

# SAARINEN HOUSE AND GARDEN VISITOR'S GUIDE



WELCOME TO SAARINEN HOUSE, THE RESTORED HOME OF FINNISH-AMERICAN DESIGNERS ELIEL AND LOJA SAARINEN. SAARINEN HOUSE exemplifies Eliel Saarinen's belief that every aspect of design should work in harmony—from the plan of a city to the architecture of a house and its smallest details—even the silverware pattern. By combining ideas from the Arts and Crafts Movement with more modern Art Deco elements, and through careful use of related colors and repeated geometric shapes, the Saarinens designed their house to be a total work of art.



## THE BOOTHS AND THE SAARINENS: BUILDERS OF CRANBROOK

ELIEL SAARINEN (1873-1950) WAS ALREADY WELL ESTABLISHED AS AN ARCHITECT IN FINLAND WHEN, IN 1922, HE ENTERED A COMPETITION TO DESIGN THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE BUILDING. He won second place and used the prize money to immigrate to Chicago in 1923, eventually joined by his wife Loja (1879-1968), daughter Pipsan (1905-1979) and son Eero (1910-1961). Shortly after their arrival, he was invited to teach architecture at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where he caught the attention of art patrons George Gough Booth and Ellen Scripps Booth, whose son Henry was one of Saarinen's architecture students. George Booth had married into the Scripps publishing family and, in time, earned his own fortune as publisher of the *Detroit News* as well as a chain of smaller Michigan newspapers. The Booths resolved to use their resulting wealth to found educational and cultural institutions on the Bloomfield Hills estate they called Cranbrook, after Mr. Booth's ancestral home in England. They engaged Saarinen as chief architect, who ultimately designed Cranbrook School for boys (1925-1929), Kingswood School for girls (1929-1931), Cranbrook Institute of Science (1935-1938), Cranbrook Academy of Art (1925-1942), and Cranbrook Art Museum and Library (1938-1942). He also formulated the Academy's curriculum and served as its first president from 1932 to 1946, headed its Department of Architecture and Urban Design from 1932 to 1950, and designed numerous non-Cranbrook commissions.

During the Saarinen's time at Cranbrook, Loja had an equally important career as a textile designer. She founded and directed the Department of Weaving and Textile Design at the Academy (1929-1942), as well as Studio Loja Saarinen (1928-1942), a separate business that wove her textile designs, including commissions for the buildings that Eliel designed on the campus. She remained active professionally until 1945, accepting commissions from designers such as Frank Lloyd Wright, and exhibiting work at venues such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1934, 1935 and 1940) and the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco (1939).



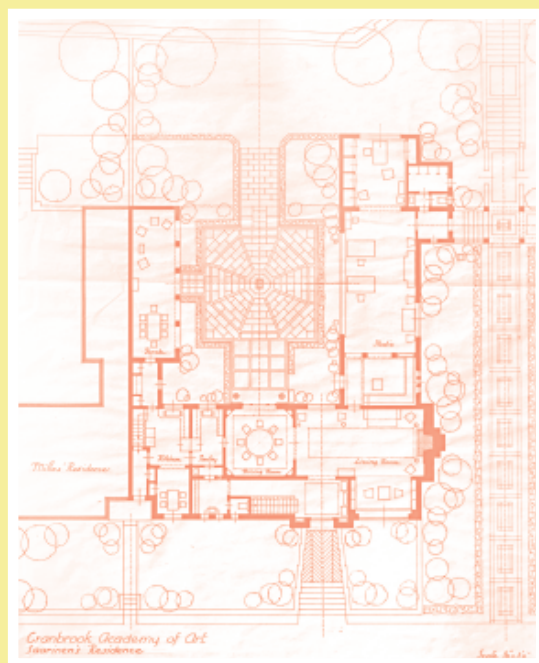
## SAARINEN HOUSE EXTERIOR ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPING

DECORATIVE ELEMENTS ARE INTEGRAL TO THE ARCHITECTURE, AND INCLUDE PATTERNED BRICKWORK AND LEADED GLASS WINDOWS WITH TRIANGLES, SQUARES, AND RECTANGLES. Similar patterns, shapes, and the color of the brick are echoed inside the house, linking the inside and outside. Like the interior, the landscaping of Saarinen House has been restored to its original 1930s design scheme (mostly chosen by Loja), with plantings that soften the transition from nature to architecture, contributing to the house's unity of design.

- [ 1 ] Each building on Academy Way, including Saarinen House, has different, unique patterns in its brickwork, doors and windows.
- [ 2 ] On the south side of the house, a covered walkway connecting Eliel Saarinen's architecture studio to those of the Academy physically embodies his idea that Academy students and faculty should live and work in close proximity with each other.
- [ 3 ] The paved courtyard served as an outdoor room where the Saarinen's entertained guests. French doors leading to the studio and dining room minimize the distinction between indoor and outdoor spaces.
- [ 4 ] The statue in the center of the courtyard is *Kivi's Muse*, by Finnish sculptor Wäino Aaltonen (1894-1966). Aleksis Kivi (1834-1872) was Finland's most prominent poet, with a status equivalent to Shakespeare.
- [ 5 ] Ivy softens the walls and gives them texture and color, much as the wall hangings do inside the house.

## SAARINEN HOUSE AND ITS RESTORATION

SAARINEN BEGAN DESIGNING HIS HOUSE AT CRANBROOK IN 1928, AND HE AND LOJA MOVED INTO THEIR COMPLETED HOME IN FALL 1930. It was built concurrently with the adjoining house where sculptor Carl Milles lived, and the cost to build both was \$140,000—considerably more than the typical cost of \$6,250 for a Detroit-area four-bedroom house of brick and stone. The Saarinen's daughter Pipsan never lived in the house, as she had married architect J. Robert F. Swanson in 1926 and they resided elsewhere in Bloomfield Hills. The Saarinen's son Eero, however, had a designated bedroom where he stayed when on break from studying at Yale University (1931-1934; B.F.A., 1934). Eero's bedroom became a guest room when he married in 1939. After Eliel died in 1950 and Loja moved out in 1951, subsequent presidents of Cranbrook Academy of Art lived in the house and made many changes. Finally, in 1977, Roy Slade became President of the Academy and initiated a process of restoration. The full restoration took place between 1988 and 1994, under the direction of Art Museum Curator and current Director Gregory Wittkopp, and returned the house to its appearance in the mid-1930s after the Saarinen's had added the finishing touches.



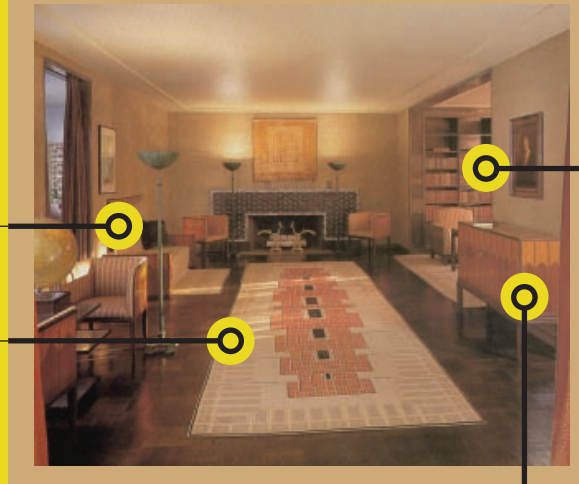
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## THE LIVING ROOM AND BOOK ROOM

THE LIVING ROOM AND BOOK ROOM COMBINE ELEMENTS OF ART DECO DESIGN WITH IDEAS DRAWN FROM THE ARTS AND CRAFTS MOVEMENT AND ULTIMATELY FROM THE SAARINENS' FINNISH HERITAGE. Despite these varied sources, the Saarinen's use of related colors and geometric motifs unifies the design. The spacious proportions and formal layout of the living room are well suited to its use as a reception hall where the Saarinen's hosted parties.

- [ 6 ] The book room is a smaller, cozier space where the Saarinen's and perhaps a guest or two could enjoy the late afternoon sun during their daily coffee break.
- [ 7 ] All of the wooden furniture in these two spaces was handcrafted at Cranbrook by Swedish cabinetmaker Tor Berglund using Eliel's designs, except for the globe stand (designed by the Saarinen's son-in-law J. Robert F. Swanson). Such fine craftsmanship was an ideal of the Arts and Crafts Movement, but the exotic woods are characteristic of Art Deco and include greenheart, African walnut, rosewood and ebony.
- [ 8 ] The rug's pattern and colors echo the exterior brickwork, the chair upholstery, and the rows of books in the book room. It forms an axis leading the eye toward the fireplace and wall hanging, but intentionally is slightly off center, making it seem less static. Like most of the other textiles in the room, it was designed by Loja Saarinen and woven at Studio Loja Saarinen.
- [ 9 ] The sofa is based on a Finnish tradition in which rugs were draped onto the floor so they could be folded up over the sitter's feet and lap for warmth. Here, however, the rug is decorative rather than functional.



## THE STUDIO

THE STUDIO HAS THREE PARTS: THE ALCOVE OFF THE LIVING ROOM, WHICH LOJA SAARINEN DUBBED THE "COZY CORNER"; THE MAIN AREA WHERE THE SAARINENS WORKED AND ENTERTAINED; AND ELIEL'S OFFICE AT THE BACK. Both Loja and Eliel spent much of their time in the studio; all of its spaces thus evoke their professional lives.

- [ 16 ] The Cozy Corner offered a comfortable space where the Saarinen's entertained guests ranging from their grandchildren to Cranbrook Academy of Art students and faculty to architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Alvar Aalto.
- [ 17 ] Originally a piano was located where there is now the small portable bar buffet, designed by son-in-law J. Robert F. Swanson, from which the Saarinen's often served martinis late in the day.
- [ 18 ] The studio is restored in the way that the Saarinen's had it photographed; however, for daily use, the rug was stored away and there were three drafting tables at which Eliel could design architecture and Loja, textiles. When the Saarinen's hosted parties, the drafting tables were removed, creating an impressive reception space that included tubular metal chairs designed by Eero Saarinen for the auditorium of the Kingswood School for girls.
- [ 19 ] This rug, made in Finland in the eighteenth century, is called a ryijy (RYE-a) for the way it is hand-knotted and woven. It is one of several historical ryijy rugs the Saarinen's collected. Most of the rugs that Loja designed, including the ones in the studio, were made using the same ancient technique.
- [ 20 ] Originally the walls displayed Eliel's presentation drawings of buildings he had designed in Finland. The restoration instead includes reproductions of his Cranbrook designs.

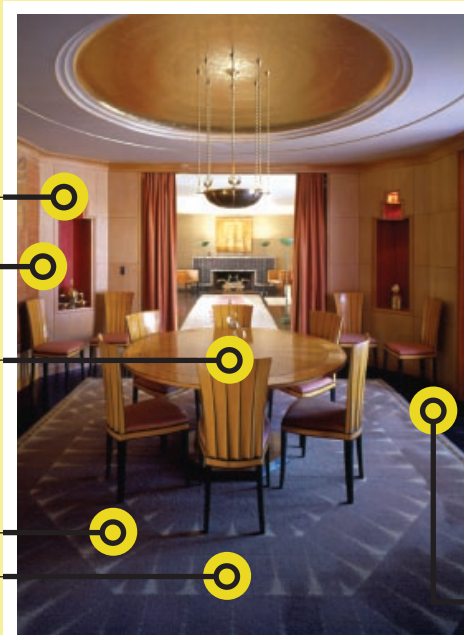


## THE DINING ROOM

ELIEL SAARINEN TOOK INTO ACCOUNT EVERY ASPECT OF THE DINING ROOM DESIGN, CHOOSING RICH, WARM COLORS AND REPEATING SQUARES, OCTAGONS AND CIRCLES TO UNIFY THE DESIGN. The dining room was the perfect space for the elegant luncheons, teas and dinner parties the Saarinen's frequently hosted.

- [ 10 ] The room is actually square, but is made octagonal by the four corner niches. These complement the room with dramatic bursts of a color that the Saarinen's called Chinese red.
- [ 11 ] The rug is square with a pattern of concentric octagons that resembles snowdrifts on the octagonal courtyard pavement.

- [ 12 ] The table has an octagonal base but a circular top to lead the eye upward to the circular light and finally to the gold-leaf-covered dome. Because the table's shape was important to the design of the room, Eliel designed four arch-shaped extension leaves for the perimeter that allow the table to remain circular when expanded, unlike most round tables.
- [ 13 ] The wall hanging, designed and woven by Finnish artist Greta Skogster (1900-1994), depicts birds in a tree, as if to mirror the view through the French doors opposite to the trees beyond the courtyard.
- [ 14 ] French doors make for a seamless transition between indoor and outdoor spaces for entertaining. The dining room is aligned on an axis with the courtyard, but also with the living room.
- [ 15 ] Beyond the swinging door is the butler's pantry containing some of the Saarinen's china and their Frigidaire, proudly made visible to guests when the door swung open. Modern materials were used in the pantry, including Monel metal for the countertops and battleship linoleum for the floors.

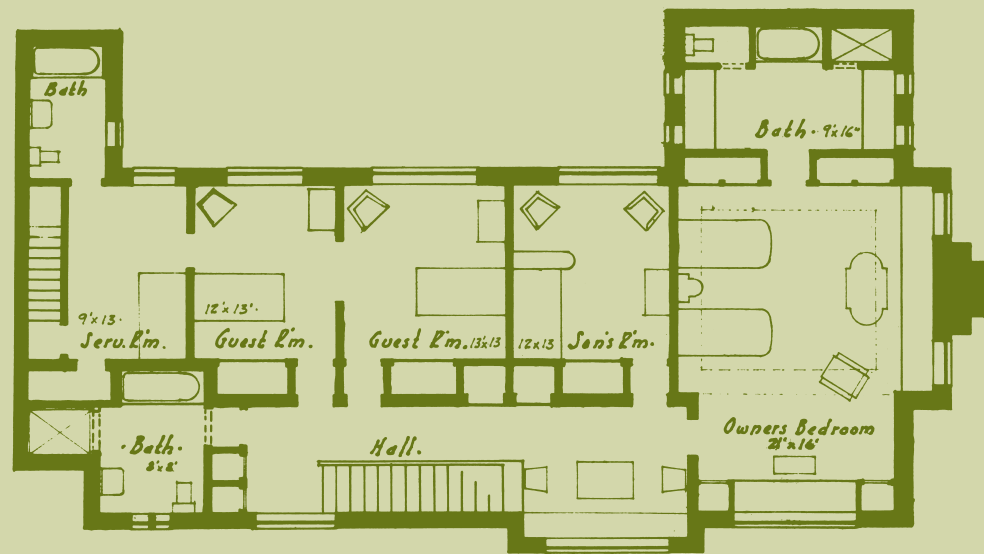


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• SECOND FLOOR PLAN •  
SCALE: 1/8" = 1'-0"

## THE UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

THE SECOND FLOOR OF THE HOUSE INCLUDES THE MASTER BEDROOM AND BATHROOM ALONG WITH FOUR ADDITIONAL ROOMS AND A GUEST BATHROOM AT THE END OF THE HALLWAY. Next to the master bedroom is the room that Eero stayed in when on break from college and before he married in 1939. The other rooms that are not included in the current restoration were used as a guest bedroom, a sewing room, and the housekeeper's bedroom, which was accessed by stairs from the kitchen rather than from the hallway.

[ 21 ] In this alcove Eliel and Loja ate breakfast, brought to them every morning at 7:30 a.m. by the housekeeper.

[ 22 ] All of the doors originally displayed designs by Pipsan Saarinen Swanson. Restorers were unable to determine the exact motifs, so they used ones that Pipsan designed for the Kingswood School for girls, which her father Eliel designed around the same time as this house.



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## THE MASTER BEDROOM AND MASTER BATHROOM

FOR THEIR BEDROOM, THE SAARINENS GAVE THEIR TWENTY-YEAR-OLD SON, EERO, ONE OF HIS FIRST COMMISSIONS, ALLOWING HIM TO DESIGN THE BEDS, NIGHTSTAND AND TABLE, AND THE DRESSING TABLE BENCH, LAMPS AND MIRROR. In these pieces, his talent and distinctive style are already evident and foreshadow his success as an architect and furniture designer.

[ 23 ] With these lamps and mirror, Eero transforms his mother Loja's dressing table into an altar to glamour and elegance. They reveal Eero's understanding of the use of indirect lighting, which Eliel skillfully employed elsewhere in Saarinen House. Scaled for the tabletop, the torchères reflect light onto the ceiling, subtly illuminating the sitter's face.

THE MASTER BATHROOM, DESIGNED BY ELIEL SAARINEN, IS A STUNNING EXAMPLE OF THE 1930S-ERA BELIEF THAT MODERNITY EQUATED "CLEAN," IN TWO SENSES OF THE WORD: "hygienic and sanitary" as well as "visually sleek and free of clutter."

[ 24 ] The bathroom's layout is perfectly symmetrical and detailed with squares and rectangles.

[ 25 ] Surfaces are lined with smooth, easy-to-clean tiles in neutral shades of off-white and gun-metal gray.

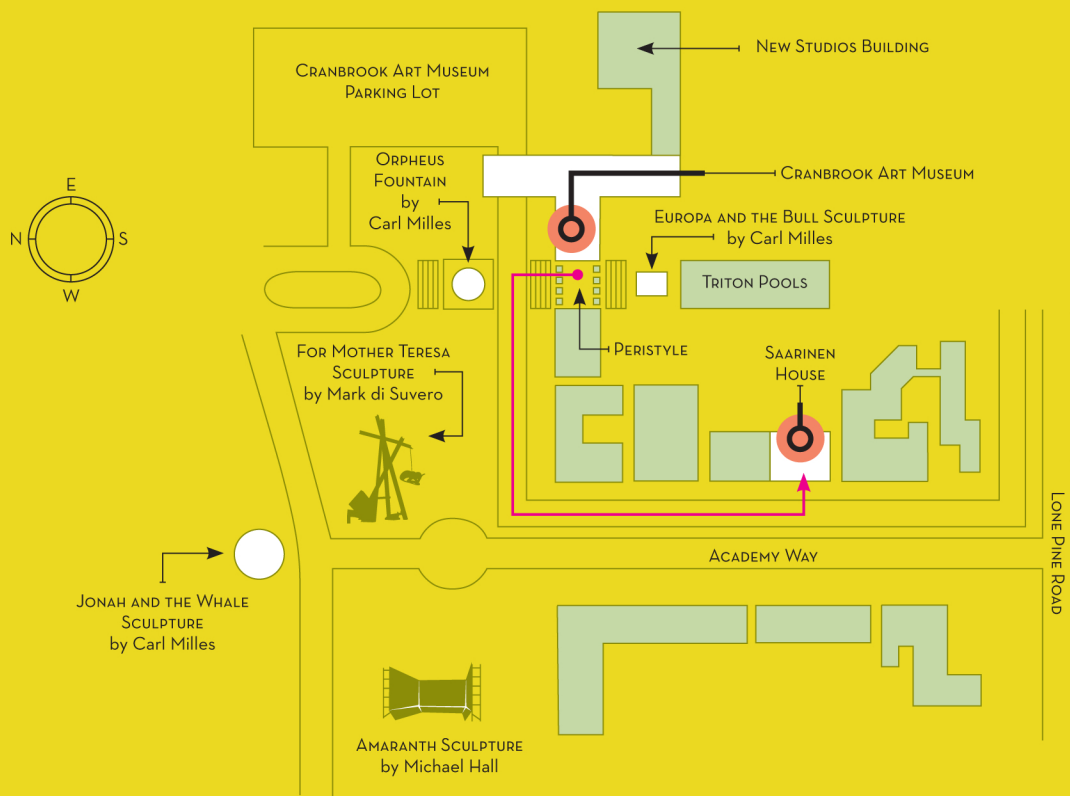
[ 26 ] The sinks are faucetless, which gives them a streamlined appearance. Water comes from an opening near the top of each basin. The countertops are Vitrolite, an opaque glass used as cladding for buildings.



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[ 24 ]



Eliel and Loja Saารinen, early 1940s  
 Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives

Operated by Cranbrook Art Museum, Saารinen House is open for tours from May through October each year. Current information about tours can be found at [www.cranbrook.edu](http://www.cranbrook.edu).

This publication was made possible by a grant from the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. It was written by the 2005-2007 Jeanne and Ralph Graham Collections Fellow, Rebecca Elliot. For a complete history of the house and its restoration, and a catalogue of its furnishings, see *Saารinen House and Garden: A Total Work of Art* (Harry N. Abrams in association with Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, 1995) by Art Museum Director Gregory Wittkopp. Special thanks to Saารinen House docent and grant writer Diane VanderBeke Mager; Mark Coir, Leslie Edwards, and Diane Schmale at the Cranbrook Archives; editors Gregory Wittkopp, Dora Apel and Marsha Gilman; and graphic designer Francheska Guerrero.

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Cranbrook Academy of Art and Cranbrook Art Museum are supported, in part, by the members and fundraising activities of ArtMembers@Cranbrook, and the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs.



CRANBROOK

