
The Kamin and Kroiz Galleries of the University of Pennsylvania recently exhibited the first retrospective of the career of Wharton Esherick since a 1958 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Craft in New York. The catalog, edited by Paul Eisenhauer (Curator, Wharton Esherick Museum) and Lynne Farrington (Curator of Printed Books, University of Pennsylvania Libraries), provides a comprehensive survey of artist's work including his paintings and woodblock prints, set designs, sculpture, furniture, architecture, and utilitarian objects. The Kamin Gallery portion of the exhibit presented Esherick's work in its social, artistic, and political context of the 1920s and 1930s, while that of the Kroiz Gallery explored the artistic evolution of the works themselves.

Wharton Esherick (1887-1970) was an artist and craftsman whose unique synthesis of art, design, dance, and theater was an early example of American Modernism. Called the "dean of American craftsmen," he is considered the founder of the studio furniture movement. Though best known for his imaginative sculptural furniture, Esherick was also a prolific printmaker, illustrator, sculptor, furniture designer and builder. He experimented with a range of styles and influences such as the Arts and Crafts movement, Expressionist and Cubist shapes, and free form organic designs. When asked about his inventive and often playful work, Esherick said that "if it isn't fun, it isn't worth doing."

The in-depth introduction by Eisenhauer provides an overview of Esherick's personal life and artistic career from his early years studying Impressionist painting at the Philadelphia Academy of the Fine Arts to the display of his work at the 1939 New York World's Fair. This overview includes an examination of the influence of dance camps on his art while living in the Adirondacks, the formation of friendships and gallery connections in New York City, his illustrations for Centaur Press in the 1920s, his set designs for the Hedgerow Theatre, and his alliances with artists and wealthy patrons.

This exhibition catalog provides a fascinating history of the artist's life and work, compiling an impressive range of materials, from books, manuscripts, and photographs to prints, sculpture, and furniture, belonging to the Wharton Esherick Museum, as well as many other collections. The book also includes a selected bibliography and endnotes. Amply illustrated with over 300 images and thoroughly researched, this book provides an excellent introduction to this influential artist and craftsman.

Wharton Esherick and the Birth of the American Modern is recommended for all art and design collections in museum and academic libraries and is accessible to all audiences.

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