

# CRANBROOK

## ARCHIVES

### **Suzanne E. Vanderbilt (1933-1988)**

Papers, c. 1945-1988  
5 linear ft.

Acquisition Number:	1998-02
Acquisition:	The collection was the result of two gifts: materials separated from the Jayne Van Alstyne gift (1990-514); and the gift of Richard Vanderbilt (1998-02).
Access:	Access to the collection is unrestricted.
Copyright:	Copyright to this collection has been retained by the donor or the donor's assignee.
Preferred Citation:	Suzanne E. Vanderbilt Papers, Cranbrook Archives, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.
Photographs:	In Boxes 4, 5, and 6.
Audio/Video:	Stored separately in the Cranbrook Audio Tape collection.
Index:	See end of finding aid.
Processing:	Amy James, December 2000.



## History

Suzanne E. Vanderbilt was born on August 25, 1933 in Mt. Vernon, New York to Donald and Evelyn (Sandberg) Vanderbilt. She graduated in 1951 from Mamaroneck [New York] High School, and went on to Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, receiving a Bachelor of Industrial Design degree in June 1955.

Following graduation, Ms. Vanderbilt began work as a Junior Designer at General Motors Corporation, becoming one of the “Damsels of Design”, a pioneering group of women automobile designers hired by Harley Earl (VP of Design) in the mid-1950s. Ms. Vanderbilt started in the Chevrolet and Cadillac Interior Studios, working on several production and show cars. Ms. Vanderbilt herself was a Corvette enthusiast, and owned several of the sports cars. She moved to the Research Studio in 1958, where she was able to work on interior sections of the Firebird II show car and on an experimental automated highway system. At the age of 28, she was the first female assistant designer at GM, and assumed responsibility for the Human Factors and Safety Program in addition to her regular design duties. During this time, Ms. Vanderbilt developed two patents relating to automotive safety and ergonomics. In 1965, Ms. Vanderbilt was promoted to Senior Designer for Chevrolet Interiors, and later became Chief Designer in the Chevrolet Interior #2 Studio in 1971. Ms. Vanderbilt left GM in 1977 on a disability leave.

From 1963-1965, General Motors granted Ms. Vanderbilt a leave to study at the Cranbrook Academy of Art (CAA), where she earned a Master of Fine Arts in Metalsmithing in May 1965. She was chosen to give the farewell address at the graduation ceremony, and received much attention for her work in religious iconography. Following her retirement from GM, Ms. Vanderbilt continued her interests in metalwork, jewelry design and manufacture, sketching, and photography. Her work was displayed in many exhibitions in the Detroit area. Drawing from her extensive group of nature photographs, she began work on a project illustrating design forms in nature. After an extended illness, Suzanne Vanderbilt passed away in November 1988.

## Scope and Content of Collection

The collection documents Suzanne Vanderbilt’s pioneering role as one of the top female designers in the automobile industry. It reflects her many accomplishments in the design field during her studies at Pratt Institute, Cranbrook Academy of Art, and various projects beyond her career at General Motors.

**Series I (Boxes 1-3)** is arranged alphabetically by subject, then chronologically within the subject. This series contains biographical information, correspondence, and files documenting Ms. Vanderbilt’s General Motors career and studies at the Cranbrook Academy of Arts.

The collection's numerous slides and photographs can be found in **Series II, Photographic Materials (Boxes 4-6)**. Her automotive design work at General Motors is documented, as is her work in metals, jewelry, photography, and sculpture. Materials are arranged alphabetically by subject. Dates are given when possible.

Examples of Ms. Vanderbilt's automotive design work, sketches, Pratt Institute and CAA projects, and personal scrapbook can be found in **Series III, Oversized Materials (Boxes 7-9)**. The arrangement is alphabetical by subject.

### **Related Collections**

- Jayne Van Alstyne papers (Accession # 1990-514)
- Suzanne Vanderbilt file (E&M files)

## **Box Number--Description**

---

### **Series I**

#### **Box 1**

1. Biographical—Resumes, various dates
2. Book Project on Design in Nature (notes), c.1980s
3. Buco Products (motorcycle helmet design), 1967-1968
4. Correspondence, 1959-1983
5. Cranbrook Academy of Art—Commencement, 1965
6. Cranbrook Academy of Art—Masters Thesis, pt.1, 1965

#### **Box 2**

1. Cranbrook Academy of Art—Masters Thesis, pt.2, 1965
2. Exhibition Catalogs, 1965-1967, 1971
3. General Motors—Career History and Achievements, various dates
4. General Motors—Chevrolet Brochures, 1956, 1973
5. General Motors—Human Factors Group, c.1960s

#### **Box 3**

1. General Motors—Human Factors Group—Anthropology of Posture, (seating study), c.1960s
2. General Motors—Patent, 1967
3. General Motors—Research Studio, n.d.
4. General Motors—Speeches, 1957, 1968
5. Pratt Institute, 1955, 1958
6. Pratt Institute—Emblem, n.d.
7. Pratt Institute—Mechanical Restaurant Proposal, c.1954

### **Series II PHOTOGRAPHIC MATERIALS**

#### **Box 4**

1. Autobiographical, 1950s-1980s
2. Buco Helmet Design, n.d.
3. Cranbrook Academy of Arts (CAA), 1963-1965
4. CAA, 1963-1965
5. CAA, 1963-1965
6. CAA, 1963-1965
7. CAA, 1963-1965
8. CAA, 1963-1965
9. Ceramics, 1962
10. Drawings, c.1970s, most undated

**Box 5**

1. General Motors, various dates
2. General Motors, various dates
3. General Motors, various dates
4. General Motors—Art Center School, 1960
5. Jewelry, some CAA, n.d.
6. Jewelry, some CAA, n.d.
7. Jewelry, some CAA, n.d.
8. Jewelry, some CAA, n.d.
9. Jewelry, some CAA, n.d.
10. Jewelry, some CAA, n.d.
11. Metalwork, some CAA, n.d.

**Box 6**

1. Nature Studies, various dates
2. Nature Studies, various dates
3. Painting, n.d.
4. Photographic Experimentation, n.d.
5. Photography, n.d.
6. Photography, n.d.
7. Photography, n.d.
8. Pratt Institute, c.1950-1955
9. Sculpture, various dates

**Series III      OVERSIZED MATERIALS****Box 7**

1. Scrapbook, c.late 1940s-1958

**Box 8**

1. Drawings [pen and ink, charcoal], n.d.
2. Drawings [pen and ink, pencil], n.d.
3. Drawings [pen and ink], n.d.
4. Drawings [pen and ink, pencil], n.d.
5. Graphics, 1982
6. Pebble Creek Logo Design, 1988

**Box 9**

1. Buco Products, n.d.
2. Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1963-1965
3. Cranbrook Academy of Art—Package Design, 1963
4. General Motors, 1964-1965
5. General Motors—Experimental Automobiles, n.d., 1960
6. Pratt Institute, c.mid-1950s



## Index

**A**merican Forests (periodical) 1:4  
Art Center School 1:4, 5:4

**B**iographical materials 1:1, 4:1, 7:1  
Book project, design forms in nature 1:2, 6:1-2  
Booth, Henry Scripps 1:5  
Buco Products 1:3, 4:2, 9:1

**C**eramics 4:9  
Correspondence 1:4  
Cranbrook Academy of Art 1:5-6, 2:1-2, 4:3-8, 9:2-3  
--Metalwork and jewelry 5:6-11

**D**rawings 4:10, 8:1-4

**E**xhibitions 2:2

**F**isher Body Division (GM) 1:4

**G**eneral Motors Corporation 1:4, 2:3-5, 3:1-4, 5:1-4, 7:1, 9:4-5  
--Branch Out Program 5:1  
--Damsels of Design 5:3, 7:1  
--Feminine Auto Show 5:1, 5:3, 7:1  
--Wide Wide World 5:1

Graphics 8:5-6

**J**ewelry design 5:6-10

**K**yropoulos, Peter 1:4

**L**archmont Avenue Church 1:4

**M**ars Outstanding Design award 1:4, 2:3, 3:7, 9:6  
Mechanical Restaurant proposal 3:7, 9:6  
Metalwork 5:11  
Mitchell, William 1:4  
Motorcycle helmet design 1:3  
My Pot Shop (Birmingham, MI) 4:9

**P**ainting 6:3

Pebble Creek logo design 8:6

Photography 6:1-2, 6:4-7

Nature studies 6:1-2

Pratt Institute 1:4, 3:5-7, 6:8, 7:1, 9:6

**S**crapbook 7:1

Sculpture 6:9

**V**an Alstyne, Jayne 1:4