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Korab's dilemma—architecture or photography

By Ellen E. Mason
special writer

BALTHAZAR KORAB is known among architects as one of the best architectural photographers in the world," according to Birmingham architect John Jickling.

Jickling, who was recently named 1983 Gold Medalist by the Detroit chapter of the American Institute of Architects and whose designs include the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library at the University of Michigan, speaks glowingly of Korab's work.

"Korab makes even the ordinary look extraordinary," Jickling said.

"That's really a double edged sword, isn't it?" Korab mused.

Korab, who lives in Troy, has had his photographs published in newspapers, books and magazines worldwide, including Life, National Geographic, Vogue, Horizon, Saturday Review and the AIA Journal.

Currently, Korab's photographs are part of the Detroit Institute of Arts exhibit "Design in America: The Cranbrook Vision 1925-1950."

"It was really an after-thought," Korab said. "The exhibit cuts off brutally at 1950. Something that didn't fit the image."

So Roy Slade, president of the Cranbrook Academy of Art, asked Korab to put together a side presentation to travel with the exhibit to New York, London, Paris and Helsinki.

"There are some vintage Cranbrook photographs taken when the shrubs were this small," Korab said, indicating an inch height with his index finger and thumb.

"It's almost like going there. You get the feeling of Cranbrook. It's a tactile show," he added.

"WHENEVER I was in a creative itch, I was running to Cranbrook," the Hungarian-born photographer said. "It's truly unique in the world. The slide presentation was really a labor of love."

"It's so much more gratifying to photograph something that's been there for 50 years or so instead of doing the routine — photographing something when you can still smell the paint and the trees are still twigs."

"Cranbrook has the patina of years," he said.

Korab studied architecture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. He worked with Le Corbusier, one of the giants of modern architecture, before coming to the United States.

In 1955, he became a designer for Eero Saarinen, son of Eliel Saarinen, the designer of Cranbrook Educational Community.

Korab resigned his position with the younger Saarinen twice. Both times he entered a major design competition including a competition to design the Sydney Opera House in Australia. His design came in fourth.

"They would have saved themselves an awful lot of headaches if they had picked my design," he said. "It took 10 years to build. They had to establish a national lottery to pay for it. And the architect was fired. It was a very painful process."

He smiled and joked as he explained how he went from architect to photographer of architecture.

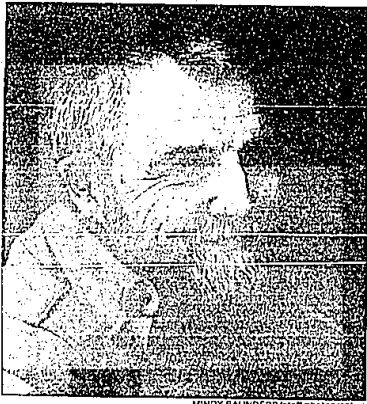
"I didn't have the patience to go into architecture little by little," he said.

"I wanted a major project. To do that you needed a commission. I felt I had to win a competition."

"After the Sydney competition, I returned to Saarinen with a raise of 75 cents an hour."

"One of the most frustrating experiences I had working with Eero was when I had to design a fireplace for the Irwin Miller house that was already completed. That was the only private residence he ever did."

"But Eero wasn't satisfied with the fireplace, and



MINDY DAUNDERS/staff photographer

'He (Eero Saarinen) drew a picture for me that I really ought to frame some day. It was of a tree with two branches. He cut off one of the branches and said that I would eventually neglect either architecture or photography. He was right.'

— Balthazar Korab

he couldn't just abandon the project. He felt a sense of responsibility to it.

"I spent three months fiddling with that fireplace," Korab said.

But it was with Saarinen that Korab's photographic talents were discovered when he started photographing Saarinen's building models.

"It was most useful to have an architecturally educated photographer in the design process," he commented.

"Through the principles of photographing models, I developed a very special technique that's still very helpful to me."

HE SAID that contrary to what many people believe, Saarinen did not encourage him to become a photographer.

"He drew a picture for me that I really ought to frame someday," Korab said. "It was of a tree with two branches. He cut off one of the branches and said that I would eventually neglect either architecture or photography — and he was right."

Today Korab's photographic assignments take him to places as diverse as Grosse Pointe and Moscow. But the place to which he keeps returning is Tuscany, Italy.

"There, near Orvieto, he owns a house which was built sometime prior to 1500."

"We don't really know when it was built," he said, "but we know there was an earthquake in 1560 and the house sits on a cliff and there's the imprint of another house on the facade of ours."

"The house must have been in good shape then. But that's the only way we can date it."

Korab hopes to renovate the house, by himself,

from plumbing to roof when he has some time. The house includes five caves which were once used for storing animals and olive oil. He plans to convert these to family living areas.

"As an architect I have an interest in the man-made character of landscape," he explained. "In Tuscany, every stone, every shovelful of dirt has been turned over."

Fate placed Korab in Tuscany in November 1966 during the Florence flood.

He was near the Uffizi when the Arno River raged over its banks. His photographs document the Ghiberti "doors of Paradise" being removed to save them from destruction. And he photographed an almost surrealistic mannequin, mud splattered and torn, in front of the Duomo.

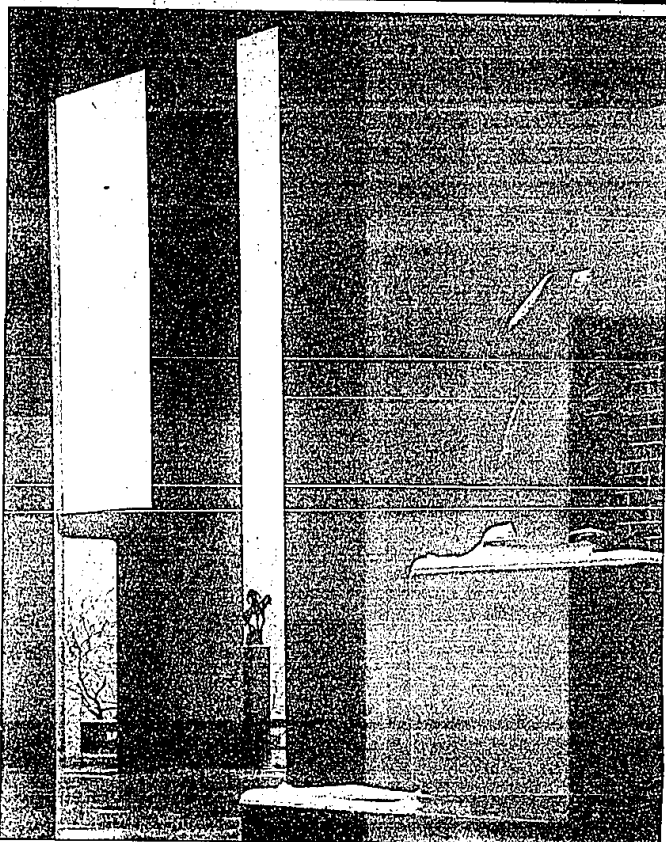
"I REALLY botched the assignment," he said. "I only had five rolls of film with me, they were all black and white, and two got wet in the flood."

He seems to be the only one who thinks he "botched it" though. Those three rolls of photographs have been printed in books and magazines including Life and Time.

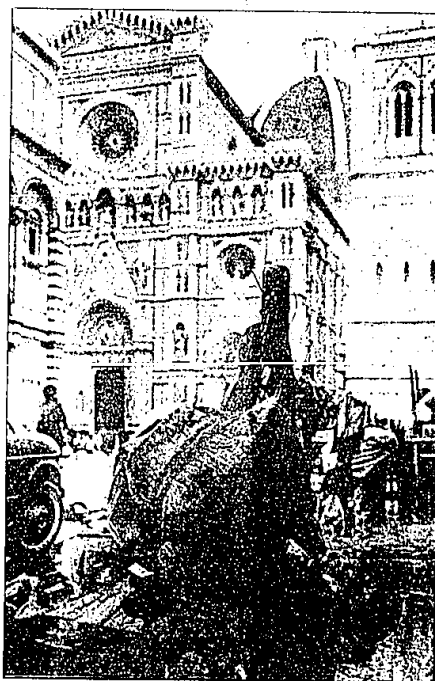
"When he takes a photograph, he seems to conjure up the skies," Jickling marveled. "Look at his skies. His skies are incredible."

Korab's slide presentation on Cranbrook can be seen at the Detroit Institute of Arts exhibit from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. now until Feb. 19, Tuesday-Sunday.

He will lecture on "The Magic of the Tuscan Hills," Monday, Feb. 6, as part of a Cranbrook P.M. series on Italy. For more information, call 645-3633.



Balthazar Korab's photographs of Cranbrook illustrate his love and appreciation of the place which he calls "truly unique in the world."



Balthazar Korab's photo of the mud-splattered manikin during the 1966 flood in Florence, Italy became world famous as a symbol of the destruction of that historic city.

At far right, Balthazar Korab presents a view of Carl Milles' "Orpheus Fountain" at Cranbrook with a different feeling than most visitors got on a bright, sunny day. At immediate right is Korab's photograph of the countryside of the Tuscany region of central Italy.

