

Wharton Esherick

Museum is sculptor's masterpiece

The influence of Wharton Esherick on contemporary American furniture is vastly greater than most woodworkers know—as a visit to the Esherick Museum in Paoli, Pa., makes clear. Before his death in 1970 and since, a steady stream of artists, teachers and woodworkers have made a pilgrimage there to study his work. That is why so much of it looks familiar—there are no books about Esherick, but his work is so good and so fresh that it has been widely imitated, often unawares.

In 1913 Esherick came to his hillside in Paoli, near Valley Forge, to be a painter. He started to carve the frames for his paintings, then to make woodcuts and bas-relief carvings, then sculpture and furniture for the home and studio he was building. His achievement was to merge furniture and sculpture, elevating furniture to the level of art. His early work shows the curving line of art nouveau and the planar experiments of the cubists. The later work settles into a controlled style of natural forms that call out to be touched, sat upon, used. He worked only in local hardwoods.

Esherick's masterpiece must be the studio itself, a deceptively complex structure where he lived and worked, and which he enlarged and modified during 40 years. It is a two-story workspace where whole logs could be brought, with a balcony studio and with living quarters tucked away above and to one side. The whole is united by a marvelous branching tree of a twisted stairway so cunningly constructed that

Paneled doors carry runners for trays and writing surface of cabinet-desk, made in 1958. At left, a music stand and several stools.



View across studio shows twisting staircase and hanging lamp in background, and large sculpture rising from floor below.

the feet and hands slide effortlessly where they should. Every detail of the building and everything inside it was designed by the artist and made by hand. The coat pegs are carved with the faces of the workmen who used them. The counterweight for a hatchway into Esherick's upstairs bedroom is a carved figure climbing on the rope. Everything is fluidly carved except the kitchen corner by the window, where Esherick liked to look across the vast, wooded valley, seated on a simple plywood bench with a plywood back and loose cushions.

The deep well where he worked is filled now with monumental sculptures carved from whole logs, surrounded by a forest of smaller pieces. The balcony contains furniture and a welter of small carvings, toys, models and accessories. Two large cabinets open into desks, with trays to store drawings and writing surfaces that slide out on runners set into the doors themselves. Several of the chairs have a knobby look that pops into focus when the director, Bob Bascom, explains that Esherick once was given a barrel of hammer and ax handles. The construction principle he discovered in the hammer-handle chairs was the start of a long series of chairs, all designed to withstand tilting back on two legs.

Bascom and his wife Ruth, who is Esherick's daughter, live next door to the museum in the building that once was the furniture workshop. The artist's band saw, an ingenious transformation of a bicycle, graces their living room. They are the volunteer staff of the museum, along with Miriam Phillips, an old friend of Esherick who now is cataloging his papers. The museum operates as a nonprofit corporation, supported by the \$2 admission fee, sales of prints and postcards, and donations. It is open every weekend, and school groups can be accommodated during the week. Bascom asks visitors to write ahead to make a reservation. The address is Box 595, Paoli, Pa. 19301; the telephone number is (215) 644-5822. He sends a map giving directions from the Pennsylvania Turnpike with the reservation confirmation.

—J. K.

