

Art Agency, Partners

Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

Rogues and Revolutions

The Best New Art Books



Leo Castelli, photo credit: Evelyn Hofer/Getty Images

By  Christian House

freelance arts and books writer for the Guardian and the Daily Telegraph

Published 28 February 2017 in [Books](#)

Daddy of all dealers

Art dealing in mid-20th-century Manhattan drew all sorts, from an heiress such as [Betty Parsons](#) to a former ballroom dancer like [Sidney Janis](#). In *Rogues' Gallery: A History of Art and its Dealers* (Profile Books), Sotheby's senior director of Impressionist & Modern Art in London, [Philip Hook](#), shines a light on a Hungarian-Italian Jew, Leo [Castelli](#), who was born in Trieste in 1907. Castelli was a modern man who tried his luck in Milan and Paris, dabbling in law and banking and opening his first gallery with René Drouin in 1939, before the outbreak of the Second World War shut down his options in Europe.

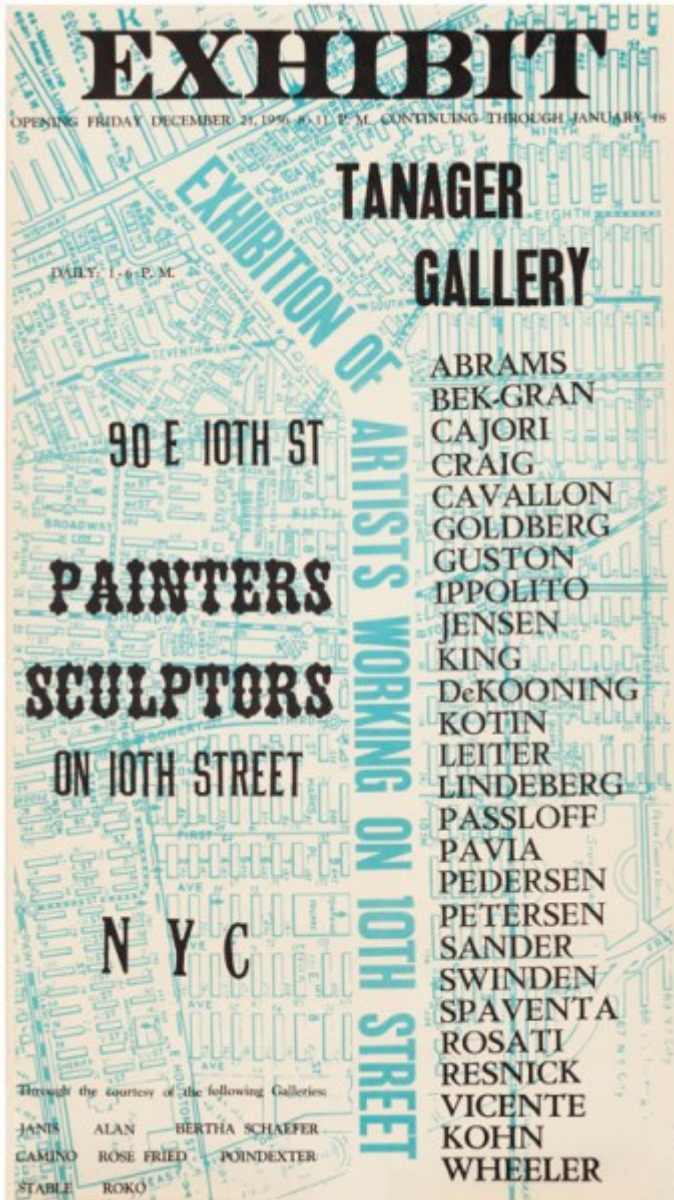
Fleeing in the early 1940s, he found safe haven in America but was initially wary of his new home and the limits of its cultural arena. In fact, Castelli was to tap into the American hunger for the new, in art as in industry, during the post-war boom. He was a manager in his father-in-law's clothing factory for a time, while dealing in art on the side and becoming friends with the leading Abstract Expressionists. He worked with Janis at the latter's gallery but finally took the plunge himself, opening a gallery on the Upper East Side in 1957 the age of 50.

Hook's portrait of Castelli is vivid. Slight and elegant, with clothes as sharp as his cheekbones, he cut a dash in the burgeoning market for avant-garde works. Castelli liked to describe himself as a gallerist rather than a dealer: the implication being that commercial gain was a bonus to the joy—and kudos—of shaping taste. "The function of an art dealer," he said, "should be to find new artists, to make them known to the public, before museums can do it... we are the real vanguard."

That he was. In the 1960s and 1970s, Castelli gave a platform to artists including Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, Jasper Johns, Ed Ruscha, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol and Julian Schnabel, among many others. "You feel things, feel vibrations, gauge reactions," he said of his talent for spotting tomorrow's superstars.

Hook is perceptive on Castelli's wisdom in trading in contemporary works. "Sometimes dealing with living artists is easier than dealing with dead ones," observes Hook, "particularly if a difficult widow is part of the negotiations."

The co-op crew



Angelo Ippolito, Poster for Painters Sculptors on 10th Street, Tanager Gallery, New York, December 1956–January 1957. Collection of Lois Dodd, New York

At a different end of the spectrum was the gallery opened in a New York former barbershop in 1952 by four painters Angelo Ippolito, Lois Dodd, Charles Cajori, Fred Mitchell—and the sculptor William King.

The many accomplishments of Tanager Gallery are detailed in *Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952-1965* (Prestel). Melissa Rachleff's handsome volume, with an introduction by Lynn Gumpert, creates a fascinating patchwork-history out of essays, historical photography, works of art and interviews.

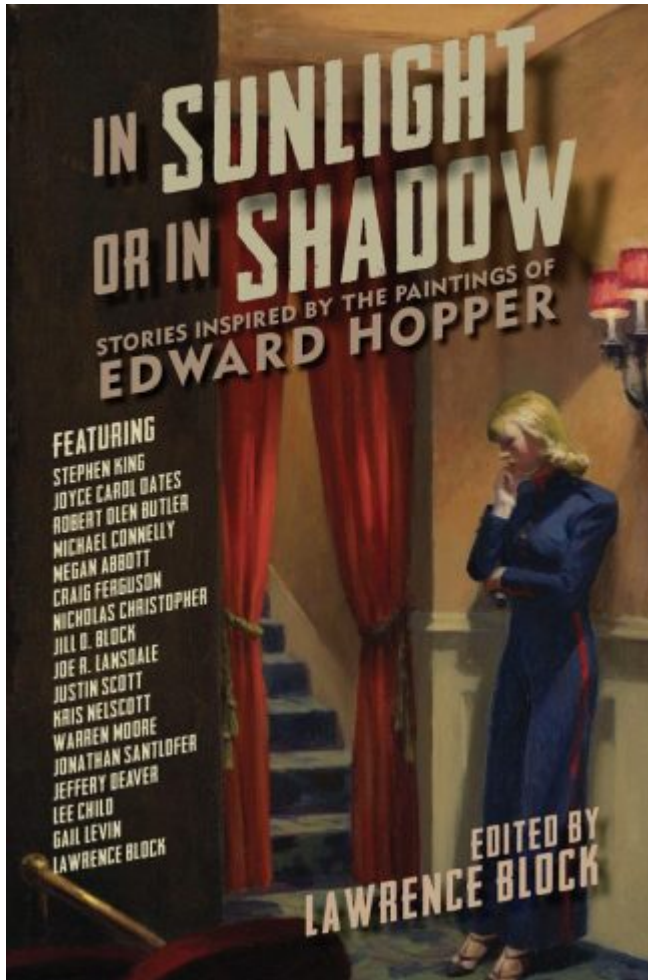
The Tanager was wonderfully irreverent: named after the tropical finch whose feathers matched the orange of the gallery's plate-glass window, its assistants were "sitters" not salesmen. Their collective creative spirit was the precursor to self-publishing and crowd-sourcing enterprises.

The gallery moved from the barbershop on 4th Street after a year to premises on 10th, where it remained until 1962. A scene swiftly [developed](#). Other artist-run galleries, attracted by the low rents, appeared and Willem de Kooning and Milton Resnick occupied studios nearby. The street developed into a hothouse of experimental work, with Minimalism, installations and performance art appearing in the galleries that opened after the Tanager.

"I didn't do a master's degree in college," recalled Dodd, the last surviving Tanager founder. "I did a master's degree on 10th Street." The team battled the prevailing winds—promoting figurative and collage work as well as abstraction—and in the late-1950s they tried to broaden the definition of the New York School.

For the artist-dealers of 10th Street, history came full circle. “Artists who, in the early 1950s couldn’t break into the art market, invented a new gallery model, that of the co-op,” Gumpert writes. “Soon after, other artists, rejecting the market altogether, experiment with new art forms in unexpected and blatantly non-commercial venues.” And, yet, this kindled the market. “Artists, as always, are ahead of the game,” she claims, “even though some of them reject it as it embraces them.”

Hard-boiled Hopper



Cover of *In Sunlight or in Shadow*, courtesy of Pegasus Books

If a plot begins to plod, [Raymond Chandler](#) once said, have a guy with a gun enter the room. Things get interesting. The opposite can be said for [Edward Hopper](#), whose paintings create a quiet *noir* in which absence is the trigger point. The silent interiors and solitary figures—waiting, worrying, watching—imply threat with little action. Such foreboding reverberates through *In Sunlight or in Shadow: Stories Inspired by the Paintings of Edward Hopper* (Pegasus Books), an anthology of 17 short stories by authors including [Stephen King](#), [Joyce Carol Oates](#) and [Lee Child](#), each based on a particular painting (reproduced on the title pages).

The writing is spare, with the stories providing short, sharp shots of intrigue perpetrated by grifters, spies and private eyes. Many of the writings retain Hopper’s title; some are contemporaneous with the work of art; a few feature the picture in the narrative.

King turns Hopper’s *Room in New York* (1932), a calm image of a husband reading a paper while his wife tinkles away at a piano, into a fiction of gruesome gothic horror. In a spin on *Nighthawks* (1942), [Michael Connelly](#) creates a detective who is rumbled while on a stakeout near where the titular masterpiece hangs in the Art Institute of Chicago. [Gail Levin](#), author of Hopper’s 1995 catalogue raisonné, has even drawn on her own history for *The Preacher Collects*, a fictional account of her real-life [claim](#) that a Baptist minister stole a priceless cache of the artist’s works. The author herself pops up to question the reverend.

The collection is edited by pulp crime writer [Lawrence Block](#), who also contributes a tale of deception in a diner (a take on Hopper’s *Automat*, 1927). Block understands Hopper’s eye. “No less so than any Abstract Expressionist, his concern was

with shape and color and light,” he explains in his foreword. Stories were suggested, never told. Through fiction, Hopper’s hushed compositions begin to make some noise and his motifs—offices, hotels, rooftops—are investigated. They don’t, however, explain Hopper’s fondness for redheads.

But that, perhaps, is another story.

Novel inspirations

Art, like drink and romance, has preoccupied novelists for a long time. And in *The Pen and the Brush: How Passion for Art Shaped Nineteenth-Century French Novels* (Other Press) Anka Muhlstein looks at a period when the art and literary worlds mixed their ink to great effect.

Balzac, Proust, Maupassant, Hugo, Zola and many more drew on the techniques and themes of painters for their own craft and subject matter. Muhlstein points out that this was a particularly French obsession during the 19th century; it wasn’t until Henry James and Virginia Woolf that the American and British literati began to look to the visual arts for stimulation.

The French Revolution, Muhlstein writes, changed the nation’s fundamental relationship with art. Museums became a restorative tonic for the masses, much like the restaurants on the boulevards. An understanding of art was natural for a young writer. They even joined in: many “spent time as pupils in artist’s studios and painters reciprocally mingled in the literary groups”.

For Proust, pictures were *madeleines* for the eyes. The nature of art reverberated throughout *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. And in creating his fictional artist Elstir—based on Monet—he utilized a paintbrush as a descriptive *device* “Proust never describes a character’s appearance in its entirety,” Muhlstein remarks. “He might evoke it with only one detail, one gesture, or a silhouette, until a painting comes along to complete the image.”



A detail of the Endpapers to *The Pen and the Brush*, courtesy of Other Press

Balzac considered himself a “literary painter” (although Delacroix thought he overworked the detail in his prose). Indeed, in the early part of the century, Balzac’s imagination was lit up the paintings in the *Louvre*. He would conjure up lives for the figures in the frames and mysteries for the houses they inhabit.

A generation later, at boarding school in Aix-en-Provence, two teenage boys struck up a friendship that fused their interests. Young Émile Zola won a drawing prize while his pal Paul Cézanne embraced poetry. "I have not only supported the Impressionists," announced Zola in later life, "I have translated them into literature." This expertly researched volume ably illustrates the fruitfulness of such shared visions.