



Fruits of the Loom

Eero Saarinen set out to immortalize Detroit's golden age in the General Motors Technical Center, a 25-building sprawl begun in conjunction with his father Eliel in 1949, but he realized that glass, steel, terrazzo, and glazed brick were not enough. Textile designer and family friend Marianne Strenge got the call: These bald beasts needed hair. After fleeing Saarinen's lines with what she called the "texture and warmth" of individually designed rugs, drapes, and upholsteries, she had to face GM's maintenance staff.

"The [lobby] rug was quite dark and fluffy," she later recalled. "And that was certainly a problem right there with the people who took care of the building, because they were scared to death of that rug. They'd say, 'What do we do?' And I gave them a broom and said, 'This.' Of course, they died because, I mean, they had all this machinery and stuff like that."

Marianne Strenge was one of a handful of textile mavens who revived the art of weaving in the U.S. during World War II. As a girl in Helsinki, she spurned conventional colors and yarns when creating fabrics for her mother, an interior designer, to sell in her shop. By the time Strenge was 25, her eclectic fiber work—she called it "rags and riches"—was displayed at the Swedish National Museum. In the 1930s, Eliel Saarinen, a classmate of Strenge's father now ensconced at the nascent Cranbrook Academy of Art, cajoled Marianne into coming to Michigan to teach.

Strenge arrived in 1937, took over Cranbrook's weaving department in 1942, and blew a new wind through the young academy. In her world, texture, color, craftsmanship, and practicality were the order of the day, not human tableaux or folk motifs. Faced with dilettantes, she wasted no time in ▶



Story by Christine Cipriani

Strenge was a close friend of Eliel Saarinen, Cranbrook's architect and president, and also worked with his son Eero (top, with his mother, Loja, left, and Strenge in 1958).

She took commissions like the textiles for Eero Saarinen's General Motors Technical Center lobby (bottom).



raising standards and forging interdisciplinary bonds (read: sherry parties) with other departments to avoid the ghettoization of weaving. She brought Charles Eames to Cranbrook, where he became an instructor—she sensed he was in a rut when bowling with him at a party in St. Louis, Missouri—and her students included Jack Lenor Larsen and Ray Kaiser (later Eames). In 1949 she married Olav Hammarström, a Finnish architect who worked with Alvar Aalto and Eero Saarinen.

Strengell's commercial success helped elevate textile design from craft to profession at Cranbrook and by extension in the larger design world. In 1940 her work was featured in the watershed MoMA show *Organic Design in Home Furnishings*. She saw textiles as architectural elements, not adornments, and clients pursued her accordingly; she used sectioned rugs and walls of drapes to divide rooms, curtains to control light, and carefully chosen yarns to add sheen or fuzz. Fiber artist and scholar Ed Rossbach, who studied at Cranbrook in the 1940s, later wrote: "The small colorful rugs that [she] produced were responses to the blandness that accompanied 'good design.' [Weavers] had to impart comfort and warmth to the ever-increasing quantities of glass and metal, yet keep the rooms looking uncluttered, severe, and controlled."

From airplane seats to corporate headquarters to store windows, Strengell's abstract designs were everywhere in mid-century America. One of her high-end weaves was a nubby black-and-silver confection called Taj Mahal, used in the 1959 Lincoln Continental. Other commissions included rugs for Karastan, hotel fabrics for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, textiles and shag rugs for the Saarinen-Swanson Group, and the first printed fabric for Knoll Associates. "One of the remarkable things about walking into Marianne's house," recalls her friend Susan Saarinen, Eero's daughter, was a "combination of Finnish simplicity with an overlay of such wonderful, rich colors and textures."

Throughout her career, Strengell extolled limitations—in raw materials,

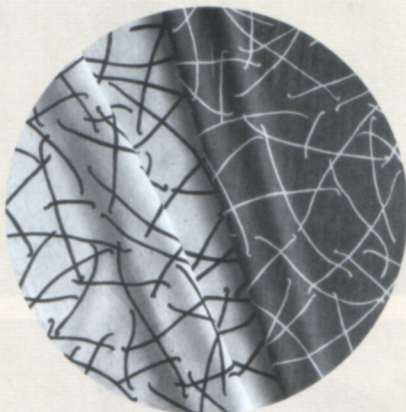
manufacturing, climate, the market—as catalysts for good design. She found the restrictions of wartime inspiring, and in 1951 she traveled to the Philippines with a U.S. government agency to help expand weaving as a profitable cottage industry. A few years later, when Alcoa asked her to make a rug of aluminum fibers in 36 colors, she was "horrified," she once said, but injected linen and wool to form brilliant contrasting stripes.

Strengell and Hammarström retired to Wellfleet, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod, and Strengell died in 1998. She never lost her confidence in the mutual importance of beauty and utility, or her impatience with the very concept of complacency. "Experiment, for God's sake," she told Mark Coir, current acting director of the Cranbrook Archives, when asked about her studio philosophy. "Don't do anything that somebody else has done before." ▶



"I never was so scared in my life," Strengell said of the moment she took this polychrome rug (bottom left) off the loom, wondering how Alcoa's aluminum fibers would

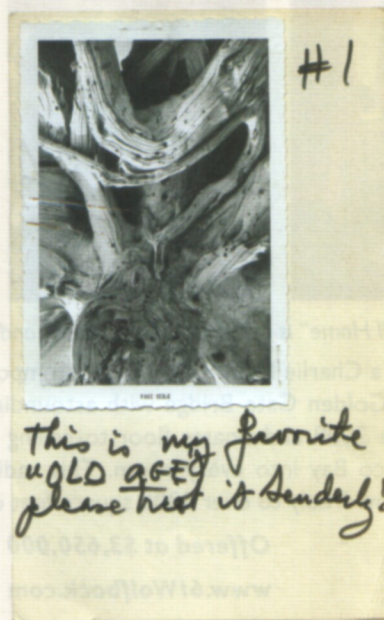
drape. With her dual demands for rigorous technique and experimental design, Strengell significantly raised the standard of weaving at Cranbrook (top left, in 1943).



Debuted by Knoll in 1947, "Shooting Stars" (bottom right) was Strengell's first screen-printed fabric. In the Philippines, she used fibers from pineapple husks (top right).

Photos Courtesy Cranbrook Archives (portrait, Alcoa rug, Philippines textile), Knoll Textiles (Shooting Stars and Pina)

10 things you should know about Marianne Strengell



1. Raised in a coastal community of Swedish-speaking Finns, Strengell was sent to summer camp to learn Finnish. She made scant progress because the other kids spoke Swedish, too.
2. When Strengell and Hammarström wed, it was the second time for both—but they had first met in dance class when Strengell was eight.
3. The granddaughter of a pianist, Strengell loved music. On a visit to San Francisco, she was offered a singing job in a nightclub.
4. She forbade her Cranbrook students from going to the library during their first semester, lest they develop an anxiety of influence.
5. Despite the age gap, Strengell was very close to Eero's father, Eliel Saarinen. He dropped into her home for a chat just one hour before his death, in 1950, while Olav was playing tennis with Eero.
6. On a trip to Japan, Strengell was startled to see one of her designs on the seats of her taxi.
7. She acknowledged her students' professional success but was tart about those who had not excelled in class—including Ray Kaiser (later Eames), who, as she later recounted, had "made no great impact at all."
8. Strengell's showpiece rugs for GM, including one that measured 18 by 32 feet, were hand-loomed by a Swedish weaver named Gerda Nyberg in her basement in Pontiac, Michigan.
9. In 1952 Hammarström built the couple a breezy modern house in the Wellfleet woods, near the ocean. Eventually they sold it and moved to a Cape Cod-style house in the town center.
10. In her later years, Strengell took up photography and shot "huge pieces of driftwood or old gnarled roots," says Susan Saarinen. "It was about pattern and texture." ■

A pioneer of the shag rug as we know it, Strengell filled her Cranbrook studio with these and other creations in bold hues and pointedly abstract designs (middle).

Strengell's textiles warmed the Cape Cod retreat she shared with Olav Hammarström (bottom left). In retirement, she turned to photography (bottom right). **i**

Photos: Courtesy Cranbrook Archives (portrait, studio interior, home interior), Marianne Strengell Papers / 1904-1989 / Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution (personal photography)