

Telling Stories: Edith Halpert & Her Artists

October 9 – December 11, 2020

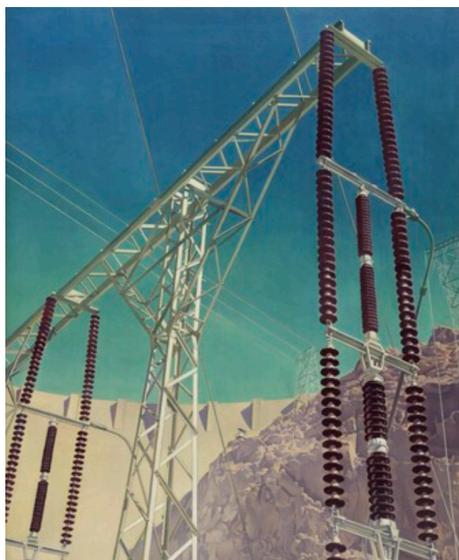


Charles Sheeler (1883-1965), *Hydro Electric Power, Hoover Dam*, 1950,
tempera and ink on paper board, 14 ½ x 14 ½ inches

Hydro Electric Power, Hoover Dam, 1950, was not the first time Charles Sheeler had addressed the subject of the Hoover Dam. In the fall of 1939, Sheeler visited the Hoover Dam and painted the closely related *Conversation—Sky and Earth*, 1940 as part of a *Fortune* magazine commission to illustrate the concept of power through American technology marvels. He returned to his image of the Hoover Dam ten years later to produce *Hydro Electric Power* for the February 1951 cover of *Reader's Digest*.

Never one to miss an opportunity to promote one of her artists, Edith Halpert mounted a show of Sheeler's original "Power" series paintings at the Downtown Gallery in December 1940. She cleverly timed the exhibition to coincide with the publication of the series in *Fortune* magazine, a publicity strategy she utilized the following year, after urging a *Fortune* art director to publish a selection from Jacob Lawrence's "Migration" series. Halpert recognized that Sheeler's "Power" series was the perfect opportunity to advocate modern art for a modern America. As she wrote in the exhibition press release (Downtown Gallery Records, AAA):

MEREDITH WARD FINE ART



Charles Sheeler, *Conversation – Sky and Earth*,
1940, Amon Carter Museum,
Fort Worth, Texas

During the two years Sheeler devoted to this series of paintings, he sustained the excitement, the drama, the emotional uplift these man-made wonders inspired in him, and translated these qualities from motor phenomena to visual phenomena with a technique and extraordinary color organization which so eminently fitted him for this task of recording the latest developments in our machine age...Sheeler, in his art, gives us the symbols of modern living, and perpetuates our era for future generations.

Halpert insisted that Sheeler's paintings are the ideal way to visualize contemporary life in America. She explained, "In the various implements of power offered Sheeler for subject matter, he selected forms most harmonious with his visual approach...His architectural sense was stimulated to a high peak by Boulder Dam as seen from the Nevada side," making it clear that Sheeler was not simply fulfilling a commercial commission, but painting with a well-honed, innate aesthetic sensibility.

Sheeler's photograph *Boulder Dam—Transmission Towers*, 1939, which he took when he first visited the Hoover Dam for the Fortune commission, is likely the source image for both *Hydro Electric Power* and *Conversation*. Painting from his photographs was common practice for Sheeler, who had a background as a successful commercial photographer. However, this was an aspect of Sheeler's creative process that Halpert did not promote. She had been Sheeler's dealer since his inaugural solo show at the Downtown Gallery in 1931, and had invested a great deal of energy into developing the public perception of him as a painter.

After Sheeler's death in 1965, Halpert was determined to safeguard that hard-won reputation. Yet, she may have foreseen the possibility that Sheeler's photographs would one day

C H A R L E S S H E E L E R

The quality that has made Charles Sheeler one of the greatest of living American artists can probably be best appreciated through these six canvases, commissioned by FORTUNE and painted in the course of the last two years. For the heavenly serenity of Sheeler's style brings out the significance of the instruments of power he here portrays, from the over-shot waterwheel above, still turning millstones at Hamilton, Alabama, to the radial motor in the wing of the *Yankee Clipper*. He shows them for what they truly are: not strange, inhuman masses of material, but exquisite manifestations of human reason. As the artists of the Renaissance reflected life by picturing the human body, so the modern American reflects life through forms such as these; forms that are more deeply human than the muscles of a torso because they trace the firm pattern of the human mind seeking to use co-operatively the limitless power of nature. *Fortune*

P O W E R

SIX ORIGINAL PAINTINGS
COMMISSIONED FOR REPRODUCTION
IN THE DECEMBER 1940 ISSUE OF
FORTUNE

1	STEAM TURBINE	1939	oil
5 2	THE YANKEE CLIPPER	1939	oil
5 3	PRIMITIVE POWER	1939	tempera
5 4	ROLLING POWER	1939	oil
5 5	SUSPENDED POWER	1940	oil
5 6	CONVERSATION – SKY AND EARTH	1940	oil

The paintings are for sale
Prices will be furnished on request

THE DOWNTOWN GALLERY 43 EAST 51 STREET, NEW YORK

Downtown Gallery exhibition catalogue for Sheeler's "Power" series.
Courtesy of the Archives of American Art.

MEREDITH WARD FINE ART



Charles Sheeler, *Boulder Dam – Transmission Towers*, 1939, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

achieve the value and importance of his paintings when she sold 2,500 photographs to collectors William and Saundra Lane, with the understanding that they be kept from the public eye until the appropriate moment. The Lanes eventually gave the photographs to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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.