

Cranbrook: Art, Architecture and a Landscape for Learning

Bloomfield Hills, Michigan

Photographs by Alan Ward 1996

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The Cranbrook campus, established in the early twentieth century on the estate of George C. Booth, integrates art, architecture, and landscape to form a village for learning. Booth, a Canadian immigrant of English ancestry, was a Detroit newspaper publisher who was inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement, which began in Britain in the late nineteenth century. The movement was a reaction to the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, emphasizing a return to handcraftsmanship and beauty in everyday objects. Booth was instrumental in the founding of the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts in 1906.¹

The site was about three-hundred acres of relatively level, former farmland in Bloomfield Hills, about twenty-five miles north of Detroit. Booth's vision was to make an environment where students would learn in a manner consistent with Arts and Crafts education in Britain with artists and artisans teaching in their studio utilizing their own processes and work. Booth met the Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen through his son, who was studying architecture under Saarinen at the University of Michigan. Saarinen prepared the master plan and was responsible for the architectural design of the early buildings at Cranbrook, working from his residence and studio at the heart of Cranbrook from 1927 to 1942. The core of the campus is organized in a grid pattern, centered on Academy Way, a north to south street, that

is the southern entrance to Cranbrook. Academy Way has the feel of a village main street, with the Administration Building, along with studios and residential buildings, including Saarinen's own house, along this spine (1,2). There are several cross axes from Academy Way, including west to the Upper School, and east to the Museum of Art (4,9,19). The axuality in Saarinen's plan extends from the Museum eastward to connect to Booth's house and gardens (30).

Saarinen did not feel compelled to make a central green at Cranbrook, following Jefferson's paradigm for the American campus. Initially, I thought Saarinen was influenced by America's continental grid, laid over two-thirds of the nation, which was especially prominent in the Midwest. There were, however, precedents in Saarinen's homeland. Beginning in the seventeenth century, many Finnish villages were planned following a grid pattern, primarily as a method of fire prevention for wooden buildings.

The expansion of Cranbrook beyond the central village, including the Institute of Science, is connected along curving drives and paths set in a more picturesque landscape of woodlands and lakes. The design of the Institute buildings by Saarinen follows the same grid pattern in the core of the campus, within a more naturalistic landscape (8).

1. *The Arts and Crafts Movement: Detroit and Environs*, Catalogue of the 25th Annual Arts and Crafts Conference, September 27-October 1, 2023

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

To enter Cranbrook is to step into a created environment immersed in an amalgam of the art of architecture, sculpture, and landscape architecture. The buildings, especially the earlier examples, have a scale and expression of hand-crafted work, that could be used as case studies for students in this didactic campus landscape. For example, the design of the brickwork by Saarinen is extraordinarily varied with patterned walls, figurative shapes, barrel vaults, and geometric lines in the paving. The bricks were made nearby, as well as in the Netherlands, in a wide range of shapes, colors, and finishes.² The architecture of the initial phases in brick has classical influences in the scale and proportion of elements in relatively small one and two-story buildings (1-4), however as Cranbrook expanded in subsequent phases, the scale shifts to larger and simpler buildings, including the Museum of Art in 1932, which is a more streamlined form of classicism with broad, planar surfaces of Mankato Kasota limestone, accompanied by a north to south axial landscape of fountains with sculpture (22-31).

Based on Saarinen's recommendation, George Booth brought Swedish sculptor Carl Milles to Cranbrook in 1931, where he served as head of the Department of Sculpture for twenty years. Milles's house and studio were also along Academy Way, adjacent to Saarinen's home. His figurative sculptures and mythical creatures are

positioned throughout the campus. Over eighty pieces, at scales ranging from small bronzes to significant groupings of large figures in the fountain basins at the Museum of Art, are positioned along paths and view corridors (3,5,21-26).

Saarinen established an overall framework of a village, composed of streets, paths, courtyards, and quads, set in the context of woodlands. The landscape is a fundamental component of the plan of the campus; however, it rarely emerges as the focal point in this integrated ensemble of architecture, sculpture, and the site. Even when the landscape design becomes prominent, for example, north and south of the Museum of Art with large-scale fountains framed by trees, the landscape makes the setting for an array of figurative sculptural pieces by Milles, which occupies the foreground of one's perception (22). The plan with multiple axes, the principal organizing feature of the master plan, are linear landscapes composed of paths, trees, and planting to define these connective spaces. Mature horse-chestnut trees flank the Museum of Art fountain with the sculptural pieces by Carl Milles, and there were originally elms along Academy Way. The shared vision of George Booth, Eliel Saarinen, along with other artists and designers, was to create a village for learning that integrated the arts; the landscape is an integral part of the experience of this idealized educational environment.

2. "The Bricks of Cranbrook," Tour Synopsis by Kevin Adkinson, Curator, Cranbrook Center for Collections and Research, 2025

List of Photographs

1. Administration Building courtyard on Academy Way at south entrance, initial Art Academy building designed by Booth Swanson
2. Original arts and crafts studio on Academy Way, first building designed by Eliel Saarinen at Cranbrook 1928-29
3. Maja Grotell Court in repurposed arts and crafts studio buildings, with Carl Milles sculpture beyond barrel vault
4. Path from Academy Way leading to Cranbrook Art Museum with stone columns, adjacent to Milles's main studio on left
5. Jonah Fountain at north terminus of Academy Way
6. Fountain in woodlands, Booth's house gardens
7. Greek Theatre, sculpture by Marshall Fredericks
8. Institute of Science, established in 1930, designed by Saarinen
9. Path and steps to Upper School quadrangle
10. Path to engraved arch to Upper School quadrangle
11. View through arch to Dining Hall and Hoey Hall observation tower, academic building
12. View through triple arches to Monreale Fountain, marble reproduction of historic fountain
13. View of east façade of Dining Hall
14. View north of residence hall in Upper School Campus
15. Gazebo, at Upper School
16. View north in Upper School quadrangle
17. Dormitories in Upper School
18. Passage with brick steps
19. Milles's studio on right and path to Cranbrook Museum of Art, Women's Dorm Two on the left
20. View north of Triton Pools, completed ca. 1934
21. Sculptural pieces by Milles in Triton Pool
22. View north of sculptural pieces in Triton Pool
23. View south to Triton Pools from within the peristyle
24. View north to Orpheus Fountain from within the peristyle
25. Orpheus Fountain by Milles, 1937
26. View south of Orpheus Fountain and Art Museum peristyle
27. View south over lawn, to Orpheus Fountain, and Art Museum
28. Cranbrook Art Museum and Library, completed 1942
29. View east from Art Museum to Booth's house and gardens
30. View west of steps to Art Museum and Library





























































Notes

Selected Publication of the Photographs:

Ward, Alan, *American Designed Landscapes: A Photographic Interpretation*, 1998

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