

# CRANBROOK COMES BACK

The Cranbrook Academy of Art is once again on the rise and celebrating its 50th anniversary.

BY DARALICE BOLES

The annual trip to New York, occasioned by Designers Saturday, has become one of the rites of passage for design students at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. The contrast between their tranquil campus in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan and glitzy Madison Ave. would be cause enough for comment. But this September's pilgrimage should have special resonance for the twenty-odd travellers and their guides Michael and Katherine McCoy. For this year marks the fifth anniversary of the Cranbrook Academy, and with the celebration of its past comes a recognition of the extraordinary influence the school has exercised on American design.

The students will see little in the showrooms and studios that was not in some way influenced by Cranbrook. But the school has suffered its ups and downs over the years. After a long period of neglect, Eliel Saarinen, who founded the Arts Academy and designed the Cranbrook campus, has been restored at last to his rightful place as a leader of American architecture and design. Saarinen's style gradu-

ally evolved into a kind of classicizing modernism epitomized by the Cranbrook Library and Museum designed in partnership with his son Eero, but the body and the best of his work remain in the proto-modern, Art Deco vein. His followers, however, were to carry Saarinen's concerns for art and craft into the mainstream of modernism: Eero Saarinen, along with students such as Charles and Ray Eames, Florence Knoll, Harry Weese, and Jack Lenor Larsen together formed the fabled first generation of Cranbrook graduates.

## EARLY HISTORY

Even if Cranbrook had not produced such an illustrious cast of characters, the school would retain its idiosyncratic fascination for the student of architecture or of education. The story of its origins incidentally provides convincing testimony to the power of artistic patronage. Publishing magnate George G. Booth, impressed by Eliel Saarinen's entry in the 1922 Chicago Tribune Tower Competition, invited the Finnish architect to design his utopian academic community. For twenty years, Saarinen worked on the Cran-



Above: Chair by Don Cramer.



Above: Chair by John Isotalo.

brook complex, designing the separate boys' and girls' schools, science institute, library and museum that spread over Booth's wooded acres in the Detroit suburb of Bloomfield Hills. The community also included an arts academy whose faculty was comprised of the craftsmen, masons, artists and architects

satisfies Saarinen's criteria. Under the tutelage of Michael and Katherine McCoy, the diverse disciplines of graphic, industrial, furniture, and even interior design are combined in a lucid program of two and three-dimensional projects.

To visit the studio is to observe an artistic community at



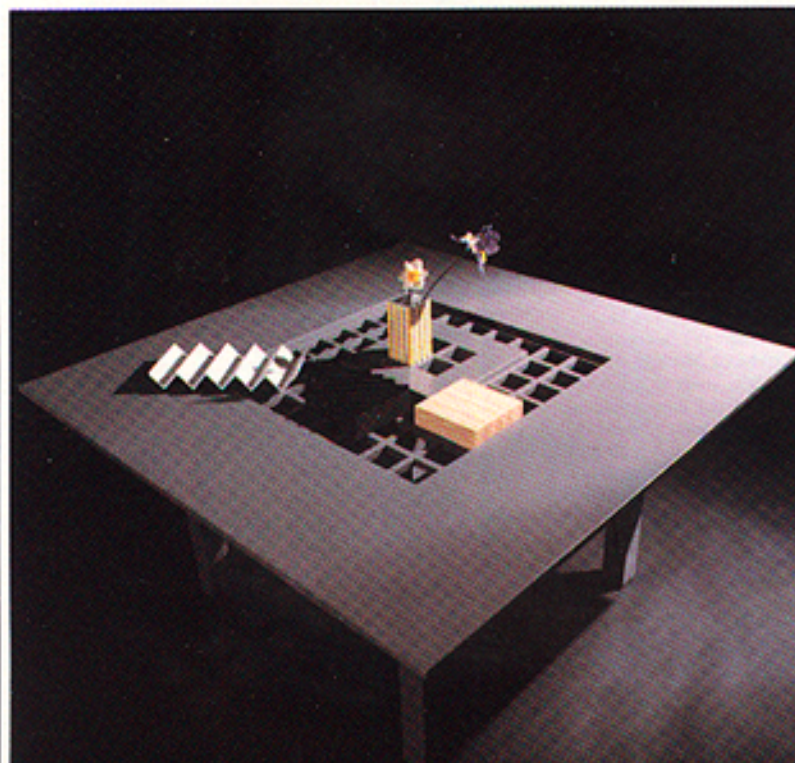
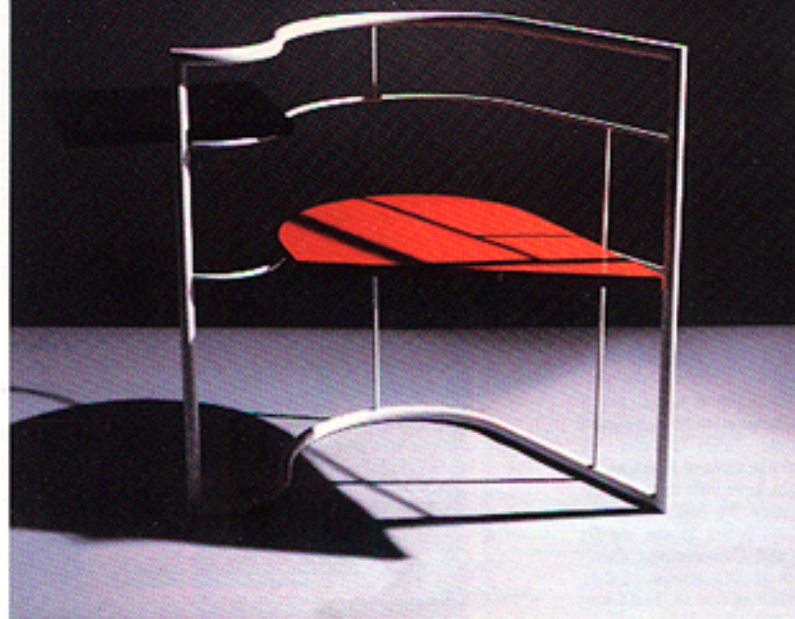
Above: Table with built-in seating designed by Martin Linder.

who collaborated on the Cranbrook projects. Founded not as an academic institution but as a collection of ateliers or studios run by master artists-in-residence, the academy set itself apart immediately from other more academic arts schools.

Saarinen's own philosophy, the foundation upon which he built his school, emphasized the unity of the arts. Just as the Cranbrook campus buildings combined the arts of architecture, sculpture, painting, textile and graphic design into an integrated whole, so too the ideal arts education would provide a synthesis of media and methods. While the school's nine separate art departments continue to be closely allied, it is the Design Department founded in 1939 by Charles Eames that most completely

work where shared concerns and interests are balanced against the distinct identity of artist as individual. Students view their two graduate years at Cranbrook as a type of sabbatical. Many come from positions in the industry as furniture designers, or craftsmen, or industrial designers, and they bring the concerns of their trades to bear upon the studio work. Thus, although the McCoy's give out specific programs for design problems, these instructions are generous enough to allow each artist to choose a direction, transforming the given problem into an instrument for self-analysis. The studio is all-encompassing; there are no typical courses, and all subjects are studied as they relate to the current project. The program is unique among graduate schools.

Below: Katherine and Michael McCoy head Cranbrook's Design Department. Shown here are first and second year projects.



## EDUCATIONAL METHODOLOGY

The freedom implied in the Cranbrook program carries with it the necessity for strong self-motivation and clarity of purpose. True to the principle of artists-in-residence, the McCoy's function not as teachers but rather as advisors, aiding in the process of design development or suggesting new areas of inquiry. They split the studio function along the lines of two- and three-dimensional design, with Katherine McCoy taking the graphic section and Michael assuming responsibility for the remaining three-dimensional design. Both sections, however, employ similar methodologies. Thus a typical graphic design problem might involve the study of vernacular styles, such as an ad in the Yellow Pages or a product label. The object is first analyzed in terms of language



Above: Chair (left) and sculptural cabinet by Angela Wiegand. Below: Table with modular elements by Aura Ostapov.

and content, then evaluated for symbolic, coloristic and compositional intent, and finally recombined into a new design. This process of transformation by which the object is taken apart, analyzed, and re-formed is replicated in the three-dimensional studio. There too a typical problem would involve the analysis and transformation of a given object such as Rietveld's Brein Chair.

Students proceed through the problems at their own pace, and the programs for successive projects are increasingly open to interpretation, culminating at the end of the second year in individual thesis projects. While the work is largely theoretical, a strong relationship between