

kaj franck (1911–1989)

a designer who practised what he preached

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Kaj Franck was no longer a young man when he set out on the career that was to become his life's work.

He had graduated as a furniture designer in 1932, but owing to the recession was unable to find any work in this area during the depression of the 1930s. Among other work, he supported himself as a draughtsman, decorator and designer of textile patterns for various companies. These were years rich in learning and in experiences of different materials and techniques. Then came the Second World War, which was also a period of growth and achieving maturity.

In the autumn of 1945 the demobilized Lieutenant Franck became an instructor and teacher at the School of Applied Arts, and was hired later that year to work as a designer at the Arabia Porcelain Factory. In 1946 he won second and third prize in an art glass competition, which led a professional involvement with glass. Within a year he had begun work in three professional sectors in the organizations of which he gained the position of artistic director – and at one period even simultaneously in all three areas – whereby he was to have an active influence on developments within design and the applied arts in Finland.

Seen from today's perspective, Franck's agenda would have been enough for three persons. But this was a man of a rare professional discipline and designer ethic who took on these tasks. His energetic figure moved with boyish vigour at the School of Applied Arts and the various factories and glassworks. He fought for his principles and developed his theories, writing articles, lecturing, teaching and above all remaining true to his ideals in his own work as a designer.

The simple and bare line of Franck's design was completely in keeping with his personality.

Franck's deep conviction of the blessings of functionalism was launched by a visit to the Stockholm Exhibition of Design in 1930, when he was still a student. A genuine interest in traditional craftsmanship, its tools and artefacts reinforced the idea that things that function and are necessary are things of beauty. He even took note of William Morris's understanding of the industrialized world's problem of not producing in response to needs but from the need to produce. Kaj Franck refused to add to the amount of unnecessary things that already existed.

Arabia - Kilta

Describing his first period at the Arabia porcelain factory, Kaj Franck said that "I was left alone in a small room and told to design things." He began by learning about the new material and the requirements of rational manufacture – the purpose was to see and realize opportunities and limitations.



Filigree glass, 1970s.



Soap Bubbles, 1951.

His first project was to redesign a bowl, a staple product that had always looked the same but now required a new design for reasons of technology. The stoneware bowl that had been a symbol of functional form for Franck ever since his childhood was now to be realized in faience, and an economically viable manufacturing technique was to be combined with a basic form.

The bowl became a point of departure for the sensible everyday aesthetic that was to be followed by the *Kilta* collection in later years. In the difficult post-war years it was necessary more than ever before to reconsider what was really needed. There was no cause to continue the routine of producing dinner services in roughly the



Glassware from the 1950s.

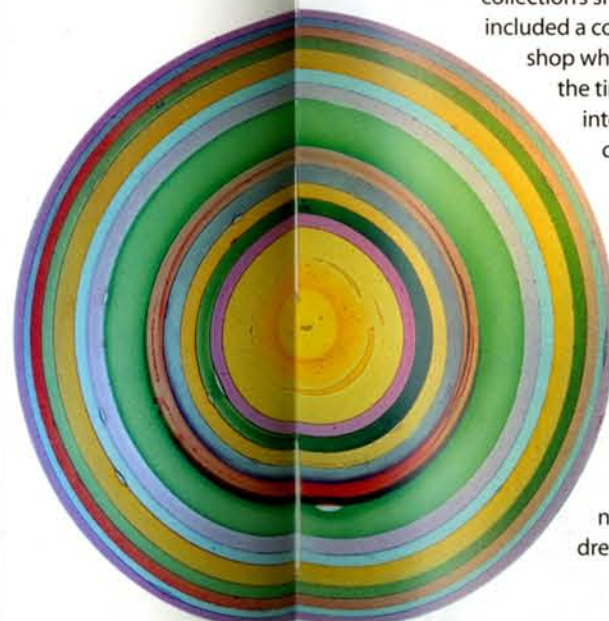


Nesting Glasses, 1950s.

same style as in foreign examples. After a stubborn struggle Franck was able to convince the somewhat less visionary factory management and marketing executives that simple, stackable vessels for varied use were the requirement of contemporary households where space was at a premium. The campaign ended with the president of the corporation finally saying: "At least let him try." This everyday dinner service employing a few basic elements was made in white and four colours. Franck's only decoration was a carefully chosen colour. Immediately a classic, *Kilta* was made from 1953 until 1974, and when discontinued in 1974 over 20 million units of the service had been sold.

Franck's whole philosophy of design can be symbolized by the *Kilta* collection's small creamer, which included a cork. It could be taken to a shop when buying cream, which at the time was still sold straight into the consumer's own container, and it could be kept cold by placing it between the inner and outer window in homes that still lacked refrigerators. It could also be placed on the table for serving cream. It is a simple, functional, timeless object that is still being made, now under the name of *Teema*, for salad dressing.

Ring Plate, 1970s.



The Nuutajärvi glassworks 1951–1976

When a change in ownership led to a merger of Arabia with the Nuutajärvi glassworks in 1950, Kaj Franck was immediately hired, being appointed to the post of artistic director the next year. As in other situations, here, too, Franck had unflinching intuition in selecting skilled co-workers. Talented students of the School of Applied Arts were hired at Nuutajärvi as trainees for the summer seasons, and some of them came to stay. At first all the artists and designers shared a studio, which resulted in cooperation and constructive criticism, far from any kind of internal rivalry.

At Nuutajärvi, Franck carried on his bare and simplified line, now in household glassware. As early as 1953 he had managed to create a classic, a pressed tumbler of coloured glass. Coloured glass was used mainly because the moulds at Nuutajärvi were not yet of sufficiently high quality for making flawless clear glass. In this connection, Franck was able to turn necessity into virtue, as the glassworks had an ample supply of dyes at the time. His pressed glass pieces met all the criteria of the everyday objects of aesthetic appeal. They were suited to various situations, in addition to being durable, cheap, stable, easy to wash, and they gave the consumer a choice of several colours in standard design. For a year, the sales of this tumbler accounted for one third of the Nuutajärvi glassworks' output.

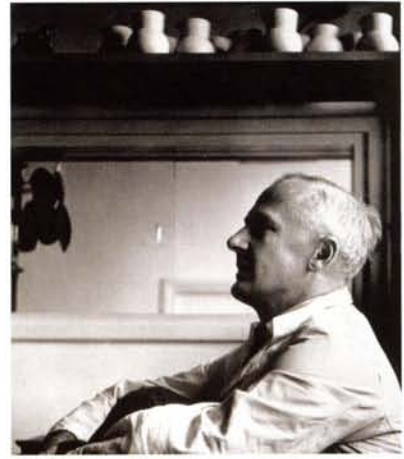
Art glass

Even though simple glassware in large series was the major professional challenge, art glass was an opportunity for playful, liberating rich artistic expression. Art glass entailed close cooperation with the glass blowers, and the quick tempo of the work was a change from strictly controlled, long-term process of serial manufacture. In *Soap Bubble*, his first work of art glass for Nuutajärvi, Franck tested, for example, the limits of available techniques for achieving the thinnest possible blown glass. He boldly experimented with the effect of different additives in the glass, which in many cases resulted in the renewing of traditional techniques.

Upon Kaj Franck's initiative, two Italian glassblowers came to Nuutajärvi in the summer of 1951 to revive the filigree technique that had made the glassworks widely known a hundred years previously. The Finnish version of filigree glass which has been made at Nuutajärvi since the 1960s, and which Franck called "rag-rug filigree", is mostly considerably heavier in its forms than its refined and light Venetian counterpart. Throughout Franck's period at Nuutajärvi, his art glass recurrently employed stripes and bands of colour of all kinds in goblets, jars, bottles, jugs and glasses – thin, fragile, broad, colourful, always with a definite rhythm and harmony of nuances. Art glass remained Kaj Franck's continually renewed and free field of experiment.



Kilta tableware



Kaj Franck

Teacher

All who have been taught by Kaj Franck speak of him in superlatives, describing him as charismatic, stimulating, encouraging, and commanding respect. He gave instructive assignments that activated all the sense, and "one sat like in church" during his critique sessions.

Franck did his utmost to impress upon his students that product design is a question of trying to achieve the self-evident, that every material has its own honest form and technique, that objects as such are not the important thing for the designer but rather a creative solution to current problem, and that objects should be necessary, practical, justified and correct. He would bring together students of different degree programmes to participate in joint courses, in the hope that it would lead to future cooperation across professional boundaries. With reference to his own experience, he spoke as much about the difficulties of the work and of failure as about success. He trained his charges for life.

Looking purely at the dates of Franck's career in teaching design – instructor at the School of Design from

1945 to 1960, senior teacher and artistic director from 1960 to 1967 – one is struck by the generosity of the fact that an artist and designer who was fully occupied in other respects devoted so much of his time and energy to teaching and instruction. For Kaj Franck, this was about taking responsibility for the future of applied art and design to develop and carry on the philosophy of design that was his conviction.

Prize Winner

Kaj Franck's work was duly recognized, and the list of the prizes and awards received by him both in Finland and abroad is long. As a result of being awarded the Lunning Prize in 1955, which included a grant for travel, and receiving an Asla stipend in the same year, the following year, 1956, was largely a sabbatical for personal development for Franck. He began his grand tour in the United States, where he familiarized himself with the leading schools of design and their teaching methods in the Bauhaus spirit.

It was no surprise that Franck travelled to Japan as a Lunning scholar.

Japanese culture had always been his second spiritual and intellectual home. It was here that his convictions of the aesthetic of functionalism, the importance of tradition and of good household wares were reinforced. Much later, after retirement in the mid-1980s, a Japanese garden was created in Finland as a "rock garden of science and art" in the courtyard of the Ministry of Education in Helsinki.

The Kaj Franck Prize

Established in 1992, the Kaj Franck Prize honours the designer who has no doubt played the most important role in the development of applied art and design in Finland. Franck himself was a strong proponent of anonymity in everyday utility items, which by no means meant that the designer can deny his or her part of the responsibility for what has been made. Through his oeuvre, Kaj Franck has provided examples that can be expected to inspire designers to work in his spirit, in order for the prize bearing his name to have worthy recipients even in the future. ■

Transl. J.K.



*Pressed glassware,
1950s-1960s.*