EVERYDAY

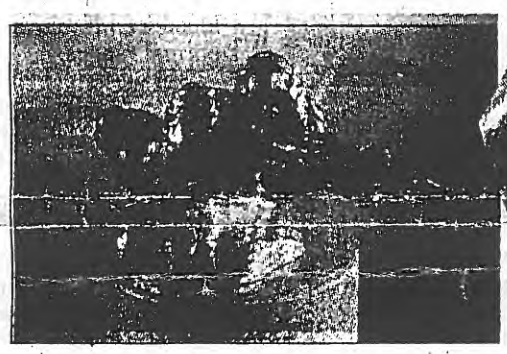
The Milles connection comes to City Museum

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 Gail and Bob Cassilly, founders of the whimsical and visionary City Museum in downtown's Washington Avenue loft district, never met a tricky endeavor they could refuse. Holding true to form, the Cassillys agreed to place Milles' sculptures in the museum's third-floor exhibition space (at the time occupied by an army of reassembled dinosaurs from Russia's Paleontological Institute. Those dinosaurs have been disassembled and have left St. Louis).

So, after a 67-year pause, the city encores its Milles connection. And in true cyclical fashion, this latest exhibition features a committee led by chairman Kenneth Marshall and honorary

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"Sunshine," a sculpture of a mermaid riding a dolphin, is reminiscent of the "Meeting of the Waters."

"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.

Carl Milles Sculpture Exhibition

Where: City Museum, 701 North 15th Street

When: Opens Thursday, continues through August 9. 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday & Sunday

How much: Free with admission

Info: 231-2489

Milles

Famed sculptor's pieces coming to City Museum

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chairman Howard F. Baer — grandson and son-in-law, respectively, of the late Edith Aloe.

Locating a St. Louisan unfamiliar with Milles' art would be tough:

■ "Meeting of the Waters" sits in a highly visible traffic area at the western edge of downtown.

■ "Folk Filbyter" (a robed, twisted figure on horseback) greeted Art Museum visitors for years, until recently 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 committee 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 Waters' is the second largest selling postcard at the tourist kiosks and shops around town."

No. 1, of course, goes to a fellow Scandinavian — Eero Saarinen of Finland and his stainless steel Gateway Arch.

This leads us to yet another connection: Eero's father, Eliel Saarinen. The elder Saarinen and Milles worked together as instructors at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Mich., outside Detroit. (Milles and his wife, Austrian-born artist Olga Granner, lived at the campus from 1931 to 1951.) During the 10-year process of planning and completing "Meeting of the Waters," Milles would sometimes turn to Saarinen for advice or bounce ideas off the designer.

But make no mistake, the finished sculpture shows all the qualities of pure Milles — the fascination with water and mythology; the homage to Greek and Roman classical sculpture; the curious mix of playful fantasy and existential spirituality. All unequivocally Milles.

Yet as this upcoming exhibition demonstrates, Milles' personal style and vision took time to develop — not too surprising when one considers the teacher whose early influence he had to shed. A master no less influential than Auguste Rodin.

Milles encountered Rodin at the close 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 Swede stopped in Paris and decided to put down roots, forgoing his obligation to travel on and manage 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 situations, too well at times. In early works such as "The Struggle for Existence," "Women in the Wind" and "American Bison," Milles emulates the hands-on vigor, 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 capturing Rodin's spirit and style in such a confident manner. "The Struggle for Existence" received critical praise.

But these weren't yet *Milles'* work, and he realized as much. According to some accounts, he went so far as to destroy many of his earliest sculptures, such was his desire to break free of Rodin and develop something from his own experience, of his own time — and within his own limits of imagination.

Milles turned more and more to the interests that had sparked him since his childhood days in Uppsala, 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 Lidingoe he created the home/workspace known now as Millesgarden. Donated to the Swedish government in 1936, Millesgarden to this day provides visitors with breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape as well as access to the largest single collection of the sculptor's figures and fountains.

This traveling collection, however, is a well-balanced retrospective in its own right. Viewers can chart Milles' evolution over time, from the early Rodin days to the classically inspired torsos and deity images, to the thin and spindly figures that lithely strike a pose in frozen states of animation.

The Milles of "Meeting of the Waters" will be instantly recognizable, yet there are many surprises here, including a series of his drawings and sketches, some of which show the influence of his "night writing," a surrealist device in which the artist awakens and immediately chronicles his subconscious rumblings.

More than anything, Milles' attention to religion emerges as a dominant theme in his life's work. (He remained active as a sculptor until his death in 1955.) And interestingly enough, that attention is almost evenly divided among mythological, biblical and existential representations. The gods and goddesses of Greek, Roman and Norse cultures get their due, as do Paul, Jonah, Jacob and a cast of winged angels.

Yet Milles' most famous later work, and possibly his most realized, is "Hand of God," a literal interpretation that works so well because 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 skyward and precariously balanced, with an ability to rise or fall based in large part upon our own decisions.

This hand of God belongs to everyone, its lined palm and sturdy fingers representing emotional and spiritual strength rather than a concrete reality.

Even with his fascination with the spiritual and with classical tableaux, Milles hardly rejected the ins and outs of everyday life in his subject matter. His earliest works capture the "common man" themes that occupied Rodin, but many of Milles' sculptures up until 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 Canoe."

In his public art, his monumental statues and fountains, Milles preferred a sense of rhythmic beauty to that of cultural critique.

Despite the serendipitous route that brought the Milles exhibit and the City Museum together, the fit appears to be a natural. Like Milles, the Cassillys hold a reputation for public art that entertains and enlightens. Their work is becoming hard to ignore for anyone interested in the city's cultural and art history.

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