If a “studio craft” category appeared on the game show Jeopardy, a $500 answer might read, “20-century painter, born 1887, died 1970, who made a significant mark on American craft.” This question might be a little arcane for most people, so the clue “had a son Peter, born in 1926,” could be added for a $400 answer (1). If that were not enough, “designed and made furniture and ceramics, beginning in the 1920s,” might come next, for $300, followed by “designed and built his own studio in the 1920s,” for $100. And at last, you would confidently answer, “Who was Wharton Esherick?” Astonishingly, that’s not the only correct answer! “Who was Henry Varnum Poor?” answers all four clues as well. Poor, who made his greatest impact in pottery and painting, built Crow House (2), as he called his home and studio in New City, NY, about 35 miles north of Manhattan, beginning in 1920, six years before his close friend Esherick built his studio near Paoli, PA. That both Poor and Esherick explored furniture making may come as a surprise. Esherick’s furniture and influence are well documented, but Poor’s furniture has remained largely unknown beyond a few furniture makers, historians, friends and family. Considered as a body of work, however, Poor’s furniture presents intriguing interpretations of both the Arts and Crafts movement and Modernism.

Because Poor was largely self-taught, his pieces are characterized by idiosyncratic workmanship and may seem crude in comparison to Esherick’s furniture. Poor didn’t have the benefit of a skilled craftsman to teach him woodworking, to engineer his designs, and to build them, as Esherick had in John Schmidt. Had those fortunes been reversed, perhaps Poor would have made the more significant impact on the studio furniture movement.

The furniture presented on these pages was built by Poor in the 1920s and early 1930s, largely for Crow House. A sizable trestle table used for dining represents his earliest verifiable work (5). Dated 1921, it was built a few years before Esherick’s first trestle table variations. Poor did not inscribe other furniture so conveniently, but approximate dates can be made through the study of photographs and other documents in his papers, which are now housed at the Archives of American Art.

1. Friends Wharton Esherick (left) and Henry Varnum Poor holding their infant sons—both named Peter—in 1926. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Wharton Esherick.

Above: Bench (1929). Made by Poor for the American Designers’ Gallery in New York, this bench accompanied a table that also had triangular legs resembling upturned sawhorses.

2. Crow House, Henry Varnum Poor’s home and studio. Poor built the main part of the house, seen on the left with its steep roof, in 1920 and ’21. The enlarged painting studio and floor above, on the right, were completed in 1931.

3. Poor expanded his painting studio in 1931, raising the ceiling to accommodate a large casement window and this spectacular staircase that reaches both the second floor of the older part of the house and the new floor above. Some say Poor built this staircase in response to the spiral staircase in Esherick’s studio.

AN ARTIST AND CRAFTSMAN

Born in central Kansas, Henry Varnum Poor developed an early love of nature, drawing and making things by hand, the latter aided by classes in carpentry and metalwork at Kansas City’s manual arts high school. (For the record, Esherick also attended a manual arts high school.) Poor’s father intended for his son to follow him in...
Poor had established himself as a painter on study in art, Poor embarked on a yearlong course of business, but fine art won out, and upon graduating Phi Beta Kappa from Stanford University in 1910 with a degree in graphic art, Poor embarked on a yearlong course of study in Europe. By the end of the decade, Poor had established himself as a painter on the West Coast, where he taught at Stanford and at the San Francisco Art Institute. Following service in France during the First World War, Poor decamped for New York, choosing to live outside of the city. Partly out of necessity, Poor chose to build his home on his own, making use of bleached but well-seasoned chestnut timbers and quarried sandstone on the property.

With Crow House largely finished by 1921, Poor began to make his own furnishings. The simplest of these fulfilled basic storage needs and were constructed of nailed-together planks that were painted over with cherry colors but, like stage sets, lacked backs and any real structural integrity. Poor seldom applied painted scenes on his furniture, which seems odd for one so skilled. A notable exception is the large and commodious chest of drawers (6, 8), rectilinear design (9), carved scarpas (10, 11), and embedded ceramic tiles for its façade. By the mid-1920s, they had become friends. Over the next decade, the Esherick and Poor families spent time at each other’s homes and even vacationed together. A humorous sketch by Esherick shows landlubber Poor being tossed out of a crabbing skiff on Barnegat Bay.

Their friendship inspired and challenged Poor and Esherick to create ever more daring designs (3) and produced clients that helped them through lean times. In Poor’s New City neighborhood Marjorie Content, Esherick gained one of his better patrons of the 1930s. Likewise, Poor painted a portrait (now in the National Portrait Gallery) for famed writer Theodore Dreiser, a friend and client of Esherick, and created custom ceramic lighting fixtures for his Hudson Valley home.

STUDIO CRAFT

In the late 1920s, many American craftsmen-designers began creating furnishings that were decidedly more modern in style. They were inspired by French Art Deco designs displayed at the 1925 International Exposition of Decorative Arts in Paris and subsequent exhibitions in the United States. The American Designers’ Gallery founded by Poor and others in 1928 to showcase modern American interior design was one outlet for this work. In this short-lived 57th Street showroom, Poor exhibited full room treatments: a painted ceramic bathroom featuring a buxom nude on the tiled shower walls, one year and a casual dining alcove of paneled tulip poplar with a table supported by triangular legs the following year. Notably, Esherick exhibited a similarly angular desk, among other works, at the same exhibition.

Poor’s modern furniture, first seen at the American Designers’ Gallery (page x70, at top), marks an important transition in his furniture practice. Designed for production and modest in scale, he made a number of pieces, including bookshelves and cabinets, characterized by two astonishing features: bold relief patterning made by the large circular saw blade at the sawmill (12) and the use of thin strips of lead lining the seams between the boards (13). The furniture made in this manner was bolted together with visible brass nuts and washers to allow for easy assembly with a stylish flair.

Despite the distinctive design and relative success of this group of modern furni- ture (at least one notable commission came out of the 1929 exhibit), Poor did not continue in this direction for long. The Great Depression was undoubtedly a factor but

5. Detail of Crow House Trestle Table (1921). The inscription on the side of this trestle table—July 17, 1921—marks the second anniversary of Poor’s marriage to his second wife, the textile designer Marion Dorn.

6, 8. Armchair (1925-30). In this striking chair, the angles of the seat and back testify that Poor paid particular attention to comfort. Note the detail in the sculptural elements of the softened arms and carved spirals on the legs.

7. Work Table. Each leg shows a variation of a spiral. The legs were squared at the top and bottom in order to simplify the joinery.
also Poor, who was best known as a ceramist by the end of the decade, had determined to devote more time to painting. In October, just prior to the stock market crash, he sailed with his family to France, where he spent the better part of a year sketching and painting on the Mediterranean coast. Poor’s triumphant return to New York came with a critically and financially successful show at the Montross Gallery and the enlargement of his painting studio at Crow House.

Even with success in other media—oil painting, fresco and, of course, ceramics—Poor still managed to make furniture from time to time. Much of his later work, which shows the influence of Scandinavian Modern, was made for friends, family or his own use at home. In spite of his continued love of wood, Poor seemed quite content to leave furniture making as a profession to his good friend Wharton Esherick and to a younger generation of studio furniture makers.

9, 10. *Couch* (1925-1927). On this low, rectilinear piece, the surface ornamentation shows geometric patterns that resemble the Art Deco designs of Poor’s decorative ceramics of the mid- to late 1920s. Typical of Poor’s furniture, this couch is imprecisely constructed, partly due to his limited woodworking skills.

11. *Stool* (1925-27). Poor’s three-legged stool has much in common—triangular shape, scale and carved ornamentation—with an early stool made by Esherick (which can be seen in the Wharton Esherick Museum in Paoli, PA).

12, 13. *Cabinet* (c. 1930). This cabinet clearly shows the pleasing results of Poor’s preference for the pattern left on the wood’s surface by the circular saw. Another hallmark of Poor’s can be seen in the lead lining the seam between the boards that form the sides and the top.