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# ARCHITECTS AND ARTISTS

## The Work of Ernest and Esther Born

By Nicholas Olsberg





PREVIOUS PAGE: Ernest Born, *Ernest and Esther Born House*, 2020 *Great Highway*, San Francisco, c. 1951. Estate of Ernest and Esther Born. (Photograph by Esther Born.)

LEFT: Esther Born, *Ernest Born in the Montgomery Street Studio*, San Francisco, c. 1969. Estate of Ernest and Esther Born.

BELOW: Ernest Born, *Esther Born in the Borns' Greenwich Village Apartment*, 1931, watercolor. Estate of Ernest and Esther Born.

THIS LONG OVERDUE STUDY OF THE WORK OF ERNEST AND ESTHER BORN, which ranges from the late 1920s through the 1980s, looks at the remarkably varied ways in which this creative couple gave visual expression to the rapid changes and dynamic growth of the built environment around them. It begins with Ernest's work as a talented illustrator and renderer, first seen in his early studies of European monuments and the San Francisco waterfront, then achieving wider recognition in his drawings of New York in the 1920s, in which he captured the expansive structures of the modern metropolis. These drawings served not only to establish Ernest's professional career and reputation, but also provided a fund of ideas from which he developed his own designs.

While in New York, the Borns produced vivid graphic work, which introduced a modern sensibility to the traditions of promotional illustration and magazine design. Furthering and fueling this sensibility, Esther made a year long, pathfinding study of Mexico's emerging modernism, and Ernest developed an inventive response to the Depression-era movement for better housing.

After the couple's return to San Francisco late in 1936, Ernest made a decisive mark on the Golden Gate International Exposition, presenting projects that ranged from a mural celebrating local industry to a vital exploration of new illuminated display techniques. All of these endeavors led to the essential and as yet unrecognized work the Borns accomplished in exhibiting and promoting the emerging "Bay Area Style" and identifying for the nation and the world a distinctive regional architecture. Starting with Esther's study of Frank Lloyd Wright's Hanna House, and passing through the sequence of architectural exhibitions the couple curated and designed between 1938 and 1949, this exploration continued with their own built expressions of a new and more natural domestic environment.

In the 1950s and 60s, the Borns made extensive forays into commercial and public space, and became deeply involved with rethinking the urban patterns of their native city in the 1960s—part of a larger, far-reaching, and often contentious movement. This is evident in their visionary plans for the San Francisco's Embarcadero, Fisherman's Wharf, and Alcatraz Island, and in the crucial and much-praised work for the Bay Area Rapid Transit system that concluded Ernest's career as an architect.

Finally, Ernest's late work in book and type design, public monuments, and his study and portrayal of the medieval *Plan of St. Gall* brought him for the last thirty years of his life back to precedents and sources—those "sermons in stone"—with which his long trajectory as a designer had begun.

Widely noticed and emulated at the time, the Borns' exercises in visual communication, particularly the studio's three-dimensional exhibition and display designs, were their most innovative and lasting achievements. They took a radical approach to scale, illumination, symbols, illustration, and slogans. However, like the designers and artists they most admired and learned from, the Borns' persistent and often brilliant originality most often lay not in inventing new methods and approaches in the many arts they mastered, nor in the instigation of ideas that would revolutionize those fields, but in the unique fashion with which they applied established means to new uses. They were modern to the core yet in love with history and precedent. As a result, they were among the most scrupulous and patient *re-inventors* of their time, working on the border between tradition and innovation, adapting familiar materials to novel forms, and drawing on their observation of what existed in one time to imagine what might be suited to another. For that readiness to reconcile old and new, and to treat architecture as an artistic endeavor whose boundaries were limitless, their work should surely be better known.





LEFT: Esther Born, *Bank of Manhattan Building Under Construction*, 1928.

RIGHT: Ernest Born, *Bank of Manhattan*, 1928, pencil and charcoal.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Nicholas Olsberg is an historian, archivist, curator, and writer. He served sixteen years (1989-2004) with the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal, first as Chief Curator and then as Director, and established the collections in the history of art and architecture that now form the special collections of the Getty Research Institute.

His architectural publications include work on Marcel Breuer and Carlo Scarpa, with major studies and exhibitions on Frank Lloyd Wright, Arthur Erickson, Carlos Diniz, and John Lautner. He also co-authored or contributed essays to three of the catalogues for *Pacific Standard Time*, the ongoing Getty series celebrating California architecture and design, and recently co-curated a highly successful exhibition, *Land Marks: Structures for a Poetic Universe*, at Hauser & Wirth Gallery in Somerset, England.

**ABOUT THE BOOK:**

*Architects and Artists: The Work of Ernest and Esther Born* is printed in an edition of 300 numbered copies. Designed by Michi Toki of Toki Design, San Francisco, the book measures 12 x 9 inches and consists of 264 pages. The slipcase and book are bound in cloth over boards. Drawing from visual collections throughout North America and Europe, the publication is richly illustrated, including many full page reproductions of works from the Borns' long and varied careers. At once a serious contribution to the literature on modern architecture and design and a rich and varied visual feast, this publication makes evident the legendary draftsmanship and graphic inventiveness of Ernest Born and rediscovers the brilliant photographic eye of Esther Born. The price is \$325 (plus applicable sales tax and shipping).

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