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Svinhufvud, Leena, "The Politics of Textile Entrepreneurship Loja Saarinen and Her Weaving Studio in the Cranbrook Art Community" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 748.

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The Politics of Textile Entrepreneurship Loja Saarinen and Her Weaving Studio in the Cranbrook Art Community

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My current art historical research project studies hand weaving as medium for woman artists in the first half of the 20th century. I have chosen as my central case study the Finnish-born textile artist Loja Saarinen (1879–1968, née Louise Gesellius) who lived and worked in the Cranbrook art community in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, U.S.A.¹ This working paper discusses the idea of entrepreneurship in the context of textile art. The concept of politics is understood here as acquisition and application of power and my main focus is on gender politics - on women's roles and strategies as artists.² My research addresses the politics of writing design history. I am intrigued by the stereotypical image of women artists and designers who worked with woven textiles. They were called 'weavers'—and they still often are—and I find this problematic as the title of 'weaver' refers to specialized skills and to practical work. I am also interested in how we talk about economy and business in the context of modern design. By using the idea of entrepreneurship I will try to widen the concept of modern textile art.

In 1925 the Finnish-born architect Eliel Saarinen (1873–1950) was commissioned to design the campus for what would later be called the Cranbrook Educational Community including various educational institutions.³ The patrons were newspaper magnate George Gough Booth and his wife Ellen Scripps Booth, well-known promoters of the American Arts and Crafts Movement.⁴ The Booths bought land outside Detroit city and lived there since 1908, forming their own estate and a village community. George Booth nominated Eliel Saarinen as the resident architect and the Saarinen family moved to Cranbrook in 1925. Three years later his wife who was originally educated in sculpture, founded the Studio Loja Saarinen (1928–1942) to produce textiles for Cranbrook buildings. The family including two children, Pipsan (Eva-Liisa, later Pipsan Saarinen-Swanson, 1905–1979), interior designer and Eero (1910–1961), architect, were deeply committed to the Cranbrook project. Cranbrook Academy of Art was established 1932 with Eliel Saarinen as its first president. Loja Saarinen headed the weaving department of the Academy until 1942.

Loja started her weaving studio with Swedish immigrant girls from Chicago and Detroit and when largest, there were altogether almost 30 handlooms active.⁵ The Studio produced mainly woven textiles for interiors: rugs, curtains, table textiles and decorative wall hangings. Among the first products were textiles for the exhibition *The architect and the industrial arts* in the Metropolitan

¹ I am greatly indebted to Cranbrook Archives for the reproduction rights of photographs published in this article. I want to thank the Head Archivist Leslie S. Edwards and Director Gregory Wittkopp of Cranbrook Art Museum for their wonderful support to my research project.

² See discussion on this issue in for example in Kirkham, Pat & Walker, Lynne. *Diversity and Difference. Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000. Diversity and Difference*. Ed. Pat Kirkham. New York. New Haven and London : Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts and Yale University Press, 2000, 48-75.

³ See the web page of Cranbrook Educational Community: <http://www.cranbrook.edu/>

⁴ *Design in America. The Cranbrook Vision 1925-1950*, edited by Adele Westbrook and Anne Yarowsky. New York: The Detroit Institute of Arts and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1983.

⁵ Thurman, Christa C. Mayer 1983. Textiles. In *Design in America. The Cranbrook Vision 1925-1950*, 172-211.

Museum of Art in 1929 where Eliel participated and the textiles for the family home in Cranbrook, today known as Saarinen House.⁶

The first five or six years were the hay day of the Studio Loja Saarinen. Textiles were woven for the new buildings of Cranbrook, the biggest and best published of them being the Kingswood School for girls, finished in 1932. After that the commissions for Cranbrook became fewer. Also the economic depression had its impact on the community. Nevertheless, the weaving studio continued work throughout the 1930s and in the early 1940s. There were commissions of interior textiles for private homes and for new constructions also outside Cranbrook and textiles were also made for exhibitions. Loja's studio was active during the wartime and closed in 1942 due to lack of commissions, as it was stated. However, there is no list of works produced in the Studio. The documentary material of the activities of Loja's weaving workshop preserved in Cranbrook is insufficient, thus making it challenging to reconstruct what exactly was done there. In fact, the scarcity of documents about Studio Loja Saarinen can be interpreted as symptomatic, implicating to lack of appreciation, as the garden historian and designer Diana Balmori has suggested.⁷ Although Loja Saarinen is today recognized as textile artist, her work is seen mostly through her husband's career.



Figure 1. The showroom of Studio Loja Saarinen in Cranbrook ca 1935. Photo: Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives.

I see two main problems when trying to fit Loja Saarinen in the history of modern design. Firstly, her personal work as designer remains unclear. We don't know for sure which and how many of the textiles that her studio produced were of her own design. In public archives in the U.S.A and in Finland there are no sketches by her and there is also very little other conventional documents of artistic activity. Moreover, the material that is available, gives contradictory information about Loja Saarinen's contribution. There is confusion between her input and the input of the members of her family and the staff of her studio. Many scholars have, correctly, pointed to the interconnectedness

⁶ *Saarinen House and Garden. A Total Work of Art*, edited by Gregory Wittkopp and Diana Balmori. Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum. New York: Abrams.

⁷ Balmori, Diana 1994. Cranbrook: The Invisible Landscape. *JSAH* 53, march 1994.

of textiles and architecture in Cranbrook—the rugs and curtains are part of the total work of art.⁸ Therefore, especially in less scholarly context, the design of textiles is often attributed to Eliel, the architect—who, in fact, did design quite a lot of textiles while still living in Finland.⁹ Also Pipsan Saarinen-Swanson, the daughter, who worked in fashion and interior design, commissioned textiles through Studio Loja Saarinen. Relying on the scarce documents of the Studio it is impossible to define who was the designer in these cases.¹⁰

Then there is the Swedish textile artist Maja Andersson Wirde (1873–1952) who was invited from Stockholm to start the weaving tuition in 1929. Wirde stayed in Cranbrook until 1933. Some of the most admired Cranbrook textiles, for example many carpets of the Kingswood School, were designed by her, as textile historian Christa Thurman has shown.¹¹ However, in her Cranbrook time Wirde was not credited so much as textile designer. She worked as the head of the Studio Loja Saarinen and as weaving teacher. Wirde was an expert in hand woven textiles and an experienced teacher and she unquestionably brought a lot of knowledge with her. Loja Saarinen did not have training in textiles and, in fact, she never taught weaving in Cranbrook Academy of Art although she was the head of weaving department.

It is interesting that even Loja's attributions of her own work are ambivalent. A good example is a big wall hanging called The Cranbrook Map. The label attached to the textile and written by Loja says that it was designed by Eliel and woven by Studio Loja Saarinen. However, in the San Francisco Golden Gate exhibition in 1939 where she was invited to participate, Loja presented the hanging as her own artwork, 'by Loja Saarinen'.¹² This confusion may lead us to ask why did Loja Saarinen get credit of work she did not do. While it is obviously important to recognize the input of each individual it is not, however, only the signature in the sketch that counts. I suggest that the logic of producing textiles in a modern weaving studio follows corporate strategies, the logic of industry rather than that of the art world with single authorship.

The second problem encountered when positioning Loja Saarinen in the history of modern design is that those textiles that—for one reason or another—are considered Loja's do not easily fit under the label of modern design. She is often juxtaposed with the Finnish-born textile artist Marianne Strengell who followed Loja as the head of textile department in Cranbrook Academy of Art. Strengell is known of work with handloom in the modernist idiom both as designer and teacher.¹³ Compared to that Loja Saarinen's art deco carpets for Cranbrook are easily labeled decorative and elitist. The products of Studio Loja Saarinen were, indeed, conservative but I argue that this does not make the weaving studio or Loja's work in the Studio anti-modern. I will try to illustrate also this point by putting Loja's work in the context of business.

⁸ See for example Thurman 1983 and more recently: Elliott, Bridget. 2008. 'The figure in the carpet': Saarinen house and the crafting of space. In *Craft, Space and Interior Design, 1855-2005*. Edited by Sandra Alfoldy and Janice Helland, 105–122. Hampshire : Ashgate.

⁹ On Eliel's work in Finland see *Eliel Saarinen projects 1896–1923*. 1990. Marika Hausen, Kirmo Mikkola, Anna-Lisa Amberg and Tytti Valto. Translated by Desmond O'Rourke and Michael Wynne-Ellis. The Museum of Finnish Architecture. Cambridge, MA : The MIT Press.

¹⁰ Pipsan's role and contribution in Cranbrook has so far received very little scholarly attention, which is a great pity. Hopefully future research will cast light on her work in textile design, too.

¹¹ Thurman 1983.

¹² Cranbrook Art Museum object files CAM 1935.7.; compare to *Decorative Arts, Official Catalog Department of Fine Arts Division of Decorative Arts Golden Gate International Exposition San Francisco*. San Francisco: San Francisco Bay Exposition Company, 1939.

¹³ Fiely, Megan Elisabeth 2006. "Within a Framework of Limitations". Marianne Strengell's work as an educator, weaver and designer. MA thesis, Graduate College of Bowling Green State University; Edwards, Leslie S. 2007. Structure and Surface. Marianne Strengell and Woven Texture. *Modernism Magazine*, Winter 2007-2008, 76-85.

To discuss the concept of entrepreneurship in textile art I will make a comparison to the Finnish situation. Hand weaving emerged in Finland in the 1920s as the key method used by educated textile artists. Textile art was a new field of specialization with independent training starting in the national design school in Helsinki in 1929. Weaving by hand was at that time still economically significant. There were skilled weavers in the countryside where craft based production provided extra income to families working in agriculture. Big textile industry developed slowly and it could not meet the demands of consumers. When industry suffered of worldwide depression in the 1930s, craft based industries flourished. One example of success is the company of the Friends of Finnish Handicraft (Suomen Käsityön Ystävät, established 1879), which produced hand woven interior textiles and rugs for the urban dwellers of the capital Helsinki.¹⁴

Modern furniture and textiles were needed in the apartments of new urban middle class. High quality interior textiles were also needed in public and corporative buildings. Many woman artists and architects seized the opportunity. To serve clients in questions concerning interior design and to produce modern, hand crafted textiles they opened small studios, often in their own home, employing one or two weavers. One example was the studio of Martta Taipale (1893–1966) producing hand woven utility textiles that were promoted for example through an art gallery exhibition in Helsinki in 1934. Most of the studios did not live long but Martta Taipale was one of the few who continued. Concentrating later on decorative wall hangings, she even developed a market for her work in the USA in the late 1940s.

A woman working at the loom in the domestic environment, clothing her family, was an idealized image in the Finnish inter-war cultural scene where political conservatism prevailed. Images of women at the loom were, however, also documentary because hand weaving became a very popular hobby at that time. When presenting themselves as specialists of hand weaving modern educated textile artists were tied to a gendered craft tradition. However, I have argued that embracing the traditional, culturally acceptable media was important when establishing the profession and addressing the emerging female consumer. You have to keep in mind that there was a socio-cultural distance between textile artists and the women who actually wove the textiles. Thus, images of educated artists by the loom popularized the modern profession of textile designers.¹⁵

Hand weaving as means of artistic and economic productivity was a thoroughly international phenomenon in the 1930s and 1940s. Other scholars have shown examples of European and American artists who made their career and livelihood through their weaving studios. The best-known examples in the U.S.A are Maria Kipp, Dorothy Liebes and Marion Dorn.¹⁶ Also here weaving business emerged simultaneously with craft revival, but further comparison will require more research. However, the context of Studio Loja Saarinen differed from other American examples. Her studio was part of the Cranbrook project and functioned under the patronage of George Gough Booth. We have to ask, how does business fit into the idea of a reformist art community and an educational center?

¹⁴ Svinhufvud, Leena 2012. Hand-woven fabrics by yard. Unveiling modern industry of the interwar period. In *Scandinavian design. Alternative histories*. Kjetil Fallan ed. London: Berg Publishers.

¹⁵ Svinhufvud, Leena. 2009. Moderneja ryijyjä, metritavaraa ja käsityötä. Tekstiilitaide ja nykyaikaistuva taideteollisuus Suomessa maailmansotien välisenä aikana. [Modern Ryijys, Fabric by the Yard and Handicrafts. Finnish Textile Art and Modernizing Applied Art during the Inter-war Years] Helsinki: Designmuseum.

¹⁶ Boydell, Christine 1989. Women textile Designers in the 1920 and 1930s. Marion Dorn, a Case Study. *A view from the interior. Feminism, women and design*. Eds. Judy Attfield & Pat Kirkham. London : The women's press; Musicant, Marilyn R. 2000. Maria Kipp. Autobiography of a Hand Weaver. *Studies in the Decorative Arts*. Fall-Winter 2000-2001, vol 8, no 1, 92–107; Winton, Alexandra Griffith. 2009. Color and Personality: Dorothy Liebes and American Design. *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 48 Nos. 1-2: The Design Issue. Spring 2009.

George Booth personally idealized the British arts and crafts movement and adored the pre-raphaelites. His activities as collector and patron can be compared to European industrialist-patrons of the late 19th century, the new bourgeois elite that aspired cultural hegemony through connections with avantgarde art. The relation of George Booth and Eliel Saarinen can be understood through this idea: the architect materializing the modern visions of the industrialist. The historian Maiken Umbach uses the concept of *bourgeois modernism* in the German context in the early 20th century to describe the interconnectedness of business networks to modernizing architecture and design. She shows that art and design reform was not separated from the world of business but quite on the contrary.¹⁷



Figure 2. The brochure for Studio Loja Saarinen printed in 1932 shows interiors from Eliel and Loja Saarinen's home in Cranbrook. Photo: Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives.

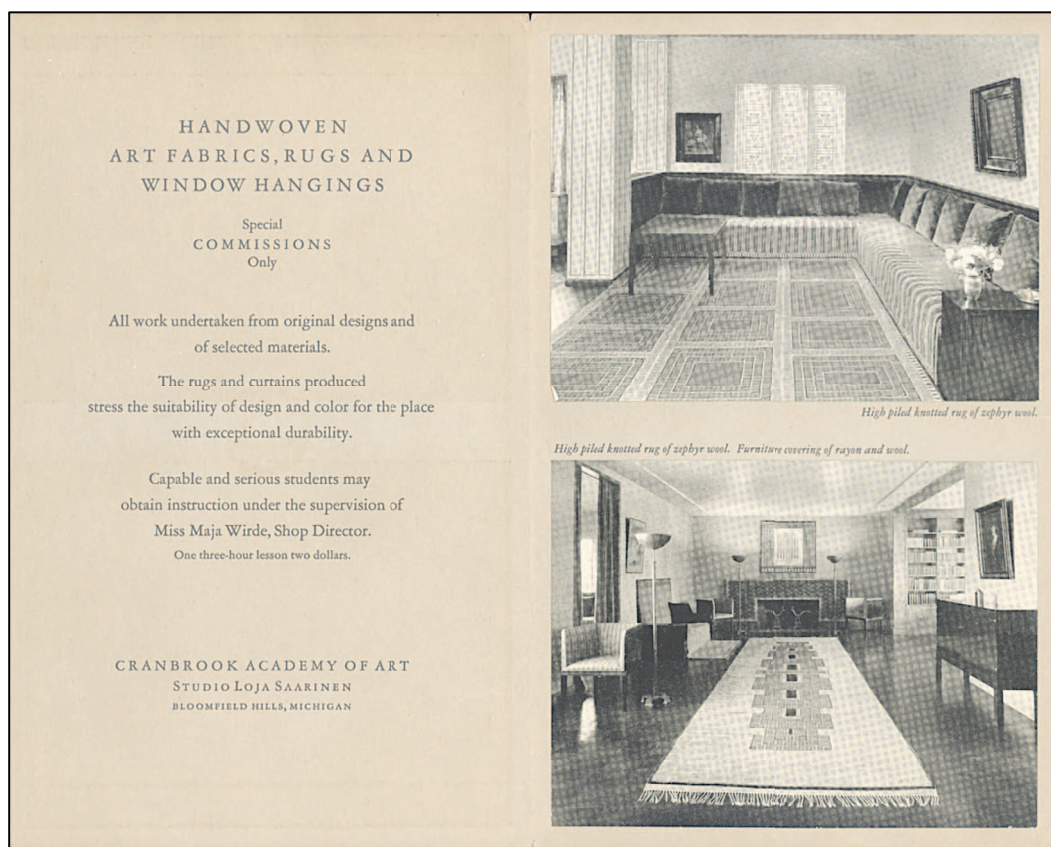
Quite concretely, the idea of artists' workshops as commercial production units was written in the Cranbrook program from the very beginning. Loja Saarinen was, in fact, one of the resident craftsmen at Cranbrook and the only woman in this position. The craft studio in weaving—as well as those of sculpture, metal, ceramics, print and other media—was commercial. Besides producing artwork for Cranbrook premises, they would sell outside, to private clients. However, the timing was bad. The Great Depression affected also Cranbrook and most of the craft studios were closed in 1933 only the weaving studio stayed open. At the time of deep economic trouble the Studio Loja Saarinen organised exhibitions in Cranbrook, opened a showroom and printed a brochure to market the line of products for domestic interiors. This business which was targeted at the affluent homes of Detroit area was evidently not very successful but in any case it shows an effort to address the private client.

¹⁷ Umbach, Maiken 2009. *German cities and bourgeois modernism, 1890-1924*. Oxford University Press.

Private clients were included in the concept of Studio Loja Saarinen from the very start. It was not a marginal workshop but quite on the contrary. The Studio was situated in the building designed for the arts and crafts studios. You can read from the physical environment that the place for textile production was highly valued. It had a separate entrance right at the entrance gate to Cranbrook. In old photographs you can see that there was a separate corner furnished for meetings with clients. The beautiful studio was decorated with paintings by Katherine McEwen presenting symbols of textile fibers.

Although we know very little about her own work as a designer, we do know that Loja Saarinen worked hard for her studio. Documents tell about communication with clients and taking charge of the economy. In fact they reveal her skills in organizing.

Loja was the manager of her weaving studio and also the person who "kept strings in the house".¹⁸ In the Cranbrook society Loja's role was that of the wife of the president. Loja was described as a formal and reserved person. Her personal letters, however, reveal her deep commitment to the success of her family and show her skills in taking care of social relations. Coming from a German-Finnish bourgeois family she had social capital to cope in this position.



**Figure 3. The President and wife, Eliel and Loja Saarinen are celebrated at the academic party the Crandemonium Ball of the Cranbrook Academy of Art in February, 1934.
Photo: Courtesy of Cranbrook Archives.**

Loja Saarinen's work illustrates how hand weaving continued through modernizing design. She was a 'weaver' who lived and worked in the center of power, but whose work as an artist has been marginalized in writing of history. Loja benefitted from her enterprise, Studio Loja Saarinen, a public role as textile artist and interior decorator. Her weaving business was, however, very much a

¹⁸ Balmori, Diana 1995. Saarinen House Garden. In *Saarinen House and Garden. A Total Work of Art*, 145–157.

“family business” and Studio Loja Saarinen attracted publicity first and foremost to her family and to Cranbrook.

I have chosen to use the concept of entrepreneurship in the context of textile studios headed by artists. However small, or short-lived, there was an economic aim—

to give livelihood to the artist and her employees. In the Finnish context textile studios of modern textile artists were comparable to women’s traditional small business ventures in towns providing to urban dwellers services and products in food, clothes and care. Not surprisingly however, these small enterprises have mostly been left out of economic histories that concentrate on big industry.

Instead of focussing on artist’s individual creativity or artistic reform, the idea of entrepreneurship turns to collective processes of design; the networks and production systems. Some of the problems regarding attribution of Studio Loja Saarinen’s products can be understood through this concept. Writing about women textile designers in 20th century America, Mary Schoeser and Whitney Blausen have pointed out that the so called in-house designers of the studios of well known artist-designers like Dorothy Liebes or Jack Lenor Larsen remained relatively anonymous. Brand recognition, the name of the Studio (that is, the name of the central figure) became even more important when competition grew harder.¹⁹

The perspective of entrepreneurship sets challenges to art historical research. The most crucial is the need of sources that would tell facts about economic productivity. Museums and designers appreciate the value of conventional art museum documentation—sketches, samples and prototypes, photographs. Information about the production process, about costs and clients, is often edited or even altogether deleted. Until quite recently, economic issues of design have been considered irrelevant, shameful or in some cases, classified. But the attitudes may be changing. Through the overall economization of art field it is more normal to talk about making money in art and design.

¹⁹ Schoeser, Mary and Whitney Blausen 2000. "Wellpaying self support": women textile designers in the USA. In *Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000. Diversity and Difference*, edited by Pat Kirkham. New York, New Haven and London: Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts and Yale University Press.