

Wharton Esherick

BY CHARLES BENDER

Discover the 'Dean of American Craftsmen.'

After a long, slow, winding drive up Valley Forge Mountain in Pennsylvania, the treeline parts. Through the underbrush several buildings seem to emerge from the hillside. These are not the tightly tended gardens of Winterthur or Longwood, where most of my period reproduction work would feel at home. Nature is the architect and builder here.

My journey to this place began 30 years ago when, as a teenager, I first traveled to Wharton Esherick's property, where buildings of log, board, stone and stucco make up the studio, visitor's center and a residence of what is now the Wharton Esherick Museum. Much of the architecture seems to have grown naturally from the earth. Ever the artist, Esherick (1887-1970) added



splashes of color to the stucco additions, doors and windows. Earthen greens, reds and browns, with accents of bold navy, pink and mauve, compose the palette with which Esherick decorated his environment. Make no mistake – that is precisely what he was creating: an environment.

While my own woodworking combines 17th- to early 19th-century aesthetics with 21st-century building techniques, even at a young age, I felt an affinity for this man whose work and life were so closely intertwined.

At first glance the buildings don't appear to be anything special. But the more you look, the more you realize that they are the expression of a life trying to strike a balance with nature. As an artist influenced by impressionism

and cubism, Esherick tried to mimic the asymmetry found in nature.

The studio, built right into the bank of the mountain, has a curved roofline as does the garage/visitor's center. Unlike the garage, where the ridge twists from one corner of the building to the other, the studio ridge curves slightly downward. With the addition of the "tower" and the "silo" to the studio, the entire building takes on a deliberate cubist appearance.

The buildings and grounds are part and parcel with the landmark furniture Esherick made during his career. But just like you cannot understand the builder without his surroundings, you cannot understand his furniture unless you understand his personal history, from painter to sculptor to craftsman.

Beyond Arts & Crafts

Wharton Esherick grew up in the latter half of the British Arts & Crafts movement and came of age just as the American Craftsman period was getting underway. Born in 1877, he was influenced throughout his formative years by the impressionist, cubist, expressionist and Arts & Crafts movements. From the time he was a child, Esherick wanted to be an artist and specifically, a painter.

The son of a prosperous businessman, Esherick was encouraged to pursue an education in business. In fact, his father tried very hard to discourage his



Birth of a style. Decades before artists such as Sam Maloof began making furniture with sculpted mortise-and-tenon joints, Wharton Esherick built such pieces as this stool made in 1929.

son's interest in art, but Esherick would not be swayed. He attended the Manual Training High School of Philadelphia where he learned woodworking and metalworking. From 1906 to 1908, he studied drawing and printmaking at the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art. In 1908, Esherick was accepted at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts where he studied painting under some of the great painters of the day.

Esherick dropped out of the acade-



Rooms with a view. The cubist-inspired studio and home of artist Wharton Esherick are surrounded by nature on Valley Forge Mountain in Pennsylvania (left).

Flowing ridgeline. The visitor's center at the museum is housed in what was Esherick's garage. His desire to create a complete environment for himself led him to shift the axis of the ridgeline of this roof to create an asymmetrical appearance (right).



my 18 months after enrolling, saying he had learned everything he could from the teachers, and he was determined to explore art on his own. It was the height of American impressionism but Esherick found steadier work illustrating for the Victor Talking Machine company and the local newspapers than he did with his impressionist paintings. By all accounts, he was a good impressionist painter—but there were lots of “good” painters around. He needed a way to set his work apart.

In 1912, Esherick married Letty Nofer and in 1913, they followed many other artists who fled the city for a simpler life. They purchased a small farm and house on the hillside of Valley Forge Mountain in Paoli, Penn.,

“If it isn’t fun, it isn’t worth doing.”

—attributed to
Wharton Esherick (1887-1970),
American artist



Colorful environment. Bright accent colors blend with the natural materials Esherick used to build his studio, and his love of asymmetry is exhibited in the deck that allowed Esherick an open space to enjoy his environment. The spiraling deck supports are his take on the pillars of iconic Chester County bank barns. Every detail, from the placement of the sculpture to the handmade door handle and latch, were carefully considered.

and began raising their three children. Here, Esherick could paint and the family could raise its own food.

In 1919, the Eshericks spent the winter in Fairhope, Ala. Fairhope, like Arden, Del., and other Georgist single-tax communities, was a gathering place for the artistic and intellectual crowd. Here Esherick painted and taught art. He also met people such as writer Sherwood Anderson and curator Carl Zigrosser. It was at this time he began carving frames for his paintings. He discovered he loved carving wood and began making woodblock prints for illustrated children’s books.

As the couple became involved with rhythmic dance, Esherick tried to capture the movements of the dancers in sketches and paintings, and his style became less rigid. It was this attempt to capture movement that would shape his later works. He and Letty also became involved with the Hedgerow Theater in Media, Pa. There, he expanded his artistic endeavors to creating set designs and carving blocks for printed programs and posters.

Through his association with the theater, he became friends with author Theodore Dreiser, through whom, along with other artists, writers and in-



Early influences. Early in Esherick’s career his work was typically in the Arts & Crafts style. In this piece you can see his penchant for things organic. The carvings on the lower panels represent the undergrowth of the woods. The middle panels are carved as if one is looking up through the trees, and the top panels have circling turkey buzzards.

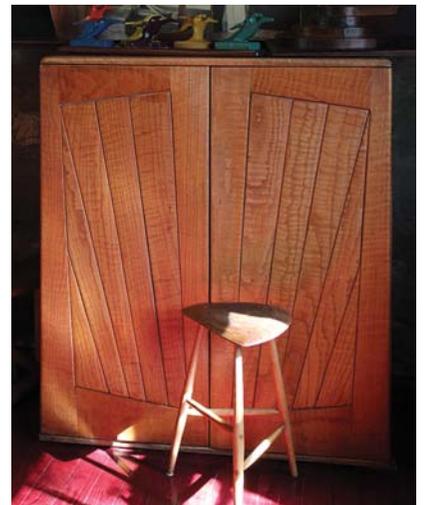
tellectuals of the time, Esherick developed connections that would serve him well for future furniture commissions.

So what does all this social and art history have to do with woodworking? To understand Esherick’s genius, you need to understand the influences on his life and art to appreciate the cutting-edge nature of his woodworking. As woodworkers, we tend to identify with the Arts & Crafts movement through its furniture and decorative arts, and perhaps forget that for some, it was a philosophy of life. It was counter-industrial. It was about people coming together and getting in touch with a simpler lifestyle.

For the intellectuals of the time Marxism and Communism were not yet political ideologies but the basis for a more Utopian society—a society where people would live, work and create in greater harmony with one another and nature. This idea of a simpler, self-reliant, holistic kind of life drove Esherick’s creativity.

Stepping off the Edge

It was in the early 1920s when Esherick began sculpting wood. By the mid-20s, he began work on his studio farther up the mountain from his farmhouse.



Museum quality. Esherick made this piece to replace his Arts & Crafts-style desk when it was destined for loan to the Museum of Arts & Design in New York in 1958. But when the museum staff arrived, they opted to display the new desk instead. (Unlike many artists, Esherick’s unique talents were recognized during his lifetime.)



Maker's mark. Esherick carved these stylized initials into most of his work.

The location looked out over the valley and his home and, surrounded by trees and lush vegetation, was perfect for an art studio.

There, in a structure built to mimic the stone barns of Chester County that surrounded him, Esherick began creating sculpture that by 1926 was on exhibit in the Whitney Museum in New York.

During the same period, Esherick also began making furniture. At first his pieces were squarish, Arts & Crafts-style pieces to which he added carvings on the flat surfaces. Although he was already creating sculptures, he was still looking at furniture through the eyes of a painter: two dimensionally. It wasn't until 1928 that Esherick realized carving needn't be "applied" to the surface of a piece; it could be the piece of furniture itself.

When Esherick began to think in terms of form rather than adornment, his furniture changed dramatically. He began incorporating prismatic shapes that were reminiscent of his cubist and expressionist painting influences. And as his sense of motion and organicism grew, his furniture took on ever-more fluid asymmetrical shapes.

Inventing a New Style

Over the trajectory of his career, we can see a clear progression in Esherick's furniture work from the straighter, box-like shapes of the Arts & Crafts furniture of his youth to the wholly fluid pieces he created in the 1950s and '60s. And because he was developing his joinery skills and techniques as he developed his designs, it is easy to see how he moved from the rectangular



Pragmatic maker. Esherick's sculptural pieces filled his work and living space. Ever the pragmatic capitalist, he sold then remade his dining room table many times until, in his old age, Esherick decided to finally attach it to the wall, thus eliminating the temptation to sell his dining table yet again.

joinery of the Arts & Crafts period, to sculpting away the material surrounding the joined pieces of wood, to eventually creating gracefully curved pieces where the joinery flows as part of the design.

Seeing examples of Esherick's work, and knowing the time in which he made the pieces, it's easy to see why he was such a big influence on the woodworking world – even though you may not know his name.

Esherick spent his life creating original, organic works of art, most of which happened to be functional. His sculpture brought him celebrity and the connections to obtain commissions for interiors and furniture. The unique nature of his work earned him the moniker "Dean of American Craftsmen," a title coined by one craftsman to whom Esherick was a huge inspiration, Sam Maloof.

During Esherick's life, his furniture and interiors were exhibited in many major museums and expositions, in-



A natural approach. Many of the artist's wooden sculptures demonstrate a sense of the twisting, flowing asymmetry of nature.

LIVING DESIGNS



One of the three pieces for which Esherick is best known, his music stand has inspired countless music-stand makers for decades.

The classic three-legged stool Esherick produced in great numbers shows his sense of balance in design. He was more concerned with the sculptural elements of furniture than the joinery. His “apprentices” would make the bases for these stools and Esherick would shape the seats.

Possibly his most successful furniture design, Esherick’s library ladder includes all the elements he held dear in his art. The natural flowing twist of the main handle and asymmetric treads combined with the practical usefulness of the piece show Esherick’s total thought process for furniture design. —CB



cluding three world’s fairs. He built one-of-a-kind pieces of furniture for his clients in the isolation of his studio on the hill at a time when the term “studio furniture” didn’t exist.

And while you might not know his name, you are likely familiar with some of his best-known work. His designs are “contemporary” by today’s standards.

Pieces such his music stand, his three-legged stools and his spiral library ladder inspire and influence studio furniture makers to this day.

So you may wonder why a period furniture maker, who started wood-working in 1976, is writing about and extolling the groundbreaking vision of a contemporary artist who died in 1970? When I first stepped onto the grounds of the Wharton Esherick Museum, I immediately felt a connection. Although our design sense differed, the tactile nature of everything Esherick ever created struck a chord with me. To see his work exhibited in the place where he made it and eventually lived, made me realize there was more to woodworking than mere process.

Although I never met Wharton Esherick, a visit to his museum felt to me as if I was meeting the artist. To wander through the studio and home, and see his hand in everything from the floors and ceiling to the hand-carved latches on the doors to the iconic spiral stair that leads from the studio to his living area, brings to life the completeness with which Esherick lived his artist’s journey. It’s not like visiting a museum at all. It’s like coming home. **PWM**

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ONLINE EXTRAS

For links to all online extras, go to:

■ popularwoodworking.com/jun13

WEB: Visit the web site for the Wharton Esherick Museum.

BLOG: Read the author’s blog.

TO BUY: “Cabriole Legs Simplified,” a DVD by Charles Bender.

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