

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



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 sheaves of wheat.

ALL PHOTOS BY SOLLO RAGO EXCEPT AS NOTED



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 kids are

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".

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 carcass, 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

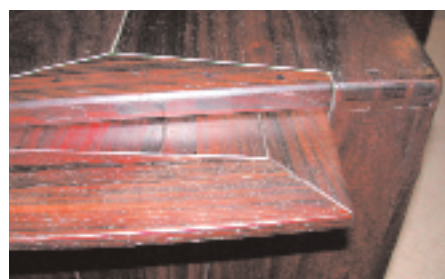


PHOTO BY MARK SFERRI

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 SPIRI

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".



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 prob-

good lesson for why one shouldn't use that wood on an exterior surface.

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 con-

trasts 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



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.

ested 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.

ably aware that there is a large collection of 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 inter-

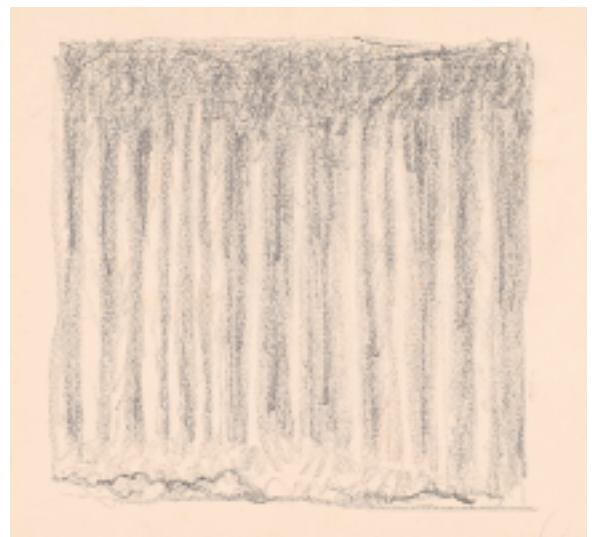


PHOTO BY JOHN CARLANO

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'Ecuyer, 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'Ecuyer 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



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

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.

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 timeframe 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.