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SAARINEN HOUSE

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THIS PAGE:
The Book Room

As part of the Cleveland World Art Deco Congress in 2017 we visited the city of Detroit with one of the highlights being a visit to Cranbrook, a nearby educational community renowned for its early 20th century architecture.

Within the campus is Saarinen House, designed in 1929 by the Finnish-American designer Eliel Saarinen (1873-1950). This house, and particularly its interior, is a subtle and elegant expression of Art Deco and Arts and Crafts styles. It features the talents of the Saarinen family who lived there from 1930-1950 — Eliel's delicately veneered furniture, wife Loja's plush and expressive textiles, along with early furniture designs from their son, Eero.

As well as being a major contributor to church and skyscraper design in the USA from 1922 onward, Eliel also designed the Helsinki Railway Station in 1915 in what was called the Finnish Romantic Style but which is clearly one of the earliest major Art Deco architectural designs in the world. (See Spirit of Progress Issue 67 Vol 17, No 4 Spring 2016 pp18-21).

Saarinen, his wife Loja (1879-1968), and two children emigrated to the United States from Finland in 1923. Loja

was a sculptor and younger sister of one of his partners in the Finnish architecture firm 'Gesellius, Lindgren, and Saarinen' founded in Helsinki in 1896. They first settled in Evanston, Illinois, where Saarinen worked on a scheme for development of the Chicago lake front. Then, in 1924, he took a teaching position at the University of Michigan.

How did they come to be associated with Cranbrook? In 1925 he was asked to design the campus of Cranbrook Educational Community, intended to become an American equivalent of the Bauhaus. He became their first resident architect, the Art Academy's first President and the Head of the Architecture Department. He was later commissioned to design several art schools at Cranbrook one of which, Cranbrook Academy of Art, he also headed for many years. His wife Loja became the Academy's first Head of the Weaving Department in 1930, serving as such until her retirement in 1942. From 1928 on Loja also headed her own textile studio.

The Saarinen's son Eero (1910-1961) visited his parents at Saarinen House while he was studying architecture at Yale University between 1931 and 1934 and became famous



in his own right for his neo-futurist style. At Cranbrook he worked with his father, mother, and sister designing elements of the campus including the Cranbrook School, Kingswood School, the Cranbrook Art Academy and the Cranbrook Science Institute. Eero's leaded glass designs are a prominent feature of these buildings throughout the campus.

Other design work of Eero's included all sorts of mid-century modern chairs and tables as well as the Washington Dulles Airport, the TWA Flight Centre in New York City and the Gateway Arch in St Louis. He collaborated with Charles Eames to design the Organic Chair in 1941 which was a major influence on chair designs in the 1950s and 60s.

Their daughter Pipsan (1905-1979) was also a talented designer, studying weaving, ceramics, and fabric design in Finland. She became a teacher at Cranbrook, conducting the first class on contemporary furniture design, during a time there known as the 'golden moment' for educators and students alike.

Known for her contemporary furniture, textile and product designs, Pipsan married architect J. Robert (Bob) F. Swanson in 1926 and they formed Swanson Associates

in the mid-1940s. She was enlisted as an interior designer for the company, starting what was to be a life-long partnership. Cranbrook Art Museum holds in its collection a wonderful array of objects designed by the Swansons, as well as many costume, glass, and textile designs executed solely by Pipsan.

Saarenen House is one of two identical houses side by side in a tree lined street on the Cranbrook campus. It is a two-storey building in the Arts and Crafts style in simple dark brick with light mortar demonstrating some simple patterns and topped with a slate roof. The many windows display geometric patterns in the lead glass framework (squares, rectangles and triangles) which break up the plain glass into multiple small sections.

The interior of the house was fully restored in 1994 and reflects a synthesis of both Arts and Crafts and Art Deco with an essence of cultured simplicity in most rooms, offset by flamboyance in the dining room and ensuite bathroom upstairs. Some of the rooms on the upper floor have been made into a small apartment for the curator and are not open to the public.

UPPER:
Living Room with large central rug

LOWER LEFT:
Saarenen House from the street

LOWER RIGHT:
View from living room to the adjacent book room/library/reading room



UPPER LEFT:
Main bedroom, upper floor

CENTRE LEFT:
Ensuite bathroom off the main bedroom

LOWER LEFT:
Alcove on upper floor with blue furniture, couch, curtains and carpet

RIGHT:
The stunning birchwood panelled dining room, showing view to the kitchen

The central feature of the living room on the ground floor is a rug designed and woven by Loja Saarinen, which echoes the brickwork of the building. The room has a feeling of spartan simplicity with its monochrome palette and muted up-lighting.

The furniture in the living room was designed by Eliel Saarinen and made at Cranbrook by the Swedish cabinetmaker Tor Berglund with a variety of wood veneers including rosewood, ebony and walnut. The sofa reflects a decorative version of a Finnish tradition where the covering of the couch extends onto the floor so that it can be folded up over the legs during cold weather. The tiles over the fire were designed by Eliel and the painting on the right over the credenza is by Eliel of his wife Loja.

The Book Room is a highlight of the house and although just an offshoot of the living room it stands recognisably distinct. With no doors it is separated from the living room by a colour change in the moulding. Its boxlike shape is accentuated by the symmetry of bookshelves and chairs with a central table, softened by a window at one end and punctuated by a hanging light over the table. The white ceiling with a slight recess adds to the formal geometry of the room. A plain carpet with a brick pattern border fills

the room and oddly extends out into the living room. Given the measure of detail in this house one must assume that it was intended, perhaps as a sense of entry or invitation.

The spectacular and extravagant Dining Room is clearly in the Art Deco style. The shape of the room is made octagonal using corner niches with special lighting which probably originally displayed sculptures and other artwork. The walls are made up of square birchwood panelling. The light above the table hangs from a majestic circular dome covered with gold leaf. The round table (mirroring the dome) has an octagonal base (reflecting the form of the room) and can be extended to accommodate up to 14 people with arch shaped extension leaves which maintain the circular shape. The chairs are works of art in their own right, with the shape and colours a mixture of classical and modern styling. Viewed from the living room, the square carpet with its octagonal design leads to the entry to kitchen area which unlike many transitions on the lower level has a door rather than drapes.

At the other end of the living room on the ground floor is the Saarinen studio which is divided into three sections. The alcove was called the 'cozy corner' by Loja and was the main entertaining and work area. Through the drapes



on the right is the studio. Detail of the couch fabric show strong Art Deco influences with a repeating zigurat style leading to a carpet with multiple geometric boxes, all in shades of green on a grey and white background. The hanging ceiling light is the same design as that in the Book Room, the Dining Room and the Main Bedroom.

On the landing of the upper floor is an alcove with blue furniture, coverings, curtains and carpet. Here breakfast was served every morning at 7.30am to Eliel and Loja by their housekeeper. At the end of the alcove is the main bedroom. The chair, table and couch opposite the beds are one of Eero's first commissions at 20 years of age and heralded a stellar career in architectural and furniture design. The remainder of the room is muted and plain in style and colour but with heavy stepped right-angled cornices creating an inset ceiling.

The Art Deco ensuite bathroom creates a wonderfully Hollywood feel with cream and black tiling covering all walls

and floor. Everything is symmetrical with a theatre-like central bath recess and almost identical shower and toilet spaces on either side. At both ends of the bathroom are benchtops with sinks and taps. The floor and ceiling have similar reducing squares and the whole effect is one of modernity and extravagance.

Saarinen House is a portal to another era.... a time in the early 1930s of intersecting design styles – with Arts and Crafts meeting Art Deco, all with a Finnish cultural overlay. Here lived a family of multi-talented artisans and designers who showed their mastery of materials and style in the way they lived. We were all fortunate that this house has been restored and we Art Deco lovers can enjoy the lifestyle and skill of the Saarinen family almost 100 years later.

LEFT:
View of Studio, showing hanging ceiling light and geometric latticework of the Studio window

UPPER RIGHT:
Detail of the Studio couch fabric and carpet, designed by Loja

LOWER RIGHT:
Saarinen Studio alcove, the 'cozy corner'