The Milles connection comes to City Museum

BY JEFF DANIEL  Post-Dispatch Art Critic

Exhibition will showcase the work of the sculptor famous for the "Meeting of the Waters" fountain in front of Union Station

The more things change ... In July 1931, the St. Louis Art Museum played host to the first American exhibition of works by Carl Milles. The show, featuring 44 pieces from the Swedish sculptor's 30-year career, drew positive international response and led to a meeting — and lifelong friendship — between the artist and enthusiastic admirer Edith Aloe.

That friendship, coupled with Aloe's desire to honor her late husband Louis, a local civic leader, had a crucial role in the creation of Milles' sculptural fountain and St. Louis landmark, "Meeting of the Waters," which is still spraying strong after 58 years in Aloe Plaza, directly north of Union Station across Market Street.

Fast forward to late 1997. A Milles retrospective of 40 pieces — touring the world in recent years in countries as widespread as Japan, Italy, South Africa and Russia — needed a home for its American debut. Because of scheduling conflicts and a lack of lead time, finding a site suddenly became a tricky endeavor for organizers.

But St. Louisans Gall and Bob Castilly, founders of the whimsical and visionary City Museum in downtown Washington Avenue's left district, never met a tricky endeavor they couldn't handle. True, the museum had to buy the space from the city, but they managed to make it happen. Castilly's agreed to place Milles' sculptures in the museum's third-floor exhibition space, which was last occupied by dinosaurs from Russia's Paleontological Institute. Those dinosaurs have been dismantled and have left St. Louis.

So, after a 57-year pause, the city encloses its Milles connection. And in true Milles fashion, this latest exhibition features a committee led by chairman Kenneth Marshall and honorary chairman.

See Milles, Page D3

"Hand of God" (above) is the most famous of Milles' later works. "Struggle for Existence" (inset) is an early work showing the influence of Milles' teacher, Auguste Rodin.
Famed sculptor’s pieces coming to City Museum

Continued from Page 31

Chairman Howard F. Baer - grand¬
child and son-in-law, respectively, of
Paul Edith Aicke.

Locating a St. Louisan unfamiliar
with Miller’s art can be tough —
"Meeting of the Waters" is in a
highly visible traffic area at the west¬
er edge of downtown.

A "Fish Flyer" (a red, twisted figure on a horse) greeted Art
Museum visitors for years, until re¬
cently moving to the busy Clayton
intersection of Forsyth Boulevard and
Bemiston Avenue.

For the last decade, seven Milles
figures have taken up residence at
the Missouri Botanical Garden’s lily
pond.

Marshall, who heads the commit¬
tee that brought the Milles pieces to
the City Museum, likes to add with a
mixture of familial and civic pride:
"The image of 'Meeting of the Wat¬
ers' is in the tradition of the family.
Even my father, Klas, made a postcard
at the tourist kiosks and shops around town."

No. 1, of course, goes to a fellow
Swedishman — Eero Saarinen of
Philadelphia and his stainless steel Mid¬
way Arch.

This leads us to yet another con¬
nection: Eero’s father, Eliel Saarinen.
The elder Saarinen and Milles
worked together as instructors at the
Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., onnie De¬
troit. (Milles and his wife, Austra¬
born artist Olga Grunzer, lived at the
Cranbrook campus in 1921.) During the
10-year process of planning and
completing "Meeting of the Waters,"
Milles was said to have spent hours
writing for advice or bounce ideas off
him.

But make no mistake, the finished
sculpture shows all the qualities of
pure Milles — the foundation with
mythology, the homage to classical
sculpture, the heavy use of symbols
and existential spirituality. All un¬
equivocally Swedish.

Yet as this upcoming exhibition
shows, Milles’ personal style and
visions have come to influence others
during its development — even
than August Rodin.

Milles encountered Rodin at the
chute of the 19th century, at a time when
the French sculptor was nearing
the twilight of his storied career.
By chance during a journey, the young
Swedes stopped in Paris and
decided to put down roots, forging
his obligation to travel on and
man¬
gage a gymnastics school in Chile.
Trained as a woodworker, Milles
soon turned to art classes. Before
long, he found himself an apprentice
(1897-1904) to Rodin.

The student learned well and, as
often happens in such pedagogical situa¬
tions, a father figure was
immediately established. Milles
emulated the hands-on, vigorous,
carefully worked bronze surface, and
strong connection between raw earth and fine art
that characterized Rodin.

These aren’t bad sculptures, and
it’s hard to imagine anyone else cap¬
turing Rodin’s spirit and style in such a
compelling manner. "The Struggle for
Existence," "Woman in the Wind" and
"American Beaver," Milles emulates
the hands-on, vigorous, carefully worked bronze surface, and strong connection between raw earth and fine art
that characterized Rodin.

But these weren’t yet Milles’
work, and he realized as much.
According to some accounts, he went
as far as to destroy many of his ear¬
er works, sculptures, such as his desire
to break free of Rodin and develop
something from his own experi¬
ence, of his own time - and within
his own limits of imagination.

Milles turned more to the ideas
that had sparked him since his childhood days in Upsala, the southeastern Swedish city
where he was born in 1875: the sea,
the behavior of animals, Norse
mythology, local folklore.

By 1908, Milles had returned to
Sweden after a period in Munich,
and on the island of Lidinge he
created the home workspace
known now as Millesgarden. Donat¬
ed to the Swedish government in
1936, Millesgarden to this day pro¬
vides visitors with breathtaking
views of the surrounding landscape
as well as access to the largest sin¬
gle collection of the sculptor’s fig¬
ures and fountains.

This traveling collection, however,
will be seen in a balanced perspective
in its own right. Viewers can chart
Milles’ evolution over three years
from the early Rodin days to the classi¬
cally inspired toms and deity im¬
ages, to the thin and ethereal figures
that thinly strike a pose in frozen
states of animation.

The Milles of "Meeting of the Wat¬
ers" will be instantly recogniz¬
able, yet there are many surprises
here, including a series of his draw¬
ings and sketches, some of which
show the influence of his "night writing," a surrealist device in
which the artist awakens and im¬
mEDIATELY chronicles his subconscious
rumblings.

More than anything, Milles’ at¬
tention to religion emerges as a
dominant theme in his life’s work.
(He remained active as a sculptor
until his death in 1955.) And inter¬
estingly enough, that attention is al¬
most evenly divided among mytho¬
logical, biblical and existential
representations. The gods and pod¬
desses of Greek, Roman and Norse
cultures get their due, as do Paul
Jonas, Jacob and a cast of winged
angels.

Yet Milles’ most famous later
work, and possibly his most real¬
tized, is "Hand of God," a literal in¬
terpretation that works so well be¬
cause of a deceptive simplicity. A
figure stands on the hand of God,
his feet resting on the holy thumb
and index finger. This could be
Adam, but Milles once pointed out
that this figure was instead all of us,
looking away and precariously
balanced, with an ability to rise or
fall based in large part upon our
own decisions.

This hand of God belongs to ev¬
eryone, its finely wrought palm and
sturdy fingers representing emotional and
spiritual strength rather than a con¬
ceivable reality.

Even with his fascination with the
spiritual and with classical taboos,
Milles’ art was not without humor. He
never met dead people and said that
out of everyday life in his sub¬
ject matter. His earliest works cap¬
ture the "common man" themes that
occupied Rodin, but many of
Milles sculptures use up his death
come across as anthropological
studies, rendered in an almost folk
art fashion. For every couple of
mermaids or sun gods frolicking about,
Milles created a raw and
brooding "Indian with Canon."

In his public art, his monumental
statues and fountains, Milles pre¬
fered a sense of rhythmic beauty to
tactile or physical intrigue.

Despite the immediate trend
that brought the Milles exhibit and
the City Museum together, the fit
appears to be a natural. Like Milles,
the Camilies had a reputation for
public art that entertains and en¬
lights. Their work is becoming
to be discussed for anyone interested
in the city’s cultural and art history.

Maybe one day they’ll have the
second hottest-selling postcard in
Sweden.