J. Robert F. Swanson (1900-1981)  
and  
Pipsan Saarinen Swanson (1905-1979)  

Papers, 1900-1983  
11.5 linear ft.

Acquisition Number: 1990-01

Acquisition: This collection was a gift to the Cranbrook Archives by Robert Saarinen Swanson and Ronald Saarinen Swanson on September 18, 1990, with several additions thereafter.

Access: Access to the collection is unrestricted.

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Photographs: Boxes 10 through 16

Index: See end of finding aid.

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History

J.[ons] Robert F.[erdinand] Swanson (Bob) was born on June 14, 1900 in Menominee, Michigan to Swan Swanson, a lumberjack, and Anna Nordquist, both of whom were natives of Sweden. The Swanson family moved from northern Michigan to Grand Rapids, and later to Adrian, MI, where Bob graduated from high school.

Eva Lisa Saarinen (Pipsan) was born in Kirkkonummi, Finland on March 31, 1905. Pipsan was the daughter of Eliel Saarinen, an internationally distinguished architect, and Loja Gesellius, an accomplished sculptor, weaver, fabric and textile designer. Pipsan attended the Atheneum Art School and the University of Helsinki where she studied weaving, ceramics, and fabric design.

Bob was a student of architecture at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor when he met Pipsan through her father, who was a guest faculty member. Bob also met and became a close friend of Henry (Harry) Scripps Booth. In 1924, after graduating, Bob and Harry began work at Cranbrook and created the architectural firm of Swanson and Booth. The firm for many years also included Eliel and his son Eero.

Bob broke away to establish his own firm of Swanson Associates, and in 1933, moved the firm to the Guardian Building in downtown Detroit. It was at this time that Pipsan joined Bob as interior designer. Eliel was a partner for a number of years as the company developed. Pipsan became a partner in 1944. Notably, theirs became the first architectural firm that included interiors as part of the organization.

In 1935, the firm moved to the Wabeek Building in Birmingham, and in 1946 relocated to the old Circle School building on Long Lake Road near Woodward Ave. in Bloomfield Hills. The firm remained on this site through several building expansions.

The Swansons, married in 1926, were lifelong design partners, and their work encompassed exteriors and interiors of many types: residences, schools, universities, churches, airports, banks and government, industrial, and commercial developments. They traveled extensively and raised two sons, Robert Saarinen Swanson and Ronald Saarinen Swanson. Pipsan passed away on October 23, 1979; Bob on March 13, 1981.

Scope and Content of Collection

This collection is a portion of a larger set of documents pertaining to the Saarinen family and donated to the Cranbrook Archives by Robert Saarinen Swanson and Ronald Saarinen Swanson between December 1989 and September 1990. Two separate
collections were created as the set included documents relating to: 1) the Saarinen family—Eliel, Loja, Pipsan, and Eero; and 2) the Swansons—Bob and Pipsan.

The Papers of J. Robert F. Swanson and Pipsan Saarinen Swanson are organized into four (4) series: **Projects, Topical, Photographic Materials, and Oversized Materials**. At the folder level, documents are arranged in chronological order, with undated material grouped before those with dates. Selected envelopes have been retained for the information they provide.

The **Projects** series (Boxes 1-6) represents the bulk of the collection and consists of the records and individual projects of the Swanson’s architecture and design business. Included are notes and correspondence relating to design, construction, customer accounts, research sources, clippings, and reviews.

The **Topical** series (Boxes 6-8) is divided into three subseries: business records, personal documents, and professional documents. The arrangement is alphabetical order within each subseries. A distinction is made between business and personal correspondence and these documents are foldered as subheadings under the appropriate main heading.

Photographs, slides, transparencies and negatives can be found in the **Photographic Materials** series (Boxes 9-14). Project materials are arranged by date; all other materials are arranged alphabetically. Of special interest is the collection of glass negatives in Box 14, containing works created by members of the Saarinen Swanson Group, and copies of architectural drawings from selected Swanson Associates projects.

The **Oversized Materials** series (Boxes 15-18) contain oversized photographs, project materials, and a University of Michigan scrapbook belonging to Bob Swanson.

**Related Collections**

- Saarinen Family Papers, Acc. # 1990-08
- Cranbrook Architectural Office Files, Acc. # 1989-01
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10. 1936, Calingaert residence
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6. 1960, Sacred Heart Seminary
7. 1961, West Bloomfield Township development
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10. 1963, Pontiac Municipal Airport
11. 1967-69, Oakland-Orion Airport
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16. 1971, Muskegon Mental Retardation Center
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10. Marriage, J. Robert F. Swanson and Pipsan Saarinen Swanson, 1926
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