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Wharton Esherick

Work of the hand, the heart and the head

by Michael Stone

On a wooded Pennsylvania hillside during the 1920s, Wharton Esherick began creating furniture that challenged the symmetry and straight lines dominating the traditional woodworking of the times. Many of his designs were inspired by the forms he saw in living things, especially in the trees surrounding his studio. His friend, the late Philadelphia architect Louis Kahn, once said, "Trees were the very life of Wharton. I never knew a man so involved with trees. He had a love affair with them; a sense of oneness with the wood itself. . . ."

Esherick's application of organic design to furniture making has since become the trend in contemporary woodworking, but few of today's craftsmen realize that Esherick was creating "modern" furniture over a generation ago, or that his work helped to free them from the restrictions of previous styles. Most of Esherick's influence is hidden, subconsciously passed from teachers who knew him and visited his studio to their students. Today, pieces that are reminiscent of Esherick's style frequently appear, though their designers may not even know about Esherick's work.

Many teachers and craftsmen working today do, however, acknowledge Esherick's influence. Arthur (Espenet) Carpenter of Bolinas, Calif., a craftsman noted for his graceful organic style, has said, "Esherick's sculptural treatment of wood, independence of working and the timing of his life make him the 20th-century progenitor of the present furni-

Esherick began work on his studio in 1926. It later became his home, and he continued to modify and add to it throughout his lifetime. The lower windows look into the main workshop (now a sculpture showroom), the upper windows into Esherick's bedroom and library. The tall wooden section contains a dining area on the first floor (with a deck attached) and a bedroom above. Esherick had always wanted a silo and in 1966 added the concrete one at right to house a kitchen and a dressing room. He directed two masons with buckets of pigmented cement to fresco the exterior in an abstract pattern inspired by the autumn colors of the landscape.

Photos, except where noted: Courtesy Wharton Esherick Museum

An Esherick woodcut, 'Diamond Rock Hill' (c. 1923), top; woodcuts led to wood sculpture. 'Reverence,' right, was carved in 1942. Above, Esherick in 1967, at age 80.

The south face of the Esherick studio and home includes the door that opens onto the coat room (shown behind the staircase, p. 54). Above is the dining area, and above that a bedroom. The foundation is limestone, the siding roughsawn oak, and the deck cedar and fir, supported by stone and plastered pillars.

ture craft." But Esherick's influence was not merely stylistic—it was also an invitation to younger craftsmen to join him in creating pieces of furniture that were also works of art. The versatile craftsman and teacher Wendell Castle of Scottsville, N.Y., revealed what he had learned from Esherick's work: "Esherick taught me that the making of furniture could be a form of sculpture; Esherick caused me to come to appreciate inherent tree characteristics in the utilization of wood; and finally he demonstrated the importance of the entire sculptural environment."

Esherick himself believed teachers inhibit the growth of developing artists and he urged students to develop their own style. He dismissed offers to teach by saying, "I make, I don't teach." However, he did open his studio to students and loved to discuss his work with them. Today, his pieces are now in the permanent collections of several major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass.

Wharton Esherick was born into an upper-middle-class Philadelphia family in 1887. His parents urged him to enter a profession, but instead he convinced them to allow him to enroll in a manual-training school. He later studied painting at the Philadelphia School of Industrial Art (now the Philadelphia College of Art) and at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and came away with an intense desire to draw and paint.

Esherick began to work with wood in 1919, carving frames for his Impressionistic paintings to make them more salable. His friend, the writer Sherwood Anderson, once told him that his frames were better than his paintings. During the twenties and thirties, Esherick combined his love of drawing and wood by carving woodcuts. These appeared in magazines such as *Vanity Fair* and in nine books, including two volumes of Walt Whitman's poems.

Woodcuts seem to have engendered Esherick's interest in sculpture of wood. Although furniture and interiors dominated his career, Esherick grew to love and depend on sculpture for giving him the greatest freedom of expression. "Reverence," above, is one of his most memorable works. Originally created to mark the grave of Sherwood Anderson, this haunting figure of an aged traveler leaning on his staff is carved from a single black walnut log and stands 12 ft. tall. Though Esherick appreciated the effects of weathering (in

some cases having exterior pieces painted as needed, often in a different color), Anderson's widow felt the sculpture would not survive the elements. Esherick replaced it with an abstract in black granite, and "Reverence" was acquired by the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Esherick first made furniture for himself; his skills were largely self-taught. At the urging of friends he made some pieces to sell and found them more marketable than paintings and woodcuts, which by the late 1930s he had given up in favor of furniture, interiors, utensils and sculpture.

Esherick's style evolved through several phases; his earliest furniture is decorated with low-relief, woodcut-like carvings. The red oak drop-leaf desk he made for himself in 1927 (next page, bottom left) illustrates this attention to surface design, soon to disappear entirely from his work. The carvings on the lower doors are abstractions of various trees native to the area around Esherick's studio—black cherry, maple, hickory. On the drop leaf of the desk is meant to be a view of the branches of trees when seen from below. The two top doors, behind which Esherick kept books, are carved in images of the hawks that soared overhead. The desk measures 6½ ft. tall, and its bulky symmetry has little resemblance to his later, more sculptural work, though the carved handholds are characteristic. Esherick's consummate use of space, however, is typical: The desk has a deep, wide, short drawer in its base, making functional that space which is usually wasted. The drop leaf and cabinet doors swing on rounded wooden hinges cut from the door itself.

During the 1930s, Esherick's work is characterized by bold angles and precise, cubist shapes, A good example is the intricate corner writing desk he made in 1931 (facing page, top left). The desk rises into a peak like a fractured prism, its outside of black walnut with ebony bead, hinges and drawer pulls; the interior is red padauk and leather. The desk opens in three hinged sections, and there are no knobs—Esherick disapproved of handholds that were attached after the fact. The desk, though strongly geometric, is comfortable and useful to work at—practicality is integral to Esherick's furniture, whatever the style.

Gradually, the sensuous, flowing style that he was to practice the rest of his life unfolded: "Some of my sculpture went into the making of furniture. I was impatient with the contemporary furniture being made—straight lines, sharp edges and right angles—and I conceived free angles and free forms; making the edges of my tables flow so that they would be attractive to feel or caress." Esherick believed that furniture should be friendly, with no sharp edges or corners. His pieces have strong, well-defined lines; they are never mushy, yet they are kindly to the touch. The spiral library ladder (facing page, top right), made of cherry with hickory legs, is a good example. The steps grow out of the vertical post like branches, softening the angularity of the joints. They are dovetailed to the legs, and here too the joint is curved over.

Esherick's fascination with using space wisely led to pieces that serve several needs. One example is a cherry piano bench that doubles as a cocktail table, made in 1950. Esherick also made for several different clients a pair of dinner tables, one with three legs and one with four. The tables usually stand in different rooms but fit together to form an extra-long table for large dinner parties. Esherick's beds, sofas and end tables usually contain drawers for storage. He shaped many of his sofas to fit odd wall spaces—some roll into the center of the room, doubling as room dividers. He often designed dining tables to match wall areas so they could be pushed back when not in use.

"My design follows function," he once said. Frequently, his ideas were a response to an unusual need. When a patron who was a composer needed a piano chair, Esherick made the chair just high enough for him to lean over the top of the piano to write music but still low enough to reach the keys. For another commission he created a portable radio-phonograph cabinet that could be tucked away into a curved corner unit holding records and sheet music (p. 56). Where the curve of the cabinet is too shallow to hold records perpendicular to the wall, Esherick angled the dividers, so that all the records are more visible than if they were stacked parallel to one another. The cabinet is cherry; shelves and drawers, which swing out on hinges along the outer edge, are oak.

The curves Esherick used in his work were dictated by the natural flow of the wood's grain; often he used root and limb wood or trees twisted or bent by the weather, as in the uprights of his dictionary stand, facing page, middle. Following the grain, rather than bending the wood, gives the piece an innate strength—the grain structure is not adulterated. Esherick objected to forcing wood into artificial shapes. When furniture maker Sam Maloof of Alta Loma, Calif., praised Castle's ability to bend wood to its limit, Esherick replied, "What did he make it out of wood for, then, if he's only after form? There's no beauty of wood there."

Esherick worked almost exclusively in local hardwoods—walnut, cherry, oak, cottonwood, hickory and dogwood—because he knew their reaction to his tools and their limits of expansion and contraction. Occasionally, the trees came from his own land. "If I can't make something beautiful out of what I find in my backyard, I had better not make anything," he once said. Esherick often combined cherry and walnut, and was particularly attracted to the much-neglected cottonwood—he found that if he took the time, he would almost always uncover a firey figure hidden within the wood.

Esherick sketched directly on the rough boards, and would readily alter his design if he uncovered interesting figure that suggested some new possibility. He once rescued a burning log from his fireplace because he saw in its shape a sculpture he later titled "Head of Mary." His relationship with his wood supplier, Ed Ray, who at 79 still runs his lumber company in Valley Forge, Pa., was a craftsman's dream. If Ray cut a log and uncovered an intriguing grain pattern, he would call Esherick and rough-cut it to his specifications. The wood was then air-dried in Esherick's shed at least one to two years per inch. Ray also stockpiled odd-shaped pieces of wood, which often became curved parts in Esherick's furniture.

Esherick's construction techniques were simple and direct. He found joinery and finishing tedious and generally assigned this work to his shop assistants, Bill McIntyre and Horace Hartshaw, so he could concentrate on the shaping. McIntyre was with Esherick for 42 years, and Hartshaw, who still produces some pieces of Esherick's design, joined them in 1959 for the final 10 years. Hartshaw introduced several machines to Esherick's work where previously all the joinery had been done by hand—Hartshaw began cutting dovetails with a router while trying to maintain a handcut look. Esherick, nevertheless, personally involved himself with every piece and generally signed and dated all his work.

Wherever possible, Esherick used round tenons because

The cherry uprights of this dictionary stand (1962), below left, were shaped by nature, not steam-bent. The top is cottonwood, the shelves walnut. However, Esherick did steam-bend a few pieces, such as the hickory library ladder (1935), left, topped by caricatures of an elephant and a donkey. The library ladder (1969), below, of cherry and hickory, is one of Esherick's last pieces.

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Bulky forms and woodcut-like relief carvings are typical of Esherick's early work—this red oak drop-leaf desk (1927), above, which stands 6½ ft. tall, holds his drawings and woodcuts. Next in Esherick's evolution were strong, geometric forms. His pyramid corner desk (1931), top, of walnut, ebony, padauk and leather, adapted cubist ideas to furniture design. When it's open, a person seated at it will find the cover leaves folded out of the way, leg-room ample, and the drawers and dividers angled conveniently around.

Below, victrola cabinet of padauk (1938) built seven years after the pyramid desk, is another variation of cubist ideas. The cabinet front is frame and panel, though Esherick altered the basic configuration by tapering rails, stiles and panels. The figure atop the cabinet, 'Finale,' was made in 1928, of walnut.

Hammer-handle chair (1930), an example of Esherick's imaginative use of found objects, is comfortable and made extremely strong by careful triangulation of the legs.

Esherick's three-legged stools all stand on hickory legs, but no two seats are alike—he shaped each individually, according to the wood at hand. These stools were made between 1948 and 1968; the seats of the outer stools are walnut, and the center seat is coffeewood.

Red oak spiral staircase, made in 1930, connects the main floor, the dining area and Esherick's bedroom in the loft (right). Despite its unorthodox shape and lack of a continuous handrail, feet and hands travel effortlessly upon it—a tribute to its cunning construction. The steps are tenoned into the massive post and drawn up with 8-in. bolts through nuts set into the tenon.

Carved rosewood latch (1926) inside the front door is typical of the detail work in Esherick's studio. He designed and made everything from lamps and switchplates to radiator covers, all to this standard.

they could be twisted into a mortise for a tight fit. In Esherick's three-legged stools, where cross members and legs had to be brought together all at once, this proved especially helpful. A disadvantage of using round tenons is the resulting poor glue bond, since long grain is only partially glued to long grain. He would strengthen his joints with wedges in kerfs in the tenons or with wooden nails driven into holes bored through the side of the joint. Wooden nails are stronger than dowels because they are split along natural lines of cleavage and the grain is continuous. They are diamond-shaped in cross section, and the sharp edges slice into the grain as the nail is pounded home.

Esherick was not sentimental about crafting by hand, saying, "I use any damn machinery I can get hold of. . .I'll use my teeth if I have to. There's a little of the hand, but the main thing is the heart and the head." The tool Esherick relied on most was the band saw. He had two of them: One, made from two bicycle wheels by his first cabinetmaker, Jon Schmidt, had its column on the right; the other had the standard left-hand column. Esherick was therefore free to run the work through from whichever side was handier. After the form was rough-cut, Esherick would shape it by hand with gouges and rasps or with a stationary belt sander if the contours were broad. The shop also contained a thickness planer, jointer, drill press, table saw and radial arm saw.

Because Esherick valued the beauty inherent in wood and respected its temperament, he often called attention to checks in his furniture, rather than trying to hide them. Likewise, he appreciated knots for the texture they contribute. Esherick believed furniture should be used freely and not pampered, as illustrated by his facetious formula for finishing: "Take a tabletop. Throw oil all over it, add salt and pepper. Rub them in carefully, then scrub them off with an abrasive cleaner." Tables, he said, are like shoes, and improve with use.

For more serious finishing, Esherick preferred boiled linseed oil, except for a few cocktail tables and countertops, which he treated with epoxy. Esherick rubbed the oil into the wood with sandpaper, then wiped it dry. One application was administered daily, using progressively finer grits of sandpaper. The final oiling was applied with rottenstone and worked into the wood with bare hand.

Esherick worked until his death at age 83 in 1970. His family and close friends preserved his home, and in October 1972 it opened as a museum. In the museum's collection are several models, prototypes and examples of designs Esherick used repeatedly, including his three-legged stools and hammer-handle chairs (p. 54, top). The stools are probably Esherick's most familiar and most widely imitated work. They were easy to make and sell, and he referred to them as his "bread and butter." The legs of the stools were always hickory, but the seats could be anything from coffeewood to dogwood. Whenever Esherick or his assistants found a piece of crotchwood lying by the roadside, they saved it for stool seats. Esherick fashioned each seat according to the shape suggested by the wood's figure, and no two are alike.

Two barrels of hammer handles purchased at auction were the genesis of Esherick's hammer-handle chairs. They were set aside, and when some time later the actors of Hedgerow Theatre, an impoverished repertory company, approached him for seating, Esherick constructed 48 chairs with the back legs angled out so the sitter could easily lean back. Under his direction, the actors finished the chairs themselves and laced the seats with painted canvas belting used to drive factory machinery. As with most chair designs, Esherick kept the prototype for his own use.

Esherick was fond of recycling materials in unusual ways. Besides hammer handles, machinery drive belts and bicycle wheels, Esherick also found a use for a couple of oxtail vertebrae from a favorite soup prepared by his neighbor. The intriguing shapes still serve as a lamp-pull weight in Esherick's dining area.

Esherick is as well known for his interiors as he is for his furniture. He received the gold medal of honor from the Architectural League of New York in 1958, and the American Institute of Architects posthumously awarded him their gold medal for craftsmanship in 1971. Perhaps the quintessence of Esherick's ideals of a totally sculptured living space is his studio, begun in 1926 on a wooded hill just above his farmhouse, 20 miles west of Philadelphia (p. 50). As with many of his other works, nature supplied his raw materials—sandstone and oak. Inside and out, every aspect of the studio was shaped by Esherick's hand. The stone walls rise from the foundation and slope inward like an old tree trunk, and the roof gently sags across its ridge. Eventually Esherick made the studio his home. Doors, walls, ceilings, furniture, lamps, light switches, mirrors, bowls and plates were all crafted by Esherick into a unified work of art. He even shaped the oak toilet seat, forged the door hinges, and had a coppersmith line the wooden sink in the kitchen. (The shape of the sink is free-form, and it receives a free-form cutting board, plucked from an overhead beam, to enlarge the kitchen's counter area.) The floorboards are a mosaic of apple and walnut cutoffs discarded by his woodman, Ed Ray. They are not nailed, but splined. Each room is comfortable and unique. Doorpulls, spoons, pot handles and the twining railings fit perfectly into both hand and spirit.

The careful use of space and characteristic irregular walls give some Esherick interiors a ship-like appearance. Esherick's own kitchen occupies one level of a cylindrical addition to his studio, called "the silo." Utensils and pots hang from the crowded ceiling, and curved shelving fits against the round walls, strongly suggestive of a ship's galley. The view from the kitchen is one of the best in the house—"A kitchen should have a good view; people spend a lot of time there. . ." said Esherick, although Miriam Phillips, his long-time companion, adds, "Esherick didn't."

The studio centers around a spiral staircase made of red oak, which sprouts from the main floor and ascends to Esherick's bedroom in the loft (p. 54, bottom left). The stairs divide at the fourth step, the spiral continuing for six more steps, then straightening out up to the bedroom. The other section scoops down from the dining area to meet the center column. The steps are tenoned into the twisting 9¾-ft. center post and secured with metal bolts. Like most of Esherick's larger works, the stairs can be disassembled, and twice they have been removed for exhibition in New York.

The home of Judge Curtis and Nellie Lee Bok of Radnor, Pa., was one of Esherick's earliest interiors, and the work commissioned by Judge Bok helped keep Esherick employed during the lean years of the Depression. The spiral staircase at the Bok's (p. 56, top) rises in the front hall, welcoming guests to an exceptional home. The steps are solid white pine beams, once part of a bridge (believed to date back to the

Stairs, left and above (seen from below), designed and built for the front hall of the Bok house (1935) from solid white pine beams.

Library fireplace and music-room doorway of the Bok house, above. The arches over fireplace and door were built in 1936 of white oak. The music-room fireplace in the background is plaster and the ceiling is white pine boards joined with full-length tongue and grooves. The curved storage unit for phonograph records and sheet music, right, made of cherry, is built into a corner. The angle of the partitions is varied to utilize the depth of the corner and to provide easy access to all the albums. The separate unit is a radio-phonograph cabinet. The window, sculpted to resemble a curtain blowing open, reflects the spirit of playfulness Esherick brought to much of his work. In the Bok's dining room, the fireplace mantel (1935), above right, is solid chestnut oak with a stone hearth, surrounded by a copper arch.

Revolution) that spanned the Delaware River. The first ten steps are free-standing, held in alignment with a 2-in. wide iron band that runs through the outer edge of each step. The eleventh step is anchored to the rear wall, and adjacent steps are joined with wedged dowels. After several years, at the request of Mrs. Bok, Esherick added polished iron railings for safety and to accentuate the curves.

The current owners of the Bok house carpeted the steps to protect them from spike-heeled shoes; the pine scratched easily, and repeated sanding wore the steps down to the iron band. Years later Esherick admitted the staircase should have been made of oak, although that would have sacrificed the knotty texture and golden color of the pine.

For Judge Bok, Esherick also designed a padauk and walnut library, which holds 8,000 volumes. A hidden shelf pulls out from among the books to hold large reference works. The arching library ladder (p. 53), topped with caricatures of a donkey and an elephant, playfully symbolizes Bok's bid for public office and marks Esherick's transition from the cubism prevalent through the Bok house to the more sculptural, organic style he worked in for the rest of his life.

The commissions of Lawrence and Alice Seiver of Villanova, Pa., represent Esherick's work during the 1960s. Esherick replaced the usual draperies in the living room with an abstract window screen of wooden slats and paneled the wall over the fireplace in a bold configuration of splined boards suggestive of brushstrokes (right). Esherick constructed the paneling like a huge jigsaw puzzle. He routed grooves ⅛ in. deep along the edges of the 1-in. panels, and cut ¼-in. plywood splines to fit the grooves and join the panels. The splines are about 1 3/16 in. wide and nailed to furring strips which, in turn, are anchored to the wall beneath. Esherick didn't glue the splines into the panels but rather secured them at a precise distance to allow the panels to expand and contract freely without buckling or showing too much spline. Esherick painted the splines in bright colors, which can be appreciated in the winter. In the summer, when the boards expand, the colorful splines disappear.

Esherick also splined his curved paneled sofas and cabinets, but since these are not framed with a lower rail, he glued one side of each spline to keep it from slipping out of the bottom of the slot. He formed the curve of these pieces by mounting the boards on a bandsawn batten screwed on from behind. For wall paneling around a fireplace, he would insert a metal strip between the top of the fireplace and the bottom of the paneling in order to secure the panels and to prevent flames from leaping behind the wood.

Wharton Esherick was a quiet man—shy, some would say. He rarely left his studio, preferring to communicate through his work. Craftsmen who knew him remember him as being highly opinionated on questions of design, although he never criticized a fellow artist. He rarely socialized and would not attend any function where the invitation suggested "formal attire." He worked incessantly, never taking a vacation because he could not imagine an activity more enjoyable than being in his shop. His son remembers hearing Esherick arise in the middle of the night to run the band saw. "If you take the fun away," Esherick often said, "I don't want anything to do with it." □

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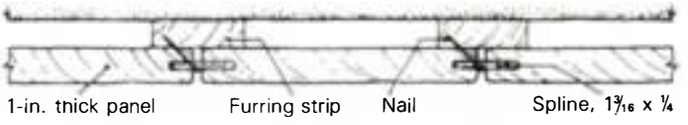
During the 1960s Esherick did extensive work for Lawrence and Alice Seiver of Villanova, Pa. Window and fireplace paneling in their living room is tulip poplar; construction is shown below. Esherick also made the shelving and curved paneled sofa.

Wall paneling construction



Walnut and leather chair. Slats in the walnut grill covering an air-conditioning unit go from flat tenons at the bottom to round tenons at the top. (Commissioned by the Schuette-Koerting factory, 1942.)

The Wharton Esherick Museum (Esherick's studio and more than 200 pieces of his work) is open by appointment on weekends to groups of six people or less, and on weekdays to larger groups or school tours. The museum is staffed by volunteers: Bob Bascom, the director; his wife, Ruth (Esherick's daughter); and Miriam Phillips, Esherick's long-time companion. Reservations, which include a one-hour guided tour of the museum, are required, and an admission fee of $2 per person should accompany the request. The address of the museum is Box 595, Paoli, Pa. 19301, and the telephone number is (215) 644-5822. A map giving directions from the Pennsylvania Turnpike is sent with the reservation confirmation.