

## EDITH GREGOR HALPERT

by MarySue Hannon

*Ms Hannon is a resident of Washington DC and describes herself as a "teacher, mother, librarian, grandmother, but I have always found time to sew, knit, do needle-point, and now to quilt in every spare moment."*

*In answer to the question "How did you happen to research Mrs Halpert, Ms Hannon wrote, "I had decided to try my hand at a folk-art angel for a Stearns & Foster block contest and then I needed to find an "angel" to dedicate it to. I got so carried away reading about Edith Halpert and other collectors and dealers that the block never got made. While I was working with some friends on a quilt I started to tell them about Edith and they urged me to write it down."*

Has the thought ever crossed your mind as you walked through museums, galleries or restored villages as to who might have been responsible for amassing such delightful exhibits and artifacts, especially the Americana or country type art that is so highly thought of in decorating circles today? It came as a surprise to me to find out that two of the most prestigious collections were the result of the work of a Russian immigrant who, for fifty years, had a most unusual influence on America and its artists.

Edith Gregor Halpert was born on April 25, 1899 or 1900 in Odessa, Russia to Gregor and Frances Halpert. In 1906 her widowed mother brought Edith and a sister to N.Y. where they attended public school. Having displayed artistic ability, Edith was enrolled at the age of 13 in the Nat'l Academy of Design in N.Y. city. Here she met Samuel Halpert, an artist who was to become her husband. They were married in 1918 when she was 18 years old. She divorced him in 1930. She was married to her second husband, Raymond Davis in 1940 for a very short time.

Shortly after the wedding she emphatically stated she would never paint again, that one artist in the family was enough. Instead, she chose the business world, but continued to champion the American artist. For that reason she is well known and left a priceless collection to her country.

Edith held a job briefly in the advertising department of a New York store, but after a year decided that she would like to be connected with an investment business, so she put on horned-rimmed glasses to pose as an older woman, and applied for the position of efficiency expert, (she was probably 19 years old.) She was hired at the enormous sum

of \$6,000 a year plus bonuses. She was efficient enough to save her company money and they rewarded her handsomely with promised bonuses, which she promptly saved until she had enough to be brave and different. This took approximately six years. She and her husband had come to a parting of the ways in 1930, but she had remained friends with the artists she had met in school and was very definitely interested in their paintings.

After a trip to Paris in the mid-20's, she had her eyes opened to the fact that artists in other countries were highly respected and their work shown and appreciated in their native country, whereas in this country it was considered more chic to support foreign artists.

On her return in 1926 she opened the first art gallery in Greenwich Village using her savings and leaving the investment firm. She called her new enterprise The Downtown Gallery of Contemporary American Art. This was when only European artists and furniture was considered high fashion. It was not long before her gallery was a financial success. Mrs. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, a collector of modern art, discovered her gallery and purchased several paintings. Others followed suit and Edith was able to widen her horizons, seeking new artists and encouraging them to sell their work through her gallery.

Before the crash of 1929 Edith had spent the summer in Ogunquit, Maine. Nearby was the artist colony called Perkins Cove and one of the artists was Hamilton Easter Field. He was also the editor of a magazine called THE ARTS. His theory was that Americans were throwing away the handmade, the beautiful handcrafted objects, and replacing them with the tawdry or machine-made, or imported items. There must have been some interesting discussions on this subject because our heroine saw that these items Mr. Field was referring to were in reality the "ancestors" of the modern art in her gallery. The time was right. Our Edith had an uncanny eye for the different, the unusual, and had cash to offer for the things that she wanted. It has been stated that she drove her Hopmobile all over the northeast foraging out trash piles, barns and second-hand furniture stores. It wasn't long before she had too much to keep in her home, so she opened a wing in her Downtown Gallery and called it The American Folk Art Gallery. The simple, hand painted figures, the simple lines of hand forged iron, the colorful quilts, all were displayed and

considered the basis from which all modern art had emerged. Her business sense again came to the fore as the country was in the throes of the depression and few people were buying pictures that were held on commission, but the "folk art" was owned outright, and her margin of profit was much greater.

Her display of unusual articles was so avant garde for the time that some of her wealthy patrons became enchanted with the idea of Americana. Edith was asked by Mrs. Rockefeller to help her to amass a collection of Americana the original idea being to furnish the buildings being restored in Williamsburg, Virginia. One house was actually furnished with this collection, but as time went on it was discovered that the majority of the items were a hundred years too young for the restored village, so in 1957 a separate museum on the edge of the restored area was officially opened in order that the public could enjoy and study in the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Museum of Folk Art.

At the same time, in the late 20's and early 30's, Mr and Mrs J Watson Webb were acquiring Americana, especially ship figureheads and quilts. Mrs Webb's mother was highly critical of this type of art. (She collected French impressionists). She said her daughter had been surrounded by the great artists, the art of Europe and was now collecting junk. Despite parental objections, the Webbs continued to collect quilts, houses, a steamboat, dolls, tools and more until in 1956 the restored village of Shelbourne, Vt was opened to the public. We know that our friend advised and bought for both of these museums, but unfortunately, we do not know which articles she chose, only that she must have had a marvelous eye for the unusual, the handcrafted, the work of the anonymous American artist. Indeed, it is fortunate for us today that she had the money to buy when she did so that generations yet to come still will have the opportunity to feast their eyes on these pieces of Americana. She was a trustee of Shelbourne for many years, encouraging the buying of the best available.

At her death in the early 70's her personal collection of Americana, or folk art, was valued at several million dollars and was disposed of by auction. Prior to this in 1964, she had given to the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington D.C. most of her American artists collection then valued at \$500,000., because she felt that the Capital city should have a collection of American artists.

Edith Gregor Halpert was criticized by John Rockefeller for selling his wife "funny looking" art and by President Eisenhower as being "too modern", but

in her own way she proved the saying, "only in America" and, as quilt lovers, we should pay a special homage to her memory.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

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TIME, Nov 27, 1964 pg 82-84

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#### Help Wanted

I am currently researching for a book on Crazy Quilts I am specifically looking for (1) any reference to "crazy" patterning prior to 1878, (2) references to specific quilts shown at the Centennial exposition (also any mention of a Japanese screen showing priests standing on crazy paving), (3) any references to Crazy Quilts in diaries, letters, journals, or newspaper's readers' columns. I have found the most references to Crazy Quilts during the period of 1882-84.

Any help will be very gratefully received.

Penny McMorris

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Does anyone know anything more about the Quilt Pageant script in Georges Mills, NH originally published in LIFE Sept 22 '41 and republished in the Fall '81 JOURNAL?

Mary Cross

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I recently ran across several references to a "Flock bed" and can not find a clue to it. Can anyone help?

Do you have any information about New England quilts, quilters, textiles for a book to be published in June, 1983?

Nancy Halpern

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