Visiting Cranbrook’s Vault
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To get there, you need an invitation, a guide with a high-security pass card and time to take in the treasures that lie underneath the Cranbrook Art Museum, which was finished a few years ago after two solid years of construction activity.

For furniture geeks, it is like a hidden Mecca, filled with examples of furniture that literally changed the world. Sure, there are the obligatory Eames Lounge and Ottomans, but there are gems like Diffrient’s Jefferson Chair as well.

To get in the first vault, the invited guest must pass through the museum. Around a corner is a massive, curved steel door. With the swipe of a badge and a key code, visitors pass down a small flight of stairs to a long hallway filled with wooden boxes. It looks a bit like the final scene in the movie, “Raiders of the Lost Ark” where the box containing the ark is wheeled into a vast space and “lost” in the myriad identical boxes.

These boxes will be filled in a few days with the furniture of Paul Evans. His furniture was featured in the first comprehensive study of his role in the mid-century American studio furniture movement, his approach to furniture as sculpture and abstract composition, and his unremitting new approaches to metal.

To enter the freight elevator used to reach the real treasures, it takes another key card swipe and code. The elevator opens to a massive room, this one perfectly organized compared to the crates above. The furniture found there fills rows and rows of the room, nearly from floor to ceiling.

The furniture is impressive, a mix of classic and modern, though mid-century certainly takes most of the space since Cranbrook is the one of the centers of mid-century design and thought. Florence Knoll studied here. So did Harry Bertoia. There is furniture from Ralph Rapson and Mies Van Der Rohe. It’s all here.

The vault is part of a a two-year, $22 million renovation. The 20,000-square-foot addition created lots of storage, something sorely lacking in the building designed as part of a larger Cranbrook campus by Eliel Saarinen. From the outside, you wouldn’t know the vault was there and that’s the point. Cranbrook did a masterful job of creating the space without disturbing the building, an architectural masterpiece, that sits above.

Before, there was virtually no space for storage at all. It is said that Cranbrook founder, newspaper tycoon George Booth, would store art in his house when it wasn’t up in the museum. Still, this is no vault where masterpieces go to mold. Students are allowed to use the vault to study art, design and architecture from the masters who came before them.

There is much to study in the vault beyond furniture. Students can examine a model of Dulles Airport, designed by former Cranbrook instructor, Eero Saarinen, Eliel’s son. Eliel Saarinen’s original blueprints and handmade sketches are on display in a separate room filled with prints. They show the stunning talent and attention to detail he brought to the Cranbrook campus. Just across the room from the chairs is a wall of towering, sliding wire racks that hold art by greats like Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Motherwell and Tom Wesselmann, to name just a few.

The building itself had not been updated since it opened in 1942. It was long overdue.

The renovation gives the Cranbrook Art Museum ample room for storage of its priceless collection and gives a few the chance to see it first hand. It is a collection that spans the gamut of creative work and one worth preserving.
The Niels Diffrient designed Jefferson chair for SunarHauserman