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CONTACT: Luise Z. Moskowitz
lmoskowitz@steegethomson.com
(267) 307-6617

SURPRISE GIFT ENSURES FUTURE OF AMERICAN CRAFT LANDMARK
\$10 Million Boost to Endowment Enables New Vision for Wharton Esherick Museum

Malvern, PA | December 11, 2020 — The Wharton Esherick Museum (WEM) is delighted to announce the receipt of a \$10 million endowment gift from the Windgate Foundation. Returns from the investment of the gift are projected to provide income that will support the Museum’s annual operating budget at a time when cultural organizations of every size are grappling with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The unexpected gift demonstrates the impact that one philanthropic act can have on preserving a singular example of American cultural heritage. A longtime supporter of the Museum and a champion of American craft, Windgate Foundation purposely bestowed this gift during a challenging time. “Windgate’s partnership with the Wharton Esherick Museum began in 1996 and over the years we have been increasingly impressed with the varied programs, tours and educational opportunities they have offered,” comments Pat Forgy, Executive Director of the Foundation. “The endowment gift is a culmination of our many years of working together and shows our trust in the staff and board and their future vision. It is our hope that this gift will inspire others to show their support for this exceptional Museum as they prepare to expand over the coming years.”

“To say we are excited, and humbled, is just the beginning,” says Julie Siglin, Executive Director of the Museum. “Being able to share news of this transformative gift with our founder, Wharton Esherick’s son-in-law Bob Bascom, just weeks before his death, was one of the most profound moments of my life. This gift not only stabilizes the Museum at a difficult moment, but also secures Bob’s vision to preserve Esherick’s Studio for future generations while expanding our site to make it not just the story of a place in the history of American craft, but a more complete picture of an artful life, well-lived.”

Wharton Esherick (1887–1970) was an artistic polymath whose significant contributions to American art, ranging from works on paper to sculpture, can be found in major museum collections across the country. Perhaps best known for his groundbreaking sculptural furniture, Esherick is widely regarded as the grandfather of the American Studio Furniture movement and one of the foundational figures of contemporary craft and design. His fiercely individual approach to art making, as well as his highly original fusion of form with function, has inspired important artists and designers including Wendell Castle and Sam Maloof.

The Wharton Esherick Museum is comprised of several buildings at the base and summit of Valley Forge Mountain in Malvern, PA, including: Sunekrest, the Esherick family home; a 1956 Workshop designed by Esherick and renowned American modernist architect Louis Kahn; and the Studio, a work and living space hand-built by Esherick that is the centerpiece of the WEM. The Studio gives an intimate glimpse into both the artist's working and private life, and also houses a wide range of his works, from toys carved for his children, to flowing and functional pieces of furniture purpose-built for the space, to an organic swirl of a staircase that seems to grow from the ground. On the National Register of Historic Places since 1973, the 12-acre wooded site was also designated a National Historic Landmark for Architecture in 1993.

Museum leaders are currently engaged in a reimagining of the site, guided by a thoughtful long-term campus planning process. "We have known for some time that we wanted to deepen the visitor experience here," explains WEM Board of Trustees President, Nicole Riegl. "But we never imagined we'd be able to embark on that vision any time soon, especially with the constraints of the pandemic affecting cultural institutions so profoundly. This gift is almost inconceivable for a museum of our size, and allows us, unexpectedly, to dream bigger."

Although planning is in the most preliminary stages, current concepts for an enhanced campus include: A new Visitor's Center that blends into the landscape at the base of Valley Forge Mountain with space to exhibit contemporary artists in dialogue with Esherick's legacy; restorations that will allow new public access to Sunekrest, including new gallery space, as well as new access to the 1956 Workshop, which will return it to its original appearance after being used as the Bascom residence since 1970; and a terraced Ramble that will lead visitors on a gentle meander through the woods connecting the lower and upper portions of the site.

"The Museum will continue to need support to fully realize this vision, but this breathtaking gift now gives us a solid foundation to build on and be able to fully flesh out the Wharton Esherick experience," comments Rob Leonard, who served as director of the Museum for two decades. "The fact that he lived and worked here makes it a unique place. When you are here, you feel as though Wharton is on a lunch break and will return any minute — you feel his presence. That feeling, and the example of a life that followed a creative passion, inspires our visitors and makes them feel that anything is possible."

Robyn Horn, Windgate Board Chair, echoes this impression. "The house and studio encompass the essence of Wharton and his boundless creativity. As a woodworker myself, I was enthralled with the scope of Wharton's work in furniture, sculpture and architecture. Ruth and Bob's vision was to preserve the house, Studio and grounds so those interested in art could share and enjoy it. That is our hope, too, and a big reason for this gift. If the Wharton Esherick Museum does not inspire you during your visit, you must not be paying attention."

For more information, including downloadable images, please visit
www.whartonesherickmuseum.org/about/news/

About Windgate Foundation — Windgate Foundation, based in Little Rock, Arkansas, is a private, family foundation supporting significant educational programs in contemporary craft and visual arts; K-12 and higher educational institutions for the development and support of the arts, scholarships and effective instructional programs; and programs for economically and socially disadvantaged children in Arkansas. Since 1993, Windgate has provided over \$890 million in grants in 48 states. windgatefoundation.org

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