
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 SPIRRI EXCEPT AS NOTED



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PHOTO COURTESY OF HELENE FISCHER ESTATE

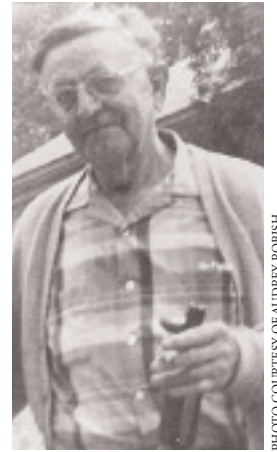


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At left: Wharton Esherick, at age 44, on his studio steps in 1931. Above center: Fischer family portrait from 1937, with Hannah (Weil) Fischer (front row, left) and Helene Fischer (back row, second from right). Above right: John Schmidt, Esherick's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

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-

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-

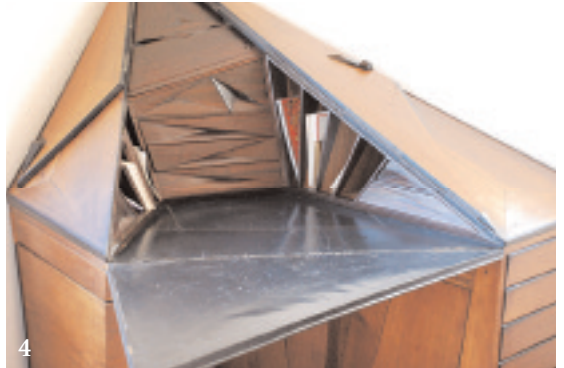
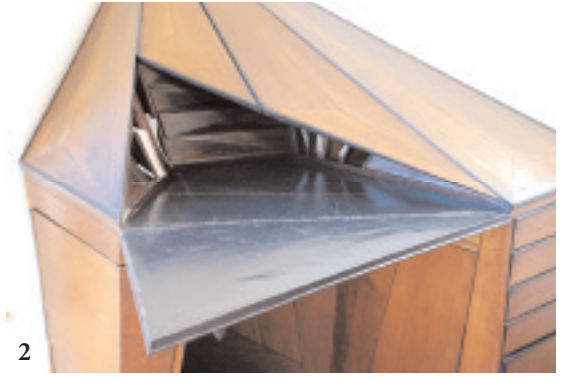
nal lines and faceted planes. The major pieces commissioned for the Fischers' house—"Corner Desk" in 1931, "Sewing Cabinet" in 1933, and "Bench with Album Storage" in 1937—were clearly influenced by Cubism and German Expressionism. The symmetrical piece, "Padauk Victrola Cabinet," 1930, [see *Woodwork* #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.

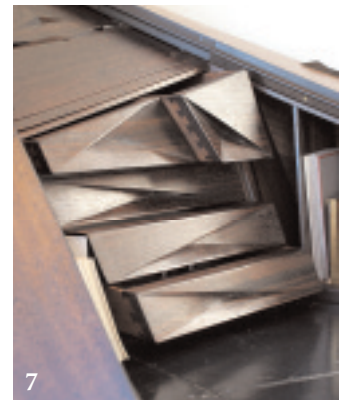
The back of the center of the desk has six angularly sculpted fronts. I assumed that these were all drawers, although the top one was very shallow and I wasn't sure. It turned out to be a removable panel that reveals two small tilted compartments (5). The bottom five fronts are all drawers, but the second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

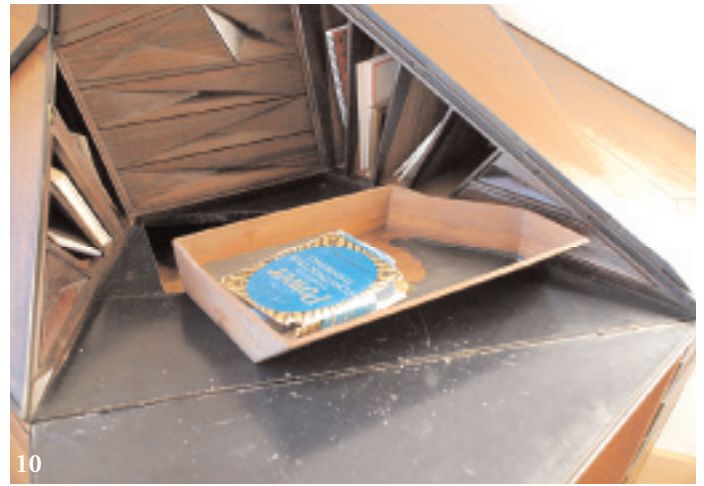


This is a common feature of Esherick's carcase work. The drawers have dovetails that are cut at an angle and they pull out at a variety of angles (7, 8). The work surface is finished in black leather and has seams that break it into five irregular shapes. The shape closest to the back slides open to 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, and it functions very well seventy-five years later. The right base cabinet contains drawers that are





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.

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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-