

# **THE CRAFTED WORLD OF WHARTON ESHERICK**

The American artist and designer Wharton Esherick (1887 – 1970) worked across a range of artistic disciplines, materials, and styles to create new worlds. His unconventional home and Studio atop nearby Valley Forge Mountain—his self-proclaimed “autobiography in three dimensions”—reflects a defining question of his career: How can one live a well-crafted life? This exhibition features highlights drawn exclusively from the Wharton Esherick Museum’s rich collection of almost 3,000 objects made by Esherick’s

hand. To reflect how the works appear in the Studio, they are grouped here by themes spanning the artist's career: natural growth, pattern and form, rural and urban landscapes, and the human body in motion.

Unless otherwise noted, all works in this exhibition are by Wharton Esherick and are in the collection of the Wharton Esherick Museum.

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## **Rural and Urban**

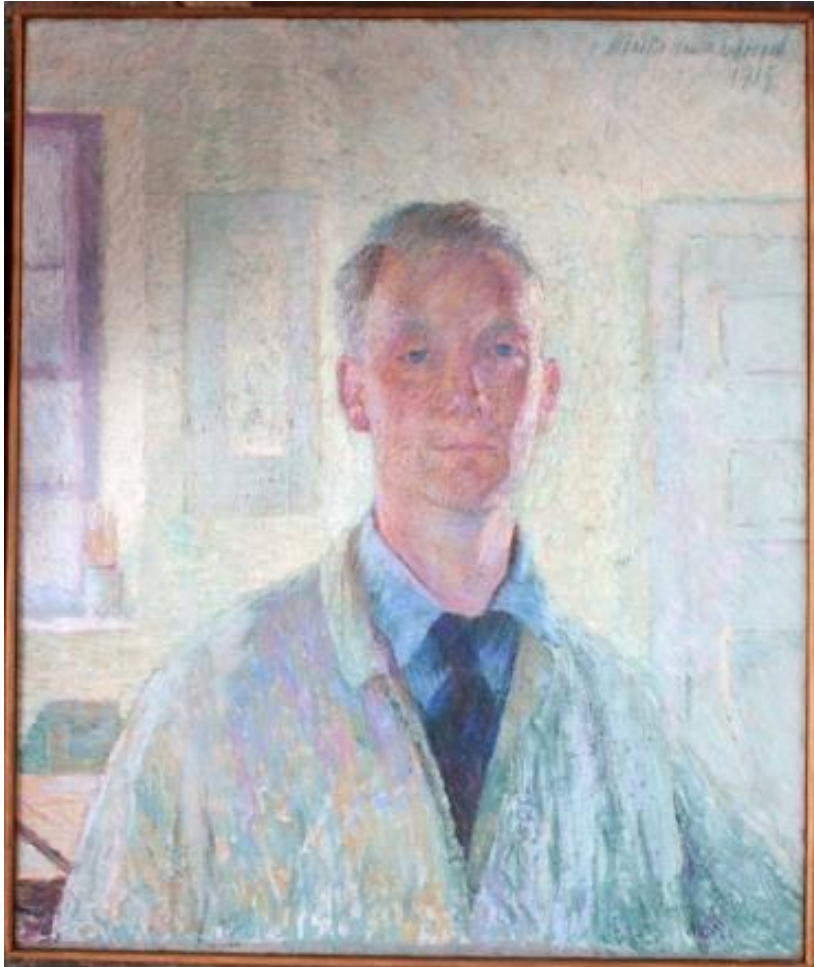
Esherick decided to move from Philadelphia to rural Pennsylvania at a time when many artists were looking to escape the city. In 1926, when he first built his studio, it stood amid a landscape of fields, forests, and the occasional farmhouse. Esherick's collaborators were laborers who worked closely with the land and its materials, quarrying local stone and installing beams of reclaimed timber.

While he maintained an identity as a "rural" artist throughout his career, Esherick's lifestyle on the mountainside coexisted with deep ties to urbanity. Much

of his artwork arose from close connections with avant-garde artists and writers, actors and performers, and savvy clients in intellectual and creative circles in Philadelphia and New York City. Woodcut illustrations were also central to the way in which Esherick navigated his existence between city and country. His geometric, high-contrast compositions depicted both rural life and moments of cosmopolitan pleasure. Many of them explore how we expect labor to look in each setting. We see both the work of the rustic woodsman and that of the urbane orchestra conductor.

*Self-Portrait, 1919*

Oil on canvas



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Esherick depicts himself in a traditional painter's smock, referencing the uniform of students and faculty at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, with brushes

resting on the windowsill behind him. While this painting showcases his deft handling of some of the primary elements of American Impressionism, including soft colors, expressive brushstrokes, and captured light, Esherick's unique voice was still in formation.

Months after making this self-portrait, the artist reached a turning point in his career. His wife Letty's study of avant-garde educational theory brought the family in 1919 to Fairhope, Alabama, to the site of an artist's colony and "organic" school. There, Esherick began carving wooden frames for his paintings, seeding his future path.

*Woodcarver's Shop, 1922*

Oil on canvas, carved wood frame with  
metallic paint



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This Impressionistic composition  
reflects the significant changes in

Esherick's creative life brought on by the carving tools given to him by educational reformer Marietta Johnson in Fairhope. After returning to Pennsylvania, Esherick began converting a harness shed on his property into a woodcarving shop, depicted here in its original hand-carved frame.

By the summer of 1922, his first major woodblock printing project—illustrations for *Rhymes of Early Jungle Folk*, a children's book on evolution by American socialist author Mary Marcy—was well underway. Esherick would carve more than 400 unique blocks for printing over the course of his career.



*Diamond Rock Hill, 1923*

Woodblock print



*Diamond Rock Hill*

*Woodblock print 1923*

Produced three years before construction began on the Studio, the photograph shows the view from the site looking down onto Sunekrest, the historic farmhouse which brought Esherick and his Family out to Valley Forge Mountain. In the evenings, Esherick would walk to the top of the hill and watch the sunset over the valley. His desire to maintain the rural landscape around his property as the surrounding area was being built up may have led him to this site for the Studio. Diamond Rock Hill, named for a large outcrop of rock studded with quartz crystals, almost became a quarry before Esherick acquired the land.

“To start with, we must have a piece of land. Through a wood, on an old worn path, a path buried in briar and brush—but it still stands as evidence of patting feet....I went through the path to a clearing, saw several trees which I imagined should be sheltering a roof. There it started....”

—Wharton Esherick, “I Build a Building—  
or—He Helps Me Build a Building,”  
unpublished essay (1926)

*Of a Great City, 1928*

Woodblock print



This print depicts Esherick's good friend and noted author Theodore Dreiser in his apartment on 57th Street in New York City, surrounded by the stuff of art—books, paintings, and a piano. Outside, angular skyscrapers bookend a wide avenue teeming with people. Esherick sent a copy of the print to Dreiser, who responded: "I'm more struck by the drawing of the room and myself as a fixture in it than I can tell you. The thing has so much originality and force."

*The Concert Meister, 1937*

Woodblock print



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Esherick had a high degree of artistic curiosity and was often inspired by the work of other creative people. He enjoyed

listening to music and met several members of the Philadelphia Orchestra through the Centaur Book Shop and Press, including Alexander Hilsberg, the orchestra's Polish-born concertmaster. In this image, Hilsberg is shown at Philadelphia's Academy of Music, performing with the orchestra to a hall filled with concertgoers. Esherick depicted himself as the fourth silhouette from the right in the balcony, his head aligning with the figure of Hilsberg onstage.

*Head of Dreiser, ca. 1927*

Pine



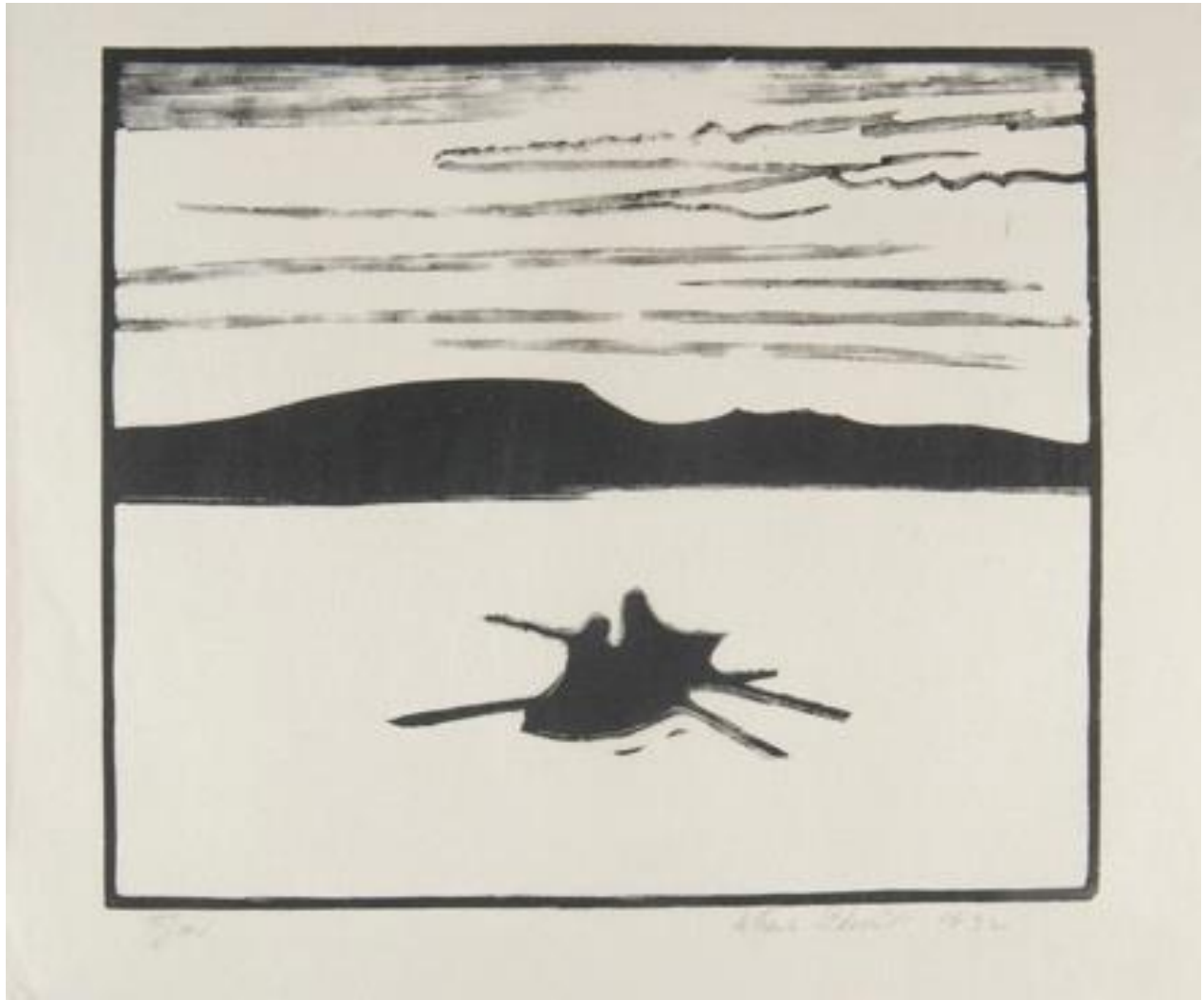


Theodore Dreiser is best known as a writer who was part of the American Realism literary movement, exploring the lure of urban environments, ambition and crime, and the hollowness of material success in novels such as *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *An American Tragedy* (1925).

Esherick first met Dreiser in 1924 through the Hedgerow Theatre. He carved two portrait busts of Dreiser: this rough, geometric sketch in local pine and a finished piece in exotic mahogany, which was exhibited alongside other new works by American artists at the Whitney Studio Club—precursor to the Whitney Museum of American Art—in New York City.

*Fjord, 1932*

Woodblock print



Esherick first captured the scene in *Fjord*, a stark composition featuring a boat isolated in an expansive landscape, while on a train in Norway. He was on a trip to Europe sponsored by Helene Koerting Fischer, one of his most significant patrons and friends. Esherick documented both rural and urban spaces in his travel sketchbooks and finished prints.

*Holzhausen, 1932*

Woodblock print



Holzhausen, produced during the same trip as *Fjord*, on view nearby, captures the view from artist Hanna Weil's porch in a village west of Munich. Portions of the rural landscape are broken into angled forms, while the human elements of the image—a figure in the foreground, an ox-drawn cart, a distant train, a ship on the lake, and a church—are rendered primarily as opaque black shapes.

*Flat Top Desk, 1929 and 1962*

Walnut and padauk

*Flat Top Desk Chair, 1929*

Walnut, padauk and laced leather seat

*Flat Top Desk Figure, 1929*

Bronze cast of cocobolo original



The *Flat Top Desk* suite exemplifies the way in which Esherick brought urban aesthetic influences back to his rural studio, especially the angular, geometric forms found in German Expressionism. Surface decoration is almost absent, appearing only as incised triangular pulls on each drawer front. The desk was originally covered with a rectangle of quarter-inch-thick aluminum plate, in a nod to the Bauhaus practice of mixing natural and manmade materials. Although Esherick ultimately substituted walnut for the metal top—which proved to be a cold and hard surface on which to write—the original

design for the desk indicates his interest in material experimentation.

The desk and its accompanying chair were exhibited in 1929 at the American Designers' Gallery in New York City, founded by Paul T. Frankl, a designer best known for his urban-inspired *Skyscraper* line of furniture. Friends in Esherick's circle were also members of the gallery, including painter and textile designer Ruth Reeves and ceramicist Henry Varnum Poor.



*Coal Wagon, 1925*

Woodblock print



left

*Wagon Wheel Chair, 1931*

Hickory and laced leather seat and back



Esherick created this chair with parts from wagon wheels which he bought in a number of sizes as overstock from a local manufacturer. The chair's connection to the past through these repurposed elements is balanced by its nod to modern design. The oversize rounded arms, which become the front legs, recall the sleek cantilevered steel chairs that first appeared in the 1920s by Bauhaus designers like Mart Stam and Marcel Breuer. Woven strips of leather loop around the frame to create the seat and back. The adjacent print of a coal wagon depicts wagon wheels much like those that Esherick was to repurpose for furniture making.

*Captain's Chair, 1951*

Walnut, cherry and leather



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After World War II, interest in furnishing homes with contemporary, artist-made

objects spread to urban and suburban middle-class consumers—not just the wealthy looked to commission one-off works. Esherick's *Captain's Chair* became one of his most marketable forms because its price made it accessible to a wider range of buyers. Often, this would be a patron's initial purchase, leading to larger commissions for Esherick. He also benefited from the collecting public's interest in the post-war Studio Craft movement, in which objects made from traditional craft materials—such as wood, metal, glass, fiber, or clay—were produced by an individual artist with a distinct voice.

right

*The Solid Forest*, 1924

Woodblock print



adjacent wall, top to bottom

*The Hammersmen*, 1924

Woodblock print



*Forger at His Forge—Furnace, 1924*

Woodblock print

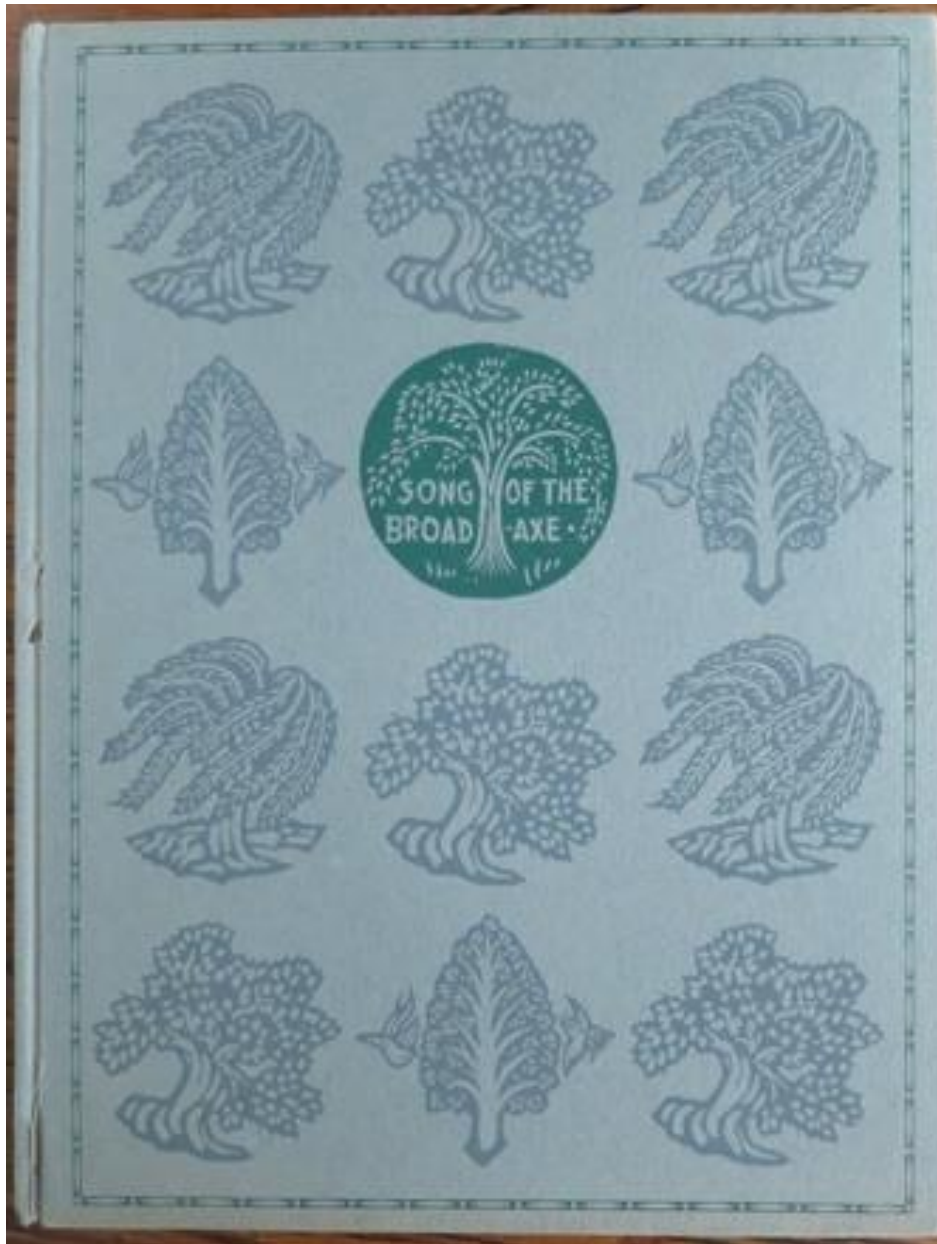




below

*Song of the Broad Axe* by Walt Whitman  
(Centaur Press, 1924)

Bound book with woodblock prints



Harold Mason founded Philadelphia's Centaur Book Shop as a cultural salon and private club, where the city's literary elite gathered over cocktails and conversation about avant-garde or controversial books. These three prints are from a group of twelve commissioned for the Centaur Press's first publication, a 400-copy printing of Walt Whitman's *Song of the Broad-Axe*. Esherick would have found his values reflected in Whitman's words extolling freedom from societal restraint through craftsmanship and connection with the outdoors.

In *The Hammersmen*, Esherick uses thickly gouged lines to render the power of

sparks as they pierce the darkness, while *Forger at His Forge—Furnace* is illuminated by a roaring fire depicted with dramatic contrast between light and dark. The light streaming through the trees in *The Solid Forest* evokes a sense of wilderness as a sacred space, echoing nineteenth-century American Romantic painting conventions of rendering nature as an outdoor cathedral.

## **Pattern Recognition**

Pattern was one of the most significant bridges between Escherick's work in two and three dimensions. By placing his paintings in frames he carved with pictorial and abstract patterns, he brought new life to his two-dimensional work while flattening the assumed hierarchical relationship of the central image over its supplemental surrounding. This led to Escherick carving wooden blocks for printmaking, using pattern to enhance both visual and narrative impact in book illustrations and bucolic scenes.

Located across the gallery, Esherick's highly patterned *Drop Leaf Desk* (1927) captures this transitional moment between two and three dimensions. The primary visual interest is how pictorial decoration has been applied to the facade of a functional object. The desk was used to support the artist's printmaking practice, another space where he investigated how pattern might be used to tell stories. As he made more three-dimensional works in wood, both furniture and sculpture, Esherick explored new ways of thinking about repetition and ornamentation that found possibilities inherent to the material itself. Repeating forms, carefully positioned

grain, subtle variation in tone, and deft material selection are just some of the ways that Esherick used pattern to communicate.

*Alabama Pine*, 1929 from the Alabama

Trees series

Woodblock print



Original woodblock for *Alabama Pine*, 1929





Completed a decade after Esherick's first use of this motif, this print's composition recalls the painting *Moonlight on Alabama Pines* and its frame, on view nearby, with clusters of needles on branches sprouting from a slender trunk. While the subject matter of Esherick's paintings and prints often reflect each other, *Alabama Pine* demonstrates the artist moving toward greater abstraction.

*Moonlight on Alabama Pines*, 1919–20

Oil on canvas, carved wood frame with  
metallic paint



Created during Esherick's first trip to Fairhope, Alabama, this painting is bordered by one of his earliest carved frames. The image is a representational depiction of an evocative forest scene, rendered by an Impressionistic hand, while the frame zeros in on bundles of pine needles to create an abstract pattern.

*Fireplace Wall Model, 1953*

Mixed media



*Wall Cabinet Model, 1954*

Wood and paper



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Esherick often created models to consider form and materials. They allowed him to work through a client's needs and desires during the commission process, and

to discuss construction with his collaborators.

Scaled-down models like these show how Esherick utilized pattern in interior contexts. The directional lines of the *Fireplace Wall Model* illustrate how the structure of the surround would evoke the energy and light of the fire within. The parallel lines of the *Wall Cabinet Model* showcase the subtle variations in the curvature of each shelf.

*Mary*, 1922

Oil on canvas, carved wood frame with  
metallic paint



In this portrait of the artist's then six-year-old daughter Mary, Esherick renders her face and garments with large, distinct brushstrokes. An incised zigzag pattern surrounds each corner of the frame, drawing the viewer to Mary's gaze.



*Three-legged stool, 1966*

Walnut, hickory

*Three-legged stool, 1970*

Cherry, hickory



Although Esherick did not make many of his furniture forms in large numbers, he created several hundred three-legged stools over the two decades they were in production. Originally priced at \$25 in 1945, they offered emerging collectors an opportunity to live with handmade furniture and served as “bread and butter” pieces that supplemented Esherick’s income between larger commissions. The grain of the wood—its inherent pattern and texture—dictated the final form of each seat, which was made of leftover wood from larger commissions.

*Table Lamp, 1932*

Padauk



Esherick often integrated lighting into his work as a design element. In this expressionistic lamp, four tapering wood elements create a sense of rhythm around the bare lightbulb. When illuminated, the lamp emits strong beams of light from the spaces between the parts of the unconventional "shade."

## *The Race*, 1925

Painted wood on walnut base



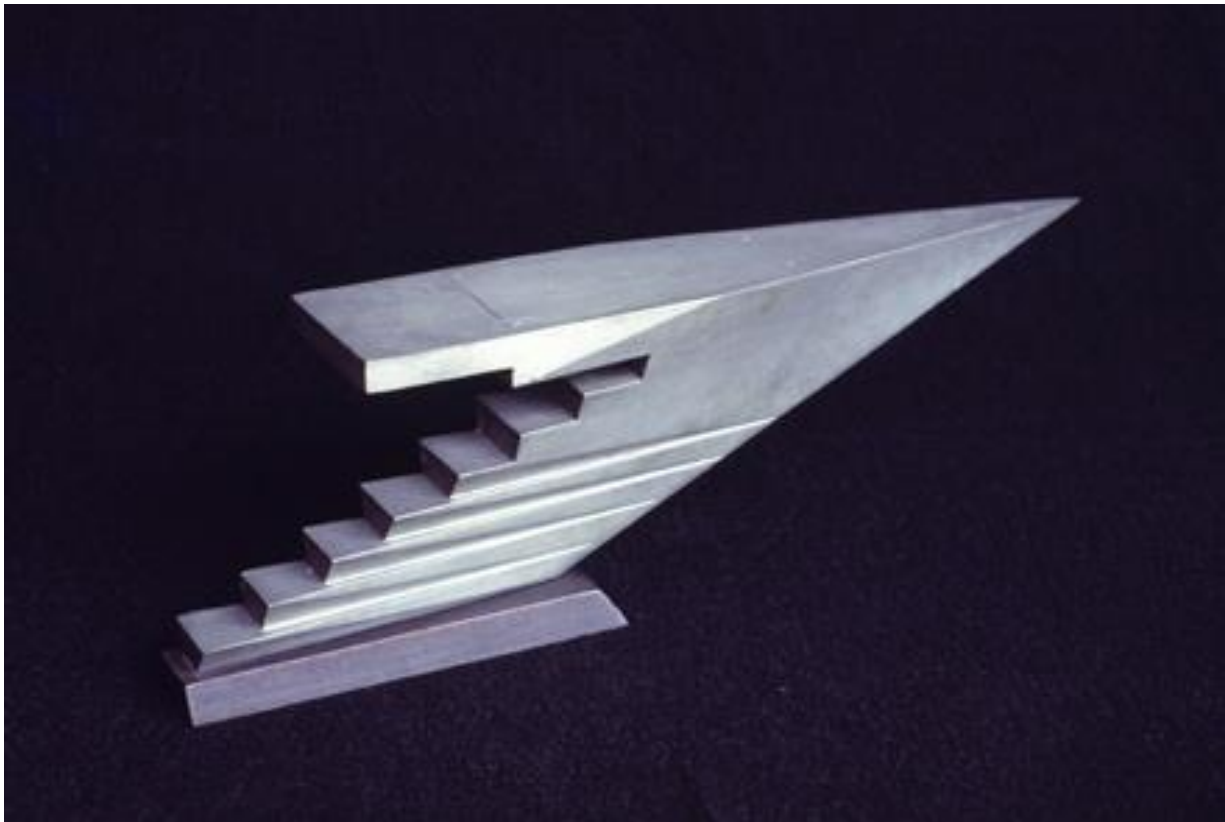
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Small sculptures like this were among the first three-dimensional objects made by Esherick after his initial experiments in carving wooden frames. *The Race*, inspired by a horse-racing game owned by Esherick's children, transforms the original static figures into evocations of speed and

movement. The repeated figure of horse and rider is rendered using sharp angles and slight variations in pose. Esherick created narrative tension by mounting the figures on a piece of wood that narrows, emphasizing the leader's position.

*Speed*, 1932

Cast aluminum (from painted wood original)



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Speed was made as a stage prop for the Hedgerow Theatre's production of *The Ship*. It represents an abstracted model of an aircraft carrier, a then recent

development in naval warfare. Esherick stacked flattened rectangles at an offset angle to create a design that conveys urgency and motion.



*The Lane, 1931*

Woodblock print



This image centers on a tree-lined drive, whose pattern of trunks and swagged branches covered with snow leads to a house in the distance. Esherick's patron Helene Koerting Fischer and her husband lived at the end of this path in Philadelphia's Chestnut Hill neighborhood in a home filled with works by the artist.

*Daphne Pier, 1931*

Woodblock print



Daphne, a town about ten miles north of Fairhope, Alabama, was home to both O'Neal Pottery and Peter McAdam, a ceramicist who became Esherick's collaborator during his trips to the state. Like Fairhope, Daphne sits on Mobile Bay. Here, Esherick uses pattern and large areas of negative space to depict a wooden pier high above the sand, arcing toward the horizon.

*Iseult*, 1930

Woodblock print



Original woodblock for *Iseult*, 1930



*Silence—Death—Shadows, 1930*

Woodblock print



Esherick deftly uses juxtapositions of patterns to define space in these images for the Centaur Press's edition of Amory Hare's theatrical reimagining of *Tristram and Iseult*, a medieval chivalric romance story. Radiating, swirling, and branching lines are set against the patternless skin of the lovers, evoking the dizzying nature of their romance.



## **Bodies in Space**

Themes of bodies, movement, and gesture appear throughout Esherick's oeuvre, although he largely stopped depicting the human body in a literal way in the 1930s as his approach drifted away from representation and towards sculptural forms and furniture. Early two-dimensional works, including portraits, life drawings, and sketches of performing dancers and actors, use representational approaches to depict the human form. Esherick brought this deep understanding of the human body with him to his work in three dimensions, where he explored how abstract bodily

movement can be used as the emotional and compositional foundation for nonrepresentational works of art.

Furniture is fundamentally of and about the body, so much so that we have taken the language of the body — arms, backs, legs, and feet — to describe furniture forms. People build intimate physical and emotional relationships with the furniture that shapes the practice of their daily lives. Esherick took this into consideration as he designed chairs, tables, and other objects intended for use, whether in private, domestic spaces or active, public ones.

*Hammer Handle Chair, 1938*

Hickory and oak with laced canvas belting



This unconventional chair is one of Esherick's best-known forms. After acquiring two barrels of hammer handles at an auction in a search for inexpensive wood, he repurposed them as legs for a series of 45 related, but distinct, chairs. Esherick traded 36 of the chairs to the Hedgerow Theatre in exchange for an apprenticeship for his daughter, Ruth.

*S-K Chair, 1957*

Walnut and black Naugahyde



The *S-K Chair* is part of a suite of furniture commissioned from Esherick by Helene Koerting Fischer, president of Schutte & Koerting, a manufacturer of precision machine parts. Hoping to convey her dynamic, forward-thinking approach, Fischer asked Esherick to design new office and boardroom furniture.

The *S-K Chair* seems like a static object in perpetual motion. A curved and elongated line that continues from the arm into the leg branches organically from the chair's erect back. It appears to be in mid-stride, reflecting the lyrical form of Esherick's sketches of dancing bodies.

*Library Ladder, 1969*

Cherry



This library ladder, one of Esherick's most widely celebrated forms, was first produced in 1966 after a client requested a more elegant and graceful design than the typical library stool. It features a gentle twist, spiraling treads, and an undulating post culminating in a rounded handle. This not only fits snugly within the palm of its user's hand, offering intimacy and tactile pleasure alongside functionality, but also reflects the gestures captured by Esherick's early depictions of dancers in motion.



*Light Pull*, ca. 1930

Aluminum cast of cocobolo original



*Swing*, 1925

Woodblock print



Both this composition in print and light pull are centered on the female body aloft in space. In *Swing*, Esherick has used a dark, solid surround to emphasize the motion of the swing and its user. The light pull focuses on the volume of a female figure, suspended from a string, who must use all her strength to turn the light on and off—with help from the hand of its user, of course.

*Carved Cup, 1927*

Walnut



This cup, carved early in Esherick's career, features faceted, organic sides and offers its user a unique tangible experience.

When designing objects for domestic use, Esherick considered the relationship between the forms he created and the physical sensations they might engender.

right

*Double Music Stand, 1962*

Cherry and walnut



Esherick followed his single music stand with this commission that allowed his client Herbert Koslow—an insurance industry professional as well as a flutist and classical singer—and his wife, also a flutist, to play duets. The construction of this stand required the musicians to face one another rather than the audience, allowing them to better respond to gestural and sonic cues from their partner.

left

*Music Stand, 1960*

Walnut and cherry





This stand was originally designed for Rose Rubinson, a major Esherick patron who, along with her husband, Nathan, filled a modest home in the Philadelphia suburbs with the artist's work. Rose was a passionate amateur cellist, and this object leans backward in an elegant curve to accommodate her motions of bowing and plucking strings. Esherick braced the three legs of the stand with a triangular shelf, which he told Rose in a notation on a hand-drawn cartoon was "for a little snifter in case you feel faint during a performance."

right to left

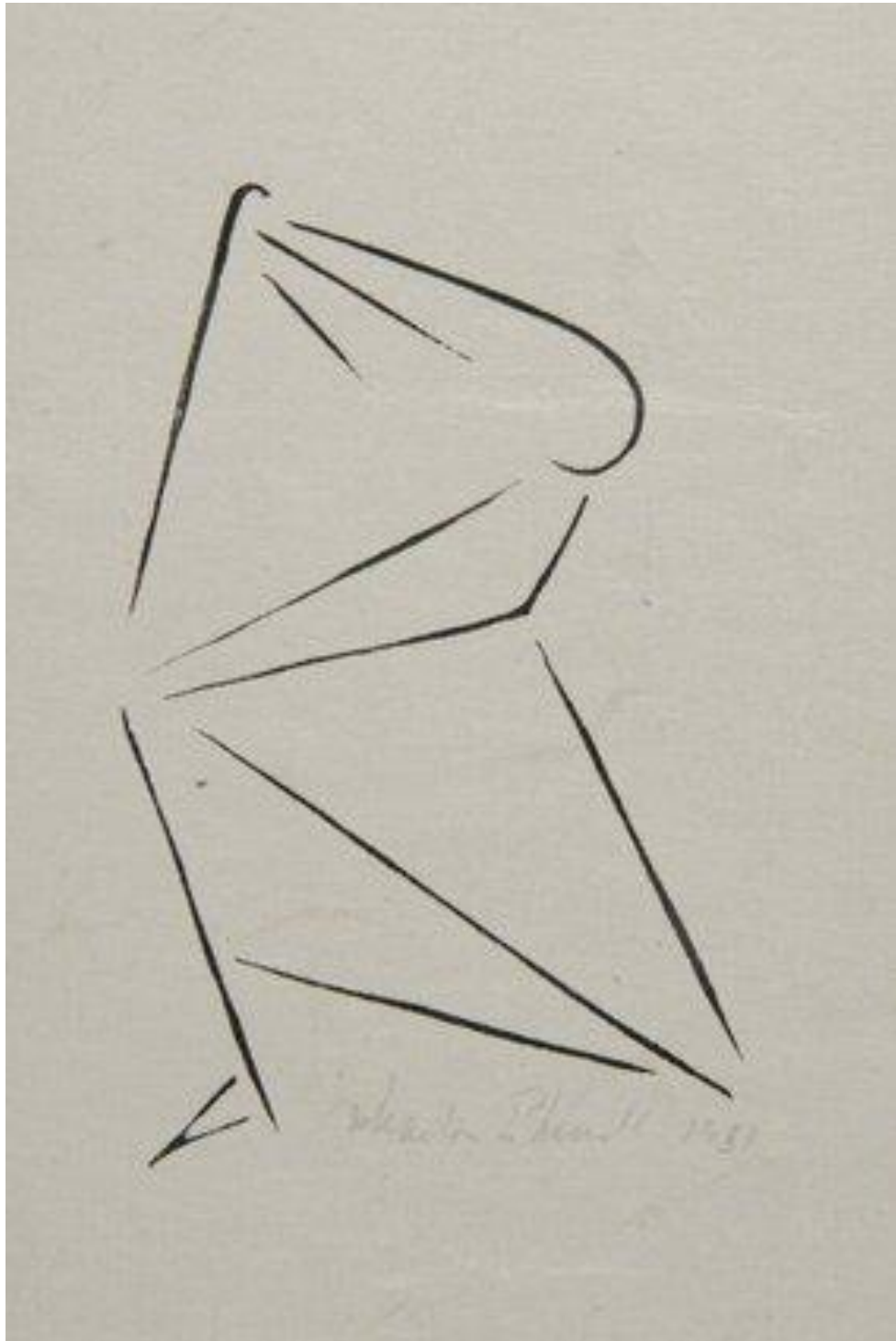
*Angular Dance I*, 1931

Printed reproduction of ink drawing



*Angular Dance II, 1931*

Printed reproduction of ink drawing



*Angular Dance I* and *II* capture the energy and dynamism of the human body in motion through a series of minimal, strongly rendered lines. These evocative images appeared on programs for the Gardner Doing Dance Camp, supporting its work to allow students to experience, as the program states, “music in a real and vivid manner, in which receptivity and the impulse to activity coincide.”

*The Actress*, 1939

Cherry

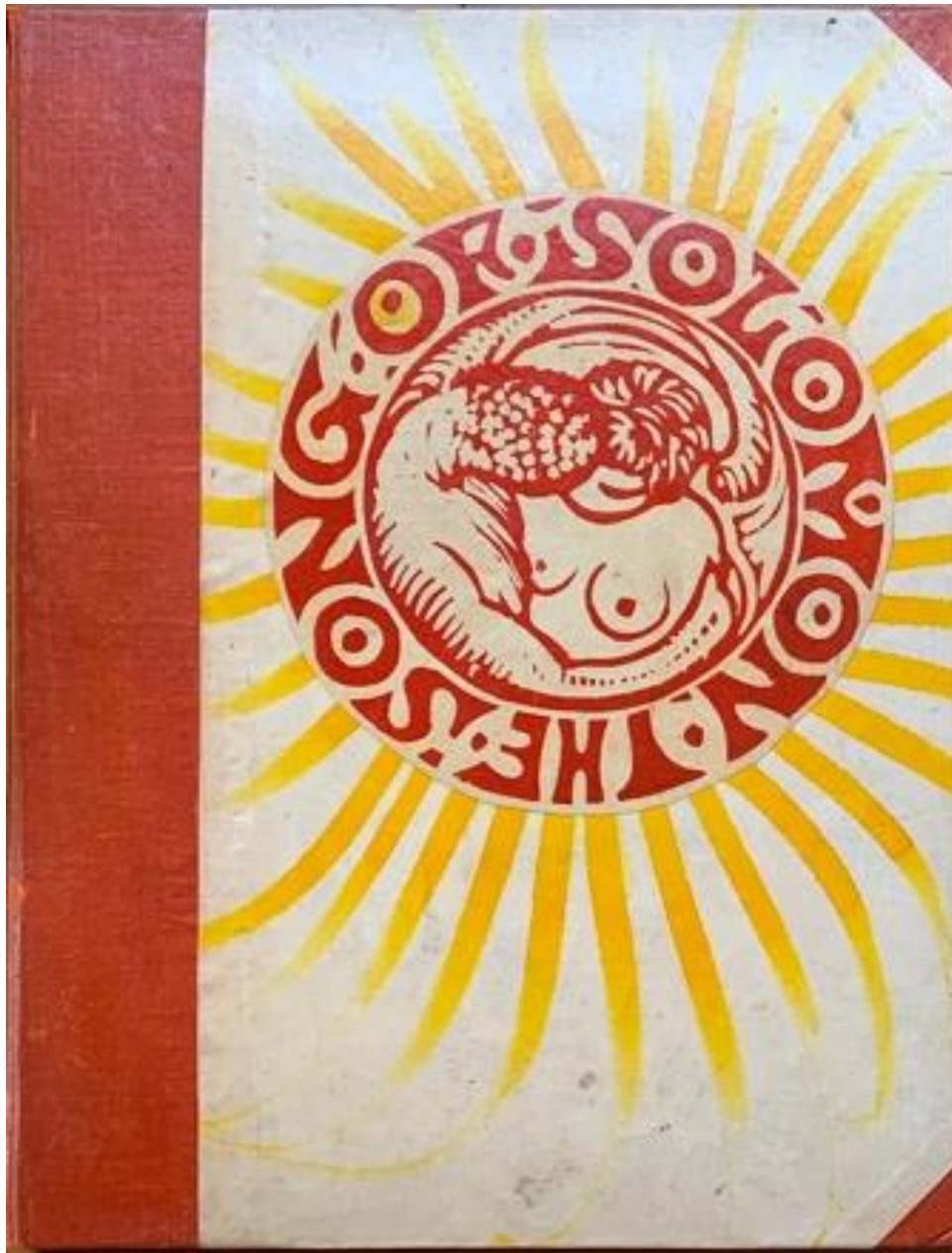


Esherick's daughter Mary often acted at the Hedgerow Theatre. He modeled this sculpture after a photograph that captured her applying lipstick in her dressing room, gazing at her reflection in a hand mirror. The original rendering included the lipstick in her hand; after deciding it was not necessary, he removed it with a saw and "dressed the wound." This portrait exemplifies the streamlined, curvilinear style that Esherick transitioned toward during the 1930s and 1940s.

left

*Song of Solomon*, 1924

Bound artist's book with woodblock prints  
and hand lettering



*Song of Solomon* sketchbook, ca. 1924

Bound sketchbook with pencil drawings





right, clockwise from top left

*Of Living Waters*, 1924

Woodblock print



*I Am Sick of Love*, 1924

Woodblock print



*Winter is Past—Flowers Appear, 1924*

Woodblock print



*I Am My Beloved's*, 1924

Woodblock print



Esherick's largest project for the Centaur Press was a series of 31 illustrations for an edition of the *Song of Solomon*, a biblical poem found in the Old Testament. In these woodblock prints, images of lovers' bodies, alone and together highlight the sensual verses of the biblical poem as well as Esherick's ability to translate his keen observations of the human body into stylized forms. The sketchbook and the hand-lettered and hand-printed artist's book both preceded the commercial copies sold to the public.

*First Born, 1927*

Rosewood, padauk and snakewood



This figural sculpture commemorates the birth of Esherick's son, Peter, in 1926. The abstracted bodies of mother and child typify Esherick's shift from representational to geometric forms around this time.

*Rhythms, Opening, 1922*

Woodblock print





*Rhythms, Opening* depicts a dancer in a series of sequential poses. Reproduced on the cover of a brochure advertising a center for modern dance, the image embodies a belief common to the progressive artistic communities with which Esherick engaged during the 1920s and 1930s: that human, creative, and natural rhythms are inextricably interconnected.

Marjorie Content (1895–1984)

*Oblivion*, 1934

Gelatin silver print



Emil Luks (1900–1964)

*Wharton Esherick with Oblivion*, ca. 1934

Gelatin silver print



Photographs by Marjorie Content and Emil Luks capture *Oblivion* in situ in Esherick's studio. Content, who commissioned major pieces from Esherick during this period, often visited the Studio on her trips from New York to the Southwest to take photographs alongside her close friend Georgia O'Keeffe. Her image focuses on the sculpture itself but allows us a glimpse into the Studio as a working space. Luks's photograph places Esherick's languid figure in relation not only to the bodies of his creation but also to his well-worn woodworking tools.

*Oblivion*, 1934

Walnut



Moved by the emotion and physicality of actors, Esherick spent many hours in the balcony of the Hedgerow Theatre, in nearby Rose Valley, sketching performers, and many more hours designing stage sets, props, posters, and other visual elements for their productions. *Oblivion* was inspired by the passionate embrace of two actors in *The Son of Perdition*, a play by Lynn Riggs. This organic, fluid sculpture offers an exaggerated rendering of emotion as two intertwined bodies, carved from a single log, seem to softly dissolve into one another. *Oblivion* was prominently featured in the sculpture portion of the second Whitney Biennial in 1936.

## **The Way Things Grow**

Nature was not simply subject matter for Esherick. He fully integrated it into his artistic output, identity, and lifestyle.

Across his practice, we see a desire to bring the mechanisms of nature into alignment with the built environment.

Branching, serpentine, and asymmetric forms permeate both Esherick's work and the Studio building itself, which seems to grow out of the land on which it is situated. In particular, he saw the upward twist as formally embodying this idea of natural growth. The gesture appears across his practice in models for major

architectural commissions, furniture, sculpture, prints, and the now iconic spiral staircase at the center of his Studio.

Esherick took inspiration from a range of ideas, including American architect Frank Lloyd Wright's notion of "organic" architecture and the theories of Swiss architect-philosopher Rudolf Steiner, who understood nature as an animating force rather than something to be tamed. The environment in which Esherick lived also profoundly impacted his creative outlook. Although he used exotic imported woods early in his career, the bulk of his output featured the very same materials that sheltered his home and Studio.



*Drop Leaf Desk, 1927*

Red oak and leather



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As one of Esherick's last three-dimensional works featuring extensive

surface decoration, *Drop Leaf Desk* marks a transitional moment for the artist. The pictorial patterning, which offers multiple, abstracted views of a single landscape, recalls the un-inked surfaces of his illustrative woodblocks. This piece was designed to contain the artist's prints and printmaking materials. It features large compartments, flat-file drawers, and a leather-clad work surface inside the drop leaf.

By 1929, Esherick had moved away from carving patterned surfaces onto his furniture, instead asserting that furniture, like sculpture, should find visual interest in its overall form.

Emil Luks (1900–1964)

*Spiral Stair*, ca. 1934

Silver gelatin print



Perhaps the most iconic architectural feature of Esherick's Studio is its twisting spiral staircase, here captured by photographer Emil Luks in its original form, shortly after it was installed in 1930. The cantilevered steps, supported by tenons mortised into a central column, appear to float, making the staircase seem precarious despite its sturdy construction.

left to right

*Bok House Chimney Stair Model, 1937*

Pine and iron



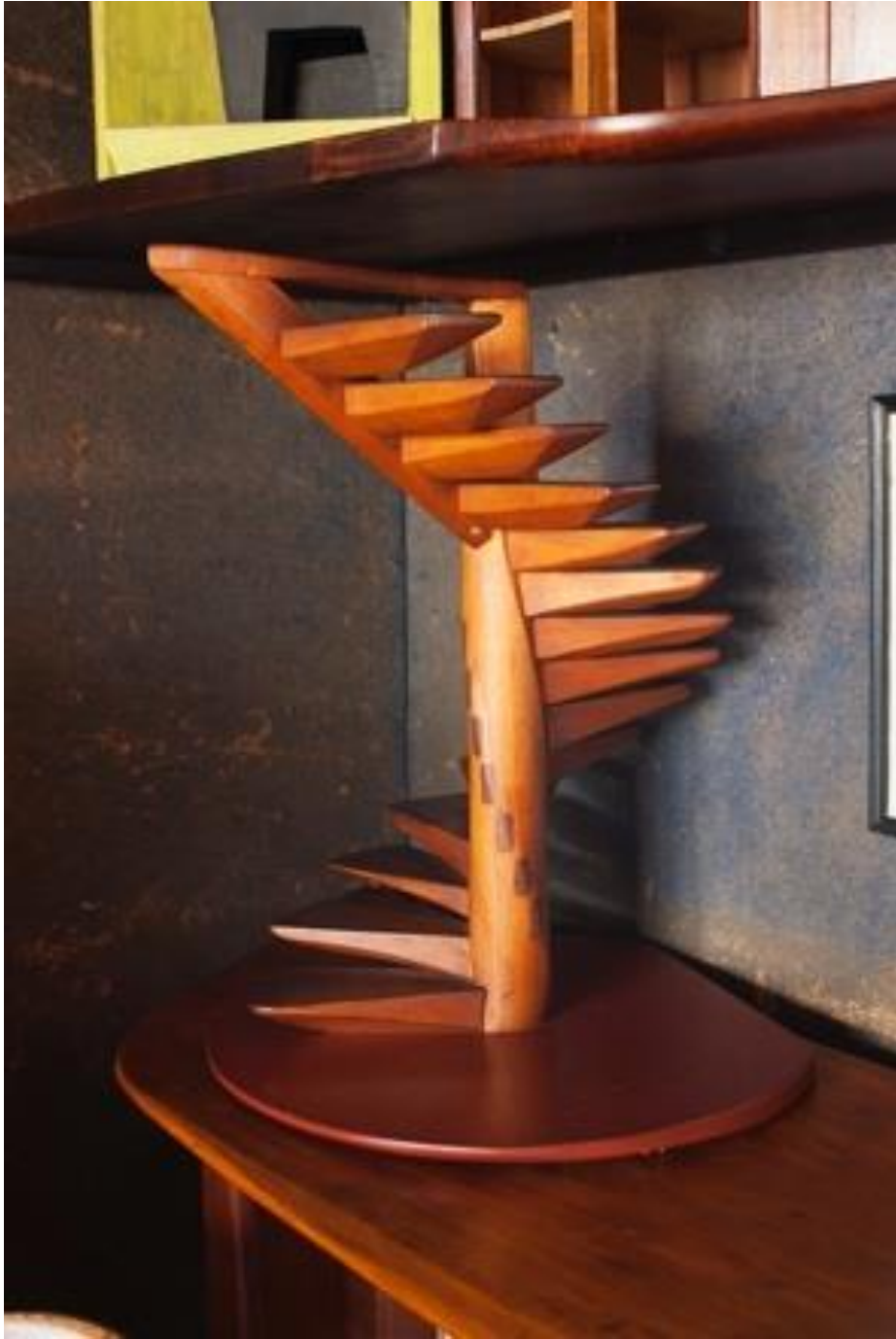
*Hedgerow Theatre Lobby Stair Model, 1934*

Walnut



*Spiral Staircase Model, 1963*

Pine



Esherick made numerous objects centering on the twist or spiral to represent natural growth. He returned to this form in models for staircase commissions for the Bok House—in which the spiral is created through gradual shifts in the shape and width of each step—and for the Hedgerow Theatre—which features a staircase like the Studio's that revolves around a center post.



*The Pair*, 1951

Ebony and walnut



Spiral-based growth appears in this abstracted sculpture of an embrace. To entice potential buyers, Esherick called it by a variety of titles, including *He and She*, *Bill 'n Anne*, and *Adam and Eve*. Despite these humanizing titles, the piece resembles a close-up view of shoots of grass or leaves. Two slender forms entwine together seamlessly, reaching up toward the sun.

*Three-legged stool, 1931*

Oak



Esherick designed this stool for Sunekrest, the rural farmhouse that the artist lived in with his family prior to the creation of the Studio. It was placed next to the fireplace, into which Esherick had laid a hammered copper hearth depicting a rising sun to echo the name of the property. The lines that radiate across the seat can be seen as a geometric rendering of rays of sunlight.

right

*Moonlight and Meadows, 1932*

Woodblock print



left and below

*Alabama Moss Hung*, 1929 from *Alabama  
Trees* series

Woodblock print



Original woodblock for *Alabama Moss*  
*Hung, 1929*



In both of these compositions, Esherick juxtaposes detailed mark-making and solid dark forms to create a sense of atmospheric nature. *Alabama Moss Hung*, produced during the family's final trip to the artist communities of Fairhope and Daphne in Alabama, re-creates languid strands of the hanging plant through small repeating curves. *Moonlight and Meadows* has a similar softness, with white hatched lines outlining a field of tall, swaying grasses.



*Five-Sided Bench, 1947–50*

English walnut, chestnut, oak and cherry



Esherick first explored skewed planes and irregular, crystalline forms in his furniture during the 1920s and 1930s; these interests are still present in this five-sided bench, produced two decades later.

*Piano Table, 1956*

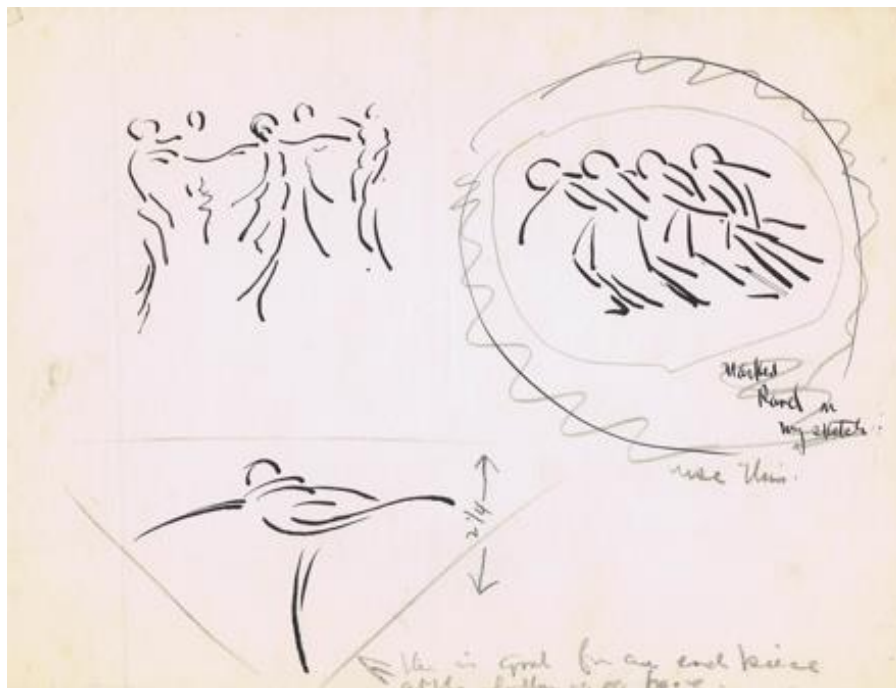
Walnut



The top of this piano table exemplifies the ebb and flow of curved forms and smooth edges that came to define Esherick's style in the late 1950s and 1960s. While many American artists and designers turned to biomorphic shapes at mid-century as a reaction against the hard edges of modernism, Esherick's engagement with the idea was deeply rooted in his unique way of viewing the natural world.

# Three Dance Sketches, ca. 1929

Ink on paper





if these I don't know  
which .  
If you want a strong  
spot - use this →

+

Esherick's quick sketches of dancers in motion capture twisting legs, torqued bodies, and outstretched arms with just a few strategic lines. These movements, pared down and abstracted, regularly appear reconstituted as three-dimensional form in his furniture and sculpture.

clockwise from left

*Jug Hollow, 1927*

Woodblock print





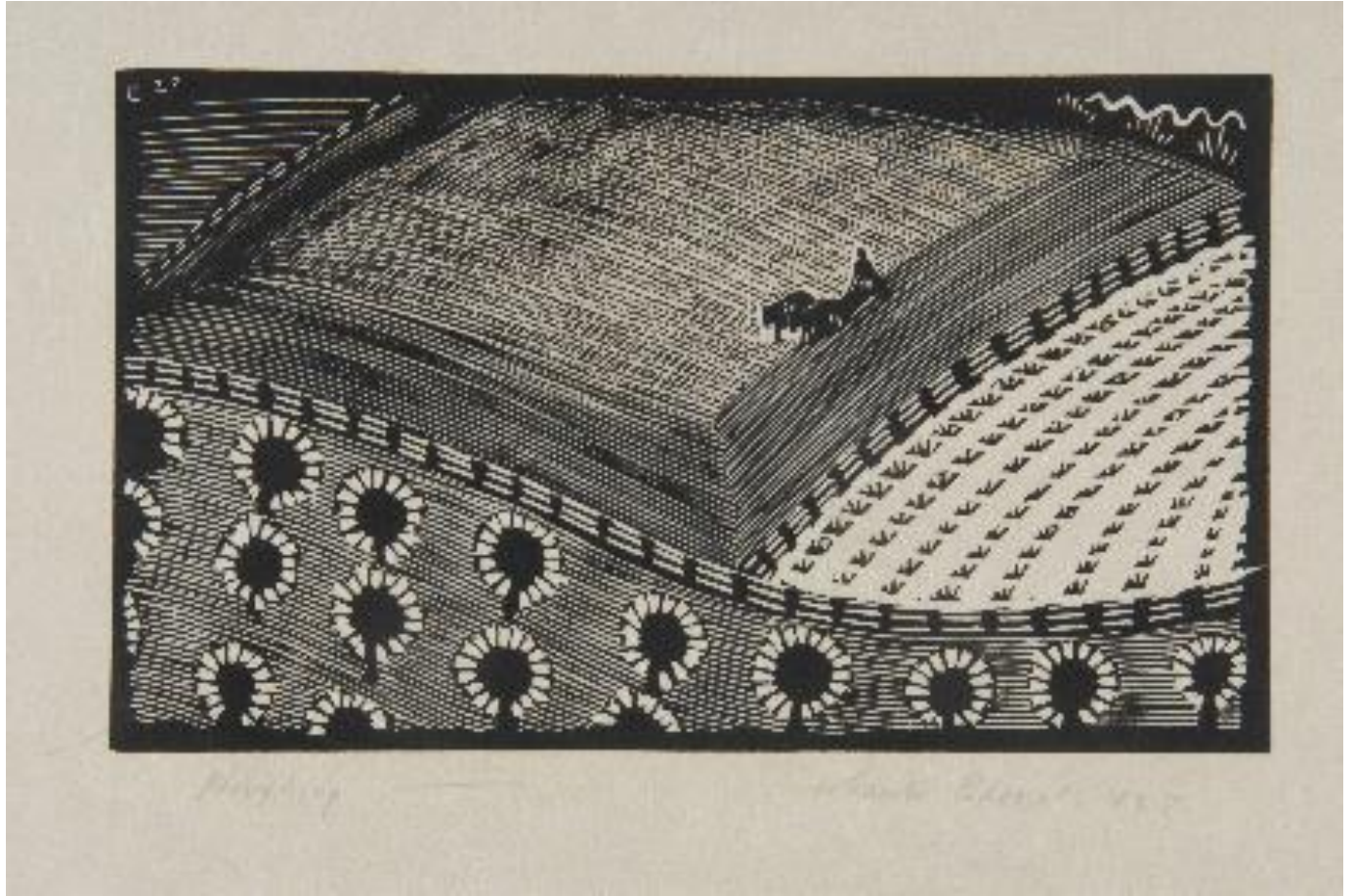
*Harrowing, 1927*

Woodblock print



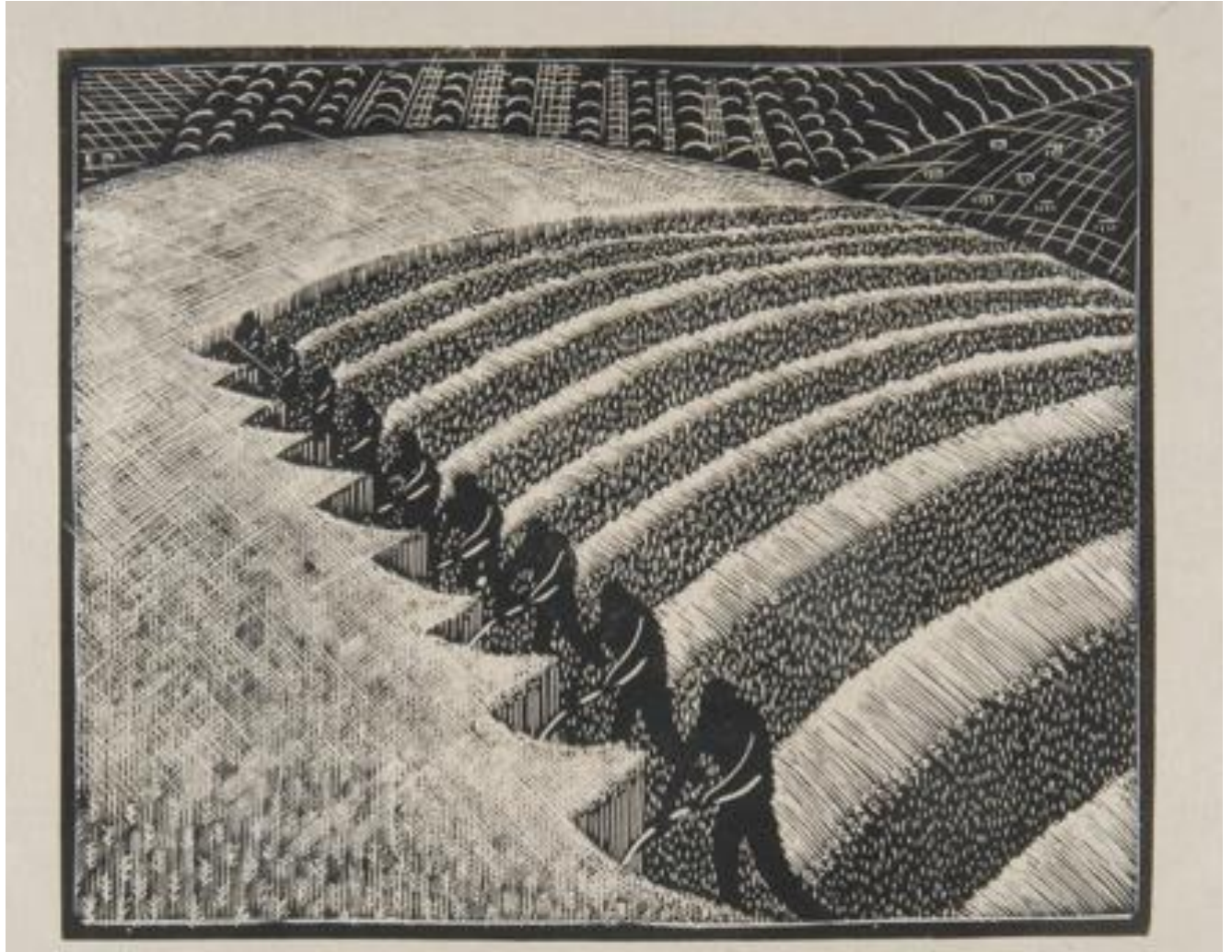
*Ploughing, 1927*

Woodblock print



*Harvesting, 1927*

Woodblock print



Esherick created nine woodblocks to illustrate a musical score by composer and singer Philip Dalmas, which drew its lyrics from a four-line poem in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*:

As I watch'd the ploughman ploughing,  
Or the sower sowing in the fields—or the  
harvester harvesting,  
I saw there too, O life and death, your  
analogies:  
(Life, life is the tillage, and Death is the  
harvest according.)

Esherick's compositions depict cyclical agricultural work through sharp, modern

geometry. Patterns made by a line of figures gathering crops or a team of horses tilling the soil emphasize Whitman's reflection that we can understand our existence through nature's rhythms.

*Trays, Bowls, and Salad Servers, 1946–68*

Various woods



Using wood leftover from larger commissions, Esherick made thousands of household objects, such as trays, bowls, and kitchen implements, throughout his career. He was guided by the grain, shape, and physicality of his raw material; each piece stands as a record of the responsive nature of his practice.

Consuelo Kanaga (1894-1978)

*Wharton at His Studio Entrance, ca. 1927*

Gelatin silver print



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Taken by Esherick's client and friend

Consuelo Kanaga, this photograph shows



him at the entrance to his hillside Studio shortly after its first phase of construction. The naturalistic framing of the image reflects her affiliation with Group f/64, a California collective whose members included Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and Edward Weston. They were committed to recording life "as it is" through documentation and framing techniques that departed from the Pictorialist approach of giving photographs soft, painterly effects. Kanaga took numerous photographs of Esherick, as well as of his family, Studio, and artwork, over the course of their friendship.