

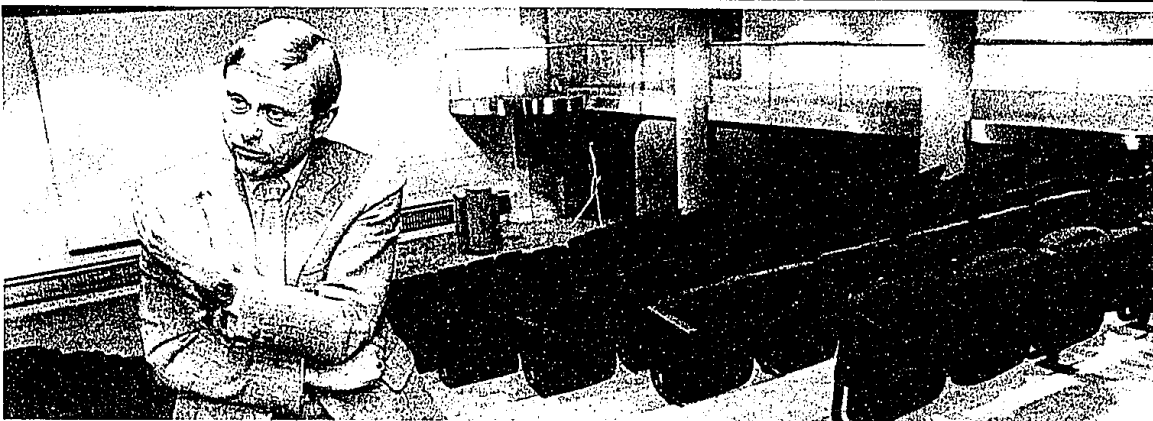
Creative Living

Co Abatt editor/644-1100



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STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

Robert Saarinen Swanson enjoys visiting the Albert and Peggy de Salle Auditorium he designed for Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum. De Salle gave \$1,350,000 for its construction before she died early last year.

Robert Saarinen Swanson

Following the family in innovative design

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

ROBERT SAARINEN Swanson was certainly the logical choice of architect for the new Albert and Peggy de Salle Auditorium at Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum. His grandfather, Eliel Saarinen, was the original architect for the Cranbrook Educational Community.

But, even without his many close ties to Cranbrook, Swanson would have been a natural choice.

It was his idea to put the auditorium underground, an extension of the lower level of the museum. And that, it turns out now that it is completed and in constant use, was a brilliant one. Only one exterior service stairway near the plaza in front of the museum and a couple of unobtrusive mechanical connections give any indication of its existence.

"The response to the auditorium has been very exciting for me. It made the whole complex work. People are clamoring to use it, saying that finally there is a place like this for them to work and teach," Swanson said, standing at the back of the new facility which seats 200 with room for more on a side balcony.

BUT, THE AUDITORIUM, with its audio and video equipment and excellent acoustics has had much greater impact than its singular, important presence.

It has had a strong, positive effect on the floor plan of the museum itself.

The space at one end of a main floor gallery, formerly used as an auditorium, has been returned to its original function. That now-larger, renovated gallery and the one adjacent to it will house changing exhibitions and the large, front main-floor gallery has become the permanent home of the Cranbrook collection.

To walk through the heavy bronze front doors of the museum and immediately see the art and designs of

Cranbrook people who are recognized worldwide is an exhilarating experience. This is what, in Swanson's modest choice of words, makes it all "work."

The lower-level galleries too have been improved. The Peggy and Albert de Salle Gallery which leads to the auditorium is now a handsome, carpeted area leading into the auditorium and this in turn gives more and better display space in the other lower galleries.

The location of collections, the transition from gallery to gallery and the traffic flow are, like the auditorium, both natural and logical.

Swanson has no quarrel with his architectural destiny. He remembers only a brief point in his life when he even considered another career.

"It was difficult to think of anything else," he said with a smile in his office on Lone Pine, less than a mile from the Cranbrook complex. "When I was a student at Cranbrook (boys school) I got very interested in chemistry — I remember I had an excellent chemistry teacher, but that was just a fleeting thing."

"When I was very young, my grandmother (Loja Saarinen, weaver who established the weaving studios at the Academy) and my grandfather (Eliel Saarinen) would spend every summer at their home (and studio), Iivittar, outside of Helsinki."

HE AND HIS MOTHER, Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, went with them three times when he was a youngster, the first when he was three months old. When he was there at age nine, he remembers meeting the great Finnish composer, Sibelius, and "falling madly in love" with a 20-year old Cranbrook design student, Florence Schust, whom the Saarinens invited to spend the summer with them. Later, under her married name, Florence Knoll, she achieved wide recognition as a designer.

As a high school and college student, Swanson worked as a draftsman and model maker in the family business, Saarinen, Swanson & Saarinen Architects of Bloomfield Hills.

The Saarinens of this firm were his grandfather and

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his uncle, Eero, and the Swanson was his father, J. Robert F. Swanson, architect who was the first to envision a branch of Michigan State University on the site of the Matilda Dodge Wilson estate in Rochester. He then convinced her to donate the land for that purpose.

After completing his bachelor's degree in architecture at University of Michigan and his masters in architecture at MIT, Robert Swanson returned to the family firm which had become Swanson Associates Inc. as project architect and later president.

While he and his younger brother, Ronald, who handles other family businesses, share the offices in a charming, old renovated building at Woodward and Lone Pine, Swanson, the architect, is now by himself.

"I enjoy it," he said, "I am one of these architects who likes to keep my hand on the pencil and get out in the field and see things being built. I collaborate with another firm — they do the construction."

"I'm very conservative as a designer, I'm still a modernist, but I think the post-modern will pass by the way side pretty soon. I like natural. I like brick."

He names the Kresge Library on the Oakland University campus "as one of the better ones I've designed," particularly since it was done as a "bare bones" project at \$30 a square foot in 1981. He calls the L'Arbre Croche Development (private homes) at Harbor Springs, which he has been doing since 1989, "one of my great joys."

HE HAS DONE many schools over the years including Andover High School and buildings on the Eastern Michigan University of Michigan and Northern Michigan campuses.

He designed the additions of the Birmingham Athletic Club and the Wabash Country Club and was also the original architect for the latter. He can see several office buildings he designed on North Woodward from the driveway of his office on Lone Pine.

Like many creative people, the most exciting project of all is the one just ahead. In Swanson's case, this is the new studios building for Cranbrook Academy of Art. He and George Zonars, architect, are collaborating on this building, slated to be constructed on a wooded site southeast of the art museum.

The family architectural heritage may stretch to the fourth generation. Swanson and his wife, Jan, a social worker in private practice, have two sons, Robert and Peter, and a daughter, Karen Pipsan. Both sons are businessmen, but Karen, an interior designer, is studying architecture and working for an architectural firm in Chicago.

Her father says with a note of pride in his voice, "She'll probably be a pretty good architect."

Robert and Jan Swanson like lots of outdoor sports — sailing, skiing, fishing, hunting and wind surfing. His enthusiasm for life carries over into his work.

His step is light as he walks the Cranbrook campus. For while three-generations of tradition and a strong commitment to excellence rest on his shoulders, he brings a fresh, invigorating viewpoint to his work.

Mid-life crisis resolved — art it is

By Corinne Abatt
staff writer

When Hal Larsen lived in Michigan, he used to think all those brilliant colors in paintings by artists of the Southwest were a little hokey.

Now, after living and painting in Santa Fe, N.M., for seven years, his landscapes are filled with tangerine and hot red skies and mountains and plains dappled with purple, magenta and blue.

Larsen and his wife, Fran, also a painter, flew in from their adobe home in the historic zone of Santa Fe Friday for the opening of his show at Rubiner Gallery of West Bloomfield. It was the first time she's been back and the first time he's been here in winter for seven years. Both called it "cultural shock."

Larsen said, "My roots are here, I grew up in Michigan, but I've been pulled by the sun, so my branches are there," he smiled, a little surprised at his romantic figure of speech.

HIS WIFE remembers that he woke up one morning in their big house in South Haven and said simply, "I'm gonna sell the greenhouse." She said that within a year they sold the business (they were orchid growers), put their house on the market, decided to settle near Santa Fe and bought land in the mountains for a house.

"When I sold the business," he said, "I told my wife that I would either pump gas or paint. My professional tenure is 10 years. I'm a midlife crisis story."

He flashes a broad smile, his blue eyes are clear and bright against what is now a permanent tan. "I've been painting most of my life. Some of my paintings are in museums. My wife is a painter and for most of our married life our friends have been artists."

He said they decided to sell the house "because an artist can live any place. An artist goes where he can get the greatest visual support. So, we looked around the country for a place to suit our needs."

SANTA FE, 60,000 population, possibly the third largest art market in the country after New York and Los Angeles, home for seven museums, 200 galleries and many times that number of artists, was the choice primarily because of the light.

It was the light that drew John Marin and Edward Hopper and later Georgia O'Keeffe and many of America's finest. Larsen said most of his fellow artists name light first in their reasons for moving to New Mexico.

"Those colors in the paintings (by Southwest artists) aren't faked. They are that way. There's a veil of water in

the atmosphere. My palette has undergone an enormous change. I used to stay safely in earth tones. In my initial work I felt I had to demonstrate I could draw to my artist friends and to people who knew me as a businessman."

"I personally thought most landscape paintings were a bit trite, but when I moved to New Mexico the landscapes are of such abstract nature and their color potential is so great (at different times of the day), so all of my work is landscapes and the non-objective work is landscape based."

He said he likes to work large because it is appropriate for his subject. His paintings are watercolor and mixed media, using collage, silver and gold leaf and oil glazing. "I use everything appropriate to the painting."

He has done what he hoped to do — avoided triteness. His paintings have a natural architectural beauty. From his interest in abstract, he brings the ability to explore the essence of magnificent landscapes without seeming to leave out anything important. His work celebrates the beauty of this silent, sculptural land.

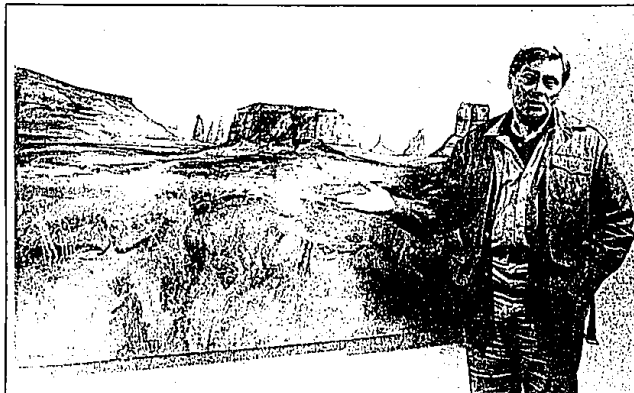
Since his career began in earnest a decade ago, Larsen has been juried into and won awards in regional shows from California, New Mexico and Colorado to Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Florida, Alabama, Wis-

consin and Virginia.

The show at Rubiner Gallery con-

tinues through the month. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday,

until 5 p.m. Saturday, 7001 Orchard Lake, West Bloomfield.



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

Hal Larsen talks about his work as he stands beside his painting, "Land of the Prophets." He writes of his work, "These paintings are not portraits of a place. They are everywhere

— and nowhere. They are my land, my colors, my dreams. I travel the Southwest lands constantly, photographing and absorbing. What emerges from the paints is me."