

Thinking Big and Designing Small: Finnish Grace in Everyday Objects

By GRACE GLUECK

A cup shaped to fit the hand or a chair that coddles the bottom may not seem like crucial considerations. But in 20th-century Finnish design, a concern for comfort has been as much a part of the game as simplicity, elegance of form and ease of production. It goes with the distinctly Finnish development of modernism evolving from the progressive design movement that swept Europe after World War I.

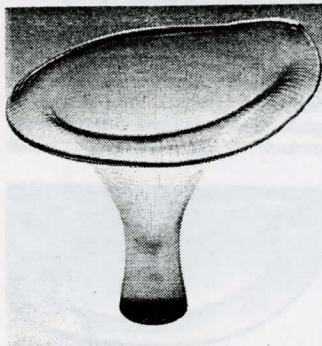
That the Finnish spirit helped in humanizing the formalities of modern design — its rigid geometricism, no-frills austerity and mass production imperatives — comes across clearly in "Finnish Modern Design: Utopian Ideals and Everyday Realities, 1930-1997," at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts. The show is part of the big culture fest in New York this season that marks Finland's 80th year of independence.

Organized by Nina Stritzler-Levine, director of exhibitions at Bard, and Marianne Aav, who holds the same post at the Museum of Art and Design in Helsinki, "Finnish Modern Design" is a fine companion piece to the current retrospective of Alvar Aalto's architecture at the Museum of Modern Art. In the Bard show, the work of Aalto (1898-1976), an artist-craftsman as well as an architect, is also much in evidence.

The display of 140 objects — chairs, coffeepots, lamps, textiles, bowls, glasses, vases, plaques, wearables, even a pair of ergonomic pruning shears — is divided into two parts: one covering the years 1930 to

1960, the other from 1960 to 1997. The objects, mostly designed for industry or for limited production in artists' studios, are handsomely laid out, and although the exhibition galleries are small, everything seems to fit handily into its own space.

In 1930, the Stockholm Exhibition introduced international modernism to Scandinavia. Already, Aalto and other Finnish architects were doing major public buildings in modern



MuseoKuva, Helsinki

"Chanterelle," a mold-blown vase by Tapio Wirkkala from 1946.

style. The field of applied arts and crafts began to follow suit. The glassworks of Iittala, Karhula and Riihimäki and later the Arabia ceramics factory retuned their product lines as did textile designers and other individual craftspeople.

Still, the traditional Finnish love of the countryside, the deep regard for natural forms and materials, did not fade out. It melded with modernism

to create a strong Finnish presence. Among the classics in the show is an exquisitely streamlined platter in the shape of a leaf made of laminated birch by Tapio Wirkkala (1915-1985). Imbued with the Finnish love of wood, Wirkkala used thin laminated striations to represent the leaf's veins in a highly stylized piece that is really a paean to the spirit of earth. Another such form is "Calla" (1946), by Gunnel Nyman (1909-1948), a vase of shaded green glass whose unadorned but lyrical shape suggests a calla lily, a staple of the Finnish landscape.

Glass and ceramic design became, in fact, one of the great Finnish success stories, helped in part by a peculiar economic circumstance.

After World War II, Finland, which had allied itself with Germany hoping to regain territory ceded earlier to the Soviet Union, had to pay heavy reparations to the Russians in the form of manufactured goods. The demand was for products from the metal and engineering industries, whose leading companies also had glass and ceramics factories. To get foreign currency for the expansion of heavier industry, the companies promoted the export of glass and porcelain to the United States and Switzerland, pushing artisans to strive for quality and innovation.

Two major designers for these companies were Wirkkala and Kaj Franck (1911-1989). In 1946, Wirkkala produced for Iittala a clear mold-blown vase engraved with vertical striations, called "Chanterelle" because of its flaring mushroom shape. It came to symbolize the nature-inspired elegance of Finnish art glass, and, as seen in the show, still

works its magic. Aalto, too, explored glass, and his suave "Savoy" bowl of 1946, an undulating form in clear blue, has become a legendary token of Finnish design.

Franck, designer for the Arabia company, was the leading advocate of functionalism in glass and pottery. He is known for, among other things, his phenomenally successful "Kilta" dinner service of 1949, a group of 10 minimal shapes in oven-proof faience, made in a modular format that allowed the pieces to be mixed and matched. Among his glassware designs in the show are a handleless clear glass pitcher and cocktail shaker in laboratory-flask shapes, with glasses fitting inside the pitcher to save space. This handsome design was a concession to the American market; at the time, a cocktail shaker was foreign to Finns.

As for furniture, in the early period Aalto was the star, particularly lauded for his experiments with bentwood and molded plywood. His sleek cantilevered "Armchair Model No. 31," designed in 1931 of bent laminated birch and molded plywood, accomplished his goal of an all-wood version of the ideal modernist chair. The graceful roll of the laminated seat and back is beautifully set off by the curves of the bentwood arms and legs. But although "No. 31" was an esthetic hit, as with many of Aalto's designs its high production costs forestalled mass marketing.

Far more successful, in production terms, was the 1946 "Domus" made by Ilmari Tapiovaara. Of solid birch and molded pressed plywood, this sturdy looking chair with short arms and a particularly user-friendly seat incorporated ideas that Aalto had

introduced in the 30's, including stackability. Its attractive modernity along with its ease of assembly and transport made it an international success.

To American viewers of a certain age, some objects in the early part of the exhibition, along with "Domus," may seem like old pals. There are, for instance, the birch stacking stools designed by Aalto in 1932; the simple bell-shaped hanging lamp of white-painted sheet metal perforated to diffuse light, made in 1947 by Lisa Johansson-Pape (1907-1989), and Antti Nurmesniemi's squat, homey

dumbed down Finnish invention anyway.)

Still, there is plenty of oomph in this section, which stresses the use of new technologies and materials over the past decade or so. The jewelry and textiles seem more assertive, with strong entries like "Planetoid Valleys," Bjorn Weckstrom's 1969 moon-terrain necklace of rough-surfaced silver squares, and "Seagull," Majja Isola's bold cotton hanging of 1961 for the textile and clothing manufacturer Marimekko, repetitively printed with big sine waves in alternating reds, yellows, blues and greens outlined in black.

Chairs, too, have a more adventurous look, for example Hannu Kahonen's "Trice" of 1985, its high back and flared seat made of thin, paper-like white polyester set on a black coal fiber frame with broad red ribbons for arms, and Ilkka Suppanen's 1994 "Nomad," a thick sheet of white felt spread on a frame of painted black steel. In the clothing line, there is "Rypypeppu" ("Wrinkled Behind"), designed in 1966 by Annika Rimala, a jumpsuit in a bright orange chain pattern, with wrinkles built in at knees, elbows and bottom.

There's more, much more, to this lively digest of Finnish design, which with its lucid catalogue will tell you all and then some about one of the world's outstanding achievements in modern design. And Bard presents it with customary finesse.

"Finnish Modern Design: Utopian Ideals and Everyday Realities, 1930-1997" is at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, through June 14.

The countryside as a role model for arts and crafts.

little red coffeepot of enameled steel with stick-out handle of 1957.

If the second part of the display seems, with certain exceptions, less even than the first, there are reasons. The period it covers, from 1960 to now, has had its ups and downs for designers. For one, in the hairy late 60's they were attacked for elitism, and many left for other parts. The energy crisis of the 1970's strained industrial resources, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, with which Finland had an exclusive trading partnership, led to factory cutbacks and unemployment. (One writer in the well-rounded catalogue suggests that the vast but dull Soviet market