

Kaj Franck, designer : April 16-October 12, 1992

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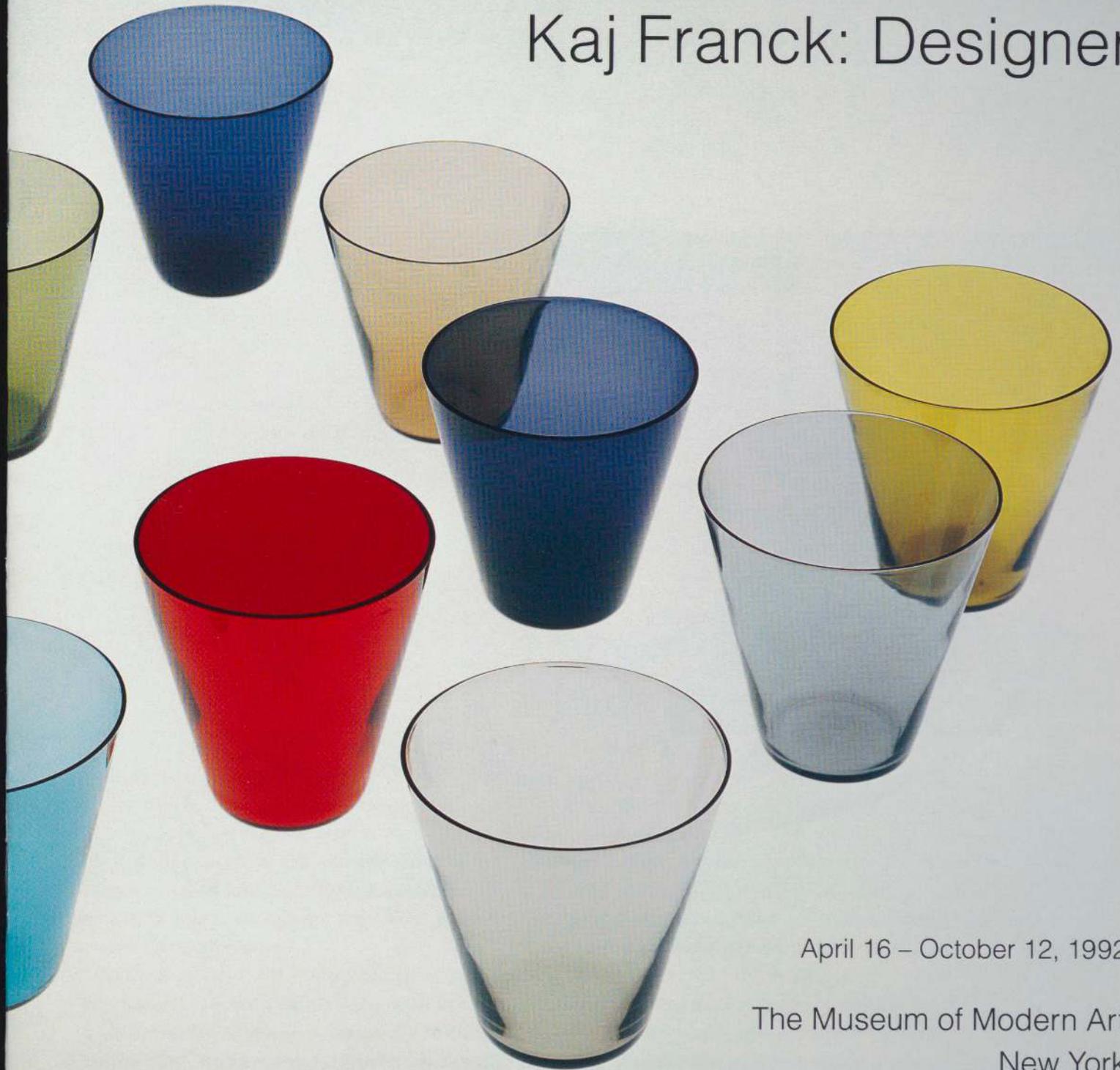
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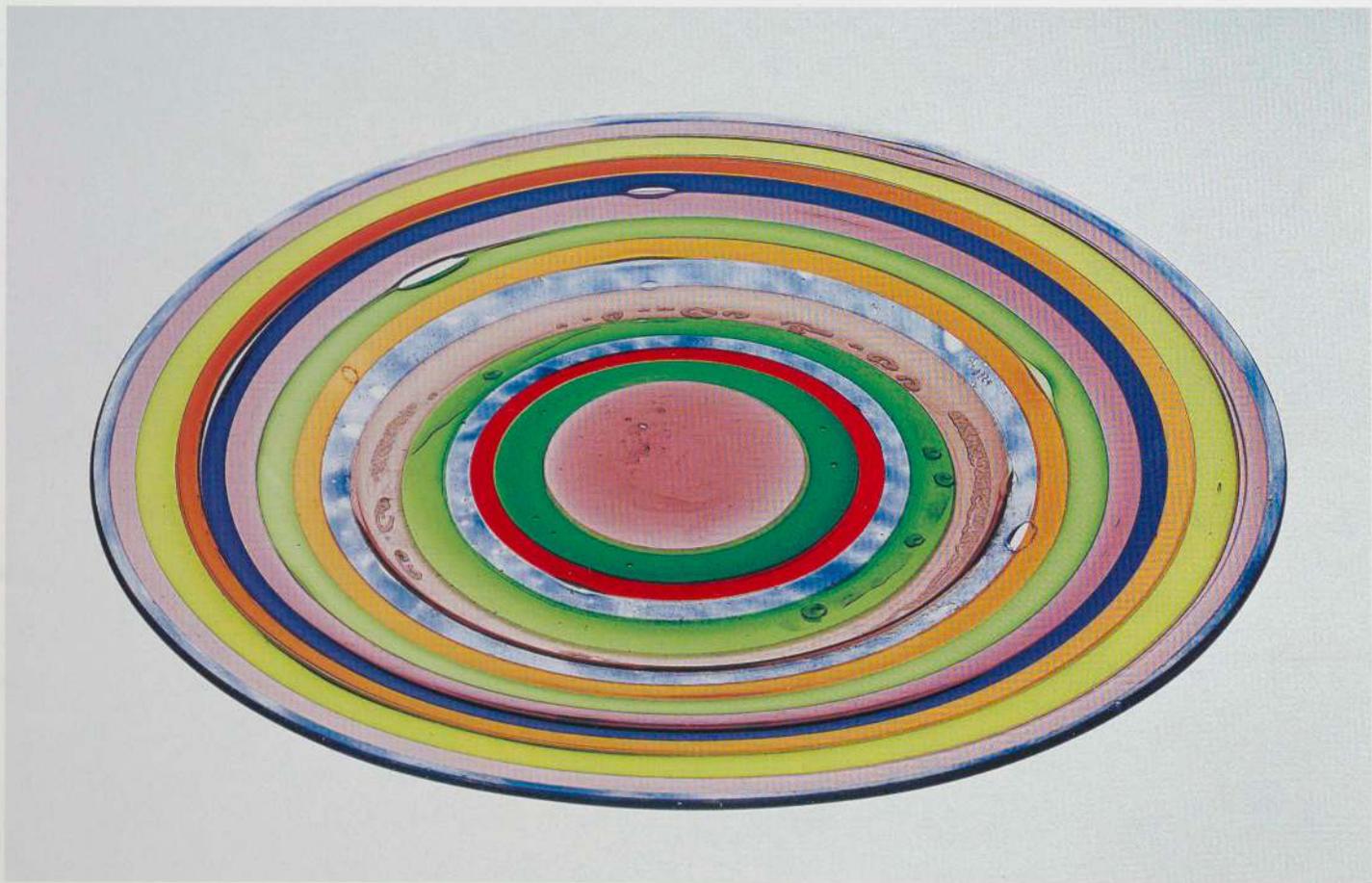
Kaj Franck: Designer



April 16 – October 12, 1992

The Museum of Modern Art
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Ring Plate, 1968
Mfr.: Nuutajärvi
Photo: Jean Barbier

Kaj Franck: Designer

Since the Industrial Revolution and the introduction of mass production, many architects and designers have aspired to create good, affordable products for popular consumption. In practice their utopian goal of improving people's lifestyles through quality design has rarely been realized. Most of the resulting designs are either too expensive, badly made, or, for some other reason, unpopular with the very people they're meant for. A notable exception is the ceramic, glass, and plastic tableware by Finnish designer Kaj Franck (1911–1989).

In Scandinavia during the 1950s and 1960s there occurred a rare moment in the history of modern design. It was a period when an abundance of beautiful, well-designed, and highly functional mass-produced household objects was made available at affordable prices. More importantly, consumers responded enthusiastically. In Finland good design became a subject of national pride; designers became celebrities, industry was modernized, and a newfound export market resulted in economic prosperity. Kaj Franck was a pioneering force in this awakening of postwar design. His prolific output ranged from the rigorously functional to the purely decorative. Durable, practical, and immensely popular, his designs defined a new style for housewares. The influence of his work is still apparent in consumer products available around the world.

Franck believed that mass-produced utilityware must first and foremost serve the needs of the user. His unusual definition of beauty — "necessary, functional, justified, right" — corresponds to his belief that a certain

truth is embodied in an object that simply and elegantly fulfills its purpose. As Le Corbusier referred to his houses as "machines for living," Franck perceived his designs as anonymous tools for eating, preparing, and serving food. Yet this highly rationalist work, reflecting its maker's essential humanism, maintains a particular warmth and softness not often associated with highly functional objects: "It is important for me to think of the situation as a whole, to consider why or for what purpose I am actually designing the piece. I have to be able to imagine one of my friends using the object."

Franck's career has been described as a search for the perfect relationship between man and the mass-produced object. The designer's responsibility, he felt, is to adapt the production process, materials, and ultimately the object itself to best serve the needs of the consumer. The goal of the designer, then, becomes the solution to a problem, not the object itself. Franck was enamored of the indigenous crafts of Finland and wrote that the ordinary "milk bowl" common in its rustic homes was a "kind of ideal functional object." It was an elementary utensil that could be put to a great variety of uses, and Franck strived to make his products as universal and useful.

To achieve what he called an "optimal object," Franck used a vocabulary of basic geometric forms: circles, squares, cylinders, and rectangles. Like many modernists, including those at the Bauhaus in Germany, Franck understood these shapes as the most logical and immediate solutions to a variety of design problems.

Pitcher, 1950s
Mfr.: Nuutajärvi
Photo: Jean Barbier



He also saw in them a certain universal truth and purity. Franck did not claim to have been the inventor of these forms (the optimal form for a bowl, for example, had evolved in an almost Darwinian fashion), but merely to have applied them to their logical purpose.

Franck's work cannot be separated from geographic, sociological, and historical elements of Finnish culture. Even the Finnish language expresses the frugality innate to the culture: many Finnish nouns are actually descriptions of an object's function. The country's harsh and isolated geographic conditions have had a marked effect on its development. In the North, self-subsistent households existed well into the twentieth century. After the war, old rural traditions were almost immediately transformed into new industrial practices, but the austerity that characterized traditional handicrafts remained apparent in postwar design. This austerity is analogous to that of traditional Japanese design or even Shaker objects. All three share an inherent respect for nature and a sensitivity to natural materials.

Franck's work also conveys a strong sense of social responsibility sympathetic to his country's liberal political climate. Early in his career Franck perceived his role as a designer as helping to repair and rebuild war-torn Finland and, to a lesser degree, the rest of Europe. Soldiers with young families needed goods, older people needed to replace objects, and thrift was paramount. A new modern style and philosophy had to be invented for the postwar age. Production techniques had to be rethought and industry retooled.

Franck, who had been working as a designer of interiors and fabrics, received his first opportunity to design mass-production tableware in 1945, when he was made an art director at the ceramic manufacturer Arabia. Founded in 1874 on the outskirts of Helsinki, Arabia was one of the largest ceramic manufacturers in Europe. His first production piece for Arabia was the MK Creamer of

Pitchers and Decanters.

1950s

Mfr.: Nuutajärvi

Photo: Jean Barbier



Prototype Ceramics. 1955

Mfr.: Arabia

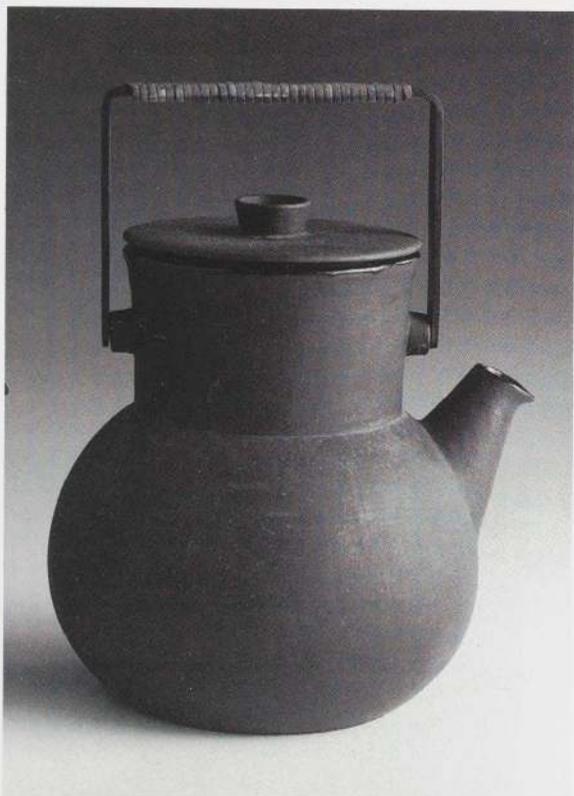
Photo: PF-Studio

Prototype Coffee Pot.

1954

Mfr.: Arabia

Photo: Indav, Finland



1948. This ingenious vessel fit in the space between the double windows common in Finnish architecture. Thus it could be stored and kept cold in the window sill (a highly desirable feature in view of the energy shortages and scarcity of refrigerators in postwar Finland).

Franck's first complete set of tableware was introduced in 1953. The Kilta (Guild) series remained in production for twenty-two years and was enormously successful, selling an estimated 25 million pieces worldwide (this is particularly impressive considering that the population of Finland during this period was under five million people). Kilta was a radical departure for Arabia and for the design of tableware in general; it lacked applied decoration and could be used in a multitude of combinations. Like all of Franck's products, it was well conceived and responsive to consumer needs. The Kilta series was designed specifically for a postwar economy. It was the first tableware to be sold by the individual piece, so that consumers were able to buy it as they could afford to expand their set. In addition, with its simple geometric shapes, lack of ornament, and variety of solid colors, it was intended to mix easily with tableware already owned.

The Kilta tableware was made of a durable earthenware, which could go directly from oven to table. All the plates, saucers, and serving dishes stacked, and the lids were interchangeable. Even the saucer was rethought and redesigned; it lacked an indentation for the bottom of the cup, so it also could be used as a small dish.

Franck had democratized the style of tableware. The homey Kiltaware had no inherent socioeconomic connotations; it did not easily define itself as expensive or inexpensive. Its elegant simplicity made it appropriate for use on a variety of occasions and in a variety of settings, and therefore it eliminated the need for families to own more than one set of tableware.

In 1981 Franck introduced Teema (Team), a varia-

tion on Kilta that was made of stoneware and could go directly from microwave to table. Earlier, in 1979, he experimented with plastics, creating the most economical of his table settings, the Easy Day, which is produced by Sarvis. Like the Kilta and Teema sets, the plasticware is stackable, interchangeable, and available in a few basic colors.

All three series exhibit a timeless quality, both in practice and in style. Teema mixed easily with its predecessor; many of the lids fit both series. Franck abhorred the fact that much of a capitalist economy was dependent on "built-in obsolescence" because of changing styles. His strict adherence to simple forms and purity of design resulted in works whose appeal is unaffected by the fluctuations of fashion.

Franck's innovations also extended to the manufacturing process. He believed that all participants in the process, from the factory worker to the marketing expert, should have an almost equal role. This cooperative approach helped the designer adapt the object to simplify the production process. This simplification is exemplified by the Kilta and Teema series: add a handle to the sugar bowl and it becomes a coffee mug; add a spout and it becomes a creamer.

From 1951 to 1976 Franck was artistic director at Nuutajärvi glass factory, and the company enjoyed a renaissance under his direction. Nuutajärvi was known primarily for its work in colored glass. Like Arabia and Iittala (a competing glass factory where Franck also worked) Nuutajärvi was a place where artists were encouraged to experiment. Here Franck designed most of his "art" glass pieces, including the "Soap Bubbles," "Morning in Athens," and the multicolored ringed plates. Franck produced these works in very small numbers and separated them philosophically from his mass-production pieces. These works gave him an opportunity to express a more artistic side while experimenting

Kilta Series. 1953-75

MK Creamer. 1948

Mfr.: Arabia

Photo: The Museum of
Modern Art, New York



Salt and Pepper Shakers.

1959-68

Mfr.: Arabia

Photo: Kate Keller



with materials and colors. The knowledge gained from these experiments was later applied to production pieces.

Like the ceramics, the mass-production glassware designed for Nuutajärvi emphasizes elementary geometric forms, particularly the cylinder. Their finely finished surfaces and colors are the works' only decoration. The fundamental reason for the beauty of these works is their elegant proportions, which attain a measure of perfection. Franck often borrowed shapes and forms from scientific labware. The necessary functionalism and purity of purpose inherent in beakers and flasks obviously appealed to him.

Franck's use of subtle muted colors in his glass illustrates a sensitivity to the nature of the material and the manner in which light affects it. Glass is a medium whose experience depends intrinsically on light, and, because of Finland's proximity to the north pole, light plays a particularly important role in its culture (the quality of light changes dramatically with the seasons).

Franck began teaching at the Institute of Industrial Arts in Helsinki in 1960. The turbulence of the 1960s did not elude the design world, and the field was becoming increasingly politicized. Design had become a major export industry in Finland. This was partly the result of successes at numerous international exhibitions including the Milan Triennales of the mid-fifties. A new sense of national identity was created, and a star cult had developed around individual designers. Manufacturers used the names and personalities of their designers to market their products. Products were sold to the public as works by specific artists, not for any objective value. This offended the modest Franck, who in 1966 called for anonymity in the design and marketing of utilityware. The star cult, he believed, had bled the creative energies of designers by encouraging them to produce objects simply to satisfy consumer demand for the new and novel.

Easy Day
1979-present
Mfr.: Sarvis
Photo: Jean Barbier



Kilita Storage Containers:
1953-75
Mfr.: Arabia
Photo: Jean Barbier

OPPOSITE:

"Soap Bubble." 1950s

Mfr.: Nuutajärvi

Photo: Jean Barbier

Franck has often been called the "conscience of Finnish design." Through his designs, writings, and twenty-nine-year teaching career he influenced many generations of young designers. His products, because of their anonymous universality, remain among the most successful in the history of modern design. Franck synthesized utility and aesthetics with the utmost refinement, creating products that continue to look as contemporary today as they did when they were first introduced. The timeless quality of his work illustrates one of the most important tenets of modernism: that an emphasis on functionalism, integrity of materials, and purity of form can produce a product whose value outlasts the ephemeral superficialities of style.

Christopher Mount
Curatorial Assistant



Vase, Ashtray, and Dish.
1946–49

Mfr.: Iittala

Photo: Jean Barbier



COVER:

Stacking Glasses.

1956-64.

Mfr.: Nuutajärvi

Photo: Jean Barbier

Acknowledgments

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