

Exhibits of Wharton Esherick Works

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New York World Fair (1939)

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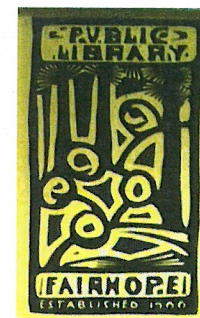


WHARTON ESHERICK

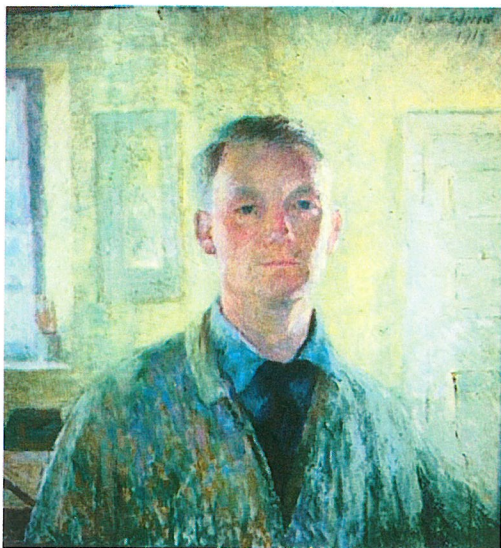
**A
Lecture
By**

Mark Sfirri

**Saturday
January 8, 2011
1:00 PM**



Fairhope Public Library



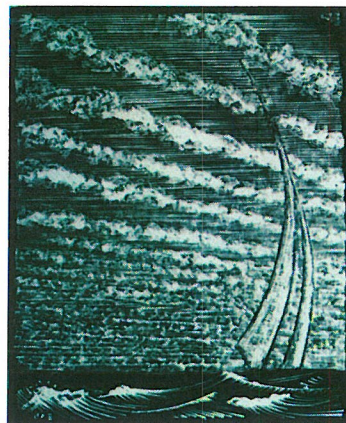
**Wharton Esherick
1919**

Mark Sfirri will give a talk on the development of the artistic career of Wharton Esherick. Esherick is the founder of the studio furniture movement in the United States. His career began as a painter and illustrator. A very important shift in his focus began after a visit to Fairhope in the winter of 1919-1920. Wharton Esherick and his family came to Fairhope from Paoli, Pennsylvania (near Philadelphia). His wife, Lettie, wanted to learn from Mrs. Marietta Johnson so that she could begin a school similar to The Organic School back in Pennsylvania. Esherick taught manual arts at the school. While in Fairhope, Wharton painted, but also began a career in wood carving. He made carved frames for his paintings. In addition he met Mary E Marcy, an author and labor movement advocate, also visiting Fairhope. He made wood block prints for her book, *Rhymes of Early Jungle Folk* (1922) which led to other illustrations by him for books of Walt Whitman.

Esherick revisited Fairhope in 1929-1930, and again in 1930-1931. During those trips he made a number of prints related to Fairhope and created some sculptural ceramic pieces with Peter McAdam in Daphne. By 1930, Esherick's woodworking career was launched and would be his focus for the next forty years of his life. Sfirri will trace Esherick's influences, various artistic directions, and the evolution of the work that he produced over his lifetime.

Mark Sfirri

Mark Sfirri is a furniture maker and teacher who has been researching Wharton Esherick for the past four years. He has written four articles on Esherick and is working on a fifth. He was a guest curator for two exhibitions on Esherick currently on view at the University of Pennsylvania, he gave a paper on the prints of Wharton Esherick at a symposium held in conjunction with the exhibitions titled "Wharton Esherick and the Birth of the American Modern." Sfirri was selected for the prestigious Distinguished Educator Award by the Renwick Alliance in 2010.



Books Illustrated by Wharton Esherick

Rhymes of Early Jungle Folk
by Mary E Marcy

Song of the Broad-Axe
by Walt Whitman

Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine
by D.H. Lawrence

Yokohama Garlands and Other Poems
by A.E. Coppard

The Song of Solomon,
published by Centaur Press

Stuffed Peacocks
by Emily Clark

As I Watched the Plowman Ploughing
by Walt Whitman

Tristan and Iseult
by Amory Hare

Bright Mariner
by Katherine Garrison Chapin

Thwarted Ambitions
by Robert Lane Anderson



Mark Sfirri's lecture is sponsored by

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Saturday January 8, 2011
1 PM

The Artistic Career of Wharton Esherick

A lecture by
Mark Sfirri

Esherick is the founder of the studio furniture movement in the United States. His career began as a painter and illustrator. An important shift occurred in his focus after a visit to Fairhope in the winter of 1919-1920. His wife Lettie wanted to learn from Marietta Johnson so she could begin a school similar to the Organic School back in Pennsylvania. While in Fairhope Wharton painted, but he began his career in wood carving.

Sfirri is a furniture maker and an award-winning teacher who has been researching Esherick for four years.

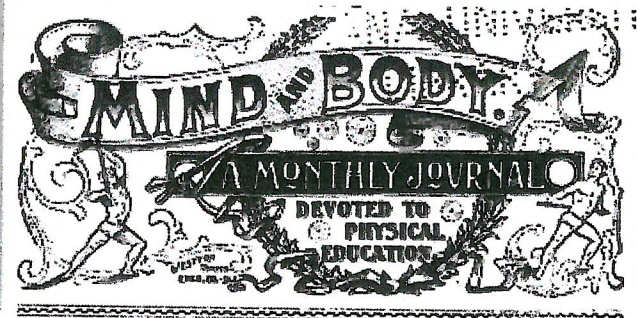
Sunday January 9, 2011
3:30 PM

Lydia J. Newcomb Comings: Teacher, Lec- turer, Author, Librarian, and Historian

A lecture by
Alan Samry

Comings was teaching music, lecturing and writing books on physical education in the late 1800s. Comings arrived in Fairhope in 1904, and in 1907 co-founded the Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education. She was instrumental in organizing and expanding the women's club movement in Baldwin County. She was active in the growth and development of the Fairhope Library and founded the Baldwin County Historical Society in 1923.

Samry works part-time at the Fairhope Public Library and is a full-time student pursuing his MFA in creative writing.



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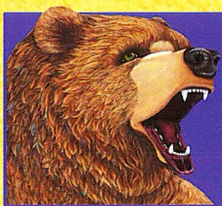
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- Blade size: 165" long (1/4" - 1 3/8")
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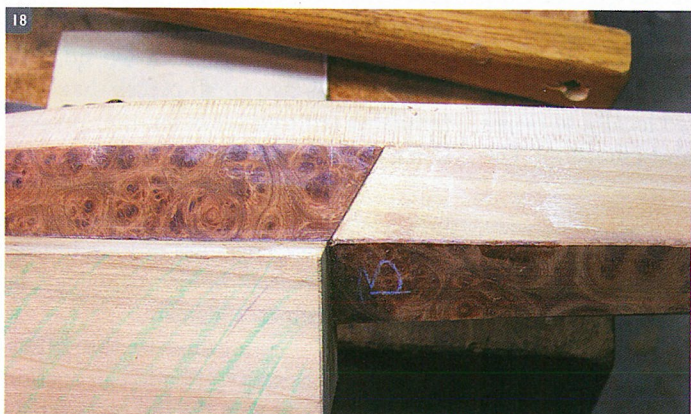


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sound. Be careful not to stretch the veneer too much or it will shrink and crack as it dries. If the glue has cooled before you are satisfied, warm it with a hot iron (set to permanent press). Pushing against cold glue will crack and ruin the veneer.

The next pieces to go on are #1 and #6, which must be curved to match the line at the cabinet. Use a template to find the correct line and carefully trim the veneer to shape (16). These are the only pieces that need a close fit, as all others simply overlap.

Use the hammer to press the first piece along the edge. Don't worry about the section below the case (17).

Use a veneer saw to cut on an angle from

the bottom point of the cabinet. Heat the cutoff section with an iron and remove it (18). Find a good color match, and avoid any obvious grain discrepancies, and the seam will become nearly invisible (19, 20). The last piece is ready to be glued on (21).

FINAL DRESSING

The edges of the veneer are often a visual distraction. For this project, I did not add the vertical inlay stripe that Ruhlmann often did to hide this problem, but I could imagine working with Michael Fortune's very clever inlay tool [see *Woodwork* #73, February 2002] to do the job. Return the leg to the lathe, and guide the cutter hori-

zontally along a shelf the way you did with a pencil earlier. I have had great success with this simple tool.

Instead, I chose to feather the edges down until only the glue line was visible between the facets. Sticklers may complain that the facets are now not exactly equal, but keep your calipers in your pocket: if the presentation is clean, the eye will be satisfied.

Paul Henry has been building and restoring furniture for more than 30 years. He is an instructor of furniture design at Palomar College, and an aspiring luthier. His website is: www.paulhenryfurniture.com.

THE HAMMER-HANDLED CHAIRS

Found object art by Wharton Esherick

BY MARK SFIRRI

My favorite example of found object art is the simple, direct, and powerful “Bull’s Head” by Pablo Picasso, made, depending on which source you believe, in 1942 or 1943. It is composed of a bicycle’s saddle and handlebars: mounted to a wall, the saddle hangs vertically and serves as the head of the bull, and the up-turned handlebars, affixed to the top, are the horns. Placed in a new context, the parts are transformed. (An image of this work is included in most books on the history of modern art. You can find it at the beginning of H. W. Janson’s *History of Art*).

But before that, in 1938, in Paoli, Pennsylvania—at that time a rural outpost northwest of Philadelphia—Wharton Esherick designed a series of chairs made from hammer handles. He, too, took a common object and put it into a different context to create a form that was as far from the intended use as Picasso’s “Bull’s Head” was from a bicycle.

Esherick’s furniture can be divided into three phases. These phases overlapped chronologically, but the style of each is distinctive. The central features of his early work, beginning in the 1920s, were bas-relief carved panels much like the blocks for his woodcut prints. His print cabinet and wonderful folding screen [see *Woodwork* #105, June 2007] are examples from this period. From about 1930 to as late as 1937 his work was much more angular and was heavily influenced by German Expressionism and Cubism. In the mid-1930s, he developed a much more fluid,

organic style characterized by curved, soft-edged lines and asymmetry, an approach that persisted through the rest of his career.

Esherick’s earliest use of found objects dates to the early 1930s, when he used wagon wheels, purchased locally, to create tables, benches, chairs, and a footstool. The

radius was a fixed dimension, but he cut the pieces up into smaller arcs to allow the curve to flow with his designs. Some of the chairs use a half-wheel for each side; the footstool has two small pieces that were remnants left over from another project. Once the wheels were cut, they lost their

original reference and became simply curved parts. Esherick’s next use of found materials, however, maintained the object’s identity.

Sometime in the 1930s, Esherick attended an auction and won the bid on two barrels containing about five hundred hammer handles from a local manufacturer who had gone out of business. He had no plans for them at the time; he just saw them as interesting forms in hickory and ash.

Esherick had begun an association with the Hedgerow Theatre, in Rose Valley, Pennsylvania, in the mid-1920s. He designed and built sets for them and made woodcut prints that served as posters for their plays. In 1937, when his daughter Ruth wanted to apprentice there, Esherick contracted to pay her way by making some much-needed chairs for the rehearsal hall. It was then that the hammer-handled chair was conceived.

Unlike Picasso, Esherick faced requirements beyond the visual in his use of these found objects. Chairs need to be comfortable and to stand up to the rigors of constant use. The structural elements of these chairs were composed of two predetermined lengths of hammer handles, neither



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WHARTON ESHERICK MUSEUM

EVOLUTION OF A DESIGN

Shown above and on the opposite page are examples of one chair from each batch of the “Hammer Handle Chairs.” The earliest chairs are in the top row above. Each batch displayed a variation in the number and configuration of struts and stretchers.





PHOTO COURTESY OF SOLO RAGO MODERN AUCTIONS



PHOTO BY MARK SFIRRI

At left, an example of an "Ash Chair" from 1958. The configuration of rails and stretchers is similar to the last version of the true hammer-handled chairs. Above, a detail of a true "Hammer Handle Chair" showing the through-tenon construction. The back seat rail is actually a hatchet handle.

of which could serve as a back leg that could reach from the crest rail to the floor. The resulting engineering, a kind of immovable folding chair effect, seems inspired by Rube Goldberg, or even Dr. Seuss (though long before those books were written). They are mostly symmetrical from the front view, but the hammer handles are not, because they thicken up where the hammer's head would have been attached. Picasso's piece was unique, but Esherick's design had four variations within a short span of time, and was further distilled decades later. It was a work in progress.

He made about forty-five chairs altogether, thirty-six of which went to Hedgerow. The design changed with each batch. The first group, made up of as many as twelve hammer handles, had legs that did not splay out much and were tippy. The crest rails were narrow and high, making the chairs less pleasing visually and less comfortable than those that followed. The

seats were made of 4"-wide canvas machine belting that had grommets underneath and hemp rope woven through them to pull the seats taut. The tops of the seats were painted with a color that Esherick had mixed up. Later changes in the designs, especially lowering and widening the crest rails, made the chairs more comfortable and more pleasing aesthetically. I suspect that the first attempts required a lot more head scratching and, consequently, more time. Perhaps that's why Esherick considered that those chairs should cost \$8.36 each, as compared to \$5.66 for the third batch. The average price of all of the chairs was \$6.53 and the total for all thirty-six was \$235.20. [At a recent auction, a hammer-handled chair in need of repair sold for more than \$10,000.00 (with the juice)!]

When Esherick's supply of handles began to run low and there were orders to fill, he reduced the number of handles used in each chair. When he completely

ran out, he started to make shaped pieces, oval in cross-section, which simulated the cross-section of the hammer handles. Though the individual elements were no longer asymmetrical over their length, one needs to look closely to see that they are not hammer handles. These are known as his ash chairs. Interestingly, a design that had been dictated by the use of hammer handles of specific lengths, that consequently needed extra engineering, had become the mandatory form when the handles ran out. The new ash Esherick used could have been any length, allowing a different, easier design.

In 2006, an inventory of the chairs at Hedgerow was taken. There were only eight remaining! It had become a tradition to send a chair off with an actor or actress upon retirement. Ray Kelso, a local woodworker, was hired to repair the remaining chairs and found them in remarkably good condition. This is a testament to Esherick's engineering and construction. Chairs are probably the most abused pieces of furniture and this was after nearly seventy years of use. One chair did need a new rail, but the rest were all structurally sound. Many had to be re-glued and have the wedges of the through tenons replaced. They were cleaned and finished with linseed oil, Esherick's standard finish. Four of these chairs, one from each batch, were displayed at the Wharton Esherick Museum in the spring of 2006, and are now on display in the lobby at the theater.

Over the years as more and more people got to see the chairs at Hedgerow, it became clear that Esherick had unknowingly marketed his work to an ever-changing audience. This distinctive collection of chairs is quintessential Esherick. What began as a chance purchase of a lot of hammer handles and proceeded as a quick project to help pay for an apprenticeship, developed into an important chapter in the work of one of the most significant figures in the American craft movement of the twentieth century.

THE NEXT TIME you are in the Philadelphia area, take in a show at the Hedgerow Theatre, in Rose Valley, Pennsylvania, in operation since the 1920s. During the intermission, you will have a chance to see a number of Esherick chairs and a table in the lobby. Some of the chairs shown in this article are on display.

Of course, you should visit the Wharton Esherick Museum in Paoli, Pennsylvania, adjacent to

Valley Forge National Park. The museum requires reservations; docents lead tours for all visitors. And it's not possible to say that you've been there and seen everything if you've only gone once or twice. I have been there probably thirty times since 1975 and I still find new things to marvel at. When I take my students there each fall, I am their docent. It's quite a privilege. The museum is closed for January and February.

Mark Sfirri is the coordinator of and professor in the Fine Woodworking Program at Bucks County Community College in Newtown, Pennsylvania. He is also a woodworker who makes furniture and sculpture that typically involve lathe-turned parts. He has been a Wharton Esherick fan since the early 1970s.

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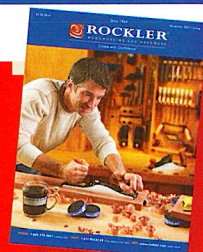
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and rungs. I also took the detail a step further by scoring sweeping arcs on the arms and on the chair's back slat.

LOOKING FORWARD

The designs of the chairs made in the New Lebanon Shaker community were in a constant state of evolution throughout the 19th century. Early on, in response to the dictates of the movement's founder, Mother Ann Lee, the chairs made there were light and plain, making the maximum use of minimum material.

Later, under the direction of Brother Robert Wagan (the genius behind the most successful commercial enterprise undertaken by 19th century Shakers), the New Lebanon chair designs were standardized to suit the requirements of mass production and mass marketing.

And later still, at the end of the New Lebanon chair-making operation, when the staff had been reduced to a pair of elderly women—Sister Lillian Barlow and Sister Sarah Collins—the designs were simplified even more, to the point at which rungs and posts were merely dowels, with rudimentary finials turned atop the back posts.

As I explore ideas that occur to me as a 21st century craftsman and work to integrate the best of them into coherent chair forms in which the Shaker antecedents are still present, I see myself as part of this continuum.

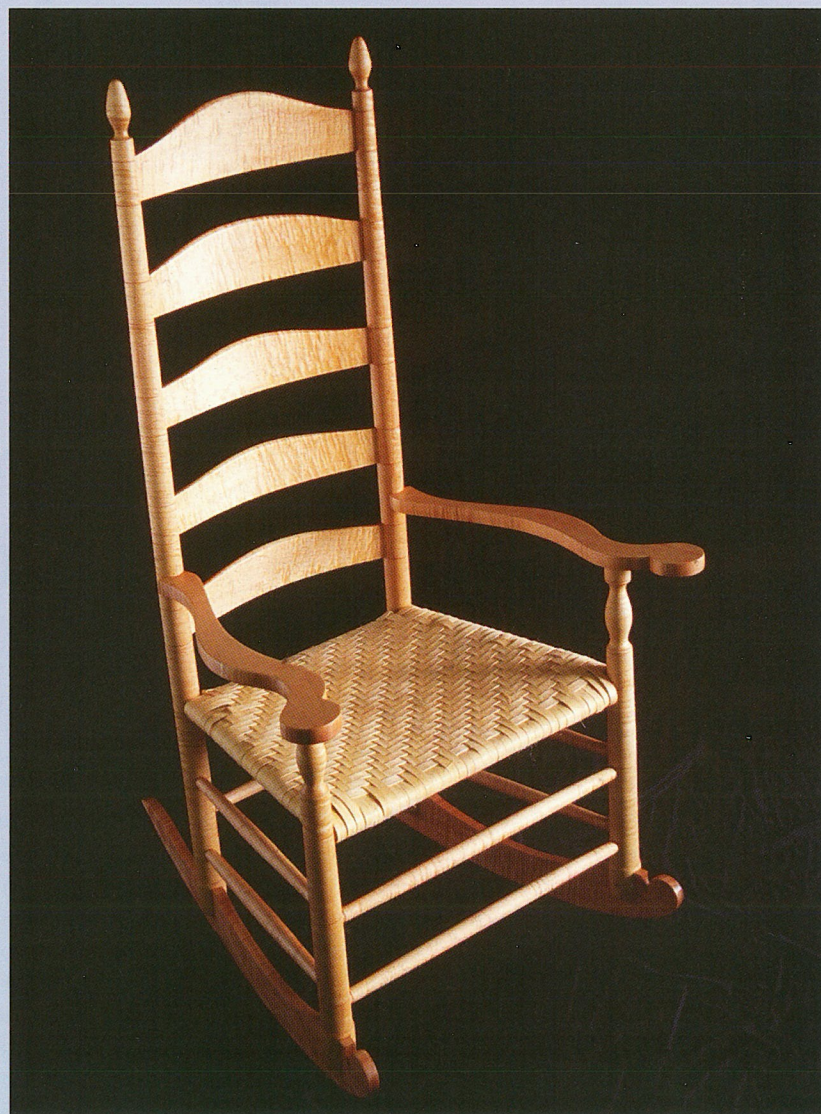
SHAKER CRAFTSMAN GOES ROGUE

Twenty years ago, while visiting the Warren County Museum in Lebanon, Ohio, I saw the original Union Village rocker on which this copy (the only one I've built) is based. This delightful form is an exception to the idea that 19th century Shaker chair forms evolved over the course of years.

Like New Lebanon chairs, Union Village chairs share common features that identify their community of origin. They typically have Gothic-shaped arcs on the top edge of some or all of their back slats. These arcs are bandsawn halfway from both ends. In addition, Union Village arm profiles tend to be quite simple.

This chair, however, lacks these identifiable Union Village features. The top edges of its back slats rise in bold full-length arcs. The number of slats is also unusual. Chairs with two, three, and four slats are quite common in the Shaker Universe. Chairs with five slats—like this example—are quite rare.

But the most remarkable departure from Union Village norms resides in this chair's serpentine arms, a feature I've seen on only three Shaker chairs, all of which originated at Union Village. Although I haven't found a scrap of documentary evidence to support the idea, I suspect that at some point in the 19th century, a Union Village chair maker was willing to break with established community traditions in order to make his own bold design statements.





A QUESTION OF INFLUENCE

COMPARING THE MUSIC STANDS OF FOUR MASTERS

BY MARK SFIRRI

Several years ago I was talking to Edward S. Cooke, Jr., the Charles F. Montgomery Professor of American Decorative Arts at Yale University, on the subject of Wharton Esherick (1887-1970). Cooke mentioned that Esherick, who began his woodworking in 1920 and is considered the progenitor of the American studio furniture movement, had inspired other woodworkers to make

music stands, and cited the *Woodenworks* exhibition of 1972 (1) as evidence. *Woodenworks* was the inaugural exhibition at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. A look back at the show provides a snapshot of a time in the creative lives of five woodworkers who were to be leading influences in the development of American studio furniture. The five were Esherick,

Arthur Espenet Carpenter (1920-2006), Sam Maloof (1916-2009), Wendell Castle (1932-) and George Nakashima (1905-1990). I was lucky enough to have seen that exhibition and had images of the pieces included in it, so I went back and looked at them. Sure enough, there were four music stands in the show, one each by Esherick, Carpenter, Maloof and Castle. They seemed like such obvious nods



1. Esherick's pieces on display at *Woodenworks*, 1972. *Woodenworks*, sponsored jointly by the Smithsonian Institution and the Minnesota Museum of Art, was the inaugural exhibition at the Renwick Gallery of the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C. Photo courtesy of the American Craft Council Library Slide Study Collection. Opposite page: Wharton Esherick, *Single Music Stand* (1951); walnut; 44-1/4" x 19-7/8" x 19-3/4". Photo by Mark Sfirri.

to Esherick that I was surprised that I hadn't noticed it earlier. Cooke attributes their choice of subject to the interconnection at the time of craftspeople and other sorts of artists, especially musicians.

Wharton Esherick's iconic *Single Music Stand* (opposite) was not included in *Woodenworks* (a later, double music stand was), but it is essential to examine this stand first in order to understand Esherick's influence. Examples of it are in the permanent collections of a number of important museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Art Gallery. It was commissioned in 1951 by Rose and Nat Robinson, who kept it in their house, where it remained largely unseen until its appearance at the 1958 Brussels World's Fair. An image of the stand appeared in the May/June 1958 issue of *Craft Horizons* magazine, the

forerunner of *American Craft*, in an article about American craft included in the Fair. It also appeared in Esherick's major retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Craft (later the American Craft Museum, and now Museum of Art and Design) in 1958 in New York City.

Esherick was an artist who worked and experimented in more than one medium. He was a painter, printmaker and sculptor, as well as a furniture maker, and there were more hits and misses in his work than there might have been in the career of someone who follows a narrower path. As important an object as this music stand has become, it was his first effort and it does have flaws. Its curved front legs end abruptly at the horizontal element where the sheet music rests. The line of the front legs continues with several small vertical dowels, which don't

allow the line to flow. The upper frame that holds the music is disproportionately large compared to the base. It appears to be leaning forward and turns out to be tippy, too. (The lower shelf is structural, but was also intended to provide a spot for Mrs. Robinson's drink while she played her cello.) The stand has the softened edges and curved elements typical of much of Esherick's work. The stand exhibited in *Woodenworks* was his later *Double Music Rack*, one of only two or three double stands that he made. The scale of this stand's upper frame is much more in keeping with the size of the base, and it's stable. It's also smaller than the original single stand. Visually, the double stand (2) is more successful.

Art Carpenter's music stand that appeared in *Woodenworks* used design elements that also appeared in tables that he was making at

2



2. Wharton Esherick, *Double Music Rack* (1962); walnut and cherry; 39" x 21" x 17-1/2". Photo by Mark Sfirri.

3



3. Arthur Espenet Carpenter, *Double Music Stand*, (1968; design introduced 1961); cherry and walnut, 54"-68" x 21" x 13". Photo by Art and Tripp Carpenter.

the time. There is an earthy, primitive look to Carpenter's stand (3) that is characteristic of his work. The four curving legs, perched like a spider's, do not meet tidily mitered together around the vertical stem. Unlike Esherick's stand, the base elements are separated from the upper portion. The vertical column and two branches curve out to support the upper section. It isn't graceful but it has a vibrating energy. In some subsequent stands, the vertical elements that support the music pierce the top and bottom crosspieces, emphasizing this effect.

Sam Maloof's furniture falls into two general categories. His chairs—the work most people associate with him—are his most sculptural work, characterized by sweeping curves and shaped elements with crisp lines

of definition reminiscent of Art Nouveau. The second category, his case goods and tables, comprises mostly pieces constructed from two-dimensional cutouts with rounded over edges. His *Double Music Rack* (4) falls more into this latter category. The base is delicate, but even though the two racks are better proportioned than Esherick's first design, the use of solid wood panels to support the music makes it appear top-heavy.

Unlike the music stands of Carpenter and Maloof, Esherick's and Wendell Castle's cannot be adjusted for height or angle of tilt. At the time that he made his stand in 1963, Castle was mainly producing sculptural, stack-laminated furniture, work that is relatively heavy visually. He took a different approach with his *Music Rack* (5). Its slender

bent wood parts allow for lightness, creating a harmonious composition that sweeps up to the top and then curves back down to present a lightweight support to hold the music. The form has a lyrical quality very expressive of the concept of music. If ever there were a piece that embodied function in form, this is it.

Wondering what Castle and Maloof thought about the idea that Esherick had influenced their music stands, I spoke to them both in 2007. Castle said that he didn't recall seeing one of Esherick's music stands before he designed his. He explained that his wife at that time was a classical musician and he made music stands for her and several of her friends. Castle certainly acknowledged Esherick's general influence, however, in the



4. Sam Maloof, *Double Music Rack*, (1971; design introduced 1960); walnut, 44-1/2" x 48" x 30". Photo courtesy of the American Craft Council Library Slide Study Collection.

catalog for *Woodenworks* and in the August 1970 issue of *Craft Horizons*, where he wrote a tribute to Esherick, who had died in May of that year. Castle wrote: "I paid little attention to furniture as a mode of expression until 1958 when I discovered Esherick's work. It came about through reading the book *Shaping America's Products* by Don Wallance (Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1956). One person's work in that book changed my entire thinking about furniture. That person was Esherick ... It had never occurred to me that furniture could be anything so personal and so powerful as sculpture. Seeing those photographs of Esherick's furniture began my involvement."

I asked Sam Maloof if the idea of making a music stand might be traced to Esherick, but he answered no, firmly. He claimed that Esherick had no influence on any of his designs. However, in the book *The Furniture of Sam Maloof* by Jeremy Adamson (Smithsonian American Art Museum, W. W. Norton & Company, 2001) there is a reference to the shaped arms of Maloof's early chairs: "The early arms' plasticity, however, was relative—especially to Wharton Esherick, a dedicated carver and sculptor of wood. In the early summer of 1958, Maloof sent the Pennsylvania woodworker a set of his stereo slides for review. The older craftsman later

returned them with a note: 'I wish that some of your things would have a little more sculptural quality.' In years to come, Maloof would take Esherick's suggestion to heart" (page 85). "Music racks were woodworkers' showpieces. Wharton Esherick had been among the earliest to create one ... (Maloof had seen his curvaceous version at Esherick's retrospective in New York on his way to the Middle East ...)" (page 123). This certainly suggests that Esherick influenced Maloof, but, like Castle, in a general sense.

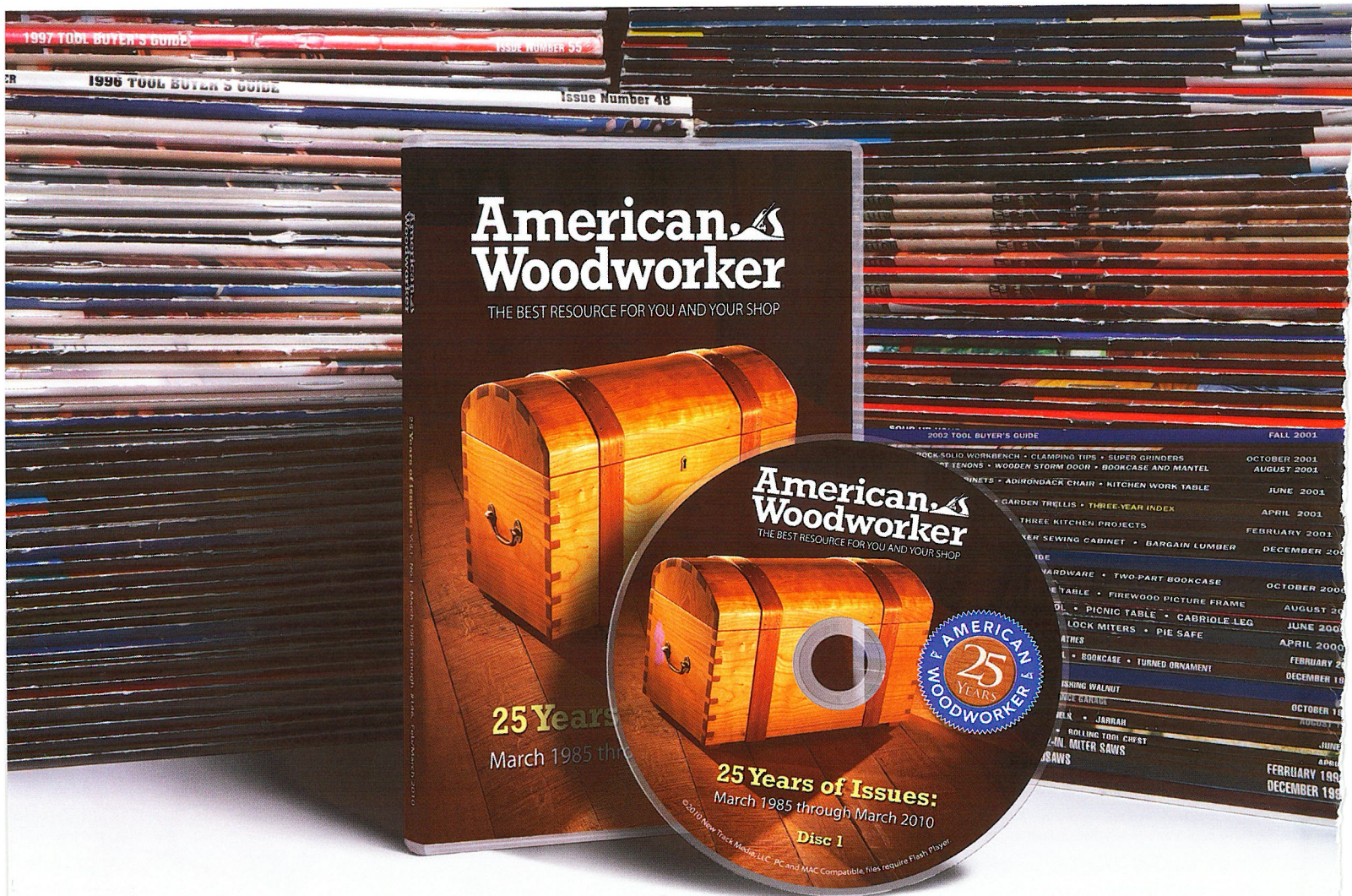
Lastly, in Art Carpenter's recently published autobiographical book, *Arthur espenet carpenter: education of a woodsmith* (Bubinga Press, 2010), a chapter titled "Influence" acknowledges Esherick as a source. Carpenter states: "... there was Hans Wegner and Wharton Esherick, who created hand-crafted work ... allied with my processes—the crafter's processes. Their work became a(n) ... inspiration to me so I was influenced early on by them."

Esherick's music stand transcended the utilitarian or traditional designs of the past,



5. Wendell Castle, *Music Rack*, (1964; design introduced 1963); 56" x 18" x 21". Photo courtesy of the American Craft Council Library Slide Study Collection.

inventing an altogether original interpretation of this functional object. His desire to bring sculpture into furniture, to create a music stand as a beautiful object, is what inspired the others. Each of theirs has design elements that reflect its maker exclusively, but Esherick was the first with a new idea. His music stand predated theirs by a decade and was featured in a national publication and in a major exhibition before the others were conceived. When Esherick combined personal expression with furniture design early in the twentieth century and in a career of more than four decades, he influenced not only the makers of the succeeding generation, but those embarking on studio furniture careers today, whether or not that influence is apparent to them.



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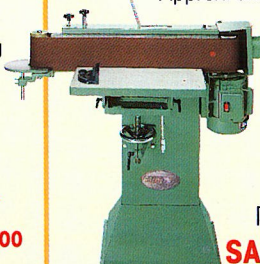
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Tom Loeser, "LadderbackcabreddaL"; maple, cherry, paint; 87" x 14" x 41".

Mark Bishop, "Beach Patterns"; Slash pine plywood, Huon pine, blackwood, stained Tasmanian oak, stainless steel, aluminum; 57" x 19" x 22".

Kristina Madsen, "Miss Dovetails"; Pau Amarello, Maple, milk paint, gesso; 29" x 41" x 13 1/2".

Ross Straker, "Duo"; laminated plywood, closed cell foam, stainless steel, kiln-polished glass; 28" x 27" x 75"

Straker. American artists include Jon Brooks, Paul Epp, Donald Fortescue, Tom Loeser, Kristina Madsen, Wendy Maruyama, Rosanne Somerson, and Peter Walker. The show was curated by furniture designers and artists John Smith, head of the Furniture Design Studio at the University of Tasmania; Penny Smith, Senior Research Fellow at University of Tasmania; and Wendy Maruyama, professor and head of the Woodworking and Furniture Design Program at San Diego State University.

This exhibition is a multi-partner collaboration among the Oceanside Museum of Art; San Diego State University; University of Tasmania; The Furniture Society; San Francisco Museum of Craft+Design; and SOFA. It will be in San Diego in conjunction with the Furniture Society Conference. It then travels to the San Francisco Museum of Craft + Design from July 9 through September 25.

Pop(e) Quiz

What is perhaps the most widely seen piece of woodworking to date? If you got up early enough to see it on television, or if you watch the news on television, or maybe if you read newspapers or magazines, you probably got a glimpse of it: the pope's coffin (actually the innermost of the three coffins*). I didn't get up at 4 AM to watch the funeral service for the pope today, but when I did see some of the clips from it, I took notice of the wooden coffin that he was in. From a distance it appeared like a rectangular pine box that was nailed together. As the cameras showed different

views and closer images, some other details became apparent. The box was tapered in height from head to foot. It was also tapered in width from head to foot. The wood was cypress and it was dovetailed together. The most subtle detail was that the box was slightly tapered from bottom to top. In other words, the top was narrower than at the bottom. These sets of tapers resulted in a fairly complex form. All of the sides had compound angles where the dovetail joints were cut. The size of the pins and tails was about equal. They were maybe 1-1/4" wide each. The top was, I think nailed on. I suppose that I would have expected to see a very embellished piece with gold leafing. I really enjoyed seeing a simple yet very considered form with the subtle tapers. It was very understated but elegant, at least to me.

Mark Sfirri

*Editor's note: according to the *Los Angeles Times*, the innermost coffin of cypress represents the pope's humanity, whereas the outer coffin is of oak or elm to signify dignity. No information was given about the joinery of the outer coffin.

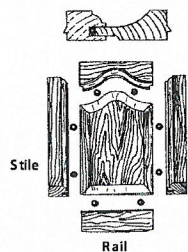
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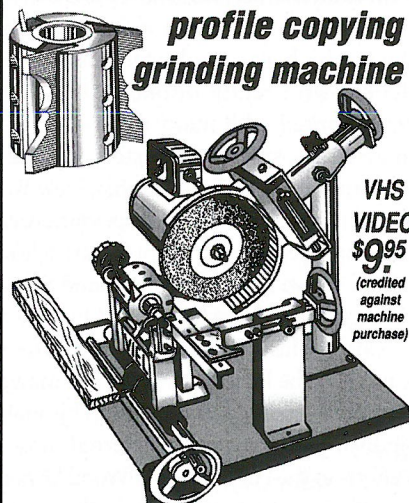
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Woodworking Savoir-Faire

The furniture, vessels, and sculpture of Mark Sfirri

BY SUSAN HAGEN

The first thing that impresses me when I walk into Mark Sfirri's shop is how orderly and efficient the place seems. Sfirri, a tall, gregarious fellow with a mop of curly black hair, readily admits to being "an organization freak," and as he ushers me in goes on to explain that he has refined and improved the space many times over the years. His shop is a detached 30' x 30' concrete building on the property where he has lived since the early 1980s. It had originally been a garage and dog kennel, but Sfirri first gutted it, then stuccoed the building and re-roofed it. A skylight now allows natural light to stream down over the lathe and workbench where Sfirri does most of his work. A piece of a wrestling mat provides a comfortable cushion on the floor near the lathe, and plastic tubs storing older work fit neatly under the bed extensions.

All of the space is nicely designed, with a place for everything. Most of his wood is neatly stored on the second floor and labeled with the species and the date of acquisition; smaller pieces are stored on the ground floor, sorted by size in cleverly designed compartments. A row of high shelves holds turned samples of various shapes, so he can access them quickly if needed. Over the years, Sfirri has continued to improve his storage. Around 1990 he added built-in cabinets with 60 drawers for tools and supplies, which keeps them out of the chips and sawdust, clean, and easy to find. Stored drawings and tools are all within easy reach of the workbench.

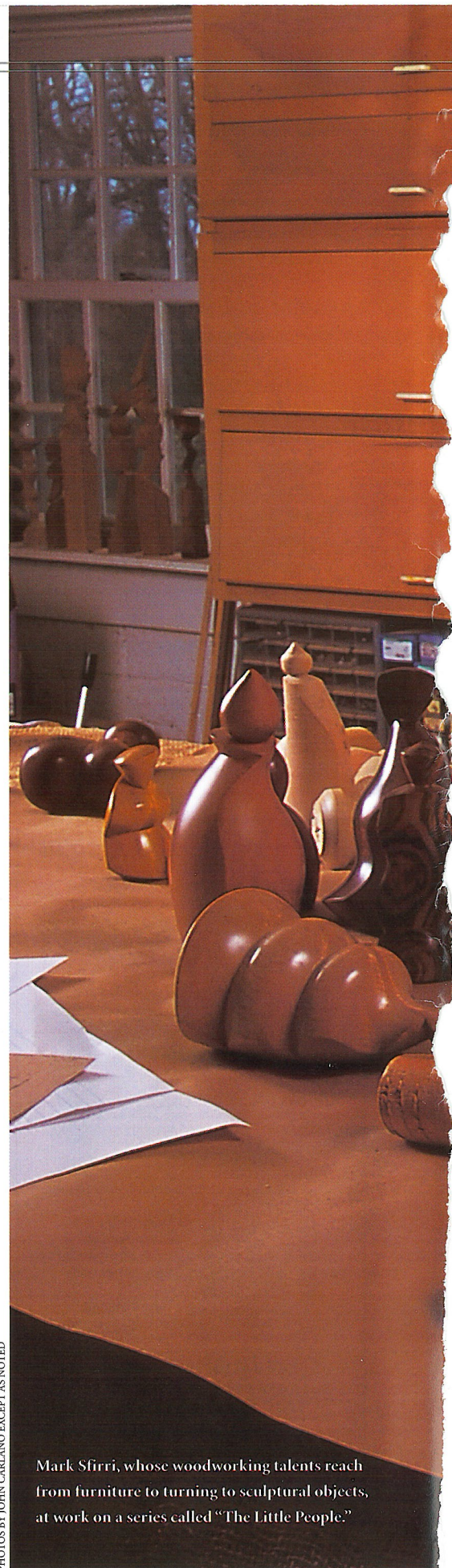
When he started setting up his shop it took two or three years to buy a first set of used equipment; then he gradually traded all of them, up-grading each time. He has gone through several different lathes, but now owns a Oneway with two full-bed extensions, the most recent added in 2003. This permits him to turn a 13' length of wood.

As he shows me around the studio, Sfirri jokes: "Life is good. I tend to be positive and that really annoys people." Actually, Sfirri is well-liked and highly respected in the woodworking world, and has been a key player in the development of both contemporary woodturning and studio furniture. Since the 1980s, he's become known for his skillful multi-axis turnings, his pioneering of the collaborative method, and his novel use of painted surfaces, narrative, and humor. He's also a committed educator, an active community member, and a dedicated *bon vivant*.

Sfirri credits his positive outlook to a happy childhood. He was always interested in drawing and making things, enjoyed math and art history, and collected baseball cards and travel brochures on cities around the country. He remembers making a wood-carving and a small two-drawer chest in 7th grade, and a spun metal bowl in 8th grade, but it was his high school art teacher, Claude Falcone, who really hooked Mark. The classes worked with many different media and materials, studied art history, and traveled to museums in Philadelphia, New York and Baltimore. Falcone, an important mentor, encouraged Sfirri to apply to art school.

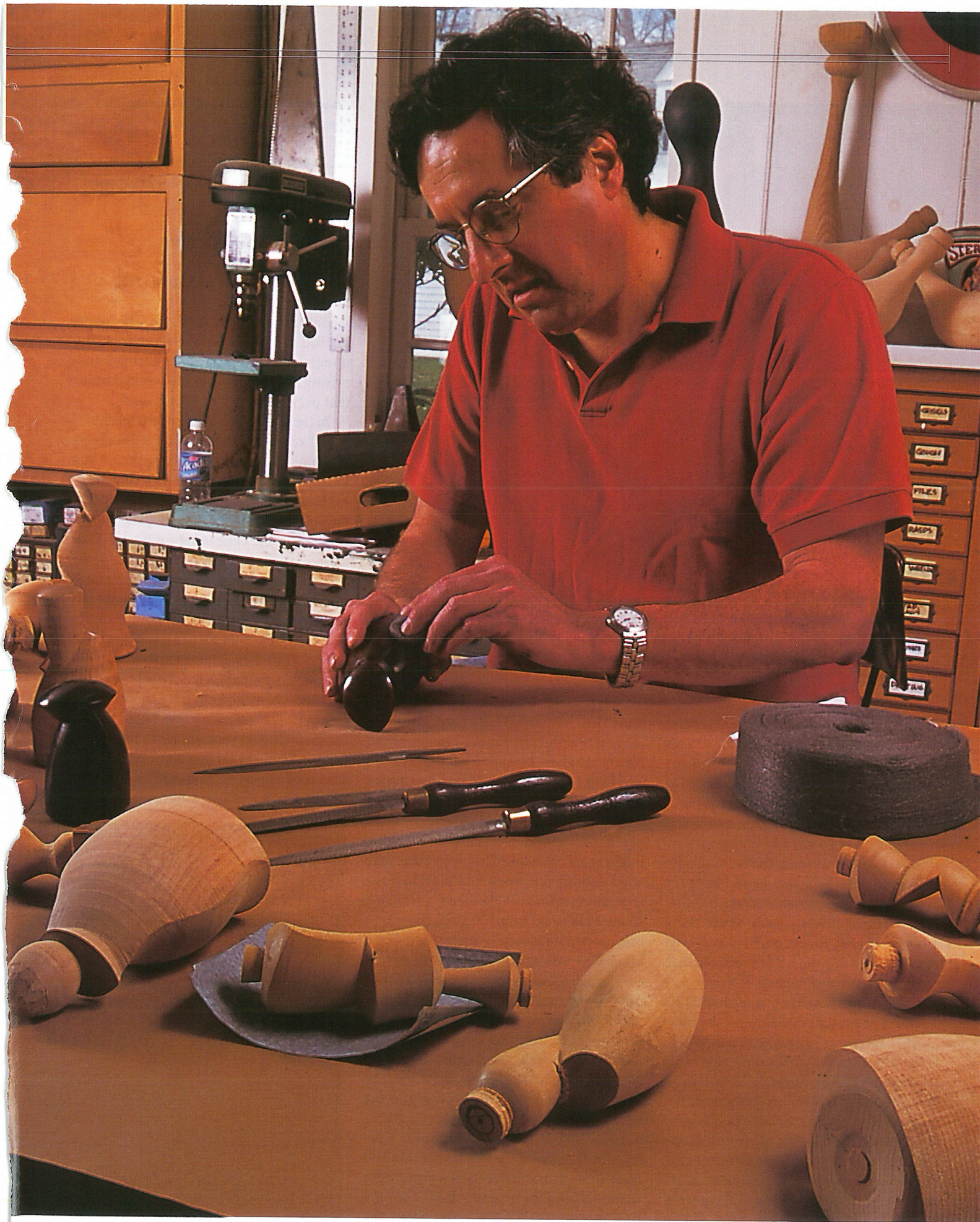
Sfirri set off for the Rhode Island School of Design to study architecture. Once there, he realized he disliked the department because of "the lack of contact with materials" and after about a year changed his major to industrial design and transferred most of his efforts to the Furniture and Wood Department. His two great influences in the department were Tage Frid and Alphonse Mattia. Mattia was a graduate student there, and Mark was immensely impressed by his work ethic, design and craftsmanship skills. Sfirri studied with Frid from 1972-78, and worked as an assistant in his shop and at the school.

Sfirri made furniture at first but remembers Frid pointing out to him that "the lathe



Mark Sfirri, whose woodworking talents reach from furniture to turning to sculptural objects, at work on a series called "The Little People."

PHOTOS BY JOHN CARLANO EXCEPT AS NOTED



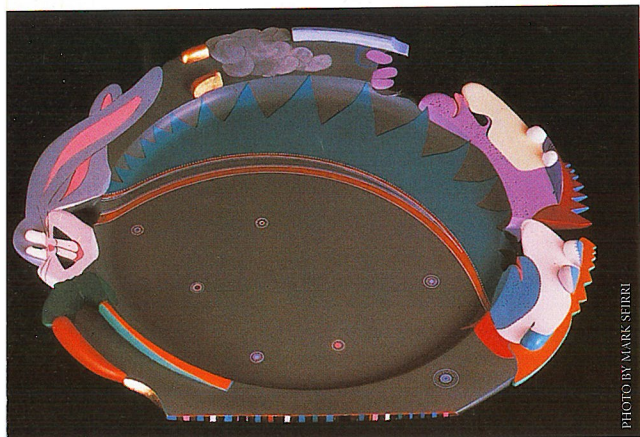


PHOTO BY MARK SFIRRI



"Bugs and Thugs" (1988) [with Robert Dodge];
Poplar, paint, gold leaf; 4" x 20" x 20".

"Secrétaire" (1988) [with Robert Dodge];
Lacewood, purpleheart, mahogany, gold leaf, paint;
48" x 48" x 19".

"The Mark and Mikey Show" (1993)
[with Michael Hosaluk];
Assorted hardwoods and paint; various sizes.



PHOTO BY RANDI BYE

has many possibilities." He made several pieces of furniture with turned components (including a dining room table with chairs that he still uses), about 30 bowls, as well as some double-rimmed platters that were subsequently hand carved. "My main motivation in turning was to speed up the carving process. I was combining the turning with carving so that the pieces would be taken away from the fully round symmetrical form. The resulting pieces were somewhere between round forms and fully carved forms." About this time, Sfirri read Stephen Hogbin's book *Wood Turning: The Purpose of the Object*, which powerfully confirmed Frid's statement about the possibilities of the lathe.

After receiving his bachelor's degree in 1974, Sfirri began working in the RISD woodshop while he continued work on an MFA. He also began teaching summer classes at RISD, as well as filling in as needed for some of the faculty. He found it was exciting to watch students develop and, "influenced by Frid's positive style of teaching," wanted to make that his career—though teaching jobs were scarce at that

time. Then he married Lucy Green, an architectural designer, and moved to Rochester, New York where he took a job that evolved into Director of Design and Engineering for an office furniture manufacturer. "The three years I spent in this position were my engineering education. Designing and making things in college required drawings that were good enough for me to interpret. In business, the drawings were sent out to vendors, so they had to be complete enough that no one needed to ask me a question. It was a much different way of looking at things."

Though Sfirri learned a great deal about furniture design and production, he was frustrated that he hadn't made any work of his own since finishing school. Seeking to remedy this, and to escape the harsh weather of upstate New York, in 1981 he took a job teaching woodworking in the newly developed Fine Woodworking Program at Bucks County Community College, in Newtown, Pennsylvania. He and Lucy moved into a pre-1720s farmhouse with old pine floors and a huge cooking fireplace located a few miles from the

school and south of New Hope. The rooms are full of light. The house is charming, understated and tasteful—offering a surprising counterpoint to the wacky humor that pervades much of Sfirri's work.

In the early 1990s, Sfirri created the first of his off-centered candlesticks, consisting of a series of irregularly stacked disk and egg forms. These were created by a technique of multi-axis spindle turning, where part-way through the turning process, the piece is repositioned on the lathe using a different set of centers (a new axis) [see sidebar]. "One of the limitations of 'regular' woodturning for me is that the resulting form is perfectly round and symmetrical. A pad foot leg from the early 1700s is a great example of a result that I find far more interesting. It is an early example of multi-axis turning that is not perfectly round and one where the form has a more organic feel to it. The geometry that I used for my candlesticks was very similar to this—turn part of the form on one set of centers and turn another part on a different set of centers. The look is very different, but conceptually it



PHOTO BY RANDI BYE

is very similar. I wanted to create the illusion that a 'straight' turning looked bent."

When his wife commented "I can't wait to see what this will look like in a piece of furniture," Sfirri was at first offended but then came to realize it was an exciting new direction. "Lucy really started me thinking about expanding this idea. I used the same concept of the different axes of the candlestick and stretched it into a leg for a table. The forms changed, but the geometry is the same. From one view, both of these forms—and the pad foot for that matter—appear curved and not symmetrical, but if they are rotated 90°, they are symmetrical. The reason for this is the fact that all of the centers (two at each end) are in the same plane."

The early multi-axis "Spider Table" has the simplest relationships, with bilateral symmetry from one point of view, like a traditional ball-and-claw foot. Some of his later pieces, such as "Bench" (which was commissioned for Yale University), achieve a much more fully sculptural three-dimensional effect by more complex combinations of multi-axis turning. Sfirri explains: "I thought that if I moved the two axes into different planes, I might be able to create a different kind of movement or animation to the work—the illusion of the pieces walking or twisting."

Sfirri likes the intellectual challenge of figuring out how to make complex shapes and has taken pains to analyze the multi-axis turning process so that he can apply the technique to any piece of furniture or sculpture. "I really enjoy working on the initial concept



and design. Once that is complete, the work gets broken down into a series of steps. It is no different than if one were making a traditional ball-and-claw foot table. It is all serious work and following the steps to the end. It is only then that I can stand back, look at it, and maybe smile (if I intended the piece to be humorous) and see if the piece accomplished what I set out to do." The impact of all these multi-axis forms on viewers is complex: we anxiously imagine impending disaster from these precarious-appearing forms, but on closer examination we are reassured by their solidity—not unlike the fears and comforts we experience in our daily lives.

Sfirri credits his son Sam, born in 1987, for giving him the idea for one of his ongoing series of pieces. The year was 1993, Sam was playing Little League baseball, and the Philadelphia Phillies were successful in the pennant race for the first time in many years. Six-year-old Sam saw a bat that was hollowed

ABOVE—Sfirri's stores "shorts" in a stepped rack that is 1' deep at eye level, 2' deep above his head and 3' deep above that. He only sacrifices 1' of footprint, he uses the "wasted" space above his head, and he can see into the short rack so that nothing gets lost.

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT—

"Spider Table" (1993);
Lacewood, curly maple; 33" x 21" x 13".

"Rejects From the Bat Factory" (1994);
Bubinga, pink ivory, wenge, shedua, curly maple, mahogany; 33" x 26" x 5".

"Glancing Figures" (1997);
Cherry, ash, walnut, other hardwoods; H: 48"-72".

"Bench" (1998);
Ash, purpleheart, brass; 27" x 68" x 20½".

"Homeland Security" (2002);
Poplar, paint; 4" x 18" x 4".



PHOTO BY MARK SFIRRI



PHOTO BY RANDI BYE



PHOTO BY RANDI BYE



Multi-axis Candlestick

by Mark Sfirri



PHOTO BY RANDI BYE

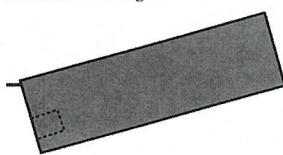
IN 1992, I HAD THIS IDEA of creating a spindle turning that looked bent. I thought that it might make for an interesting candlestick, so I experimented with this in mind and came up with a fairly finished-looking product.

There were some slight modifications that were made—some aesthetic and some based on the limitations of the process, but I figured out how to design within those limitations.

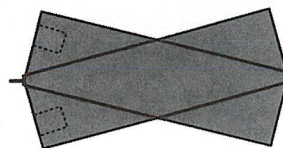
For all of my spindle turnings, whether multi-axis or not, I turn with a cup center in the headstock. I never use a spur center. Never! I also use a ball bearing live center in the tailstock that is also a cup center. This combination is very important. It's much safer. If you have a catch, the wood most likely will stop but the lathe will keep spinning. You simply have to tighten the tailstock up and keep turning. I turn the majority of the piece with a 5/8" bowl gouge sharpened at a 30° angle. You might wonder why not use a spindle gouge, but the reason is that the toolrest would have to be so far away from the work that it tends to cause tool vibration when turning, resulting in an uneven surface. The last pass is done using a 1/2" detail gouge, with the toolrest angled in to minimize this vibration.

The first set of centers are at the safest maximum distance away from center. Safe to me means having the full cup of the cup center on the wood—about 3/8" in from the edge. The wood is placed on a diagonal in order to maximize the "bent" effect. On this axis, most of the bottom portion is turned and sanded. The piece is then repositioned on a different axis that is about 7/8" in from the opposite edge at the top,

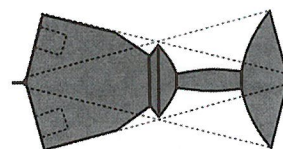
Multi-axis turning of a candlestick:



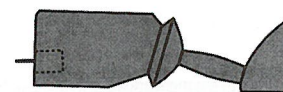
Blank mounted on first axis



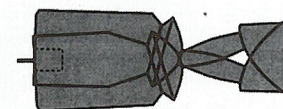
Blank spinning on first axis



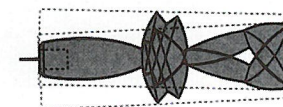
Blank turned on first axis



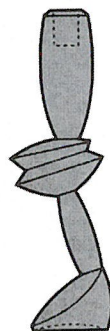
Blank mounted on second axis



Blank spinning on second axis



Blank turned on second axis



The completed multi-axis turned candlestick

and on true center at the bottom. It's not as close to the edge at the top because a hole needs to be drilled that's about 7/8" diameter. It's centered at the bottom so that the piece can be as large a diameter as possible at the bottom, therefore making it more stable.

The initial stock is about 3-3/8" x 3-3/8" x 12". I typically pre-drill the hole on the mortiser (but it could also be done on the drill-press) and place a plug in it to turn the final center. The hole actually needs to be drilled parallel to the final axis, which means the hole is drilled at an angle on the initial rectangular block. Starting with such a large block, but wanting a finished piece that had some elegance to it, I wanted to have some areas that were thin. It would have been easy for the piece to have looked chunky. I also wanted several areas that utilized the full dimension of the stock. Logically, the base was one of those areas (for stability), the other was a result of the initial set of centers. The only place to have the wood at that maximum dimension was right in the middle. If you look at the second drawing, it shows the piece spinning and this was the only area where a full diameter was possible. Sometimes, as in this case, the positioning partly determines where a detail can occur.

The repetition of the process and the morphing of one shape to the next provides me with an ongoing, evolving vocabulary of form that is in response to the process. In a sense it has become my three-dimensional sketchbook. I admire the spontaneity of the process of turning and I have attempted to capture spontaneity of design by designing while turning. I used to sketch on paper a lot, but now most of it is done in the form of sample pieces that I turn. The biggest obstacle is remembering what I did to get there! At first, I wrote things down and made sketches, but after looking at many sketches that I kept, I realized that I had no idea what they meant. Now, I lay out two pieces, one that I will turn, and one that has the centers laid out. I keep that as my reference.

People often ask me about making two pieces the same and my response is that if the centers aren't the same, it's impossible, but if they are the same, it's a possibility. I believe it to be no more difficult than making two pieces the same that are on one axis.

on the end of the barrel, and pestered his dad to make him one. After he complied, Sfirri realized that the bat form presented some very interesting sculptural possibilities. So he started working on a series of contorted bats, and has returned to the theme a number of times over the years. "Rejects from the Bat Factory" (1994) is one such set, each bat twisted and deformed into a different and impractical shape. "I thought that this might be a good way to explore some of the 'serious' forms that I was making by integrating them into a very recognizable form. It was a good fit for me, since I was very interested in sports, particularly baseball, and I finally found a way to combine it with my creative work."

Inspired by a 3-D design class that he taught at Bucks, Sfirri started making sculpture more seriously in 1995. Though he has continued to make furniture and practical turned objects, Sfirri describes sculpture as "a growing interest." In 1996 he began work on a series titled "Glancing Figures," which started out about 8" tall and grew to 4'-6" tall. These sculptures were technically challenging because the centers of some turned sections were not on the object itself and required the addition of waste wood on the end(s) in order to mount the piece to the lathe. The shapes are severely elongated and simplified, but are still clearly recognizable as abstractions of the human form; they are reminiscent of Modernist artists like Brancusi and Boccioni, but made with a tongue-in-cheek postmodern sensibility. Though Sfirri claims he didn't set out to make figurative sculpture, the associations started to emerge once he began his complex off-center turning techniques.

In the late 1990s, Sfirri began another series, making cartoonish, nonfunctional "vessels." He explains: "The contemporary turning movement is pretty much centered around the vessel form. I had a real problem just jumping on the vessel bandwagon because it was the thing to do. When I came

up with the idea for some painted vessels that were more animated and gave me the opportunity to create some graphic labels, I got really excited about it. Back around 1975, I fell in love with woodworking and more or less abandoned all of my painting and drawing, except as it related to designing furniture. This was an opportunity to bring that back into my work. It was also an opportunity to make some commentary on things going on in the world."

Two different series of leaning and twisting objects have evolved. The first is a light-hearted series with puns and jokes for titles, based on the tempting exoticism of food and drink bottles he saw during his travels in France. "Fromage Wiz," which makes a light-hearted comparison between the

cuisines of the United States and France, is an example of a piece from this series. The second group explores more serious issues, including topical events and political issues. "Weapons of Mass Destruction" was made in 2003 during the period of political posturing and build-up prior to the Iraq War.

Teaching is more than just a "day job" for Sfirri, and he feels fortunate to be at BCCC. "I don't think of myself as a natural teacher. I get very nervous in front of a group. What has really helped me is doing it year after year. I love teaching. Communicating ideas through demonstrations and lectures and seeing a student develop design and technical skills in a relatively short period of time (typically two years) is very rewarding to me. It has also been good for my own develop-



"Figurati (Go Figure Yourself)" (2002)

[with Amy Forsyth];

Walnut, paint, coffee, misc. exotic woods;

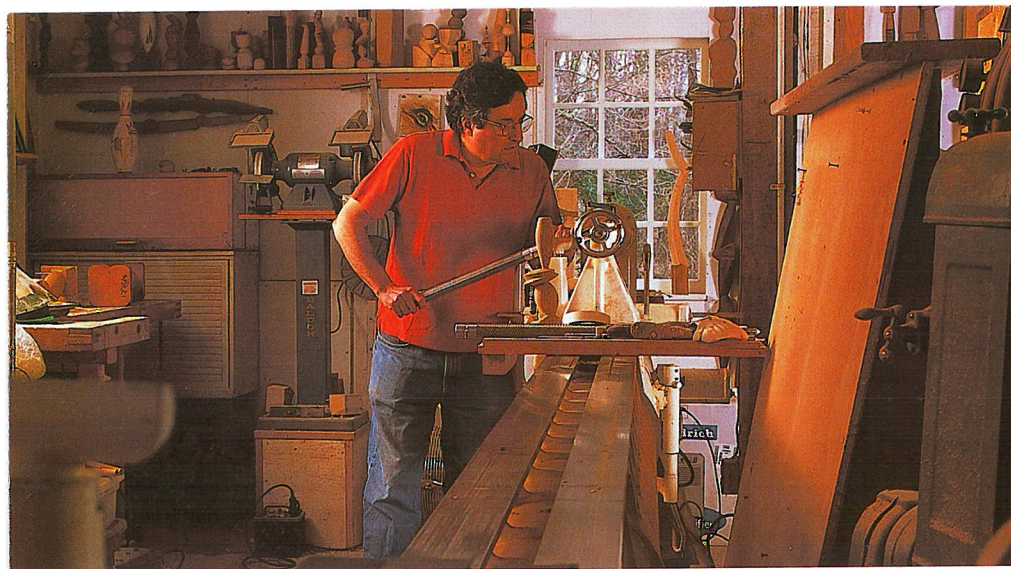
54" x 24" x 17".

"Chemical and Biological WMD" (2003);

Mahogany, paint; H: 16½" & 14½".

"The Little People" (2002);

Various hardwoods; H: 3"-7½".



Mark Sfirri at his lathe, a Oneway to which he has added two full-bed extensions for a 13' capacity.

ment as a designer because teaching forces me to verbalize what I am doing in an effort to make the demonstrations as clear as possible. Like my engineering experience, it has evolved into a tool for communicating ideas."

His students give Sfirri high marks in the classroom. Bernard David, who took classes with Sfirri at Bucks for several years, told me that one of the most memorable and entertaining demonstrations in Sfirri's advanced turning class was when he made "an extremely long thin turning with lots of beads and coves and rings—and he just kept going and going and going...."

Teaching at Bucks also brought Sfirri into contact with other turners. He recalls that in his first semester at the school he was informed that his department would be hosting a turning conference. This was one of the early symposia co-organized by Alan and Albert LeCoff (who later founded the Wood Turning Center) and the late woodturner Palmer Sharpless, a vital personality and active community member in Bucks County. These symposia brought together established but somewhat isolated woodturners from all over the United States and had a tremendous impact on the development of a cohesive woodturning field. Within the first few years of the 1980s Sfirri started attending and participating in other turning workshops and conferences.

Sfirri has been credited with making collaboration (and community) an important and unique feature of the woodturning field. Between 1986 and 1991, he collaborated with Robert Dodge, an artist and fellow teacher at Bucks County Community College. In "Bugs and Thugs" and "Secrétaire" (both from 1988), Dodge's colorful painted patterns and cartoon characters accentuate the wacky asymmetry of Sfirri's off-center turnings. As a result of this collaboration, Sfirri began painting his work with outland

colors and decorative elements, becoming one of the first contemporary woodturners to undermine the aesthetic idealization of natural wood. Later, Sfirri teamed up with Canadian woodturner Michael Hosaluk in a very fruitful (and also very colorful) long-term collaboration and a series of exhibitions titled "The Mark and Mikey Show."

The idea for the Emma Lake events in Saskatchewan, Canada was partially shaped by these collaborations, beginning with a key 1992 workshop featuring Sfirri, Hosaluk, Del Stubbs, Giles Gilson, and Richard Raffan. They all agreed the night before the workshop was to begin that they didn't want to follow the typical demonstrator/audience format; they wanted everyone to work and learn together. This model has been used ever since in the biennial workshops at Emma Lake. More recently, Sfirri has been a co-organizer of the Echo Lake Collaborative Workshop, an annual event in Bucks County that works on a similar principle. Sfirri told me: "I've learned so much from seeing how different people do things...collaboration is a great form of education for artists."

Sfirri enjoys speaking, writing and demonstrating. As he puts it: "I like the excitement of juggling entertainment, danger, and education in front of a group of people." Over the years, he has given woodturning demonstrations at conferences in France, Ireland, Canada, and England, as well as five times at the annual conventions of the American Association of Woodturners. He has also been extensively involved with the Wood Turning Center and the Furniture Society.

In spite of Sfirri's involvement and unmistakable pleasure in teaching, collaborating, and many other aspects of the woodworking

world, he enjoys the solitude of his work in the studio most of all. He had several people working for him in the late 1980s, but decided that he "needed his solitude to really concentrate and so would settle for a slower pace with less productivity." He enjoys an ongoing dialogue with his wife Lucy, crediting her as one of his most lucid critics. He strives for balance between the solitude and social activities of his professional life; he states: "I am very organized, obsessive about avoiding anxiety, and careful about commitments, and I try to plan realistically on a two-year cycle...I like to be very involved, but am also very aware of my limits. It is a delicate balance."

When I last visited Sfirri's studio, he showed me a new series of small figures—reminiscent of chess pieces and Brancusi sculptures—that evolved from a recent collaboration, called "Figurati," with architect/furnituremaker Amy Forsyth for *Cabinets of Curiosity*, a joint WTC/Furniture Society exhibition. He started the series, titled "The Little People," in January of 2004. For each of 16 different figures, he has selected a different species of wood. Sfirri commented that, after painting his work almost exclusively for a number of years, he enjoyed working with natural wood again. The pieces are small and gem-like, with the presence of his larger figures compressed into an object that fits easily in your hand. The effect of this shift in scale is a little jarring at first, but it makes the sculptures into more personal, intimate objects, like amulets.

In his recent work, Sfirri has begun to combine the techniques of turning, furniture and sculpture with more and more fluidity. Sometimes this process seems to take place almost subconsciously—collector Fleur Bresler recalls Sfirri exclaiming with surprise "My heavens, it has a slipper foot!" when he saw one of his more sculptural pieces installed in her apartment. His diverse early interests, from baseball cards to architecture, may have provided the groundwork for Sfirri's ease in aesthetic travel—between art, design and craft; popular culture and good taste; comedy and serious political issues—which for many people remain in rather rigid categories. Perhaps it is his skill and knowledge in each of these areas that make this possible. Or it could just be his positive outlook. Sfirri clearly knows what he's doing, makes it look easy...and has fun doing it.

Susan Hagen is a sculptor and writer; she lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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ESHERICK EMERGES

A recent auction brings the “Dean of American Craftsmen” some overdue notice

BY MARK SFIRRI

In the late 1960s, I was an art major in a rigorous program at a public high school outside of Philadelphia. We attended exhibitions in Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore, and this introduced me to many aspects of the art world at the time. When I was younger, my parents took me to the Nakashima Studios. I grew up about 4 miles from Hedgerow Theater, where Wharton Esherick had close ties, but in spite of all of this exposure, I was completely unaware of his existence.

In the early 1970s, I studied furniture at Rhode Island School of Design with Tage Frid. When he found out where I was from, he told me in his thick Danish accent to go to the studio of “Warden Aizure.” When I went home for a visit, I looked all over for Warden Aizure, but of course to no avail. Upon returning to school, I had Frid write his name down and then at least I had a clearer notion of who I was looking for. While on break in the spring of 1972, I went to the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institutions in Washington, D.C. to see the exhibition titled *Woodenworks*, a group show of work by Art Carpenter, George Nakashima, Sam Maloof, Wendell Castle, and Wharton Esherick. It was revelatory. The piece that struck me the most, and is my all-time favorite piece of furniture, was an angular, asymmetrical corner desk in the German Expressionist style. When the writing surface is open, one can see that the

ALL PHOTOS BY RAGO ARTS AND AUCTION CENTER EXCEPT AS NOTED



In 1927 Wharton Esherick made this walnut three-paneled folding screen. It was chiseled and chip-carved with alternating geometrical patterns, depicting ebonized birds flying over sheafs of wheat.



During his cubist phase (1931), Esherick created this corner writing desk and stool.

The Rago Art and Auction House is just across the Delaware River from New Hope, Pennsylvania and about a forty-minute drive from Philadelphia. This scenic area is historically an artists' colony and the home of the Nakashima Studios. Wharton Esherick's house and studio, now the Wharton Esherick Museum, in Paoli Pennsylvania is located about a forty-minute drive northwest from Philadelphia, about a one-and-a-quarter hour drive from Rago.

Sollo Rago (John Sollo and David Rago), a division of Rago Art and Auction House, specializes in twentieth century Modern craft and decorative objects and usually holds two auctions per year. All of the work they auction was professionally photographed and impressively presented in a huge catalog that displayed more than fifteen hundred lots. Their website is also first-rate (www.ragoarts.com) and contains multiple images of a number of the pieces in the sale. Sandwiched in the middle of the catalog are thirty-two lots of work relating to Wharton Esherick, about half of which are functional wood objects.

OVERVIEW OF THE WORK

This was very much like a museum show and I wish it could have been on view for

more than a week. I took four trips to see it. One trip was a last minute field trip for one of my classes, and the other three were to really study the work in a more leisurely way. Despite the shortness of time, there were advantages to the venue. One could handle and photograph the work, which museums generally do not allow. In particular, the work consigned by York Fischer, Jr. provided an historic first look at mostly previously unseen work, including drawings and photographs that gave an intimate view of Esherick.

The most significant objects in wood by Esherick in the auction were three large, unique pieces of furniture made early in his career. These were made within a three-year period with three distinct stylistic approaches. There was a screen with bas-relief (surface carved) organic imagery; a cabinet influenced by German Expressionism, using exotic wood and precise craftsmanship; and a table whose base has German Expressionist elements but is carried out in a less precisely crafted manner. The wavy surface of the tabletop suggests a more organic form and a looser sense of craftsmanship.

Most of the pieces came from Fischer, the grandson of an Esherick patron named Helene Fischer, and the son of Hannah and York Fischer, Sr. When asked why he decided to sell now, Mr. Fischer said, "My

dividers are all at slightly different angles and the drawers have angled dovetails. It is complex and perfectly constructed. It was made by Wharton Esherick.

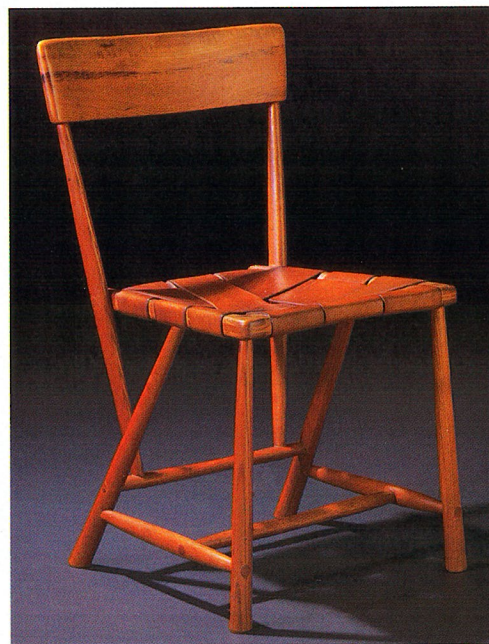
Wharton Esherick was a true pioneer, showing the way at a time when there was no market for handmade furniture; when, considering that it was the Depression, there wasn't much of a market for anything. When he died in 1970, *Craft Horizons* (the predecessor of *American Craft*) published an article in its August issue, titled "Wharton Esherick, 1887-1970," in which both Sam Maloof and Wendell Castle wrote tributes to Esherick, describing his profound influence on them. That influence fueled their generation and the one after that. It continues to ripple today. If a new student in the field is not directly touched by his work, his or her teacher most probably was.

In the light of that, it seems odd that the work of the person with the title "Dean of American Craftsmen" doesn't command the prices of some furniture makers who came after him. One would expect that the prices for his work, when they appeared on the secondary market, would be at the top of the heap. But this hasn't been the case.

During one week in October, 2006, the Rago Art and Auction House in the small town of Lambertville, New Jersey was the scene of an exhibition of the work of Wharton Esherick, only the second outside of the Wharton Esherick Museum since the *Woodenworks* show in 1972. The only other major exhibit of his work was in 1996 at the Moderne Gallery in Philadelphia, a gallery that specializes in furniture and decorative arts on the secondary market.

On the left, a sculpted cherry and walnut stool from 1962; 25" x 16" x 16".

On the right, a 1958 hammer-handled sided chair of hickory with leather straps.



Clockwise from the upper left—

Carved walnut ladle (1960); 17" long.

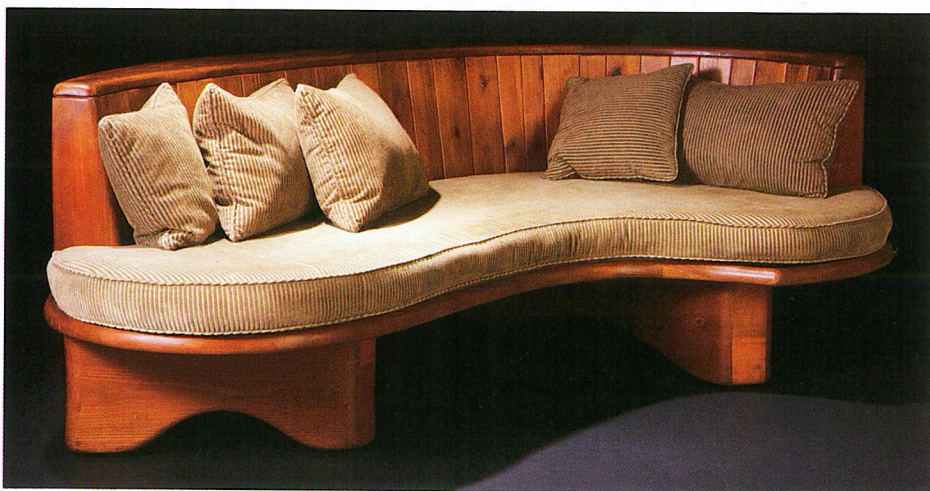
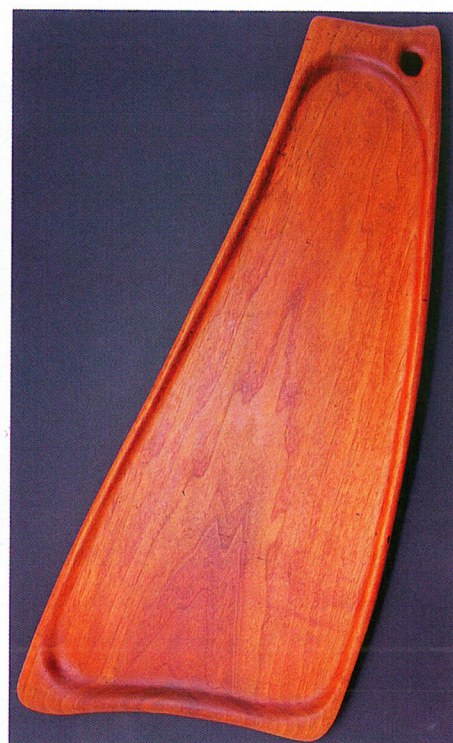
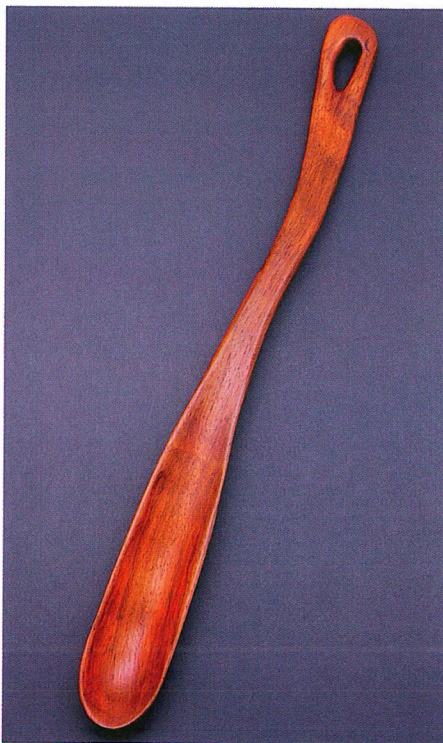
Sculpted walnut tray (1962); 31½" x 13¼".

Walnut footstool with slab top on whalebone-shaped legs (1939); 7¾" x 31" x 7".

Poplar sofa with sculpted and paneled back and upholstered cushions (1966); 31" x 88" x 50".

kids are not interested in Wharton and I thought that it would be good to share the work with the people who knew him and who appreciate his work." Two of the large, important pieces of furniture were Mr. Fischer's: a Victrola cabinet commissioned by Helene Fischer in 1930 as a base for a previously purchased sculpture of Esherick's, and a six-foot table made for Hannah Weil Fischer [see sidebar]. He consigned much more work, dating mostly from 1930 and 1931. Included was a unique oak footrest with a slightly dished top supported by two arches, made in 1939, and a hammer-handle chair, possibly from the Hedgerow Theater.

The rest of the lots offered examples of the kind of work that he created throughout his life. Pieces from the 1960s were consigned by a collector from nearby Lancaster, Pennsylvania, including some custom-commissioned pieces such as an organic wall-hung shelf with a sofa designed as a companion piece, a late hammer-handled-style chair, and some of the signature work that comes to mind when one thinks of Esherick. The three-legged stools of differing heights are essential examples. Esherick saved the odd cutoffs that contained the crotch wood of a board so that, when there was a lull in the studio, he could carve a seat. His workers completed the pieces with hickory legs and joinery. That was the closest he came to making a production item, but each seat was distinctly different from the next. The Lancaster collector also consigned a carved wooden ladle in cocobolo from 1962, which, like the stool, is one of a series. The organic sculptural forms of the ladles are also distinct from one piece to the next, but unlike the stools, were made entirely by Esherick. They are very well sanded, but file marks are evident. These were often made as gifts to friends when he went to visit for a meal and were meant to be used. They rarely come on the market since they generally are handed down from one generation to the next. A coffee table made the year Esherick died was consigned





Padauk Victrola cabinet (1930) and details. The cabinet has two pull-out counter slabs and two exterior folding doors that fold open. Inside are a pair of frame-and-panel doors, a drawer, and six pull-out record holders, each carved with abstract forms. The overall size is 42½" x 52" x 25".



The remaining space on each surface is carved with abstract landscapes that evolve into geometric patterns. Woodcuts and block prints consumed much of his time during the period from 1922 to 1936; he made over four hundred block print designs (woodcuts and linoleum blocks), which grew out of his first interest in art, painting. This screen is an extension of that technique.

The bas-relief narrative imagery is reminiscent of the large oak print storage cabinet from the same year, on display at the Wharton Esherick Museum, although the cabinet has no contrasting woods or geometric patterns. After making these pieces, Esherick decided to abandon what he termed his "organic phase." At this point he considered this pictorial carving as "unneeded 'literature,' stating that furniture, like sculpture, should depend on the overall form for design."

VICTROLA CABINET-1930

The style and construction of this cabinet is hard-edged and differs from the folding screen. The influence is clearly German Expressionism. The carving, of prismatic triangles, is minimal and has no narrative reference. Esherick used padauk (also called vermillion), an exotic wood, for most of the piece. The wood was carefully milled and re-milled to be perfectly true. There is no sapwood. There are no blemishes, like knots or checks. The joinery is complicated and impeccable. The piece has many features, including pullout trays on the top and holders for albums inside. Exposed dovetails on the carcase, through tenons, and pinned joints are sanded smooth. The piece appears never to have been exposed to direct sunlight since the wood still has its deep red color. For comparison, one can see the effect of sunlight by looking at the desk with the free form top at the Wharton Esherick Museum. The drawer fronts, also in padauk, have been exposed to direct sunlight for many years and now have a less than desirable greenish tint, providing a good lesson for why one shouldn't use that wood on an exterior surface.



separately, as was a large folding screen from a California collector.

FOLDING SCREEN-1927

Due to the vertical orientation of the panels of the folding screen, the viewer is

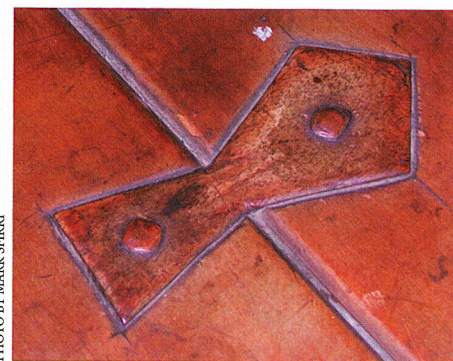


drawn in from a distance by the strong graphic contrast of the woods used and the textured surface. On closer inspection, one becomes aware of the crisp carving of the imagery. Each of the walnut panels contains an inlaid abstract bird form made of ebony.

PHOTO BY MARK STEIN



PHOTO BY MARK SHERRI



Oak and pearwood dining table (1930). The legs and stretchers are carved with radial geometric patterns; the top planks are spanned with carved butterfly- and fish-shaped splines that have been pinned and plugged. The table is 25" x 73½" x 27".



This cabinet is out of step with the other two major pieces. Despite a wonderful play of graphic symbols on each of the album holders, it is very restrained. German Expressionism is embodied in the work but there is something about this piece that is not Esherick. It's too immaculate, too clean. The answer lies in the signature. It's signed "WHARTON ESHERICK MCMXXX + JS." JS stands for John Schmidt, a local cabinetmaker who worked for Esherick. In this case, while the idea was Esherick's, the execution, save for the carved details, was clearly Schmidt's.

TABLE FOR HANNAH-1930

This is the third major piece and it contrasts with the two previously described

pieces on a number of counts. The top is made of two book-matched pearwood boards that are flipped end-to-end so that they don't read as book-matched. The boards used in the cabinet are flawless and flat, an aesthetic that was completely abandoned in the decision to use these boards. The wood was so badly cupped across the grain and twisted over its length that it would have been impossible to mill the wood flat, because it would have been completely milled away. And considering the many blemishes in the wood, it is a mystery why this wood was used. The result, while it must be challenging from a functional standpoint, allows the nature of the material to become part of the design. There are four butterflies inlaid along the joint of the

boards and each is a different shape and not symmetrical. These inlays serve as decoration but they are primarily functional. The butterflies appear to be walnut, so when the table was made, they would have contrasted with the pear wood. Now both have faded and almost appear to be the same wood. The base of the table, like the cabinet, was influenced by German Expressionism.. Nonetheless, because of the top, there is a looseness and organic quality in the form and craftsmanship that is in clear contrast to the cabinet. The cabinet was a major commission from an important client and there were probably significant differences between the fully equipped workshop used for the cabinet and the conditions under which he made the table. Still, this piece marked a definite shift in approach from that point on. Robert Aibel, owner of Moderne Gallery, said, "This table is about his whole career in one piece," which sums it up. The work that followed, his three-legged stools, his library steps, utensils, and trays, all have the signature Esherick look of undulating forms, rounded edges, and earthiness reminiscent of the top of this table.

THE GLASS CASE

Nineteen Esherick lots were displayed in a locked glass case. There was one small wood sculpture, books illustrated with Esherick block prints, individual prints, two of his original blocks, several lots of drawings, and several lots of photographs. Many of the prints were framed but had severe paper discoloration and "foxing" (which looks like small rust stains). Collectors are probably aware that there is a large collection of



A spiraling red oak staircase connects the main floor with the dining area and bedrooms of Esherick's home. The faceted steps are tenoned and bolted to a massive centerpost. At right, a sketch.

pristine original Esherick prints from the 1920s and 1930s available at Moderne Gallery. That said, and despite their condition, these prints have inscriptions that give them historical context.

One lot was entirely pen and pencil drawings which, in addition to their artistic value, provide insight into his life at the time. About half of the drawings were signed, dated, and inscribed "to Hannah." The subject matter ranges from figure studies, to landscapes, to exterior and interior views of his studio, done to remind Hannah of her visits there. There is one drawing of the spiral staircase that he made for his studio, drawn sparingly. A few simple strokes convey the twist and movement of

this important work. Some drawings were more graphic; perhaps they were studies for woodcuts. For example, "The German Forest" is simply a series of tree trunks, but his technique blends the trees into a repeat pattern of black and white that suggests a block print. Most of the drawings are slightly abstracted impressions of what was in front of him, but they all have a spirit that was distinctly his. It's a skill that isn't essential for a furniture designer, but it contributed to his depth as a creative artist.

THE SALE

A rumor was circulating that the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston was interested in a major piece of Esherick's work.

There was also a rumor that there was interest from serious collectors. It seemed as though the stage was set for at least one bidding war, but it was unclear which piece would be fought over. The Esherick lots were sandwiched in between what seemed like a sea of George Nakashima's work. An early highlight of the sale was a small burl-topped Nakashima coffee table with a simple Minguren walnut base. Pre-auction estimates were \$55,000-\$75,000. The final bid was \$150,000, plus a 20% buyer's premium for a total of \$180,000, not to mention tax.

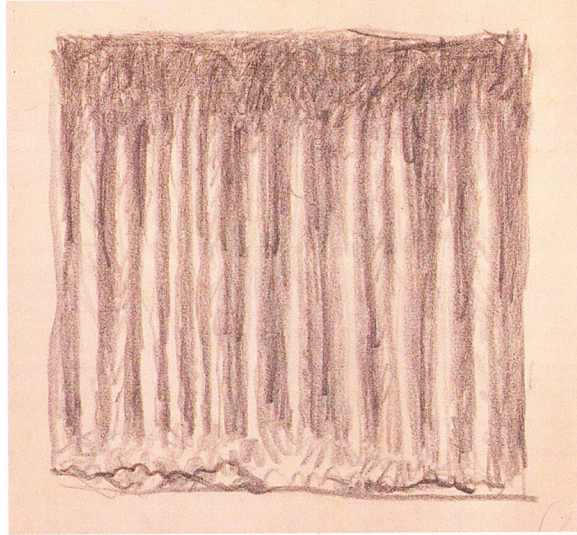
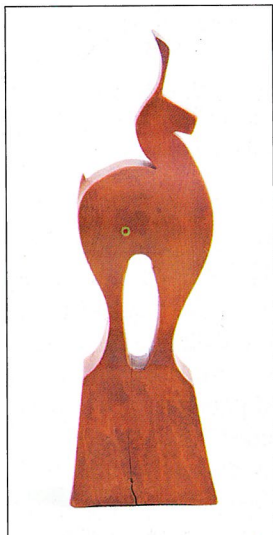
Prices for Nakashima's work have been exploding over the past five to ten years despite a considerable number of pieces available. Mira Nakashima offered an interesting thought: "I'm not sure how my father would feel about those sales prices. He never intended the work to be that high and out of reach for most people." Nakashima's designs and output were consistent throughout the years and he promoted his work well. Esherick, on the other hand, was reclusive, and had only a handful of patrons. His desire to be creative forced him

From left to right—

Carved walnut stag on pedestal (1936); 13" x 2" x 4".

"Daphne Pier", a woodblock print on rice paper from 1931.

A pencil sketch titled "The German Forest", perhaps a study for a block print.



to change the style and even the category of his work. He went from painting to woodcuts and block prints to furniture to sculpture, and even within each discipline his work changed. While very prolific, he produced far less work than George Nakashima did. Nakashima's work was simpler and easily identifiable. Even now, outside of makers, museum curators, and some collectors, few people know about Esherick, even locally.

The first Esherick lot offered was the folding screen. Pre-auction estimates were \$80,000-\$120,000. That's clearly a lot of money, but in the context of the Nakashima coffee table, it would seem that a major piece with historical significance by Esherick should sell for significantly more. Still, some were concerned that it wouldn't make the minimum bid. But the bidding started at \$75,000 and quickly went to a final \$260,000 gavel price plus the juice (what a great expression), for a total of \$312,000. It's a remarkable number, but still below what some contemporary makers get for their work. So is it still undervalued? The buyer was the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Kelly L'Ecuylar, Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture, Art of America Department said, "We wanted to go for something terrific, a stand-alone piece." They certainly got that. The table would also have been a good choice, but L'Ecuylar made the point that "tables, as a rule, are hard to display—what you see is the top." In a museum setting, a screen takes up less floor space and has more visual impact.

Would the sale of the screen be an aberration once the museum was no longer bidding? The next big test was the Victrola cabinet. The starting bid was \$47,000. It sold for \$90,000 with the juice to New York dealer and TV personality Leigh Keno. Next up was Hannah's table. Leigh Keno was interested again. By the end of the bidding, the table was his, for \$156,000 with the juice, over the upper limit of the pre-auction estimate. The three-legged stools went for over \$7000 each, slightly above the current gallery prices of them. But there were still surprises. The hammer-handle-style chair from the 1960s went for \$19,200 with the juice, while an early actual hammer-handled chair went for \$11,400 with the juice. Perhaps the biggest surprise was a small sculpture of a stag, dated 1936, which seemed to have a rather high catalog estimate of \$10,000-\$15,000. After

Who was Hannah Weil Fischer?

Helene Fischer, an Esherick patron, returned to her native Germany for a visit in 1930. She visited a gallery in Bavaria that displayed ivory carvings made by a local sculptor named Hannah Weil. Mrs. Fischer was so impressed that she invited Hannah Weil to the United States for six months to do some commission work. On Hannah's birthday, Mrs. Fischer took her to visit Wharton in his studio. This meeting, based on their artistic interests, was the beginning of a close relationship that lasted their entire

lives. Later that year, Wharton went to visit Hannah at her home in Holzhausen, Germany and that is where he built the

pear wood table for her with the help of York Fischer, Sr., Mrs. Fischer's son, who was living there at the time. A number of drawings in the auction include images of Hannah from this time. In 1932, Hannah married York Fischer and in 1935, they had a son, York Fischer, Jr.

The carved stag in the auction was a present for his first birthday. The Fischer's moved to the United States in 1939 and the footstool in the sale, built in 1939, was a present to welcome them.

A major display of Esherick's work in the World's Fair in 1940 included an ivory salad set carved by Hannah Fischer. Hannah and York, Jr. visited Wharton in 1969, shortly before Esherick's death. There was a

photograph in the auction that shows Esherick as an old man, most likely from that last visit.



A photograph, inscribed to Hannah and York, of Esherick with one of his sculptures.

spirited bidding, it sold for an astonishing \$57,000 with the juice!

"This auction had two directions that it could have taken," observed Robert Aibel. "It could have been one where many of the pieces, particularly the larger pieces, would not make the minimum, or it could have been the breakthrough sale. This was clearly the breakthrough sale for Wharton Esherick's work." Many who were present felt that they were part of an historic event: the opportunity to see all of this work together for the last time, and to see Esherick finally emerging in the world of furniture and decorative arts.

Lewis Wexler, owner of the Wexler Gallery in Philadelphia, commented, "It's great that Esherick is getting his just due in the auction world." Months before, John

Sollo said, "In fifty to one hundred years, it will be Wharton Esherick's work at the Philadelphia Antiques Show that will be selling for a million dollars." That certainly seemed like a strong opinion before this auction. Afterward he said, "maybe the time-frame shortened a little bit." He also said that he believed that "Wharton Esherick's furniture will be the most valuable furniture ever made in America. The day will come when it exceeds pretty much everything else. We're not there yet but we're approaching it." That statement seems too bold...or is it?

Mark Sfirri is a woodworker, the coordinator of the woodworking program at Bucks County Community College, and a long-time fan of Wharton Esherick.

Understanding Finish Terminology

BY BOB FLEXNER



ALL PHOTOS BY BOB FLEXNER

Finishing is confusing partly because the terminology is specialized and often misunderstood, and partly because we don't always use the terms the same. For example, oil and varnish are very different finishes, but varnish is often called "oil" and sold as oil. Varnish, lacquer and water-based finishes are also very different finishes, but water-based finishes are often labeled varnish, polyurethane or lacquer.

Understanding the meanings of various terms is critical to mastering finishing. It's also critical for our being able to communicate with one another. (Imagine if a manufacturer insisted on calling a bandsaw a "tablesaw" because it has a table, after all!) Following are some of the most commonly used finishing terms and their meanings. For the purpose of this article, I'm not including coloring terminology.

FINISH

A finish is a substance that changes from a liquid to a solid after being applied to the wood. A finish enhances the appearance of wood, but more importantly it protects the wood from liquid staining and slows moisture-vapor (humidity) exchange between the wood and the air around it. Slowing this exchange reduces swelling and shrinking and retards joint failure, warping, splitting and veneer peeling.

As finishes age, they become porous, eventually crazing and cracking. The more porous a finish, the less effective it is at protecting the wood from staining and moisture-vapor exchange.

FILM FINISH

A film, or "film-building," finish is any finish that can be built (by repeated applica-

tions) to a hard, thick layer on the surface of the wood. The key requirement for a film finish is that it must cure hard. Varnish, shellac, lacquer, water base and catalyzed finishes are all film finishes. Wax and any finish that contains oil in its natural, unreacted form cannot be film finishes because wax and oil cure too soft to be functional in any thickness.

The thicker a film finish is built up on the wood, the better the protection against moisture-vapor exchange, but also the sooner the finish will begin to craze and crack.

PENETRATING FINISH

"Penetrating finish" is the traditional term used to categorize linseed oil, tung oil and oil/varnish-blend finishes. It's not the best term because all finishes penetrate, so it doesn't add anything to our understanding. In

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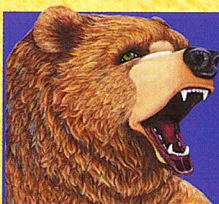
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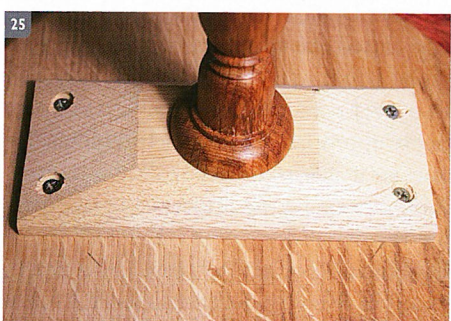
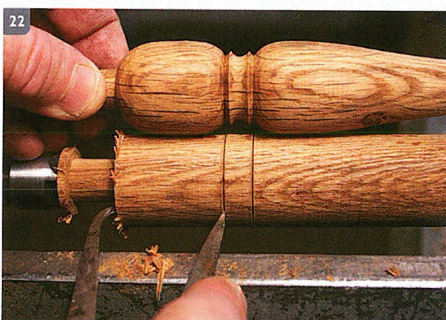
The three legs of the table are dowel-jointed into the base section of the stem. Boring the holes should not be left to guess work; to be sure that the position of each leg is equally spaced and splayed, an indexing device and a drilling jig is required. I have used the lathe indexing ring with its locking pin to position and hold the work in place while the holes are drilled. I made the drilling jig out of a square block of hardwood by first drilling a hole the same size as the dowel joint all the way through at right angles to the side of the block. Center the block on the lathe and turn one end down to form a post which fits into the tool rest banjo of your lathe. Position the height of the jig so that the center of the drill is the same height as the lathe center (20). Fit the workpiece between centers and set the jig for the desired rake angle on the legs. I chose a 30° angle for this table, though a steeper angle of 45° would provide more strength to the leg assembly if that is of concern to you. Rotate the stem so that a dowel position lines up with the point of the drill, and bore each hole in turn (21).

THREE SPLAYED LEGS

Turn the block for the leg to a cylinder and mark out the overall length. After the first leg was made, I used a pair of odd leg calipers to transfer the dimensions from one leg to the other (22). Cut a dowel at one end and use a vernier gauge to check the accuracy of the diameter. Use the same methods that you used on the table stem to form the reel molding. You can use the beading tool instead of the skew chisel to round off the shoulders (23). This technique, which uses the corner of the tool edge to cut, does not produce quite the super smooth finish of the skew, but it does provide a more consistent result. Complete the leg shape using the roughing gouge (24). One of the little tricks that I have learned when doing a set of duplicate turnings is to leave the spindles with their centered ends intact until the last one has been made. It is then possible, if a mistake is made to one of the legs, to fix the others back on their centers and do any modifications required to make them match.

SANDING AND POLISHING

Wear a dust mask when you do the sanding. I use J-flex aluminum oxide cloth abrasive as it is long-lasting and works in and out



of tight curves. Start off with 80-grit and work through to 240-grit, then finish off with 400-grit. Each successive grade should remove the scratches of the previous grade until the surface is perfectly smooth and free from any marks other than the grain of the wood. Wipe on a coat of cellulose sanding sealer if you require a finish that resists water marks, or use a soft fast drying wax, which is rubbed all over with the lathe stationary and then burnished with the lathe running. Further waxing will improve the finish and with time the wood will gradually take on a deep, translucent antique patina.

ASSEMBLING THE TABLE

There are methods to join a table together that use buttons to hold the top down and allow for shrinkage. I have used the traditional but less sophisticated way for joining the top of the table to the central stem, which is to glue and wedge the dowel into an intermediary cross-brace, which is then slotted for the screws which go through into the underside of the table-top (25).

Chris Child is a contributing editor for Woodwork magazine.

ANATOMY OF A MASTERPIECE

The 1931 Corner Desk by Wharton Esherick

BY MARK SFIRRI

It's unfortunate that most people only get to see three-dimensional art through photographs. Usually a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional object of art—a sculpture, a piece of furniture, or a building—reduces it to a “kill shot,” an overall image from the “best” angle, and, if you're lucky, a detail shot. But the work should really be experienced in person. An academically-trained artist is taught that three-dimensional work needs to be considered from all angles, each equally important.

Images of Wharton Esherick's 1931 “Corner Desk,” showing the piece both open and closed, have been published in a variety of books and catalogues. They are able to convey some of the desk's visual impact, but to appreciate it completely requires that one use it, at least to some extent—opening it up, operating the drawers and discovering the details for oneself. Esherick would have liked all of his furniture to be experienced in this way, because he built his furniture for use as well as appearance. Functionality is part of its aesthetic.

I was one of the lucky few who at least got to see “Corner Desk” when it was on view at the seminal exhibition *Wooden-works* at the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., nearly half its life ago in 1972. Seeing it made such an impression on me that it immediately became my favorite piece of furniture ever made.

When it was displayed at the Bicentennial exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1976, it was cordoned off. During that exhibition, Barbara Fischer Eldred, the daughter of the owner at the time, and the

current owner of the desk, brought Bess Hurwitz, also a patron of Esherick, to see it. She was upset that she couldn't show Hurwitz how it worked, so she stepped over the rope and did just that! Eldred would like to see the desk in the permanent collection of a museum someday, but struggles with the idea that the desk would necessarily only be viewed and no longer experienced.

Recently I had the opportunity to visit the desk again, at the house of Barbara and Ken Eldred, and this time I really got to explore it. When I was arranging my visit, Eldred suggested that she could empty out the desk, but I thought that it would be a better idea to photograph it the way it is used, and I'm glad we did it that way. The alcove where it now lives was designed into the Eldreds' house specifically for the desk. In addition to forming a more intimate acquaintance with the desk itself, I learned much about the rich history surrounding the creation of it.

Before discussing the desk itself, I need to mention three people who played important roles in Wharton Esherick's life at the time: Helene Koerting Fischer, Hannah Weil, and John Schmidt. Helene Fischer, a German-born businesswoman, was one of Esherick's earliest and most important patrons. Fischer's purchase of Esherick's sculpture “Finale” in 1927 marked the start of a patronage that lasted into the 1940s. Esherick produced four major Cubist-influenced works for the Fischers' house. In addition to these commissions, it is the general consensus among the people I've spoken with that Fischer arranged and paid for a trip Esherick made to Europe in

1931, because she supported his desire to explore something of the art world there. Esherick went to Europe only one other time, when he was about eighteen and still a painter. Travel to Europe in the thirties was a major commitment of time and money. Commercial air travel was, of course, years away. Esherick sailed on the Saint Louis, arrived in Germany in July of 1931, and stayed for six months.

Hannah Weil was a sculptor and the widow of the German Expressionist painter Otto Weil. Helene Fischer had seen Weil's sculpture exhibited in Germany, and in 1930 brought Hannah Weil to the United States from Germany for about six months, commissioning a number of ivory pieces from her. Fischer introduced Weil to Esherick in October of 1930, the beginning of what would become a lifelong friendship. (Esherick thought so highly of Weil's work that he included a set of her ivory salad servers in his Pennsylvania Hill House exhibit at the New York World's Fair in 1940). The bond with Weil provided Esherick with a connection to Germany, and he visited her at her home in Bavaria the next year. Germany was in a period of artistic creativity in the twenties and thirties, and Cubism and German Expressionism were at the center of it. Esherick was eager to take it in, and Weil's friendship, connection to the art community, and knowledge of the language and the country made this possible. I wonder whether Esherick would have made the trip had he not known Weil. Hannah Weil married York Fischer, Helene Fischer's son, in 1932; one of their children was Barbara Fischer Eldred.



ALL PHOTOS BY MARK SPIERI EXCEPT AS NOTED



PHOTO COURTESY OF RAGO ART AND AUCTION CENTER

It could be argued that John Schmidt was the most important of these three influential people. Esherick had been interested in drawing all his life. He studied painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, but try as he might, he couldn't make his mark as a painter. He turned next to woodcuts and block prints, and he was prolific, making over 400 designs, some of which illustrated ten books published from 1922 to 1935. Carving wood for his prints and making wood picture frames for his paintings led him in two new directions, wood sculpture and furniture. Sculpture was the easier transition. The pieces were made from single blocks of wood and required carving techniques and an understanding of grain direction. He could easily have learned this on his own. The results were a perfect blend of his concepts and his technical skills.

Furniture, on the other hand, is much more complicated. Knowledge of the necessary equipment, its use and maintenance would have taken a long time to acquire. Understanding joinery techniques and the proper application of them would also have required a lot of trial and error. Esherick was thirty-eight years old with two small children and a third on the way in 1925, so it was a dif-



PHOTO COURTESY OF HELENE FISCHER ESTATE

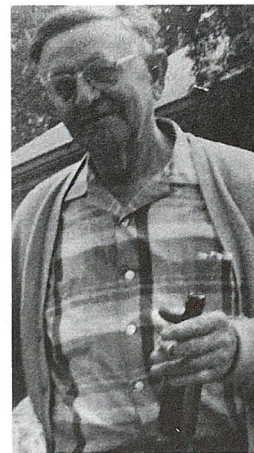


PHOTO COURTESY OF AUDREY ROBISH

At left: Wharton Esherick, at age 44, on his studio steps in 1931. Above center: Fischer family portrait from 1937, with Hannah (Weil) Fischer (front row, left) and Helene Fischer (back row, second from right). Above right: John Schmidt, Esherick's woodworking teacher and lifelong collaborator.

ficult time for him to start down this new road. John Schmidt, an outstanding woodworking student in an apprenticeship program in Germany, had moved to the United States in 1907, and fortunately for Esherick, he settled about a mile from Esherick's house. John Schmidt was 34 in 1925, the year that Esherick began working in Schmidt's studio. (Schmidt also trained a neighbor, Bill McIntyre, in woodworking, and he became an employee of Esherick's from the age of 12, in 1926, until Esherick's death in 1970).

In 1927, after Esherick made his "Drop Leaf Desk" in oak—now displayed at the Wharton Esherick Museum—he decided that he would not make furniture by himself; he needed help. The "Drop Leaf Desk" is an impressive, large, significant work. Perhaps it could be viewed as his journeyman's piece, but its construction is simple. All of the planes are square to one another, especially in comparison to the "Corner Desk" that is the subject of this story.

Thus Schmidt was Esherick's furniture teacher and collaborator from the start and for over a quarter of a century. When Schmidt contributed significantly to one of Esherick's pieces, "J. S." appears next to Esherick's signature (visible in 14). Esherick certainly designed his subsequent furniture and made parts of it, particularly the carved areas, but it was John Schmidt who engineered and constructed much of it. With a cabinetmaker as skilled as Schmidt, Esherick had virtually no ceiling placed on his creativity.

From the mid-1920s until the mid-1930s, much of Esherick's work was characterized by the use of hard-edged diago-

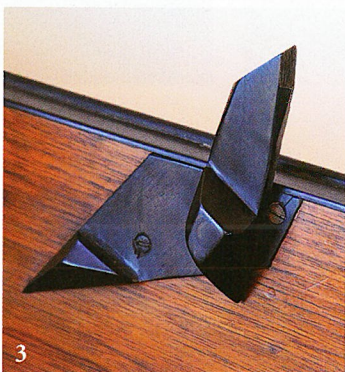
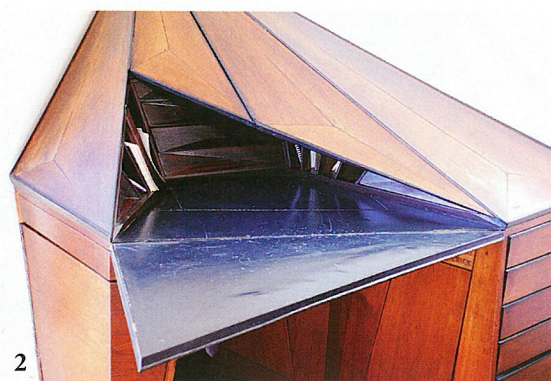
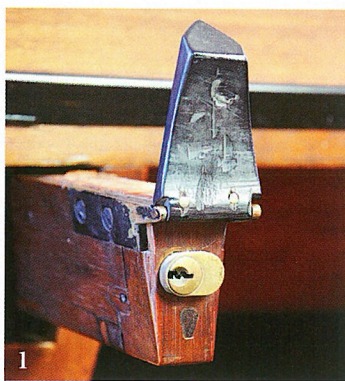
nal lines and faceted planes. The major pieces commissioned for the Fischers' house—"Corner Desk" in 1931, "Sewing Cabinet" in 1933, and "Bench with Album Storage" in 1937—were clearly influenced by Cubism and German Expressionism. The symmetrical piece, "Padauk Victrola Cabinet," 1930, [see *Woodwork* #105, June 2007, "Esherick Emerges"], was also influenced to some extent by Art Deco aesthetic.

There is no area of "Corner Desk" that hasn't been considered; there were no "easy" parts to its construction. Although faceted and angular, the desk is playful and engaging, unlike the more reserved "Victrola Cabinet." When the desk is closed, it is composed of a series of odd-shaped walnut triangles that dance around the upper portion of the desk and create an irregular faceted shape akin to a miscut diamond, with each facet framed in ebony. Each of the triangles is composed of three triangular pieces mitered together. The motif is consistent to the last detail, and each detail is designed and executed flawlessly. There is no visible hardware. At first the desk appears to be symmetrical, but further inspection of each component reveals that it isn't. The three centrally located triangles open up to reveal a miniature environment in padauk that is right out of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the important 1919 German Expressionist film. The drawers, the partitions, and the hidden compartments present a skewed perspective that might have been easy to put down on paper, but the execution of the design would leave even the best craftspeople scratching their heads.

The only references that remained square and true are the work surface, which is level, and the back of the desk, which is square in order to fit into a corner of a room. All the rest are compound angles joining compound angles with compound angled dovetails and other tricky joinery.

To use the desk, one must figure out a series of puzzles. There are a number of secret compartments, and the first challenge is to find the compartment that holds the key...something I never managed to do on my own. The next step is to discover that if you flip up the small black triangular form by the top left drawer you will find a keyhole (1)—this unlocks the pullout that supports the top. Next, the triangular work surface folds down onto the support (2). Reaching under the upper two triangles, you can rotate an ebony catch (3) and open two flaps to see into the desk (4). The vertical partitions toward the center of the desk on both sides are slightly canted. Each successive partition angles more than the one before, creating a cascading effect as they come forward.

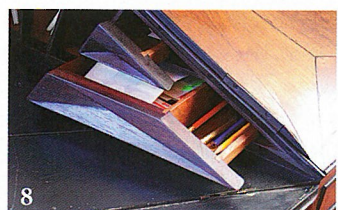
The back of the center of the desk has six angularly sculpted fronts. I assumed that these were all drawers, although the top one was very shallow and I wasn't sure. It turned out to be a removable panel that reveals two small tilted compartments (5). The bottom five fronts are all drawers, but the second front from the top pivots out, turning on a light that illuminates the work surface, eliminating the need for a separate desk lamp (6).

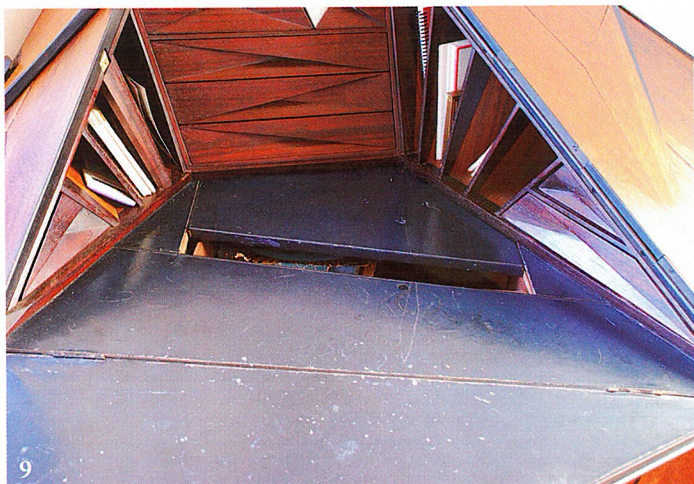


This is a common feature of Esherick's carcass work. The drawers have dovetails that are cut at an angle and they pull out at a variety of angles (7, 8). The work surface is finished in black leather and has seams that break it into five irregular shapes. The shape closest to the back slides open to reveal a hidden removable recessed tray (9, 10).

The left bank of drawers below the work surface contains two file drawers and one narrow drawer (11). They are side hung,

but not in the normal sense of side hung: they are all hung by the right side of the drawer. The drawer front is the front and the left side of the drawer. There are no pulls, so you just slide the drawer open by placing your hand flat on the outside and pulling against the side. There is a channel that surrounds the top and bottom of the drawer side, forming a track, and it functions very well seventy-five years later. The right base cabinet contains drawers that are





also side hung from the right (12). The method for opening these drawers is the ebony trim strip at the top of each drawer, on the left side of the drawer. This pull area tapers back and is nearly flush on the right side of the drawer. As the drawer pulls out, a space is created between the left side of the drawer and left side of the cabinet. Note that the drawers are tapered in plan and in elevation and that the fronts are angled

back slightly from top to bottom.

For years I thought that the bench for the desk was an afterthought and didn't go with the piece, because it appeared to be symmetrical. It turns out not to be the original chair, which was angular, but had linear elements that competed too much with the desk. The bench works much better visually. After visiting the desk and pulling out the bench, I discovered that it isn't sym-

metrical but mirrors the irregular shape of the knee-hole space (13). Once the bench is pulled out, you discover the compound angled dovetailed trash container nested into the knee-hole (14). If you toss a crumpled piece of paper under the desk, you will not miss the trash can. Brilliant. When the trash can is pulled out, you can see that each of the three planes that define the knee-hole space is composed of angled wedge shaped parts that fit together like puzzle pieces. Even here, under the desk, Esherick maintained the design scheme.

This might seem like an exhaustive description, but there's even more to it. What a treat it would be to live with the desk for a week or two, to discover more of its secrets, to use it to write letters and to sort correspondence, to have daily life influenced by it.

Esherick was forty-four years old when this desk was made, but he was only in his sixth year as a furniture maker and designer, which makes this accomplishment all the more impressive. His collaboration with Schmidt allowed his genius to be realized.

Nothing in the past thirty-five years since I first encountered this desk has changed my conviction that it is my favorite piece of furniture. This recent visit allowed me to spend time with it, play with it, and explore it, making it possible to appreciate its intricacies and the thought that went into it in a way I never could before. I am now even more in awe of this masterpiece and the men who made it.

Mark Sfirri is a woodworker, the coordinator of the woodworking program at Bucks County Community College, and a long-time fan of Wharton Esherick.

The Book Illustrations of Wharton Esherick

By Henry Wessells

With [A Checklist of Books Illustrated by Wharton Esherick](#)

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Wharton Esherick, recognized as a key link between the pre-1916 Arts and Crafts Movement and the renewed interest in the crafts following the Second World War, is most widely known for his sculptures and non-traditional furniture designs from the late 1920s and 1930s onward. In his long and varied career, Esherick (1887-1970) joined the traditions of the decorative arts with those of the fine arts. He was also a noted printmaker and book illustrator whose work was published in popular magazines and in elegant limited editions and remains sought after by collectors to this day.

Curiously enough, Esherick's woodcut work, produced almost entirely between 1922 and 1936, occurred in a period of great artistic transition for him, when he sought a medium in which he could evolve his own characteristic style. Formally trained in oil and watercolor painting, Esherick soon abandoned painting as he developed an identifiable style in his woodcuts. He also began to carve simple, woodcut-like designs on antique furniture, to experiment more freely and less academically with sculpture, and to design furniture to be ornamented with carvings. By the early 1930s, Esherick began receiving important design commissions and had a rising reputation. His Pennsylvania Hill House interior was exhibited at the New York World's Fair in 1940, and major exhibitions of his furniture and sculpture followed during the next decades. Esherick's studio, a building of his own design that evolved over a 40-year period, incorporates countless marks of its owner's personality; a larger woodworking shop, constructed in 1956 from plans by architect Louis I. Kahn, bears many of Esherick's distinctive design signatures.

Wharton Harris Esherick was born on July 15, 1887, in Philadelphia. He was one of seven children. His family resided on Locust Street, in an area now occupied by the University of Pennsylvania, and possessed independent means. From an early age, Esherick was interested in drawing, and soon determined to become an artist, despite the fact that his parents discouraged him. He attended the Manual Training High School where he took courses in woodworking and metalsmithing and graduated in 1906. Esherick studied painting at the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art (now the University of the Arts), and earned a scholarship to a two-year program at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. He studied under William Merritt Chase, Thomas Anschutz and Cecilia Beaux, and produced technically proficient work, yet became disenchanted and left before completion of his studies.

Esherick worked briefly as an illustrator for Philadelphia newspapers and as then resident commercial artist for the Victor Talking Machine company. In 1912, when he lost his job, Esherick and his wife Letty moved out of the city to a farmhouse in Paoli, Pennsylvania, where he concentrated on painting. Yet before long, Esherick found himself dissatisfied with the work he produced using the academic approach to art



February by Wharton Esherick (from the collection of Henry Wessells)

of his formal training.

Fairhope, Alabama

In 1919, Esherick was invited to join the faculty of an experimental school for "organic learning" in Fairhope, Alabama. Located on Mobile Bay, Fairhope was then an artist colony that attracted many writers, painters and craftsmen during the winter. Esherick met Sherwood Anderson, who remained a life-long friend. Significantly, Esherick obtained his first set of woodcarving tools and began making decorative frames for his own paintings. He also met Mary Marcy, a young woman who was writing a children's book on evolution. Esherick carved a woodcut illustration for one of her verses. She, in turn, was inspired by his illustration and they began a correspondence that resulted in Esherick carving more than 100 blocks.

Back in Pennsylvania in 1920, he converted his barn into a studio, and began making woodcuts and carving small objects, including *The Race*, a game consisting of a set of six brightly colored figures on horseback.

Esherick's early woodcuts were carved on inexpensive flat grain boards. He made dramatic use of contrasts, primitive shapes, and the textures of the wood in the woodcuts for the first book he illustrated. This was Mary Marcy's *Rhymes of Early Jungle Folk*, verses on the then still controversial subject of evolution, issued in 1922 by the socialist publishing house of Charles H. Kerr & Company of Chicago. The title page is an Esherick woodcut, and more than 70 of the 100 blocks carved by Esherick were selected to illustrate the book. Marcy died the month before the book appeared.

Esherick found himself intrigued by the possibilities of the new art form. He acquired a Washington hand press and began to produce his own prints in small editions (frequently between 20 and 60 prints). In 1922, Esherick printed a woodcut invitation to a showing of his paintings and woodcuts at his barn. Esherick's woodcuts, and later wood engravings, also began appearing in national magazines, such as *Century*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Forum*. In 1922-1923, *Century* published a series of woodcuts illustrating different months (January -- Blankets of Snow; February; March -- The Manure Spreader; April; September Corn; and December). At much the same time, *Century* published woodcuts by J.J. Lankes, a contemporary whose work is frequently associated with the writings of poet Robert Frost. The woodcuts of Lankes and Esherick have a certain resemblance, both in their execution and in the choice of subject matter.

A 1928 wood engraving, *Of a Great City*, is an image of Esherick's friend Theodore Dreiser at work at an Art Deco desk, beneath a tall window that gives a glimpse of a teeming city. Dreiser worked on the stage adaptation of *An American Tragedy* while a guest in Esherick's farmhouse.



View from Esherick's studio window, February 1999.
Photograph by Henry Wessells

The Centaur Book Shop

During the early 1920s, Esherick had met Harold Mason, owner of the Centaur Book Shop in Philadelphia. Mason had a keen appreciation of the book arts, and sought to produce fine press books, printed on hand made papers in limited editions.

Esherick

made Morse a Centaur (1924), an ornament of iron and wood that adorned the shop sign for many years. He also made several other centaur figures during the late 1920s.

In 1924, the Centaur Press published its first book, Walt Whitman's poem, *Song of the Broad-Axe*, with woodcuts by Esherick. The title page bears the Centaur Press logo by Esherick. The colophon page reads: "The first book of the Centaur Press published during the autumn of MCMXXIV at Philadelphia. The edition is limited to four hundred copies, of which three hundred and seventy five are for sale." Esherick had prepared a complete hand-lettered "prototype" of *Song of the Broad-Axe* that contains many unusual design elements that were not incorporated into the published book, which was designed and printed by Frederic Warde at the Princeton University Press.

The second Centaur Press book, published in 1925, was D.H. Lawrence's *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine*, which predates the English edition and includes an Esherick woodcut porcupine at the lower right corner of the half title page.

Esherick's next two book projects for the Centaur Press were more substantial. *Yokohama Garlands*, a volume of poetry by A.E. Coppard, contains 24 "vignettes" by Wharton Esherick, woodcuts screened for printing that appear to be delicate line drawings. *Yokohama Garlands*, published in an edition of 500 copies in 1926, was designed and printed by Elmer Adler at the Pynson Printers, and was included in the "Fifty Books of the Year" selected by the American Institute of Graphic Arts.

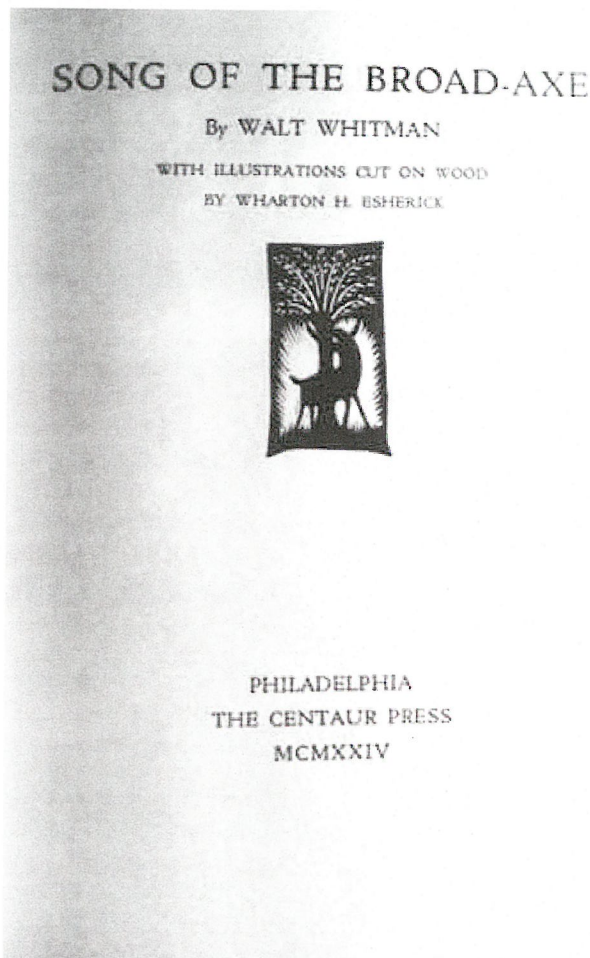
For *The Song of Solomon*, Esherick prepared 30 woodcuts, including a circular woodcut title-page, as well as a decorative medallion for the front cover, and a stylized design for the back cover. He made not one but two complete prototypes. In the

prototype that most resembles the finished book, Esherick's title page indicates the work of the artist, but the finished book bears only the circular woodcut. Esherick's illustrations are erotic in nature. In 1927, *The Song of Solomon* was published in an edition of 525 copies printed on Japanese paper.

Esherick made a series of linoleum block prints for Emily Clark's *Stuffed Peacocks*, published by Knopf in 1927. The following year, Esherick created a sequence of nine woodcuts for *As I Watched the Ploughman Ploughing*, a poem by Walt Whitman set to music by Philip Damas, and issued in an edition of 200 copies. Four of Esherick's illustrations of rural themes for this book were reprinted in the February 1929 issue of *Vanity Fair*.

Esherick's connections with Philadelphia society brought him his next book commission. Amory Hare asked him to illustrate her play, *Tristram and Iseult*, and Esherick prepared 10 linoleum block prints for the beautifully produced edition of 450 signed copies published by the Slide Mountain Press.

Three later works illustrated by Esherick include vignettes for a memorial poem, *Bright Mariner*, by Katherine Garrison Chapin (1933), illustrated below; woodcut illustrations for the poem "Turkey Gobbler Land" by Thomas Caldecot Chubb (1934); and *Thwarted Ambitions* by Robert Lane Anderson, son of Sherwood Anderson. *Thwarted Ambitions* (1935), which includes a foreword by Sherwood Anderson, reprints a humorous newspaper article reporting small town legal



proceedings arising from the pasturing of heifers and steers.

Sculpture, Furniture, Architecture

By this time, Esherick's interests had turned to furniture and sculpture, the areas in which he would gain his greatest acclaim. From his modest carvings on picture frames and the edges of tables, Esherick had progressed to more elaborate carvings and the design of pieces of furniture that would reflect his preference for organic forms and natural lines. In his sculpture, Esherick had abandoned classical methods in favor of carving directly in wood; while he frequently chose exotic tropical woods for sculptures in the late 1920s, increasingly he began to make use of local woods: oak, cherry, walnut, and pine from nearby forests.

In the middle 1920s, Esherick and his wife became involved with the Hedgerow Theatre, a professional company that converted the guild hall of the nearby Rose Valley arts and crafts community into a forum for producing avant-garde plays. Esherick carved posters for Hedgerow productions (including *The Emperor Jones*) and built furniture for the theater. He also made prints and sculptures inspired by theatrical subjects.

In 1926, Esherick built a new studio building on the wooded hillside above the farmhouse. This gave him a larger work space and also served as sleeping quarters in the summer, when his wife and three children went to the Adirondacks and the main farmhouse was rented.

In the late 1920s, Esherick began moving away from the Arts and Crafts influences as he became interested in German Expressionism. Hard edges and flat surfaces appeared in his work, and he made a trip to Germany in 1930 to see what German sculptors were doing. Esherick produced a number of expressionist furniture pieces between 1931 and 1933, as well as stage sets for the Hedgerow Theatre, and a series of sculptures.

This expressionist period gave way in 1934 to what can be termed the mature Esherick style of rounded corners, undulating forms, and natural shapes. In 1935, he received a commission from Judge Curtis Bok for some bookshelves. This work eventually grew to include two walls of bookshelves, doorways, a unique spiral staircase, a small library room, a paneled music room, an office and numerous items of furniture for the Bok house in Gulph Mills, Pennsylvania. At the height of the Bok commission, Esherick employed 11 workers, including cabinetmakers, masons, a blacksmith, a weaver, and others. The Bok house no longer exists but many of these pieces were removed to museum collections prior to its demolition.

In the mid 1930s, Ford Madox Ford visited Esherick's hillside retreat:

A dim studio in which blocks of rare woods,
carver's tools,
medieval looking carving gadgets, looms, printing
presses, rise
up like ghosts in the twilight while the slow fire
dies in the
brands ... Such a studio built by the craftsman's



own hands out of
 chunks of rock and great balks of timber, sinking
 back into the
 quiet woods on a quiet crag with, below its long
 windows, quiet
 fields parceled out by the string-courses of hedges
 and running
 to a quietly rising horizon ... such a quiet spot is
 the best
 place to think in.

And let Esherick be moving noiselessly about
 in the shadows,
 with a plane and a piece of boxwood, or swinging
 backwards the
 lever of his press, printing off his engravings. Or
 pouring, a
 hundred times, heavy oil and emery powder on
 one of the tables he
 has designed, and rubbing it off with cloths to get
 the polish
 exactly true, and bending down again and again to
 see the sheen
 of the light along the polished wood ... Those are
 the conditions
 you need for thought. Because they present to
 your mind neither
 success nor failure, but conditions, coeval with the
 standing
 rocks and the life of man. There have always been
 craftsmen and
 the craftsmen have always been the best men of
 their time because
 a handicraft goes at a pace commensurate with the
 thoughts in a
 man's head. [Described in *Great Trade Route*,
 1937]

In 1940 Esherick removed the massive oak spiral stair that connected his studio to his loft bedroom and sent it, along with several pieces of furniture, to the New York World's Fair. The Pennsylvania Hill House exhibit introduced Esherick's work to a national audience but few commissions resulted in that time when people were preoccupied with the threat of war. He continued to work on sculpture and occasional design commissions. In the postwar years, Esherick gained a new generation of followers, and designed chairs for production by a local cabinetmaker, as well as hi-fi cabinets, kitchen objects, and other items. The New York Architectural League awarded him its gold medal in 1954 for his furniture and interior designs.

In 1956, Esherick used a legacy from an aunt to build a larger workshop next to his studio, and a 1958 retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in New York City (Now the American Craft Museum) resulted in wider exposure and many new commissions. Esherick's principal sculpting tool was the axe, but by the late 1960s, he could no longer wield it with the necessary control. His last major sculpture, *Rhythms II*, a graceful form shaped from the trunk of a cottonwood tree, was carved by workers using chainsaws at Esherick's direction. Esherick continued working until his death on May 6, 1970.



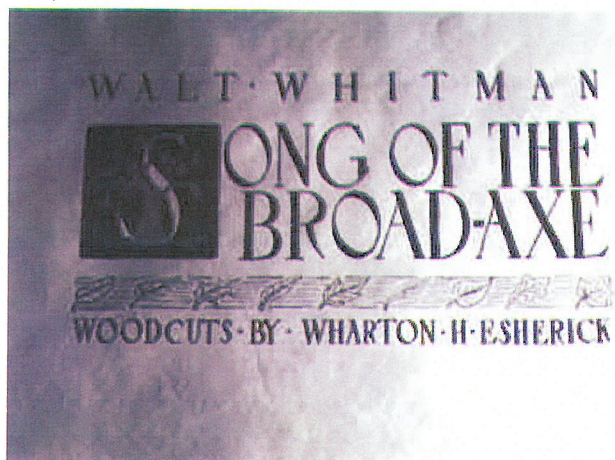
The Wharton Esherick Museum

After Esherick suffered a stroke in 1967, his children purchased his property to ensure that he would be able to live in his studio for his remaining years. Following his death, his heirs determined to maintain Esherick's studio and collection intact. The Wharton Esherick Museum, established in 1972, is housed in the 1926 studio building, and preserves works from the whole of Esherick's career, including furniture, sculpture, prints and books, as well as many of the original printing blocks carved by Esherick.

Several books have been published by or in association with the museum, including *The Wharton Esherick Museum Studio and Collection* (Paoli: The Wharton Esherick Museum, 1977; second edition, 1984); *Drawings by Wharton Esherick*, compiled, edited, and with an introduction by Gene Rochberg (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1978); and *Half a Century in Wood* by Mansfield Bascom (Paoli: The Wharton Esherick Museum, 1988). Limited edition restrikes of some of the woodcuts have been produced, following a custom initiated by Esherick. Efforts are under way to reprint *Rhymes of Early Jungle Folk*.

[The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Robert Leonard, director of the Wharton Esherick Museum, and Mansfield Bascom, curator, in preparation of this article. The mailing address is: The Wharton Esherick Museum, P.O. Box 595, Paoli, Pennsylvania 19301. The Wharton Esherick Studio website is found at

<http://www.briarweb.com/esherick/index.html>. Another well designed website devoted to the artist is found at <http://www.levins.com/esherick.html>.]



Title page of Esherick's dummy for Song of the Broad-Axe

An Esherick Checklist

Esherick's illustrations appeared in books and periodicals between 1922 and 1935, with a few later items. The following chronological list describes the books featuring Esherick illustrations. Further information is contained in *Prints by Wharton Esherick*, the catalogue of a 1984 exhibition at the Woodmere Art Museum in Philadelphia, which provides a detailed alphabetical listing of 214 prints (by title) and 181 illustrations for books (in order of appearance).

1. *Rhymes of Early Jungle Folk* by Mary E. Marcy. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1922.

Illustrated with 71 woodcuts by Wharton Esherick.

2. *Song of the Broad-Axe* by Walt Whitman. Philadelphia: Centaur Press, 1924. Illustrated with 20 woodcuts by Wharton Esherick, including dust jacket and illustrations on boards. Edition of 400 copies. The first book of the Centaur Press.

3. *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine* by D.H. Lawrence. Philadelphia: Centaur Press, 1924. The half-title bears a woodcut Porcupine by Esherick. Edition of 925 copies, bound in marbled boards, with slipcase. The second book of the Centaur Press.

4. *Yokohama Garlands and Other Poems* by A.E. Coppard. Philadelphia: Centaur Press, 1926. Illustrated with 24 vignettes by Wharton Esherick. Edition of

500 copies.

5. *The Song of Solomon*. Philadelphia: Centaur Press, 1927. Illustrated with 30 woodcuts by Wharton Esherick. Edition of 525 copies, bound with orange cloth spine and white boards embossed with colored designs by Esherick.

6. *Stuffed Peacocks* by Emily Clark. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1927. Illustrated with eight linoleum cuts by Wharton Esherick. Dust jacket illustration by Esherick.

7. *As I Watched the Ploughman Ploughing* by Walt Whitman and set to music by Philip Damas. Philadelphia: Franklin Printing Company, 1928. Illustrated with nine woodcuts by Wharton Esherick, including cover illustration. Edition of 200 copies.

8. *Tristram and Iseult* by Amory Hare. Gaylordsville: Slide Mountain Press, 1930. Illustrated with 10 linoleum cuts by Wharton Esherick. Edition of 450 copies printed on Bishopstoke hand made paper, each copy signed by the author and artist.

9. *Bright Mariner* by Katherine Garrison Chapin. New York: Duffield and Green, 1933. Esherick produced three woodcut illustrations on yachting themes for this memorial pamphlet: a small vignette of a sloop tipped onto the front wrapper; a full page print (illustrated above), and a small vignette of a sloop on calm seas for the last printed page. Not listed among the books in *Prints by Wharton Esherick*.

10. *Thwarted Ambitions* by Robert Lane Anderson. Foreword by Sherwood Anderson. Philadelphia: Centaur Book Shop, 1935. Printed by the Marion Publishing Company, Marion, Virginia. Illustrated with six woodcuts by Wharton Esherick, including cover illustration. "Second Edition" so indicated on the copy examined.



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