallery, and opening her exhibition on December 27, 1932, a few hours before curtain time on Radio City’s debut night. Crowds of “sober and indignant art lovers” came in droves to see what all the fuss was about, and the New York Times called the work “one of the most significant pieces of plastic art ever produced in America.”

For the next description, please proceed past the small gallery, to the gallery titled “American Ancestors”.

3. *VENUS RISING FROM THE SEA—A DECEPTION*, RAPHAELLE PEALE

We are now in the gallery titled, “American Ancestors”. This space holds a wide variety of American folk-art objects, including paintings and weathervanes on a medium-grey wall.

We’re going to talk about Raphaelle Peale’s *Venus Rising from the Sea—A Deception*, made around 1822. It’s an oil painting on canvas, measuring about 29 inches by 24 inches. The framed painting is vertically-oriented.

Across the top of the canvas the artist has painted a clothesline. From the clothesline hangs a large white cloth, which looks to be about the size of a tablecloth. It dominates the painting’s composition, stretching almost from the top to the bottom of the canvas. It sags in the middle, between where it is pinned. The creases from where it was previously folded are still visible. It is a *trompe l’oeil*, meaning the painting is rendered so realistically, it seems we could touch it.

The draped cloth functions as a make shift curtain covering the female figure that hides behind it. We are aware of her presence because fragments of her body appear in two places. At the top of the canvas, from behind the top of the draped cloth, we see a raised, pale pink arm with a delicate hand twisting up strands of golden hair. A dainty foot emerges from below the bottom hem of the cloth. The woman’s weight is placed firmly on her toes, as if she is arching her foot or standing tiptoe. Her back foot is faintly visible behind it. The ground surrounding the foot is covered in a small spattering of white and brown flowers. The rest of her body is left to our imagination. Most of the background that surrounds the cloth and the woman is a deep brown color. The painting holds a sense of mystery as the cloth creates a stark white barrier between the viewer and what is happening behind.

The history of this painting is unusual. It had initially been passed over by all the major dealers on Fifty-Seventh Street. Edith Halpert, owner of the Downtown Gallery, sensed that the painting was special and purchased it for \$75.00. It was only after the work was professionally restored that the artist’s signature became visible. The signature of Raphaelle Peale is painted on the draped cloth. It is located near the hem on the bottom right.

4. *THIS IS HARLEM*, JACOB LAWRENCE

Welcome to the gallery titled “The Picture Boom”. The works in this gallery, largely paintings, are hung on a warm grey wall.

We’ll be talking about Jacob Lawrence’s *This Is Harlem*, made in 1943, which is from “The Harlem Series.” The work is made with gouache, a slightly less than opaque paint, and pencil on paper. It measures about 15 inches by 22 inches, about the size of a hand towel. The framed painting is horizontally-oriented.

This work is an image of Harlem, a neighborhood in Upper Manhattan, and a center of African American life and art. Lawrence, an African American artist, moved there in 1930, and created work that captured all the buzz that distinguished the neighborhood. Lawrence’s colors are bright and jumpy, including fire engine red, brown, sky blue, and mustard. The painting is flattened, offering a mosaic-like geometry, which, along with the colors, express the energy of the city.

Lawrence places the viewer high above the city; life is taking place below and beyond them. On the upper left is sign for a dance hall. D-A-N-C-E spills down vertically in a sign that butts up against a church, with a tall cross on a spire and stained-glass windows. On the lower left, the words “funeral home” are placed above an image of a coffin. This is near a sign that reads B-A-R. Telephone wires crisscross the scene, connected all the roofs in the foreground. A city block in the distance is boarded up, concealing a site of possible demolition or construction. The high brown walls are plastered with three posters showing a pack of cigarettes, a hand holding a bottle of alcohol, and a sunset. Hovering above the scene, in the top-right corner, a large blue sign boldly declares “Beauty Shoppe”.

Across the way, apartment buildings press up against each other and recede into the distance. No sky is visible. The repeating vertical and rectangular designs of fire escapes and windows create a syncopated geometry. In some windows, we see plants, curtains, or different shapes signifying life inside. Some cars and trucks are on the streets, but traffic is light. People, all with dark skin, are moving along on the sidewalk; some are alone, some are in groups. A woman pushes a baby carriage. Children are playing. Some people cross the street. The image is cropped as if the action continues beyond the limitations of the frame.

Throughout his work, Lawrence immersed himself in the sights of Harlem, citing the “variegated colors and shapes of pieces of laundry on lines stretched across the backyards, the patterns of letters on the huge billboards and the electric signs.” Lawrence was inspired by everyday tasks and life, and felt a responsibility for depicting African American history and contemporary life.

Edith Halpert, owner of the Downtown Gallery, first exhibited Lawrence’s work in 1941, marking the first time that a Black artist was represented by a major New York gallery. He

had six solo exhibitions at the Downtown Gallery between 1941 and 1953, including the debut of "The Harlem Series," and this work.

5. WELCOME HOME, JACK LEVINE

Jack Levine's *Welcome Home*, painted in 1946, is an oil on canvas painting. It measures about 40 inches by 60 inches. The framed painting is horizontally-oriented, hung on dark grey walls.

This painting shows a banquet scene rendered in dark muddy tones, including forest greens, browns, and acrid yellows. The brush strokes are sketchy and lithe, capturing the jostle of a dinner party. The vantage point of this piece is high, as if the viewer is standing, overlooking the scene.

At 7 o'clock, on the lower-left corner of the painting, is the back of an older man cropped at his shoulders. He is seated at the table with his fellow guests. He's in profile, and we can tell he's older by his balding head, sagging jowl, and blotchy, pink skin. He is dressed in formal wear, as are his fellow diners. We see the black of his suit, the white of his collar and cuffs, the cut of his bow tie.

Across the table we observe three other guests. At 10'o clock is a woman placed near the left edge of the canvas. She is wearing an off-the shoulder, golden gown. Her face is long, and her expression is both tense and blank. Her skin is pasty, with hollow cheeks. Her red lips are squeezed tight. Her thin arched eyebrows frame green eyes that stare off into the distance. Her red hair is worn in an upward hair style, garnished with a white flower.

On her left, moving down the table towards the middle of the painting, sits a general, the markings of his rank visible on his uniform. He is in the act of salting his celery. His large face, with its multiple chins, disappears into his neckline, into which he has tucked his white napkin. It poorly covers his girth. Next to him, and in the center of the painting, is another bald, gnarled man. His skin is pallid white, his yellow eyes bulge from his head as he raises a coffee cup to his lips. To his right, a waiter dressed in a green suit bows as he refills a glass with wine.

The painting is cropped at the left, implying that the banquet table extends onwards with other diners. In the background we can see portions of other guests seated around tables. The composition is cramped. The artist allows us to view a small piece of a larger event that extends beyond the limits of the canvas.

Rebecca Shaykin, the curator of this exhibition, has written about the controversy this work sparked. When it was exhibited in the 1959 *American National Exhibition* in Moscow, Washington officials were offended by Levine's satirical painting of a gluttonous general at a banquet. 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".

6. *POPPIES*, GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

Our last stop is in the gallery entitled, "The Halpert Influence." It contains all works from Halpert's personal collection, hung salon-style. We'll end the tour with Georgia O'Keeffe's *Poppies*. Made on 1950, this is an oil painting on canvas, measuring 36 by 30 inches. The framed painting is vertically-oriented and hung on medium-grey walls.

In this painting O'Keefe magnifies and abstracts two poppy flowers. A peach colored poppy occupies the bottom two thirds of the canvas, while a white poppy emerges behind the peach flower. Both flowers' petals are spread open; their inner lives are revealed to the viewer. Most of the petals extend off the canvas as O'Keefe's composition frames the flowers in a tight close-up. In areas where the soft curved edge of a petal is visible, the space that surrounds it is the color of a flat, clear blue sky.

The peach colored poppy dominates more than half the composition. The interior of the flower is surrounded by soft undulating peach petals. Darker petals tipped in black, followed by a rich ruby color at the base wave around the interior heart of the plant. The interior is a small, circular shape surrounded by spiky, purply black lines; a tiny pink dot is visible in its center. The white petals of the second poppy hover behind the peach flower. These petals turn a silver lavender at their root near the flower's center. This poppy also boasts darker, black tipped petals flowing from its red and light purple interior. A tiny purple dot is visible in its center. Fragments of green leaves are seen behind the blooming poppies. O'Keefe keeps the paint quality thin and takes advantage of the luminous nature of oil paint. Her colors glow. It is clear that the artist spent time closely observing poppies; she has abstracted and simplified their shapes while retaining the essence of the vivid, blossoming flowers.