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## Daring Design: The Impact of Three Women on Wharton Esherick's Craft

by Lita Solis-Cohen



*Daring Design: The Impact of Three Women on Wharton Esherick's Craft*, an exhibition at the Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, opened early in September and continues through February 6, 2022. It demonstrates the importance of commissions from three women on the creative life in the early career of Wharton Esherick (1887-1970), considered the father of American studio furniture, an artist who also made woodcut prints and sculpture. Esherick's house and studio in Paoli, Pennsylvania, built over a period of 40 years, is now a museum.

Co-curated by Laura Turner Igoe, Ph.D., the Michener's chief curator, and woodworker Mark Sfirri, an authority on Esherick and his work, *Daring Design* focuses on commissions by Helene Koerting Fischer (1879-1970), an industrialist; artist Hanna Weil (1900-1985), Fischer's friend and later her daughter-in-law; and photographer Marjorie Content (1895-1984). Sfirri writes that a 2006 sale of Esherick furniture and ephemera from the collections of Helene Fischer and Hanna Weil Fischer at Rago Arts and Auction Center in Lambertville, New Jersey, triggered his interest.

Fischer and Content supported Esherick with commissions during the Great Depression and at a critical moment in his career when his work pushed the boundaries between fine art and functional design, furniture, and sculpture. The exhibition and its accompanying catalog show rarely seen works from private collections and museums. There are loans from the Wharton Esherick Museum in Paoli; the Modernism Museum Mount Dora, Florida; and the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA). The PMA loans were made possible through Art Bridges, a program funded by arts patron Alice Walton since 2017 to expand access to American art through loans from large museums to small regional institutions. The PMA lent works given by the Fischer family and furniture from the Curtis Bok house.



The dining table, four chairs, and a bench, made circa 1928 for the Esherick family, lent anonymously, are an early example of Esherick's asymmetrical, prismatic furniture, engineered and constructed by John Schmidt, that became a blueprint for his furniture for nearly three decades.

According to the show's informative and well-illustrated catalog, after seeing Esherick furniture at the Fischers' house, Nellie and Curtis Bok hired Esherick to transform their house in Gulph Mills, Pennsylvania, 1935-38. After the Bok house was demolished by developers in the late 1980s, the Boks' music room went to the PMA, and other elements went to the Wharton Esherick Museum and the Wolfsonian museum in Florida. Over the years, Bok heirs and Fischer heirs gave Esherick furniture to the PMA, some of which is in the Michener exhibition.

Who were these women so important to Wharton Esherick early in his career? Helene Koerting Fischer and her husband, Adalbert Fischer (1869-1942), emigrated from Germany in 1903. Adalbert became a manager in the Philadelphia manufacturing company owned by Helene's father, Dr. Ernst Koerting, an internationally known physicist and mechanical engineer, who invented an innovative technology for use in steam boilers. He had formed a partnership with L. Schutte in 1876. When Adalbert died in 1942, Helene, the mother of five, took over running Schutte & Koerting Company. She was president until 1953 when she became chairman of the board.

Fischer commissioned Esherick and blacksmith Samuel Yellin to design furnishings for her house in the West Mount Airy section of Philadelphia that was designed by architect Milton Bennett Medary (1874-1929) and completed in 1909. (Later the house was lived in by the architect Robert Venturi and his wife and business partner, Denise Scott Brown.) A Victrola cabinet that served as a base for the first sculpture Helene Fischer purchased from Esherick, an abstract black walnut carving of a draped reclining figure titled *Finale*, is pictured in the catalog. The cabinet is at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, but not in the exhibition; *Finale* was lent to the exhibition by a descendant. In the 1940s Helene Fischer commissioned furniture for the Schutte & Koerting boardroom. The boardroom table and two chairs given to the PMA in 1971 are in the exhibition.

German artist Hanna Weil, born Johanna Speckner, met Esherick through Helene Fischer. Weil was known for her ivory carvings and paper cuts (*scherenschnitten*), examples of which are in the show. She was married to Otto Weil, an Expressionist painter who died in 1928, which left her a single parent at age 29. Helene Fischer met Hanna Weil in Germany and supported her during the Depression. Fischer sent her son York to study art with Weil in Germany and invited her to Philadelphia, where she introduced her to Esherick. Fischer also underwrote Esherick's trip to visit Weil in the summer of 1931 in Germany, where he built Weil a worktable of pearwood and oak that is in the exhibition. Weil reportedly wanted to marry Esherick, but he was not single. Instead, she married York, Helene's son. Their son, also called York, was born in 1935, and a daughter, Barbara, was born in 1937. In 1939 they moved back to America, and the Fischers gave them a stone farmhouse in Bucks County as a wedding present. Esherick made a footstool as a housewarming present that is in the exhibition, and he took on some building projects in the farmhouse. When Esherick and architect George Howe designed the Pennsylvania Hill House for the New York World's Fair, Esherick hung an ivory spoon and fork carved by Weil on the paneled wall beyond the sofa, demonstrating his respect for Weil's work and craft. When Hanna and York Fischer divorced, Hanna lost Helene Fischer as a patron, and she spent the rest of her life farming and tending sheep to supplement her life as an artist.

Sfirri wrote about the Fischers and Weil, and Laura Turner Igoe wrote about Marjorie Content, a photographer connected with the New York avant-garde. Content's first husband was Harold Loeb, a Guggenheim heir, writer, and publisher of works by Sherwood Anderson, E.E. Cummings, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf. Content was on the staff of The Sunwise Turn, a Manhattan bookstore and literary salon founded by women. Peggy Guggenheim, Loeb's cousin, interned there in 1920. Content was also a close friend of Georgia O'Keeffe and traveled with her to New Mexico. Esherick met Content in 1926 while visiting a friend, the ceramist Henry Varnum Poor (1887-1970), who was her neighbor in Rockland County, New York. After her second husband, painter and theater designer Michael Carr, died in 1927, Content moved back to New York City and became serious about photography. Two of her photographs in the exhibition were taken from her Washington Square apartment. The abstract images may have inspired the furniture Esherick designed for her. Her cropped photographs of flowers in the exhibition relate to Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings. During the summers of 1931, 1932, and 1933, Content traveled to New Mexico with a young painter, Gordon Grant, always stopping in Paoli to visit the Eshericks on the way. In the early 1930s, she commissioned bedroom furniture from Esherick for her brownstone on West 10th Street in New York City, where she moved after her marriage to poet Leon Fleischman, her third husband, deteriorated. Much like the Fischer furniture, it is sculptural. A bed in the exhibition is designed with dressers formed with zigurat-like stacks of drawers that swing outward and are pulled out from the side, eliminating the need for hardware. A floor-to-ceiling dressing table designed by Esherick and built by his craftsman John Schmidt (1891-1967), pictured in the catalog, has dramatic triangular wings.

In 1934 O'Keeffe introduced Content to her fourth husband, the writer Jean Toomer (1894-1967). A year later Content and Toomer moved to a farm in Doylestown. Esherick designed built-in bookshelves and additional furniture for the house, including a dining table of three oak slabs on a walnut base, now in a private collection and illustrated in the catalog. Esherick also made them a tray and ladle and inscribed them; both are in the exhibition. They also acquired at least one of Esherick's hammer-handle chairs, now in the Michener Art Museum collection.

A dining table, four chairs, and a bench made circa 1928 for Esherick family use, lent anonymously, are front and center in the exhibition as an early example of Esherick's asymmetrical, prismatic furniture, engineered and constructed by John Schmidt, that became a blueprint for his furniture for nearly three decades.

The Michener Museum is open Thursday, located at 138 South Street in Doylestown, is open Thursday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Friday and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, noon to 5 p.m. Admission is \$15 for adults, \$13 for seniors, \$8 for college students, \$5 for youths 6 to 18, and free for members and for children under 6. The catalog is \$19.99 and is available only at the museum shop. For more information, call (215) 340-9800 or see the website ([www.michenerartmuseum.org](http://www.michenerartmuseum.org)).

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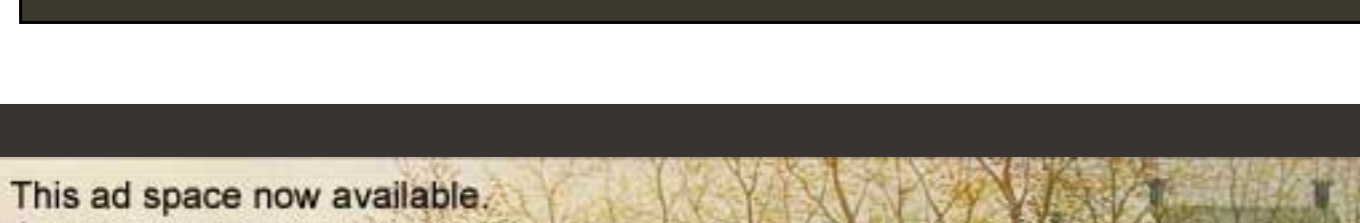
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