

THE CRANBROOK VISION

The Metropolitan Museum commemorates an American giant among schools of design.

A LOVE OF THE PAST and of the interrelationship of artistic forms are evident in the display of a Wei dynasty lion-dog in the Cranbrook collection (far left).

VARIED TALENT was the forte of Eiel Saareinen, who designed the campus and attracted, among others, Carl Milles (sculptor of the bronze, near left).

CLASSICISM marked Saareinen's last big project, the museum and library (right, shown with Carl Milles's Triton group).



By Paul Goldberger

THAT A SINGLE AMERICAN SCHOOL COULD PRODUCE enough art objects during a 25-year period to fill a major exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is not in itself extraordinary. Several art schools might be able to fill one of the Met's galleries with significant work by their alumni, and so could numerous schools of architecture. But if the exhibition were to include first-rate works of painting, sculpture, architecture, furniture design, interior design, ceramics, textiles, metalwork and bookbinding, the possible sources diminish rapidly. They come down, in fact, to one — the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich.

Cranbrook is like no other institution in the United States. It is part artists' colony, part school, part museum and part design laboratory, and it has never allowed its students to be bound by the narrow lines separating the various design disciplines. It has been around for more than 50 years — it was in the planning stages from the mid-1920's and opened its doors in 1932 — and it has had numerous ups and downs over the years. But in its finer moments it has nurtured some of the greatest design talents the United States has had in modern times, and the effect of Cranbrook and its graduates and faculty on the physical environment of this country has been profound.

The work of Cranbrook and its students and teachers not only might fill a section of the Metropolitan Museum, it has. A major exhibition celebrating Cranbrook's history and the work produced by its leading figures, which originated at The Detroit Institute of Arts in December, will open at the Metropolitan on April 18. The exhibition ranges far and wide, including designs from throughout the careers of some of Cranbrook's great designers, and it is a major event in the realm of American design studies. The title tells much: "Design in America: The Cranbrook Vision 1925-1950," a phrase that is ambitious and sweeping, but fair. For Cranbrook, surely more than any other institution, has a right to think of itself as synonymous with contemporary American design; the work of

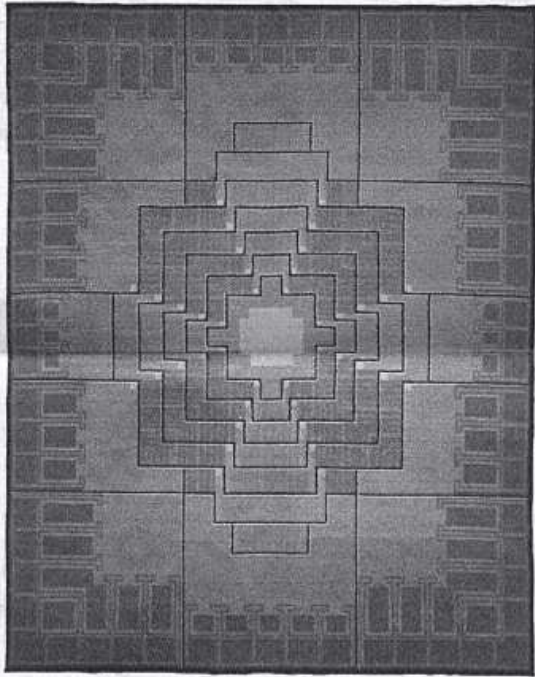
Paul Goldberger is the architecture critic of *The New York Times*.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MALTHEZAR KORNIAK

BOTTOM: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, COURTESY KNOX INTERNATIONAL CENTER, THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, KINGSWOOD SCHOOL, CRANBROOK, TOP: BALHAZAR KOZAB



DINING ROOM by Eiel Saarinen (1928-30) in which Art Deco furniture holds sway.

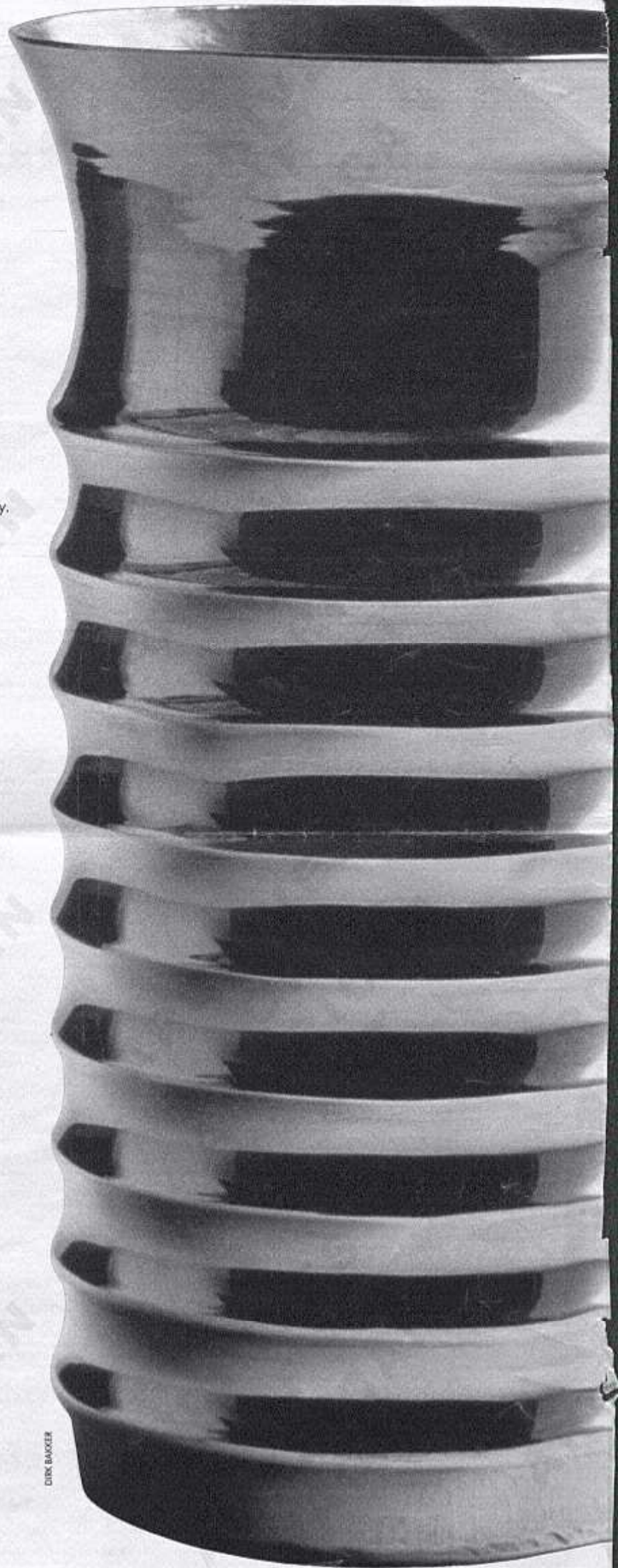


CARPET by Loja Saarinen (1931) was made for the headmistress's office at Kingswood, Cranbrook's school for girls.



SHOWROOM by Florence Knoll (1957) epitomizes the contemporary styles that Cranbrook alumni bequeathed to the American workplace.

VASE by Harry Bertoia (right, circa 1940) shows the artist's skill in using machine methods to create perfectly regular surfaces.



DIK BAKKER

its students and faculty did more than that of any other place to focus international attention on design work being done on this side of the Atlantic. And the school did have a vision — it was as much an academy devoted to the notion of the design idea as it was a teaching center for specific skills.

Indeed, relatively little teaching in the conventional sense ever went on at Cranbrook at all. The school operated on the atelier system — students worked in groups around masters in each art and craft, pursuing their own projects under the guidance of their teachers, while acting as apprentices to those teachers at the same time. There were no classes and no grades — the notion of inspiration was all. (Even today, Cranbrook, with nine faculty members and 150 graduate-level students working toward master's degrees, has the same approach. There are still no grades and no classes, and each student is considered an "artist-in-residence.")

That loose, unstructured Cranbrook system was largely developed by Eliel Saarinen, the great Finnish architect who designed the campus and presided over Cranbrook from its founding until shortly before his death in 1950. Saarinen brought to Cranbrook many of its most distinguished teachers — Carl Milles, who ran the sculpture department; Maija Grotell, the ceramicist; Harry Bertola, the sculptor and furniture designer, and Charles Eames, the designer and architect.

It was also at Cranbrook that Eero Saarinen, the son of Eliel, began his long and productive association with Eames and his wife, Ray, which yielded some of the most important furniture produced in postwar years. The furniture and interior designers Florence Knoll and Benjamin Baldwin also came out of Cranbrook, as did the textile designer Jack Lenor Larsen, the industrial designer Niels Diffrient, the sculptor Duane Hanson and the architects Ralph Rapson and Harry Weese.

All of these people have played significant roles in postwar American design, and collectively their influence is enormous. Florence Knoll, who along with her husband, Hans, founded the furniture firm Knoll International, probably did more than any other single figure to create the modern, sleek, postwar American office, introducing contemporary furniture and a sense of open planning into the work environment. Charles Eames's chairs are American classics and they continue to be produced and sold at an astonishing rate, more than a full generation after most of them were designed. Eero Saarinen's architecture epitomizes the ambitions, and failings, of the 1950's, surely more than that of any other single architect. And Jack Lenor Larsen's fabric designs continue to be central in shaping popular taste in mass-produced, quality textiles. In a sense all of these designs, from Eames's chairs to Eero Saarinen's vast building complexes, are part of the Cranbrook legacy.

CRANBROOK WAS FOUNDED BY GEORGE G. BOOTH, A NEWS-
paper publisher, esthete, philanthropist and Anglophile who had long dreamed of establishing some sort of cultural institution on the land of Cranbrook, the 300-acre estate 20 miles outside of Detroit that he had named for his family's ancestral village in Kent, England. An early key to Booth's sympathies lay in the manor house he commissioned from the architect Albert Kahn as his own residence at Cranbrook; completed in 1908, the house frankly imitates the English Arts and Crafts style. Booth's ambition ultimately led him to endow at Cranbrook an entire family of academies — Cranbrook School, a boys' preparatory school; Kingswood School, a girls' preparatory school; the Cranbrook Institute of Science, and the centerpiece of the estate, the Cranbrook Academy of Art.

Booth envisioned Cranbrook as representing diversity — he was devoted to the principle of individual expression and in fact originally saw the Cranbrook Academy as being modeled after the American Academy in Rome, where students pursue independent study under the guidance of masters in their field. It was the notion of an artistic community that would, by its very presence, enrich the quality of life for everyone in the upper Middle West that interested Booth the most.

Booth, who fancied himself a patron of architecture as well, believed that Cranbrook would take much of its tone from the land and the buildings of the estate, and he wanted a clear sense of what the campus would be like before creating a final program for the schools. In Eliel Saarinen, he found the man who would give identity both to the campus and to the institutions themselves — an architect with an international reputation but relatively little work, who had only limited interest in existing educational institutions and was able to devote the rest of his life to Cranbrook.

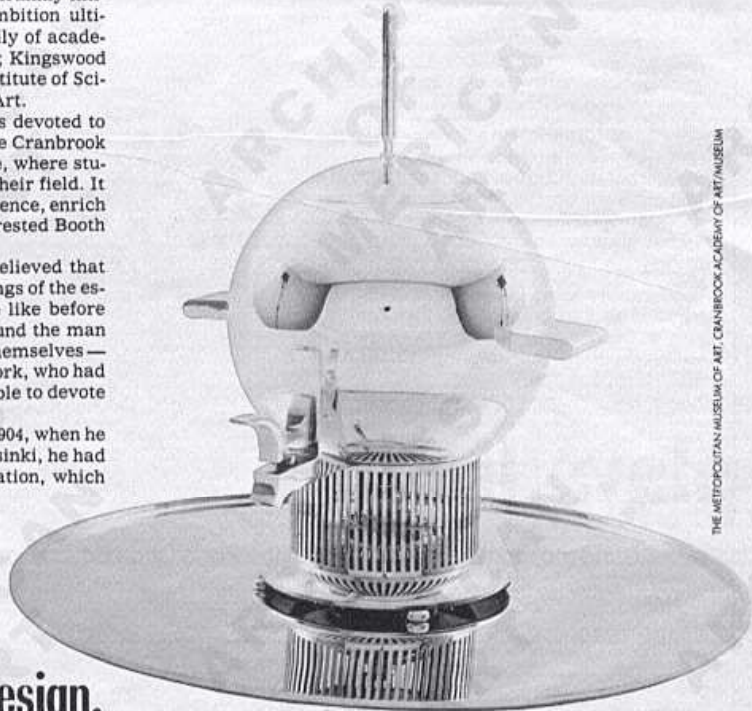
Saarinen had been born in Rantasalmi, Finland, in 1873, and by 1904, when he won a competition for the design of a major railroad station in Helsinki, he had become a major figure in Scandinavian architecture. But the station, which

**On this Michigan campus,
artists from every discipline
changed the face of American design.**



HAND MIRROR by Arthur Nevill Kirk (above, circa 1931) combines silver, ivory and enamel in handwrought elegance.

SILVER URN by Eliel Saarinen (below, 1934) shows a geometric purity in a style conforming to neither modern nor traditional modes.





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was not in operation until 1919, did not bring significant numbers of new commissions in its wake, and when Saarinen's entry in the competition to design a new headquarters tower for The Chicago Tribune won second prize in 1922, he decided to visit the United States.

Here, he was widely acclaimed — his design for The Chicago Tribune was considered by many critics to have been superior to the winning entry — but still, he received relatively little work. He was teaching architecture at the University of Michigan and considering a return to Finland in 1924, when one of his students, Henry Scripps Booth, invited him home to discuss his father's notion of an art academy.

And thus Cranbrook was born, "not an art school in the ordinary sense," as Saarinen said, but "a working place for creative art. The leading idea is to have artists of the highest ability live at Cranbrook and execute their work there . . . This rich and creative atmosphere will bring to Cranbrook young artists and art students who are eager to develop their talents . . . How much we can do, we do not know. The buildings will not do the work. The artists we can get to live at Cranbrook do the work partly, but most depends on the artistic creative power of the youth of the country." Saarinen developed several master plans, which Booth initially rejected as too elaborate, preferring at first to have the old farm buildings remodeled into a school. But a revision of the Saarinen scheme eventually won out, and construction began on the property in 1926 with the first sections of the Cranbrook School for boys, followed shortly by the initial portions of the Academy of Art.

It would not be unreasonable to compare Cranbrook to the Bauhaus, the celebrated German school of design, and, indeed, that comparison has been made frequently enough in the last couple of years to give it an air of cliché. But the parallel is nonetheless instructive: Both institutions were created to encourage new achievements in 20th-century design, and both were created in the hope of breaking down barriers between various design disciplines. In each case, the founders hoped that their school would bring about new connections between art and life, and would make design

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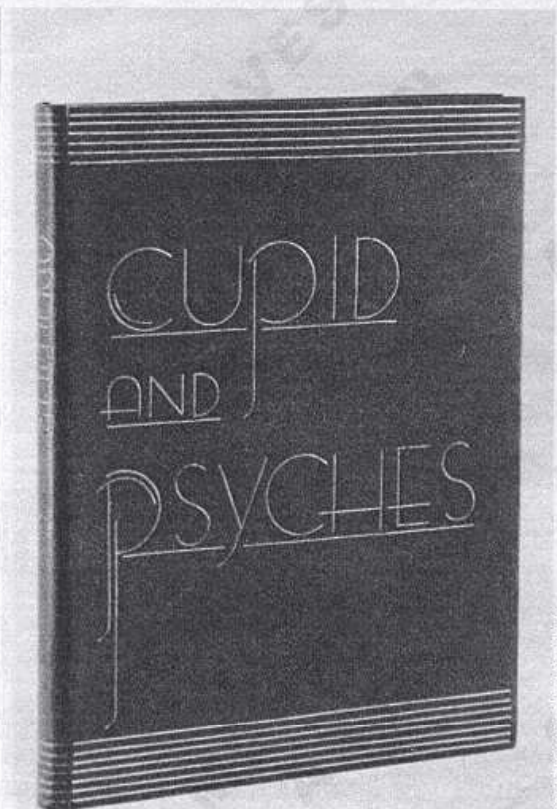
But the histories of the two institutions belie the similar intentions. The Bauhaus was always troubled by politics, both internally in the form of friction between practitioners of different disciplines, and externally in the form of pressure from the German government, which considered the school to be left wing. Ultimately, the Nazis forced the Bauhaus to close in 1933, and its leading lights, among them Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Josef Albers and Marcel Breuer, scattered.

Cranbrook's past was more tranquil, at least superficially. With Saarinen secure in the president's chair and Booth's generous financial backing, the school seemed in the 1930's and 1940's, an idyllic place. Booth's patronage was such that, as Jack Lenor Larsen has recalled, "There were as many gardeners as students." There was always an air of separation from external pressures that was altogether different from that of the strife-torn Bauhaus. This happy condition did not, however, long survive Booth's death in 1949.



Surely the most important distinction between the schools was in terms of ideology. While the Bauhaus made certain claims toward ideological freedom, in reality there was never much diversity; the Bauhaus's greatness was in its almost evangelical sense of itself as an academy for the sleek modern forms of the International Style. And its real legacy is not in its teaching methods, but in the important International Style work it produced — the tubular steel chairs of Marcel Breuer, the headquarters building at Dessau by Walter Gropius, and so on.

But there was no real Cranbrook style to serve as an American equivalent of the Bauhaus style. Eliel Saarinen's architecture was itself relatively nonideological; it was a gentle and inventive mix of modernism and tradition, lavish in its detail and craftsmanship, and never quite the same from one building to the next. If designers like Charles Eames symbolized the use of modern technology to achieve new forms, as Eames did so remarkably with his bent plywood chairs, Jack Lenor Larsen stood for an attempt to evoke the feeling of hand-crafted textiles through mass production.



CRANBROOK EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY

The craft of bookbinding (here, an example by Jean Eschmann, circa 1931) flourished at Cranbrook in its early years.

So there was no party line at Cranbrook, no single way to do things, as there so clearly was at the Bauhaus. The objects in the Metropolitan exhibition, which was organized by R. Craig Miller of the museum and Davira S. Taragin of The Detroit Institute of Arts, bear this out. They include such nearly traditional objects as Arthur Nevill Kirk's exquisite hand mirror of silver, ivory and enamel, crafted at Cranbrook in 1931, a piece that merges the delicate precision of classic antique silver with the swirling ornament of Art Deco, and such starkly modern items as the furniture of Eames, Harry Bertoia and Florence Knoll, with its crisp, taut lines and bright colors.

Some of the most remarkable objects seem neither modern nor traditional, at least not in the conventional sense of these terms — Eliel Saarinen's own silver urn, of 1934, is a sphere of silver on a cylindrical base, with a geometric purity that has hints of the forms of both the visionary French architects of the 18th century and of the Viennese architects of the early 20th century. Loja Saarinen's carpets, like her husband Eliel's domestic objects, are based on simple geometries

made rich and lively by a splendid sense of composition; they manage the remarkable trick of seeming at once energetic and serene.

If there is no clear style to the Cranbrook output, there is an overall impression that these works give, and it is one of freshness. More than a sense of modernity per se, they suggest a kind of fresh breeze blowing through Cranbrook — a breeze that gently, easily, altered ways of looking at things rather than radically changed them. There is a sense that the artisans and architects of Cranbrook loved the past, and were far less fearful of it than their counterparts at the Bauhaus; they wanted to make their mark without turning the world upside down, but by evolving their own style in easy stages.

Unquestionably, some of the appeal of Cranbrook's legacy today comes from the prevailing attitude toward the International Style, which has undergone considerable change in recent years. The International Style right now is a less potent influence on American design than at any time since before World War II. It is perhaps no accident that the years of Cranbrook's eclipse, following Booth's death, were also years of the

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International Style's preeminence. For while the Bauhaus itself did not prosper, its style did, and the glass-and-steel buildings and sleek objects encouraged by the Bauhaus were unquestionably the dominant style of modern design in the United States in the 1950's and 1960's.

But today, bored with the bleakness that whole cities of International Style buildings have turned out to have, American esthetic taste has moved sharply away, seeking a kind of modernism that is more frankly picturesque, and contains more visual richness, ornament, texture and even historical allusion. So the varied design objects that emerged from Cranbrook speak to this moment, skeptical as it is of any rigid design dogma, and desirous as it is of a kind of sensual, rich and varied form.

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In some ways, Eliel Saarinen's campus is itself Cranbrook's greatest legacy, a collection of buildings that are only now achieving the recognition they deserve as comprising one of the greatest campuses ever created any-

where in the world. Saarinen's designs for the Cranbrook Academy, the Cranbrook School and the Kingswood School, as well as for his own house on the campus, form a major part of the exhibition, and they epitomize all that Cranbrook stood for.

The buildings evolved in style somewhat over the years, though Saarinen's basic stance as an architect never changed. The Cranbrook School, begun in 1926, is a collection of buildings that hint at the Gothic Revival style of so many American campuses of the early 20th century. But Saarinen's Gothic is far less literal-minded than most; what he was after was more of a mood than a stylistic re-creation, and he achieved it brilliantly. The buildings are placed with utter precision around a group of small courts and large lawns; if they were not also so exquisitely detailed, one would be tempted to say that Saarinen's greatest gift of all was in the making of larger wholes out of single buildings. For his impulse was fundamentally that of the urbanist — buildings did not stand alone to Saarinen, but reached out and formed con-

nections with their neighbors.

At Cranbrook, it was up to Saarinen to make both the buildings and the connections, and the result was a complex in which movement from one place to another, from open space to closed, from narrow to wide, through sequences of archways and courts and lawns, provides an architectural experience of continual pleasure and vitality.

After the Cranbrook School, in 1929, Saarinen designed the Kingswood School for girls beside a lake on the Cranbrook property. Here, Saarinen's stylistic evolution took a step: The buildings of Kingswood are sleeker than those of the Cranbrook School, and call to mind the streamlined forms of Art Deco. But this is Saarinen's own Art Deco, as Cranbrook School had been his own Gothic. There is none of the sense of jazzy, nervous energy here that is present in so many buildings of the period; Saarinen's version of Art Deco, like all of his work, was serene, tranquil and resolved. And the passionate devotion to detailing and craftsmanship that was evident in the earlier buildings is continued, even

enhanced, here. Kingswood became an even more completely realized work of design: Saarinen's wife, Loja, who was to become one of Cranbrook's weaving masters, designed rugs, curtains and furniture fabrics. Their son, Eero, who would soon attend the Yale School of Architecture, designed furniture.

The buildings at Cranbrook that would house the Cranbrook Academy of Art were constructed over a period of several years from 1928 on. The most important of the early works is the elder Saarinen's own house on the campus, completed in 1930, a building that turns a rather restrained brick face to the road but bursts forth with an exuberant and gracious set of rooms within. The house is most notable for its furniture and fixtures. There is an extraordinary dining-room set of holly wood and inlaid ebony, its lines as sleek and romantic as an Art Deco skyscraper, placed within an octagonal dining room with a low dome that is itself one of the more distinguished domestic rooms produced in that period. There are also a pair of fireplace andirons in the shape of peacocks,

numerous indirect lighting fixtures crafted of metal, and a master bathroom that is a more sumptuous array of colored tile than anything the 1930's produced in New York.

The house now looks relatively close to the way it did when the Saarinens occupied it, thanks largely to the efforts of Cranbrook's current president, Roy Slade, who made its restoration one of his prime projects upon his arrival at the campus in 1977. Working from photographs, Slade tracked down original pieces that had been dispersed over the years, and, where they could not be found, he substituted furniture by Eames, Florence Knoll, Warren Platner and other Cranbrook designers. The result is a mix that is deliberately eclectic, but which serves as a clear demonstration of the vitality of Cranbrook as a source of inventive and significant furniture design.

Saarinen's last large building on the Cranbrook campus, the library and museum, completed in 1942, is in many ways his best. It is more formal than the earlier works, with an immense, columned central arcade tying together

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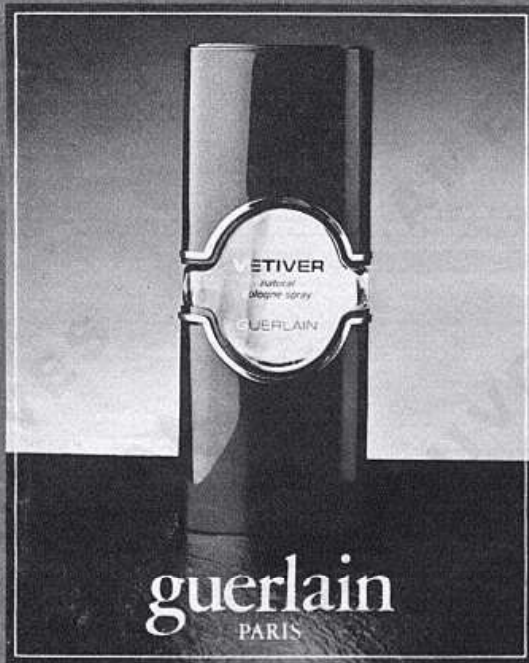
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two large, boxy wings that are a mix of tan brick and yellow-beige Mankato stone. It is more classicizing than the other buildings of the campus, and there are echoes of the abstracted, stripped-down classicism that was the favored institutional style of that period. But Saarinen's version of that style is warm, gracious and delicately scaled, with none of the bleakness of so many government buildings of the time. The library-museum was also the occasion for a particularly happy collaboration between Saarinen and the sculptor Carl Milles, whose two sculpture groups, Triton and Orpheus, were each placed within a reflecting pool on one side of the arcade.

But what is ultimately most appealing about the Saarinen buildings is their ability to balance so comfortably on the edge of modernism. They are neither modern in the sense of the International Style nor traditional in the sense of the classical architecture that the Bauhaus rallied against; they exist at a point of intersection between these worlds, and it is a point that Saarinen in many ways made himself. It is difficult, standing in the midst of the Saarinen buildings on the Cranbrook campus, to accept the belief that was implicit in the International Style: that modernism and historical modes had nothing to say to each other. Here, they seem not to contradict each other at all.

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After Saarinen's death, in 1950, a year after George Booth himself died, Cranbrook began to slip. It was not by accident that the organizers of the current exhibition decided to limit it largely to work produced prior to 1950; by the mid-1950's, all the best Cranbrook-related work was being done by alumni, on their own and far away. Some of the problems were financial: Booth's endowment had not been well invested, and the academy fell on hard times financially. But more troubling still was the loss of distinguished faculty. Charles Eames had left for California in the early 1940's, and gradually most of the academy's other leading figures departed or retired. They were not replaced by their equals, and the academy came under the control of the painter Zoltan Sepeshy, who lacked Saarinen's passion for diverse talent.

The effect of all this was a downward spiral. As Cran-

brook lost its ability to attract good faculty members, that in turn made it difficult to attract good students. By the early 1960's, there was little sense that Cranbrook had much meaning for the national design community — it was seen as not much more than a second-rate design academy that happened to be located on an unusual campus near Detroit. It became so Detroit-oriented, in fact, that the design department had begun to be funded, and was eventually controlled, largely by General Motors, which tried to shift its focus, understandably enough, toward automotive design.

It was in the late 1960's, with the coming of Glen Paulsen to replace Zoltan Sepeshy as president, that the academy's fortunes began to turn around. Cranbrook eventually sold off some of the academy's art collection, including works by Henry Moore, Maillol and Rodin, at an auction at Sotheby Parke Bernet in 1972, as a way of increasing the endowment, and reduced General Motors's involvement in the school. Younger faculty members more attuned to current work were hired; not surprisingly, they began to attract better students. Several recent Cranbrook alumni, including David Sterling and Jane Kostrin of the class of 1978, have begun to make their names in New York, particularly in graphic design, and that, of course, attracts still more good students.

Roy Slade, who came to Cranbrook from the directorship of the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, not only continued this process, he accelerated it. Flushed with the success of the restoration of Saarinen House, in which he now resides, Slade has restored other campus buildings, and he took out what remained of the Cranbrook art collection and reinstalled it in the museum. His main goal has been to increase Cranbrook's profile; that, he has clearly done. And if Cranbrook is better-known now than it was five years ago, there is more to come. The Detroit-Metropolitan exhibition will eventually travel to Helsinki, to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. So while it is far too early to tell if Cranbrook will again be the creative center it was a generation ago, there can be no question that it is, at last, being properly recognized as a crucial place in the history of modern design. ■