

Movement is Life
March 2, 2024 – June 2, 2024

A Year of Rhythms Kicks Off at Wharton Esherick Museum with Exploration of Modern Dance as a Context for the Emergence of Wharton Esherick's Art

Movement is Life centers the influence of “rhythmics” dance communities, practiced primarily by women and children, on Esherick’s artistic development.

Malvern, PA – The Wharton Esherick Museum (WEM) is pleased to announce the opening of *Movement is Life*, on view in the museum’s Visitor Center beginning March 2, 2024, kicking off a year of programming that traces the thread of rhythms from the 1920s through the present.

Movement is Life explores modern dance as a context for the emergence of Wharton Esherick’s art. In the early 1920s, Esherick underwent an extraordinary transformation: he metamorphosed from an under-appreciated impressionist painter to a woodcarver whose dynamic modernist forms would carry him through an illustrious career. Esherick’s earliest woodworks—woodblock prints and decorative reliefs on frames and furniture—used swirling lines and rhythmic patterns to depict the natural world as alive. With his gouges, he rendered plants, animals, and human figures as pulsing with vital energies emanating from within them. Esherick struck this new direction at a time when he was involved with communities of women who practiced a form of modern dance called “rhythmics.”

Rhythmics was part of an early twentieth-century move toward using dance to revitalize city-worn bodies by reconnecting people with the rhythms of nature. Primarily the domain of women and children, rhythmics was a fixture in progressive school curricula and was practiced among circles of health-minded adults. Participants used movement to interpret phenomena such as ocean swells, branches in wind, and planetary orbits. With their bodies, they gave physical form to inner worlds



Rhythms, Wharton Esherick, circa 1922.
Woodcut. Collection of the Wharton Esherick
Museum.

of emotion. In many ways, rhythmic resembles the interpretive dance of Isadora Duncan, who gestured to the undulations of waves and breath, declaring “movement is life.”

Wharton Esherick encountered the communities that formed around teaching rhythmic through his wife, Letty Nofer Esherick. The Eshericks were introduced to rhythmic at the Marietta Johnson School of Organic Education in Fairhope, Alabama and as Letty’s interest deepened they were summer regulars at the Ruth Doing Camp for Rhythmic and the Gardner-Doing Camp for Rhythmic in the Adirondack Mountains.

“These enclaves of dancers and progressive thinkers introduced Wharton Esherick to a view of art as invigorated through rhythmic harmony with nature – and mark the beginning of his engagement with these themes throughout his life,” says Holly Gore, WEM Director of Interpretation and Associate Curator of Special Collections. *“He chose a life surrounded by nature and continually pushed against the currents and tempo of industrialization in the machine-age era when he lived.”*

Movement is Life draws together a selection of woodblock prints, carvings, and archival photographs from the WEM collections, created during the five-year period, 1919-1924. Among the artworks on view are rarely exhibited early works, including an antique chest with carved decorative reliefs by Esherick on each side. Used by Esherick and his family, the carvings depict their farmhouse home and mark one of his earliest forays into exploring art and furniture as one.

This installation marks the first in a series of programs at WEM this year celebrating the creative energy that Wharton Esherick found in the rhythms of life. Shifting seasons, daily rituals, life cycles, and body mechanics are rhythmic movements that informed Esherick’s work, as they do for contemporary makers today. WEM’s Annual Juried Woodworking Exhibition, opening this summer, will feature artists and woodworkers offering a broad spectrum of approaches to this theme.

***Movement is Life* is on display in the WEM Visitor Center from March 2, 2024 - June 2, 2024. Please note, guests wishing to enter the Studio must make advance reservations for a tour. Details about visiting can be found at whartonesherickmuseum.org.**

Explore upcoming programs and exhibitions at <https://whartonesherickmuseum.org/programs/>

About the Museum: The Wharton Esherick Museum, located just outside of Valley Forge Park in Malvern, PA is the handcrafted home and studio of Wharton Esherick (1887-1970), an internationally significant artist and leader of the Studio Furniture Movement. Esherick worked primarily in wood and extended his unique forms to furniture, furnishings, interiors, buildings, and more. His motto, “If it isn’t fun, it isn’t worth doing,” is evident in the joyful expression of his work. A National Historic Landmark for Architecture, his hilltop studio/residence has been preserved much as it was when the artist lived and worked there.

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