

CRANBROOK

ARCHIVES

Benjamin Baldwin

Papers, 1913-2000 (Bulk 1939-1993)
4.8 linear ft.

Acquisition Number: 2006-02

Acquisition: Collection was donated to the Archives by Benjamin Baldwin's niece, Shirley Weese Young, on Nov. 11, 2005.

Access: Access to the collection is unrestricted.

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Preferred Citation: Benjamin Baldwin Papers, Cranbrook Archives, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

Photographs: Included in Series IV. Photographs and Series V. Oversize.

Architectural drawings: Cataloged in Horizon online catalog.

Index: See end of finding aid.

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History

Benjamin “Ben” Baldwin was a critically acclaimed interior designer and architect known for a sense of lyrical order and refined taste. His garden designs were as important as his interiors and reflected a philosophy, “The whole thing was to make the space beautiful.” His work was embodied by a simplicity of space, purity of form and quality of materials.

Benjamin Baldwin was born in Montgomery, Ala. on March 29, 1913. For his early education he attended Starke’s University School in Montgomery and Lawrenceville Preparatory School in Lawrenceville, N.J. He graduated from Princeton University in 1935 with a bachelor’s degree in architecture, then studied painting for a year with Hans Hofmann in New York City. He returned to Princeton in 1935, studying architecture under Jean Labatut, and graduated with an M.F.A. with honors in 1938.

At Princeton he was awarded a scholarship to the Cranbrook Academy of Art, which he attended from 1938-39. While there, he worked under Eliel Saarinen in architecture and town planning, and also studied photography, ceramics, textiles, metalwork and painting. Attending Cranbrook during its “golden period,” he was there with Marianne Strengell, Harry Bertolia, Maija Grotell, Zoltan Sepeshy, Carl Milles, Wally Mitchell, Charles and Ray Eames and Harry Weese. During this time he and Harry Weese built a folding loom which Baldwin later used to weave some rugs and material for two suits.

Following Cranbrook, and a visit to his family home, Kintray, in Verbena, Alabama, Baldwin returned to Cranbrook in the fall of 1939 to work in the office of Eliel and Eero Saarinen, taking charge of the model for the Smithsonian Art Gallery project. Charles Eames, Harry Bertolia and Carl Milles worked along with him on the model of the gallery, which was never built.

Baldwin then joined his good friend Harry Weese in Chicago to open a private practice, designing small houses. During this time, 1940-41, Baldwin and Weese won first place and two honorable mentions in the Museum of Modern Art’s contemporary furnishings competition, “Organic Design.” First place was won by the tea cart they designed.

World War II intervened and Baldwin was commissioned as an ensign in the U.S. Navy in Photo Interpretation. His tour of duty gave him the opportunity to travel to Casablanca, Marrakesh and Algiers, and on the return to the U.S., to make an unscheduled stop in Belem, Brazil where he saw exotic tropical plants that later played a part in his landscape designs.

In 1945 he took a position at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in New York, working on interiors for the Terrace Plaza Hotel in Cincinnati. Baldwin worked with Miró to design a mural for the Gourmet Room restaurant at the top of the hotel. Also at this time he befriended Alexander Calder and began collecting the art of Paul Klee.

He left Skidmore in 1947 and the next year began working independently under the name Design Unit, in New York City. He began creating fabric designs with painter William Machado, and in 1951 they moved their design office to Montgomery, renovating an old house for business and residence. They opened a retail shop for home furnishings in Montgomery, but it was unsuccessful.

In 1955 Baldwin, Machado and the design shop moved to Chicago, beginning the business in space at Baldwin Kingrey, a shop owned in part by Baldwin's sister Kitty, who had married Harry Weese. Machado left the business in 1957. In 1963 Baldwin moved to New York City, where he continued to design interiors, display rooms and products including: offices for Cummins Engine Company in Columbus, Ind.; cups and offices for the Solo Cup Company; Leonard Bernstein's dressing room, the Boardroom, and Green Room for the New York Philharmonic; the Ritz Hotel bar in Boston; and interiors of the townhouse and photo studio for Richard Avedon in New York. During this time he also designed interiors for himself: a house on North State Street in Chicago; an apartment on Central Park West in New York, which he sold for an studio-apartment on East 51st Street and a house-studio in East Hampton. Several of these homes received notable publicity from the *New York Times* and *Architectural Digest*, among others. Baldwin's homes reflected his lifelong world travels, and were filled with outstanding art and artifacts, while maintaining a look described as minimalist. Sophistication was a word that applied to all of his designs.

In 1973 he moved to Sarasota, Fla., remodeled a house-studio, and split his time between Sarasota and East Hampton. He began writing his book, *Benjamin Baldwin: An Autobiography in Design* around 1974 and was finalizing it for publication at the time of his death in 1993. Through the efforts of his niece, Shirley Weese Young, it was published in 1995. Benjamin Baldwin died on April 4, 1993 in Sarasota.

Scope and Content of Collection

This collection has two main components: Ben Baldwin's correspondence, written almost exclusively to the object of his affection and admiration, Harry Weese, and the work for his book, *An Autobiography in Design*. All the stages of authorship, from proposal to finished product are represented, including efforts made by his niece Shirley Young Weese to see the book to publication.

The collection is arranged in five series: **Personal**, **Professional**, *An Autobiography in Design*, **Photographs** and **Oversize**.

Series I, **Personal** contains letters by Ben Baldwin to Harry Weese, chiefly from 1939-1940, just after they left Cranbrook. They reflect some of Baldwin's insecurity about his architectural ability and his deep feelings and to some extent, dependency on, Weese. There are also numerous letters by others to Harry (who became his brother-in-law), including Marianne Strengell, Ralph Rapson, Lily Swann and Wallace Mitchell, that reflect the camaraderie, exchange of ideas, and yearning between a cadre of friends formed at Cranbrook. The letters are in a chronological arrangement.

Series II, **Professional** is chiefly a small amount of correspondence, and magazine articles on his interior design work and the renovation of his many homes. It also includes some drawings for fabric and china designs.

Series III, *An Autobiography in Design* contains the manuscript for his book, in all its various stages, along with related correspondence to publishers and photographers. The manuscript versions are, for the most part, undated. Box 8 contains envelopes of images used in the book, arranged by page number. They include transparencies, prints and slides and have been left in their original order, not integrated into Series IV, Photographs. There are also 3.5 floppy disks with book-related information.

Series IV, **Photographs** has a family photo album that begins with photos of Baldwin as a small child, and continues up until 1957. There is a box of largely black and white images of his work, friends and homes, plus a few slides and negatives. There are also photographs in Series V, Oversize.

Series V, **Oversize** contains photographs, drawings and a poster.

Related Collections

- Wallace Mitchell Papers, 1990-21
- Marianne Strengell Papers, 1991-07
- Cranbrook Foundation Records, 1981-05
- CAA Publications, 1998-05c
- Scrapbook Collection

Box Number--Description

SERIES I: PERSONAL

Box 1

1. Art Collection, 1963-1988
2. Correspondence, 1938-Aug 1939
3. Correspondence, Sep-Dec 1939
4. Correspondence, 1940
5. Correspondence, 1941-1951
6. Correspondence, 1952-2000
7. Ephemera
8. Records
9. Telephone/address books

Box 2

1. Telephone/address books
2. Travel maps & brochures
3. Yale 50th reunion yearbook

Series II: PROFESSIONAL

4. Correspondence-General
5. Drawings—Designs, c1970s
6. Drawings—Misc., n.d.-c1970s
7. Ephemera

Box 3

1. Exhibition catalogs
2. Magazine articles, 1941-1973
3. Magazine articles, n.d., 1978-1992

Series III: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN DESIGN

Box 4

1. Proposal & publishers, c1974-1975
2. Correspondence, 1967-1992
3. Manuscript/Draft 1 of 2
4. Manuscript/Draft 2 of 2
5. Revisions, p.1-55
6. Revisions, p.1-78
7. Revisions, p.1-84
8. Revisions 1 of 2

Box 5

1. Revisions 2 of 2
2. Final manuscript 1 of 2
3. Final manuscript 2 of 2
4. Working copy

5. Uncorrected proofs 1 of 2
6. Uncorrected proofs 2 of 2
7. Before final corrections

Box 6

1. Author's revisions
2. Final revised text (p.72-85)
3. Edited copy
4. Page layout
5. Illustration captions, 1991
6. Photography
7. Notes

Box 7

1. Specs and text, 1993-
2. Publication, 1993-July 1994
3. Publication, Aug.-Oct. 1994
4. Publication, Nov.-Dec. 1994
5. Publicity, 1995

Box 8

Images

Series IV: PHOTOGRAPHS

Box 9

Photo album, 1913-1957

Box 10

1. Art Collection, n.d.
2. Baldwin, Ben, c.1941-1991
3. Baldwin, Ben & Harry Weese, c.1941
4. Saarinen, Eames and Susan, c.1952
5. Weese, Harry, c.1938-n.d.
6. Friends & colleagues, 1930-c.1990
7. Friends & colleagues, Cranbrook, c.1939
8. Organic design competition, 1941
9. Projects and designs—Chicago houses, c.1940
10. Projects and designs—Folding loom, 1939
11. Projects and designs—Furniture, c.1941
12. Projects and designs—Harry Weese, c.1939-1940
13. Projects and designs, 1938
14. Residences, n.d.-1973
15. Residences—Chicago, State St., c.1957
16. Negatives and transparencies, c.1957-c.1973
17. Slides, c.1941-c.1973

18. Unidentified, c.1939-n.d.

Series V: OVERSIZE

Box 11

1. Drawings—Designs, c.1970s
2. Drawings—Floor plans, c.1965-c.1973
3. Photographs—Eames, Ray, n.d.
4. Photographs—Ben Baldwin & Kitty Baldwin Weese, c.1945
5. Photographs—Unidentified, n.d.
6. Poster—Herman Miller, a Pictorial History, 1925-1965

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