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Examining Mid-Century Decorative Arts: Pipsan Saarinen Swanson's Printed Textiles for the Saarinen Swanson Group

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In 1923 Pipsan Saarinen Swanson (1905-1979) moved with her family from their native Finland to the United States and soon settled in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan near the newly established artistic and educational community of Cranbrook. The Saarinens' European home, Hvitträsk, was a cultural center in Finland—filled with beautifully handcrafted furnishings, frequented by noted artists and musicians, and designed by Pipsan's father, the illustrious Finnish-American architect, Eliel Saarinen. At Cranbrook, Eliel created distinctive modern structures for the schools, art academy, and faculty residences. The Saarinen family collaborated on the interiors of these buildings—Loja (Pipsan's mother) designed rugs, carpets, and upholstery fabrics that were hand-woven on campus, while Pipsan and her brother, architect and designer Eero Saarinen, contributed decorative ceiling and wall treatments and furniture designs. Through careful consideration of how each element would relate to its surrounding furnishings, architecture, and natural setting, the Saarinens created an environment at Cranbrook where art was integrated with daily life.

Pipsan's unique artistic heritage manifest itself in her varied and successful career as a designer. She not only explored many areas of design, including fashion, glass, metalwork, furniture, and textiles, but she also considered how her designs would relate to their settings, and as an interior designer, created many environments in which they were used. One facet of Pipsan's career which clearly illustrates her adherence to a total design concept is the set of printed fabrics she created for the Saarinen Swanson Group, a coordinated line of affordable modern home furnishings introduced in 1947. [Figures 1 and 2.] Approaching these textiles from the perspective of a decorative arts historian provides an opportunity to examine how they worked within the full home furnishings line, met the needs of postwar consumers, and embodied ideas inherent in Cranbrook.

In 1939, Pipsan, her architect husband J. Robert F. Swanson, and Eliel introduced the Flexible Home Arrangements line. This consisted of thirty-two pieces of natural birch furniture with simple, clean lines and an emphasis on versatility. Because the pieces were light-weight and of related proportions, they could be arranged to accommodate any size room. Pipsan later explained that she and her husband developed the furniture to meet a need—in trying to furnish the modern buildings that J. Robert F. Swanson designed, they discovered a lack of affordable modern furniture so they created their own.¹

Pipsan and her husband also faced the difficulty of finding appropriate modern home furnishing accessories for their projects, but it was not until after World War II that they were able to introduce the Saarinen Swanson Group. This new collection incorporated the Flexible Home Arrangements line and added twenty-two pieces of furniture as well as an assortment of accessories. For the Saarinen Swanson Group, Pipsan and her husband worked with four artists closely related to Cranbrook: Marianne Strengell, who designed the woven textiles; Lydia Winston, who was responsible for ceramic dishes and vases; Benjamin Baldwin, who created lighting fixture designs; and Charles Dusenbury, who made small sculptures. J. Robert F. Swanson designed metal

fireplace tools and worked with his wife on the additional furniture designs. Pipsan also designed metal items, lamps, a variety of glass objects, and printed textiles. As with the Saarinen family collaborations at Cranbrook, the Saarinen Swanson Group artists created elements that interrelated. While the earlier Cranbrook projects (c. 1925-1932) focused on individual objects for a specific location, the Saarinen Swanson Group sought to make good modern design available to a wide market. By working with major manufacturers and displaying their products in both museums and department stores, the Saarinen Swanson Group artists presented a modern line of furnishings and accessories that was both well designed and affordable.

The Saarinen Swanson Group display at the Grand Rapids showroom of the Johnson Furniture Company (manufacturers of the Saarinen Swanson Group furniture) presented a variety of rooms illustrating the versatility of the line by utilizing pieces differently from room to room. The varying range of room sizes and formality further emphasized the adaptability of the line. Through the Johnson Furniture Company's display, Pipsan illustrated her beliefs that rooms should not overpower the people living in them. *House and Garden* described the Saarinen Swanson Group arrangements as "backgrounds for living, not stage settings."² Pipsan achieved this by using limited patterns, usually only one, per room. As illustrated in Figure 3, she used her printed fabrics, in this case *Curliques*, to create the splash of pattern and color.

Pipsan designed seven patterns for the Saarinen Swanson Group: *Caprice*, *Dress Parade*, *Mardigras*, *Curliques*, *Low Tide*, *Vibrations*, and *Purists Choice*, all manufactured as hand silk-screened prints on a linen-type weave in cotton, rayon, and mohair by Goodall Fabrics of New York. These light-hearted, abstract repeated patterns represented the modern style. Though, like the Saarinen Swanson Group furniture, they were a conservative version of modern addressed to a middle to upper middle range audience and intended to be livable items rather than high design pieces. In 1947 the American Institute of Decorators gave Pipsan an award for her Goodall printed fabrics, indicating peer approval of her designs.³

The Saarinen Swanson Group textiles were printed in a special palette of colors devised by Pipsan and described as "fifteen shades with a fresh outlook on life."⁴ *House and Garden* noted that while there were several "exciting hues," emphasis was placed on "subtle combinations rather than sharp contrasts," in keeping with the idea that the Saarinen Swanson Group should create backgrounds for living.⁵

In addition to Pipsan's personal design background, the Saarinen Swanson Group printed textiles also reflect aspects of postwar American design. Though World War II ended in 1945, the magazine *Interiors* described 1947 (the year the Saarinen Swanson Group was introduced) as the first postwar year as far as furnishing fabrics were concerned because it was the first time that a reasonable supply of materials were available and that new designs were reaching the market.⁶ The method of production, silk-screen printing, also reflected a postwar shift. Prior to the war, most printed textiles were printed with engraved metal rollers, many of which were melted down for war use. After the war, it was more cost efficient to develop silk screens rather than new rollers. Silk screens could be changed easily and inexpensively, allowing textile manufacturers to keep pace with quickly changing fashions.⁷ By utilizing new printing techniques, Pipsan's textiles represent "modern" not only in their design, but also in their manufacture.

In 1948, Pipsan and her husband redesigned the Birmingham National Bank in Birmingham, Michigan, furnishing the interior with Saarinen Swanson Group items. Figure 4 illustrates the Directors' Room, with Pipsan's textile *Low Tide* serving as the room's single patterned element. Filling the room are simple chairs and lighting fixtures from the Saarinen Swanson Group. The designs created a modern atmosphere, but the understated arrangement maintained a sense that the space was intended for use. In the Swansons' new interior for the bank, modern design was subtly integrated into the daily activities. Figures 5 and 6 present the original classical exterior and proposed modern exterior for the building, illustrating the Swansons' goal of creating a total new environment.

Because Pipsan Saarinen Swanson's printed textile designs for the Saarinen Swanson Group were conceived as part of a larger scheme, they should be approached not as isolated designs but as part of the larger contexts of the Saarinen Swanson Group, Pipsan's design background, and modern American design of the postwar years. Examining Pipsan's textiles from the perspective of a decorative arts historian reveals how they closely relate to her unique background while embodying the styles and technology of their own time period. *House and Garden* noted that while the Saarinen Swanson Group was not directly a Cranbrook project, that it reflected "the Cranbrook principle that architects, art and interior design are mutually integrated parts of living."⁸ Like her mother's hand-woven textiles for Cranbrook, Pipsan's silk-screen printed Saarinen Swanson Group fabrics were designed to relate to their surrounding furnishings, architectural setting, and cultural environment.

¹ Letter from Pipsan Saarinen Swanson to Ann Stacy, Executive Director, Michigan Society of Architects, 29 July 1969. J. Robert F. Swanson and Pipsan Saarinen Swanson papers. Cranbrook Archives.

² "Art, Architecture and Decoration Merge Ideally in Saarinen-Swanson Modern," *House and Garden* (October 1947), 152.

³ Christian T. Fedderson, *Scandinavians in Michigan, Vol. 1* (Romeo, Michigan, 1968), 89.

⁴ General Session (Possibly Johnson Furniture Company), Evening May 5, 1947. J. Robert F. Swanson and Pipsan Saarinen Swanson papers. Cranbrook Archives. [The fifteen colors were: lacquer, chalk, yellow, lime, olive, sapphire, pumpkin, natural, beige, turquoise, brown, cerise, gray, caribbean, and chartreuse.]

⁵ "Art, Architecture and Decoration," 152.

⁶ "The Good Word in Fabrics," *Interiors* (November 1947), 101.

⁷ Mary Schoeser, *Fabrics and Wallpaper: Twentieth-Century Design* (New York, 1986), 79 and Paul T. Frankl, *American Textiles* (London, 1954), 10.

⁸ Art, Architecture and Decoration," 152.



Figure 1. Pipsan Saarinen Swanson with *Curliques* and *Mardigras*, 1947. Courtesy of Ronald Saarinen Swanson.

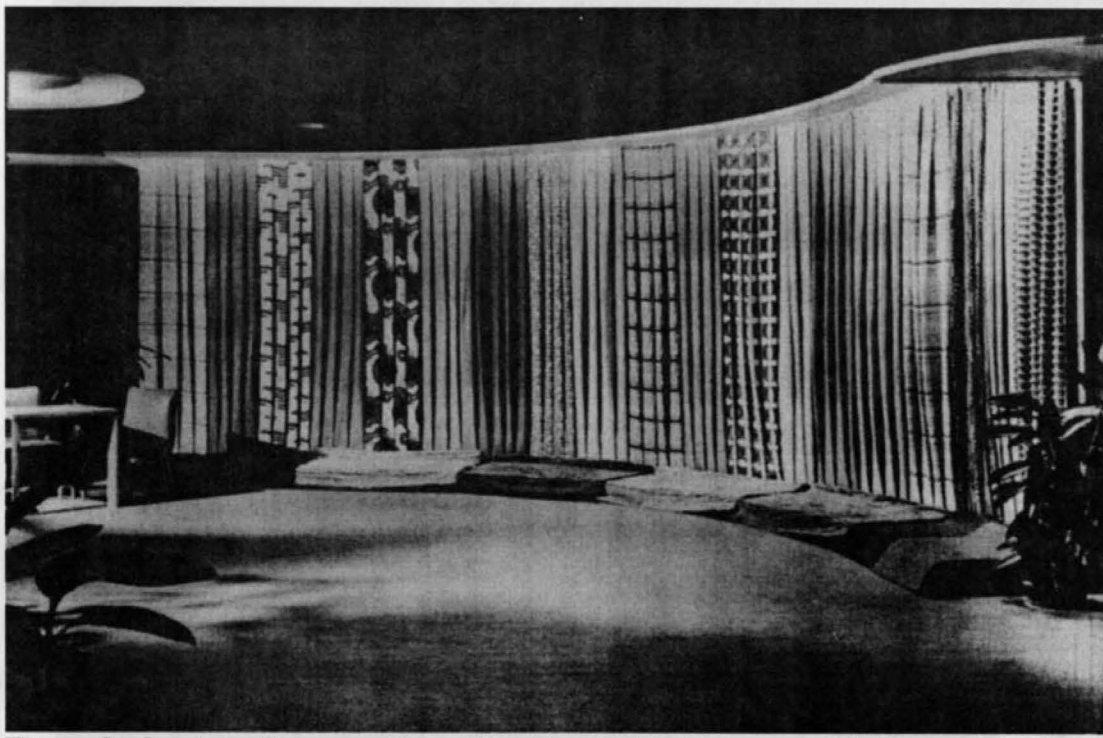


Figure 2. Saarinen Swanson Group Textiles, 1947. Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives



Saarinen Swanson Group Installation with *Curlicues*, 1947. Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives.

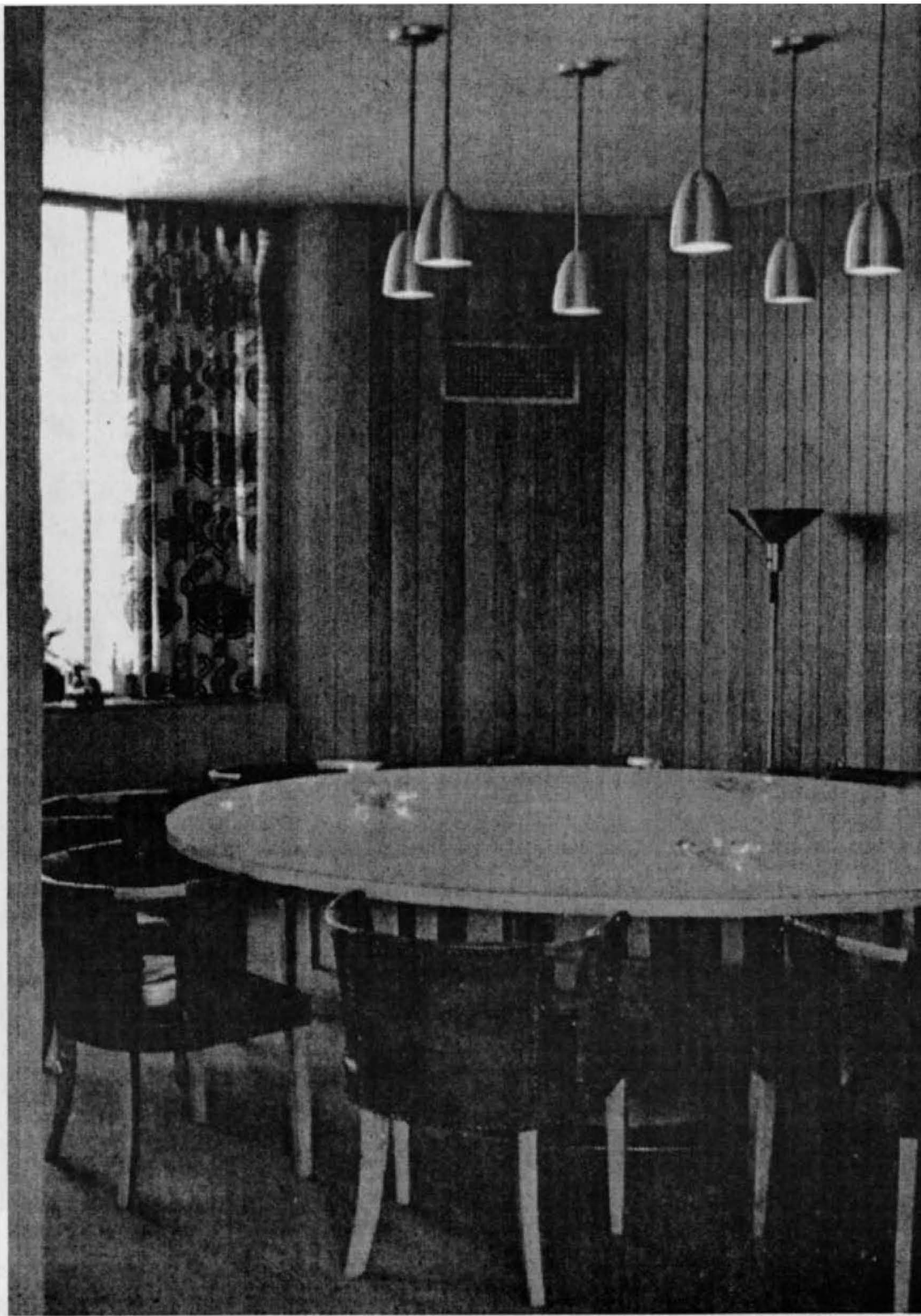


Figure 4. Directors' Room, Birmingham National Bank with *Low Tide*, 1948. Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives.



Figure 5. Birmingham National Bank Exterior, 1948. Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives.



Birmingham National Bank Proposed Exterior, 1948. Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives.