

# Wharton Esherick's Studio: The House of Wows

## Mansfield Bascom

'Wow,' I whispered in awe when I first stepped into Wharton Esherick's studio. Since then I've heard thousands of wows, whispered, shouted in glee, and sighed, first as Director for 18 years, then as Curator for another 18, of the Wharton Esherick Museum. (Learning along the way that directors do all the work and curators have all the fun.)

*Fine Homebuilding* magazine called Wharton Esherick's Studio, residence and showroom one of "The Best Twenty Five Houses in America." It was one of the first five places selected by the National Trust for Historic Preservation for its Historic Artists' Homes & Studios program. Hundreds of school children will tell you it's the house they'd most like to live in. Every year it attracts thousands of visitors from across the nation and from at least 20 different countries around the world. Many become members and return repeatedly bringing friends.

The eight-acre Studio site with its five buildings has been designated a National Historic Landmark—a place worthy of preservation—not for any historic event, but for its architectural significance, and its playful forms.

Wharton Esherick (1887–1970) was a sculptor who believed in a sculptural environment wherein everything—a chair, table, lamp, bowl, even the building—could be a sculptural work of art. His preferred medium was wood; it was readily available, cheap and could be worked at a pace commensurate with his imagination. His work was not representational but expressive of a condition, mood, emotion, or just pure form waiting to be caressed.

In his youth, Wharton was determined to be an artist when he grew up, despite his father's admonitions that he'd never make any money. He learned woodworking and metal crafting at Manual Training High School in preference to algebra and Latin, studied drawing and printmaking at the Museum School of Industrial Arts and painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

A credible painter at the height of American Impressionism, he could mix pigments to match any color he saw in nature. But the buying public at the time wanted exaggerated colors and his naturalist paintings hung unsold on his studio walls. The carving of frames for his paintings led to the carving of woodcuts, decorative designs on furniture, the sculpting of small pieces, and making furniture for himself.

After painting seriously without much notice, he was liberated through carving woodcuts, beginning with illustrations for a children's book. He found freedom and pleasure—as well as success and recognition—in sculpting and furniturere-making. He finally felt free to express and enjoy himself, to explore, as a child does. "If it isn't fun, it

isn't worth doing," became his motto. His work emanates a sense of joy and humor, a sense of his mind at play, producing the 'wows.'

His sculpture, including a chess set, was first exhibited in the 1920s at the Whitney Design Studio, the forerunner of the Whitney Museum of American Art, and he soon was recognized as one of the vanguard of artists creating a truly American sculpture style. In 1952, his 12-foot tall black walnut *Reverence* was selected for "Sculpture of the Twentieth Century," a collection of works by forty internationally respected sculptors, with Auguste Rodin the eldest, Wharton Esherick the youngest, and Brancusi, Epstein, Calder, Moore, Noguchi, Picasso, and a host of others sandwiched in between. The show opened in October 1952 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art—where, after purchase by the Fairmont Park Commission, *Reverence* for years stood in the vestibule overlooking the Parkway—before traveling to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Modern Art.

By then he had developed a reputation for his unique sculptural furniture, slipping easily from crystalline prismatic shapes to flowing curvilinear organic forms beckoning to be touched, but always in unexpected ways.



*Reverence*, outside the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom.

His 1926 sculpting studio, inspired by the local bank barns with their massive stone gable-end walls, ‘hung’ board-and-batten ‘overshoots’ and rolling door, large enough for a wagon, shows the influence of the romantic Arts and Crafts Style; the stone walls taper and curve out at their bases as a tree trunk does with deeply-raked mortar joints to emphasize the character of each stone. Each board is a different width, and the hand-hewn chestnut beams were salvaged from an old mill on Valley Creek at Church Road. The roof ridge intentionally sags. And the door is replaced by a large ribbed-glass window that diffuses light throughout the interior. After twenty years with an outhouse—testimony of a simple life style—he expanded his living quarters, adding an Expressionist prismatic bathroom and kitchen. He completed the barn-like Studio in 1966 with a free-form deck and a lyrical ‘silo’ colored to match the autumnal woods.

In 1927, he used logs, cut on the site, to build a two-car garage—with twisting, concave/convex walls and roof—used primarily for storing the balks and slabs of exotic woods he would use for sculpture and furniture. Then he built a three-sided, tilted outhouse, with sloped sides and a door, left open when in use so that one could sit and enjoy the magnificent view of the Great Valley.

When his cabinetmaker closed his shop and moved in 1956, Esherick built a new, on-site workshop. Designed by the then relatively unknown architect Louis I. Kahn, it consists of three connected concrete block hexagons, each having three diamond-shaped roof planes and sloping eave lines. Esherick added his own touches, exposing the dovetailed blocks at the corners, working a bit of a curve into the walls, and sculpting a chimney.



Ruth & Bob's home in Wharton's former workshop, Sept. 2007. Photo by Anne Todd.

Stepping into the Studio, surrounded by sculpture and furniture forms beyond one's imagination, one senses the presence of an ingenious artist constantly exploring better, more interesting, forms for the things we use in our everyday lives. It is very much as it was when the artist lived there. There are no glass cases or signage typical of museums. Instead, a knowledgeable docent describes the work and answers questions.

There are coat pegs caricaturing the artisans who built the Studio, and a tall cabinet carved with depictions of the trees in the woods. Through a large opening in the floor we see sculptures including the 16-foot tall oak *Twin Twist*. A cubist spiral stair takes us up to Esherick's bedroom, using a mastodon tusk as a handrail.

I won't tell you any more. You can see for yourself with a visit to the Museum, or through a virtual tour at [whartonesherickmuseum.org](http://whartonesherickmuseum.org).

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top): (*Unless otherwise noted, images are courtesy of the Wharton Esherick Museum.*) The Wharton Esherick Studio, viewed from the west; The Studio, viewed from the northeast, courtesy of Charles Uniatowski; Log garage; Carved coat pegs; Spiral staircase in the studio, courtesy of Charles Uniatowski.



Wharton Esherick's Studio, 1947. Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom.



The outhouse. Courtesy of Mansfield Bascom.



