

Festive years for Iittala's glass factory and museum

This year represents a remarkable milestone for Iittala, both for the factory and for the Glass Museum. The Iittala glass factory is turning 130 and the Iittala Glass Museum, which showcases the products of the factory, is now 40 years old. Along with the factory, the museum has established its place as a specialized museum of the industry. The stories of the products attract tourists; after getting to know the history in the museum, it is interesting to visit the factory and watch the glass being made.

Founding the factory and the museum

The Iittala glass factory was founded by *Petrus Magnus Abrahamsson* from Sweden, who came to Iittala from the Nuutajärvi glass factory. The Senate of Imperial Finland granted a permit for a glass factory in April 1881 and the first glass objects were blown on 24 November 1881. On the 90th anniversary of the glass factory in November 1971, the Glass Museum was opened on Lasimäki (Glass Hill) in the old cattle house of Orvo farm. The museum was designed by architect *Juhani Kivikoski*, who was the factory manager at the time. Currently, the collections of the Glass Museum belong to the Finnish Design Museum, and the museum exhibits the most important products in the history of the factory.

Early years of the glass factory

The factory was located in Iittala, close to a railway and Lake Äimäjärvi, which provided access to waste wood for fuel from an adjacent sawmill. In the early years, the factory had 50 employees, and the first blowers were from Sweden. At its peak, the factory had several hundred employees. Currently, the number of personnel has stabilized to just under two hundred.

Throughout its first few decades, the factory mainly produced glassware for pharmacies and household items and the product range was predominantly based on traditional models from abroad. However, some objects were manufactured, polished and engraved to order, as well as the patriotic *Suomi (Finland)*, *Vapen and Suurmies (Great man)* pressed glass series, which were Iittala's earliest original designs. The moulds for these were engraved by the mould master of the factory, *Alfred Gustafsson*.

As Finland became independent in 1917, *Karhula-Iittala* was born, and that name was used in marketing up until the 1950s. The new owner implemented some technical reforms at Iittala and organized a division of labour between the factories in the 1930s: bottles and pressed glass were manufactured in Karhula and blown glass products were made in Iittala.

Crystal services were in high demand during the 1920s and 1930s, even though the sale of alcohol was prohibited at the time. Flamboyant ground and polished objects manufactured for the Barcelona World Exhibition in 1929 – also on display at the Iittala museum – were especially magnificent.

In the 1930s, *Göran Hongell* was hired as the first actual designer. His *Aarne* glass set, designed in 1948, was awarded a gold medal at the 1954 Milan Triennale – and is still in production.

Alvar and Aino Aalto

The names of *Alvar* and *Aino Aalto* have been connected to Karhula-Iittala since the design contests organized in the 1930s. The longest-lived product in the current Iittala collection, the *Aino Aalto* series, was originally manufactured in Karhula. The most famous Iittala product internationally, and an icon of Finnish design, the *Aalto* vase was also originally blown in Karhula before production was moved to Iittala in the 1940s. The Aalto vase is a part of the winning contest entry "*Eskimonaisen nahkahousut*" ("*Eskimo woman's leather trousers*") designed by Alvar Aalto for the Karhula-Iittala design contest in 1936.

Wirkkala, Franck, Sarpaneva

In 1946, *Tapio Wirkkala* won a competition for figured glass design, while *Kaj Franck* was placed second.

Their arrival at Iittala revolutionized glass design, making it an important part of the golden era of Finnish design during the following decades.

After Kaj Franck left Iittala in the late 1940s to modernize the range of products made at the Nuutajärvi glass factory (owned by Wärtsilä Group), *Timo Sarpaneva* was hired to replace him. Iittala, Wirkkala and Sarpaneva formed a strong team as Finland participated in international exhibitions in the 1950s. The concept of "Finnish Design" was further enhanced by pieces such as Wirkkala's *Kantarelli (Chanterelle)* and *Jäävuori (Iceberg)* and the ground and polished *Triennaali (Triennial)* objects, as well as Timo Sarpaneva's *Kajakki (Kayak)*, *Lansetit (Lancets)* and *Orkideat (Orchids)*. All of these are also being exhibited at the Iittala Glass Museum.

As a counterbalance to the spectacular art glass of the 1950s, Timo Sarpaneva designed a modern utility glassware collection whose magnificent world of colour and variety can be seen at the museum: violet, bluish, greenish and greyish glass, objects which can be easily combined with each other and with other materials. Sarpaneva also designed the packages, displays, advertisements and a specific typography for the series. The entity was called the *i-linja (i-line)*. The 'i' sign designed as the symbol of the i-line (a white letter 'i' in a red circle) soon became Iittala's logo.

Pock-marked and unleaded i-glass in the 1960s

In the 1960s, Iittala modernized its production methods and developed a new glass – i-crystal: a modern, unleaded crystal glass that was dishwasher-safe, aiming for the future. Iittala stopped manufacturing ground and polished glass and the factory concentrated on clear glass and a few selected colours.

The natural, pock-marked surface of the glass created in the charred wooden mould of Timo Sarpaneva's Finlandia art glass collection modernized the look of Iittala's clear glass. In memory of this, the Iittala Glass Museum is exhibiting the *Ikonoostaasi (Iconostasis)* collection designed by Timo Sarpaneva, consisting of used moulds from the Finlandia series. Subsequently, pock-marked glass was also used in utility glassware. The success and production of Sarpaneva's *Festivo* candlesticks and Wirkkala's *Ultima Thule* series originating from that era still continue.

Return to clear glass in the 1970s

The demand for smooth-surfaced glass started to grow again. Timo Sarpaneva designed the *Pisaranrengas (Droplet circle)* series, pioneering new combinations of different materials. *Jorma Vennola's Paula* series combined glass with metal and his *Kaveri (Fellow)* glass set combined glass with plastic. New methods were developed and Timo Sarpaneva's bubbly *Arkipelago (Archipelago)* collection was born. Assignments were now also being given to freelance designers.

Aalto vase as the flagship in the 1980s

The Iittala glass factory turned 100 in 1981. The number of vases, candle lanterns and other separate gift products grew in the selection, alongside glass sets.

In 1986, the Aalto vase turned 50 and its popularity took off in terms of both domestic sales and exports. An object that for decades had only been valued by specialists in modernism became the flagship of Iittala.

In 1988, A. Ahlström and Wärtsilä merged their utility glassware industries and Iittala-Nuutajärvi Oy was born. The designs from Nuutajärvi, Kaj Franck's legacy and contributions from designers *Oiva Toikka*, *Kerttu Nurminen* and *Markku Salo* were shared by both glass factories.

The 1990s; a time of great changes

Hackman Group, which owned the cutlery and cooking vessel industry marketed under the brand name Hackman, started to develop a product branch for cooking and bought Iittala-Nuutajärvi in the beginning of 1991. This Hackman Group division was first called Hackman Tabletop, but the name was soon changed to Hackman Designer. Iittala gradually became the trademark for all glass production.

In conjunction with the 200th anniversary of Nuutajärvi in 1993, Kaj Franck's coloured *Kartio (Cone)* glass was taken into production again. The press line was moved from Nuutajärvi to Iittala, where the rest of the machine glass production was already located, and coloured glass became a major success for Iittala. The year of Alvar Aalto's 100th anniversary, a significant international event, was a success for the Aalto collection, whose original colours were re-issued, along with some limited edition varieties.

In 1999, Iittala launched its *Iittala relations* collection, which, in addition to the work of Finnish designers *Annaleena Hakatie* and *Harri Koskinen*, included the work of some foreign designers, such as *Konstantin Grcic* from Germany. This was a good way to seek international content for the globalizing market.

Growth through internationalization and a strong new owner

In 2003, a new Iittala collection was launched, combining glass with other materials. Iittala became an international product and decoration brand. In the same year, the name of the company was changed to Iittala Group. In 2006, the Iittala glass factory turned 125, which was commemorated by a large exhibition in the Finnish Design Museum.

In August 2007, Iittala was acquired by Fiskars Oyj. Fiskars, best known for its orange-handled scissors, is a time-honoured Finnish company just like Iittala, appreciating design and high quality as important values. Currently, the Iittala glass factory belongs to the Fiskars Home division of the Fiskars Group.

At the moment, the glass factory can be classified as a short-run manufacturer specializing in coloured glass. The factory produces glass products both by machine and traditionally, by mouth blowing. Internationally acknowledged pressed glass products include the *Aino Aalto* and *Kartio (Cone)* glasses, the *Kivi (Stone)* candle lanterns and Oiva Toikka's *Kastehelmi (Dewdrop)* glass set, which was re-launched in 2009. In addition to the colourful and multiform Aalto collection, *Aurora* glasses and *Kartio (Cone)* vases are produced by mouth blowing. In honour of Iittala's 130th anniversary, the magnificent modernized *Claritas* collection was launched in the spring. The production of these items requires great skill, both in blowing and grinding the glass.

Currently, visitors are allowed to enter the factory during weekdays to watch how glass takes form in the hands of skilled blowers and to see how beautiful items are produced. Seeing the production further enhances the appreciation of the products. During the summer season, there were visitors from more than thirty different countries. The production of unique Iittala glass was of interest to American, Japanese and Australian tourists.

Previously, glass-blowing was a skill passed down through the generations. Even now there are third- and fourth-generation glass professionals employed at the glass factory. People at the factory are looking confidently to the future and strongly believe that the generations-long tradition will continue.

Pipe, bucket and mould at the museum

Since 1997, the second floor of the glass museum has also housed the *Pipe, bucket and mould* exhibition designed by *Joni Liukkonen*, a vocational high school graduate in glass arts. The exhibition showcases glass-working tools and explains how they are used. The exhibition is a tribute to all glass workers and their versatile skills; glass objects have been manufactured for centuries using similar tools. All exhibited objects are from Iittala's glass factory, where they have served in different stages of the work process.

More information

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