

Art of Scandinavia: Design in the 20th century

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Introduction

One of the most significant contributions of the Scandinavian countries to the European fine arts has been in the field of design. The Scandinavian countries have achieved world-wide renown by attributing a modern aesthetic to their traditional craft industries.

The strong indigenous craft tradition, which developed as early as the Viking age, was preserved and protected in the Scandinavian arts throughout the centuries. The awakening of these crafts into a conscious national aesthetic in the 19th century laid the foundations of a movement that would represent the new modern Scandinavia and achieve international acclaim by the 20th. The idea of beautifying simple, everyday objects in modern styles and materials and producing them with low cost production has absorbed the Scandinavian design world for the past century.

Chapter 1: Indigenous Craft Work

The Scandinavian Countries have a strong craft tradition dating as far back as the Viking age. The relatively small size of the countries combined with their abundant natural resources and largely homogenous populations have helped the tradition of indigenous craft work prevail.

A concern with the aesthetic design of crafts can be seen in the Scandinavian arts as far back as the Vikings; The Osberg findings saw textile and wooden engravings of professional standard and the interiors; furnishings of Norway's medieval churches demonstrate craftsmanship in their pulpit engravings; various items of copper and silver ceremonial paraphernalia; and perhaps most importantly the beautifully-woven church textiles such as those at Baldishol and Høyland*.

Up until the 20th century decoration in the Scandinavian countries continued to be heavily influenced by national folklore. This is most prominent in Norway, where Viking-revival imagery was immensely popular. This gained particular popularity during the Jugend period at the turn of the century which saw a renaissance in the use of ancient Viking insignia such as drakes and dragons' heads, which have since become something of a national symbol*.



*Ale bowl/ Kjenge
Luraas, Thomas
Date: ca. 1845
Place: Norway-
Hardanger*

This drinking bowl has one handle in the shape of a crowned lion and the other in the shape of a snake. The snake may be a representation of the snake from the Garden of Eden, with an apple under its chin.

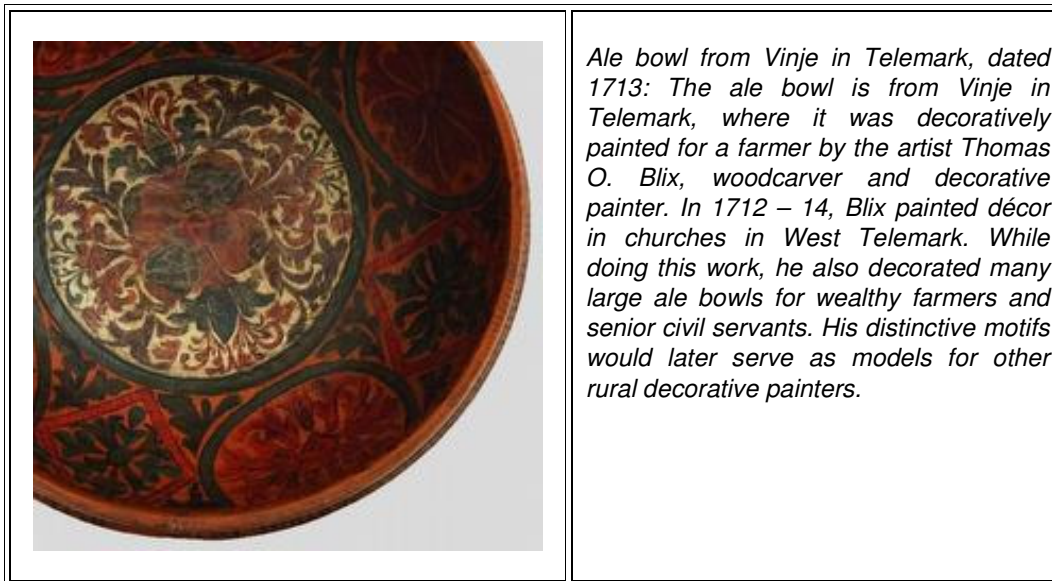


*Fireside bench
August
Halvorsen, Kongsberg
Wooden handcarved
bench with winged
lions at ends. Front
view.*



Fireside bench August Halvorsen. Side view

Different Scandinavian regions perfected different crafts. In Norway the region of Gudbrandsdalen is known for its pictorial weaving and Hardanger is noted for its needlework. The most widely practiced example of Norwegian craft is the art of Rosmaling or 'rose painting' that developed particularly in the regions of Hallingdal and Telemark Fylke. The technique, which consisted of painting patterns with flowers, was frequently found on the walls or the ceiling beams, as well as on utensils such as ale bowls, caskets and jugs of peasant and farming communities*. The painters were untrained local craftsmen often learning the technique from local artists or older rosmalers. These traditions continued into the 21st century.



Ale bowl from Vinje in Telemark, dated 1713: The ale bowl is from Vinje in Telemark, where it was decoratively painted for a farmer by the artist Thomas O. Blix, woodcarver and decorative painter. In 1712 – 14, Blix painted décor in churches in West Telemark. While doing this work, he also decorated many large ale bowls for wealthy farmers and senior civil servants. His distinctive motifs would later serve as models for other rural decorative painters.

Weaving is an important Nordic and predominantly Norwegian craft dating back to the Stone Age. During the Viking Age the tools required for weaving became so sophisticated that they would be used for the following centuries. Impressive frieze-like tapestries were found in the Oseberg ship with images of richly laden carriages, warriors and knights. Different regions in Norway developed different styles of weave; in the north and by the Lapps Rano weaving was prominent; at Helgeland and More it was pile-woven rugs; The west country produced chequer-board aklaer; and Gudbrandsdalen, Osterdalen and Trondelag specialised in double weaving*. The ancient tradition of 'pictorial weaving' became especially prevalent in the region of Gudbrandsdalen during the Renaissance.



Craft production in other parts of Scandinavia likewise developed regional characteristics; Finland is known for its production of an ornament of bent wood called 'dark drawing' and the findings of prehistorical metal ornaments in Karelia; In Denmark very distinct folk art regions can be distinguished in Hedebyrde (linen embroidery), Fyn archipelago (colourful floral painting), and Jutland and Slesvig (cabinet making); and in Sweden unique built in furniture and painted or woven wall hangings were produced*.

By the mid 19th century the various systems of craft guilds were breaking down alongside an increase in the importation of foreign mass-produced goods. The arts and crafts movement, with its focus on national Romantic styles and the preservation of the traditional crafts, reacted strongly to this. In Sweden this was done in the creation of Svenska Slöjdföreningen (Swedish Society of Craft and Industrial Design) in 1845. An organisation focused on the preservation of the native craft tradition, which through its exhibitions, publications, and educational programs became instrumental in the development of the modernist aesthetic in Scandinavia. Such nationalistic motivations were often supported by the government, especially in Sweden where modernism was seen as a solution to the problems of overcrowding and unsanitary conditions*. In Norway opportunities promised by Independence in 1814 have been somewhat hindered by poverty.

By the late 19th century international influences brought new technology to the craft production of the Scandinavian countries. An example of this can be seen in the Hadeland Glassworks, established in 1852, which used the influence of foreign techniques to produce more refined glass. Other examples of foreign influences include Egersund Faience Industry who introduced methods of English stoneware and the Porsgrunn porcelain Factory*.

Scandinavian arts became noticed across Europe during the 1897 Stockholm Exhibition of Arts and Industries and the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris. Some of the most successful

exhibits were from the Swedish Rörstrand porcelain factory. The most notable characteristics of these were the beautiful sculpted vessels reminiscent of native flora and fauna designed by artists such as Alf Wallander and Nils Erik Lundström*.



The seriousness of the crafts in Scandinavia is demonstrated by the trend that began in the 16th century of Norwegian goldsmiths stamping their products, so the craftsman's name appeared on the finished product.

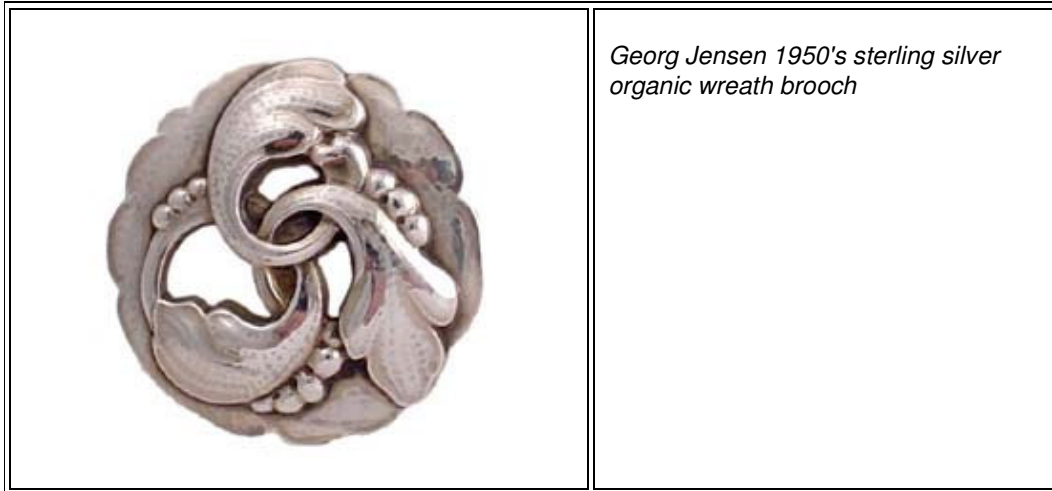
Chapter 2: 20th Century Design (1900-1950)

A century of intense design activity commenced throughout Europe in 1880. In the changing environment of politics, cultures, languages and traditions a multifaceted design philosophy emerged which had a major international presence. The Art Nouveau of the turn of the century provided a cohesive unity to the Scandinavian arts but was limited to the production of expensive one-off pieces. However, the first part of the new century saw a new wave of Swedish design, humanistic in its approach, and focused on the aesthetic of everyday objects. This approach expressed the Scandinavian's attitude towards its environment and is recognisable by its emphasis on unpretentious forms*.

This philosophy produced decorative arts of increasing international acclaim. Unlike the rest of Europe and America Scandinavian industry continued on a relatively modest scale with a continued commitment to tradition and the applied arts. The Scandinavian countries had not encountered the rapid industrialisation of the rest of Europe and as such the craft tradition was not separated from the arts and continued undisturbed by the 1914-18 war. Denmark and Finland were aware of the need to safeguard skills so institutions were set up to protect craft traditions. By mid century awareness arose of the need to incorporate these traditions into commercial production to ensure their survival and they were renamed the 'industrial arts'*.

The Art Nouveau

The Art Nouveau demonstrated a sense of unity across the Scandinavian arts from the visual arts to architecture, the decorative arts and graphics. The new style was born out of a common desire in creating a new style for the new century. The Art Nouveau however was largely focussed on craft production and only on expensive individual pieces. An example of this can be seen in the work of the Danish metalworker Georg Jensen. His workshop, founded in 1904 concentrated on the production of slick and fluid objects free of excessive decoration*.



Similarly in porcelain manufacture, the two major companies, Royal Copenhagen and Bing & Grøndahl concentrated on producing work influenced by the Japanese arts.



Sweden

In Sweden the craft arts avoided this elitist production of arts and instead struck upon a diplomatic ideal of creating an appealing aesthetic without compromising functionality. This can be seen at Gustavsberg, where although the manufacturing processes remained essentially craft-based the introduction of the artist Wilhelm Kåge in 1917 introduced the philosophy of beautifying everyday objects in a simple modern way for a substantial market*.



Surrea. Designed by Wilhelm Kåge for Gustavsberg, Sweden. 1940's.

The idea of simple, beautiful everyday goods became a focus for the Swedish arts as the century progressed. This was identified by Gregor Paulsson in 1919 in his influential book, *Vackrare Vardagsvara* (More Beautiful Things for Everyday Use). Paulsson made it his interest, as director of the Swedish Design Council (1920-23) to push the accessibility of non-elitist objects of high artistic quality. As a result this was the main focus of Swedish arts and artists in the 20s and 30s with artists such as Kåge, Simon Gate and Edward Hald, acquiring the name 'Swedish grace'- to lend grace to the chore of life*.



Beer Mug Simon Gate

The international recognition of this is reflected in their success at the 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes where they won 35 Grand Prix, 46 gold medals, 13 bronze medals and 13 honourable mentions*.

At this time Sweden began to enter the international market on a larger scale by embracing mass production. This was not the technology-based mass production of America but an effective combination of traditional production methods and new ideas of aesthetic innovation with a wealthy foreign clientele. The main companies which sprung up, aimed at the international market, included Volvo, Saab, Electrolux, Lego, Ericofon, Luxo and Poulsen.

The 1930 Stockholm Exhibition provided an important international showplace for Swedish design, but also demonstrated the clear divide that had grown between architecture and the decorative arts. While architecture was dominated by functionism, the decorative arts focussed on the humanistic aesthetic of Swedish tradition. By the end of the 1930s the decorative Scandinavian arts had acquired a more solid position in the international arts. The term Swedish Modern was used at the 1939 New York World's Fair and the style exerted considerable influence in the aesthetic of furniture of mass production in America*.

Swedish ceramics and glasswork led by Gustavsberg, Kosta and Litala emerged at the end of this period with no international equivalent. The work of Kage, Gate and Hald was joined by that of Vicke Lindstrand and Edvin Öhrström. The works were consistently more humanistic and lighter than other European examples, the approach recognisable by its unpretentious form*. Swedish furniture and textile designers likewise began to emerge at this time that were instrumental in forming the Swedish Modern style*.



*Edvin Öhrström, Vase,
Ariel, 1937;*



*Vicke Lindstrand, Vase
Tigers', Graal, 1937*

Denmark

The most consistently traditional craft based industry was Danish furniture making. This was internationally recognised in the post war years as high quality and hand made.

During the war years, while it remained virtually their only resource, Denmark led the world in its innovative wood sculpting techniques. With the importing of teak, which became popular after the Indochina war, the Danes developed a light and practical furniture that was simple, bright and user-friendly. This gained European popularity, especially in the cramped living spaces of Germany, and led to a wave of imitation Danish teak furniture*.

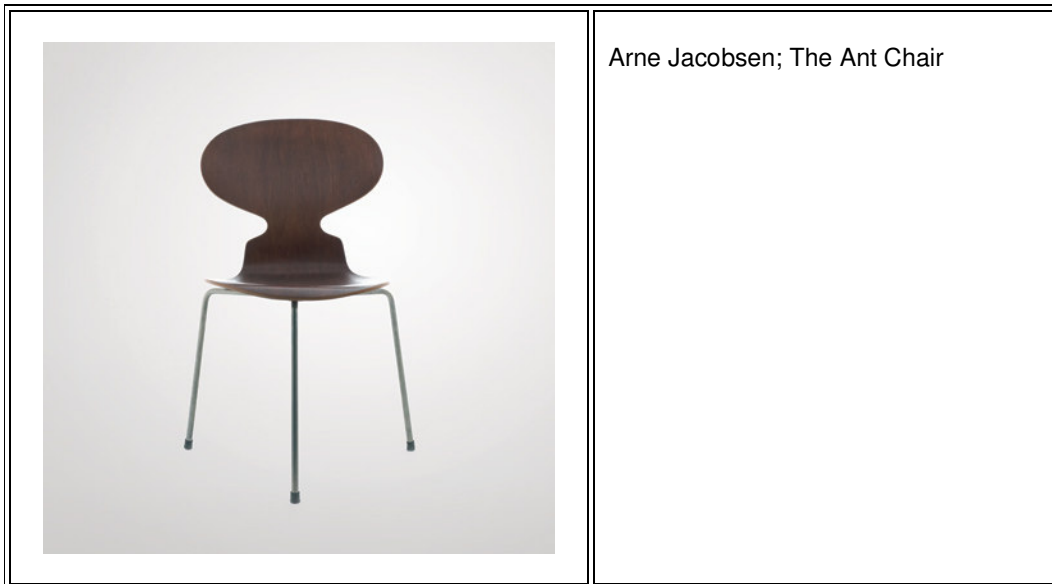
The modern style was embraced in Danish metal work by Georg Jensen in his handcrafted modern silver created for the new bourgeoisie. The biomorphic shapes of Jensen's work, closely followed by that of Johan Rohde and Henning Koppel is reflective of modern sculptural works such as those of Jean Hans Arp and Henry Moore*.

The post war years saw Denmark combine the international style with its traditions and craft in a new industrialised fashion. Newly adopted materials and industrial processes were incorporated into a modern yet comfortable and homely aesthetic*. This can be seen in the innovative lighting designs of Poul Henningsen.



*Poul Henningsen ;
Artichoke*

The Ant Chair of Arne Jacobsen became the first mass produced Danish chair.



An exception to Danish designers of this period is Verner Panton whose designs would become influential in the latter part of the 20th century and whose work continued to be more influenced by American and Italian design.

Finland

In Finland the work of architect-designer Alvar Aalto and his firm Artek, took advantage of the new machine-processed wood (such as laminated ply wood) to experiment with new forms. He gained international acclaim by designing furniture as an organic component of the architecture he was designing. Examples of this include the stools in the City Library at Lipuri, and the scroll chairs designed for the Paimio Pulmonary Sanatorium near Turko*.





Unlike its Scandinavian counterparts Finland welcomed the new materials and technology of this period. Finland's comparative lack of craft traditions and its late arrival in the modern international design scene meant Finnish designers were less committed to traditional craft ideals and its designer less restricted to working in a single medium. Key designers of the era include Timo Sarpaneva and Tapio Wirkkala who broke the boundaries between arts and crafts working between glass and ceramic art, silver art, fair architecture, sculptures and industrial design. Tapio Wirkkala is best known for his design of the Finlandia bottle*.





Platter.
Tapio
Wirkkala
(Finnish,
1915-
1985)



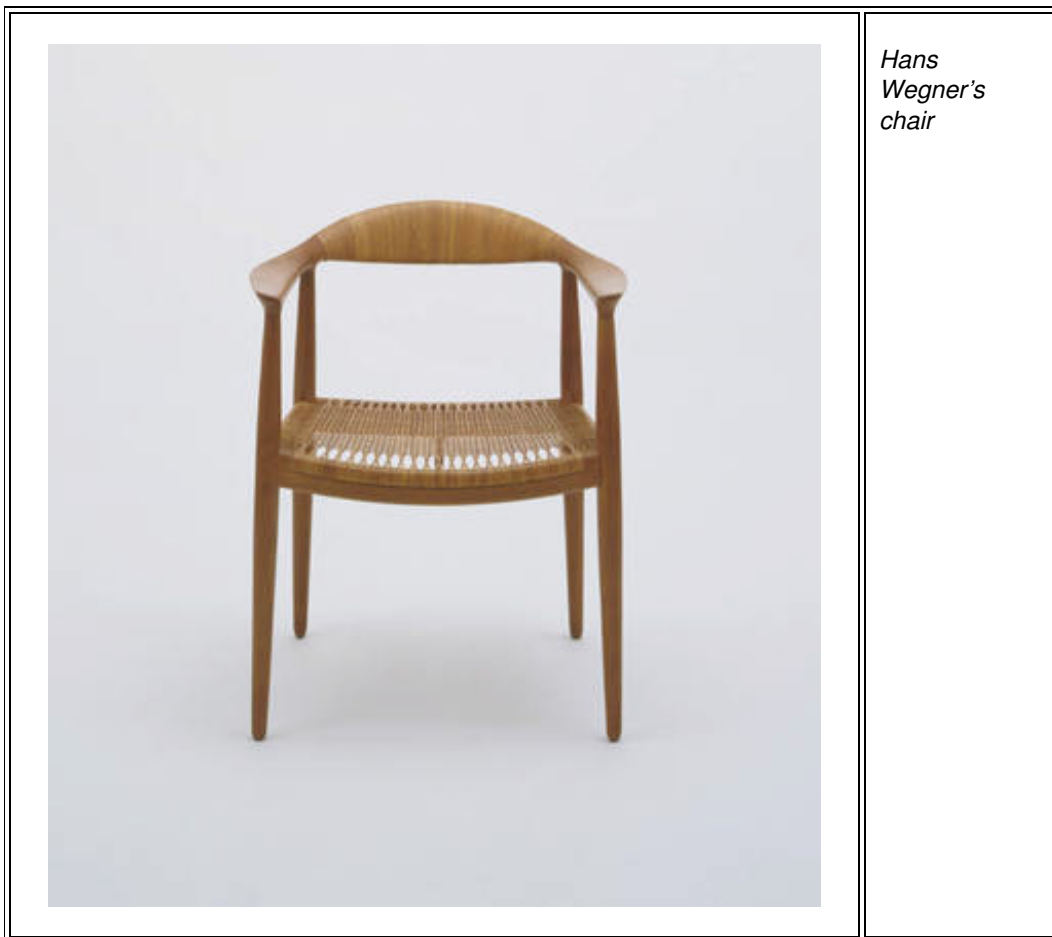
Devil's Churn
*Object*Timo
Sarpaneva (Finnish,
1926-2006)

Chapter 3: The birth of 'Scandinavian Design'

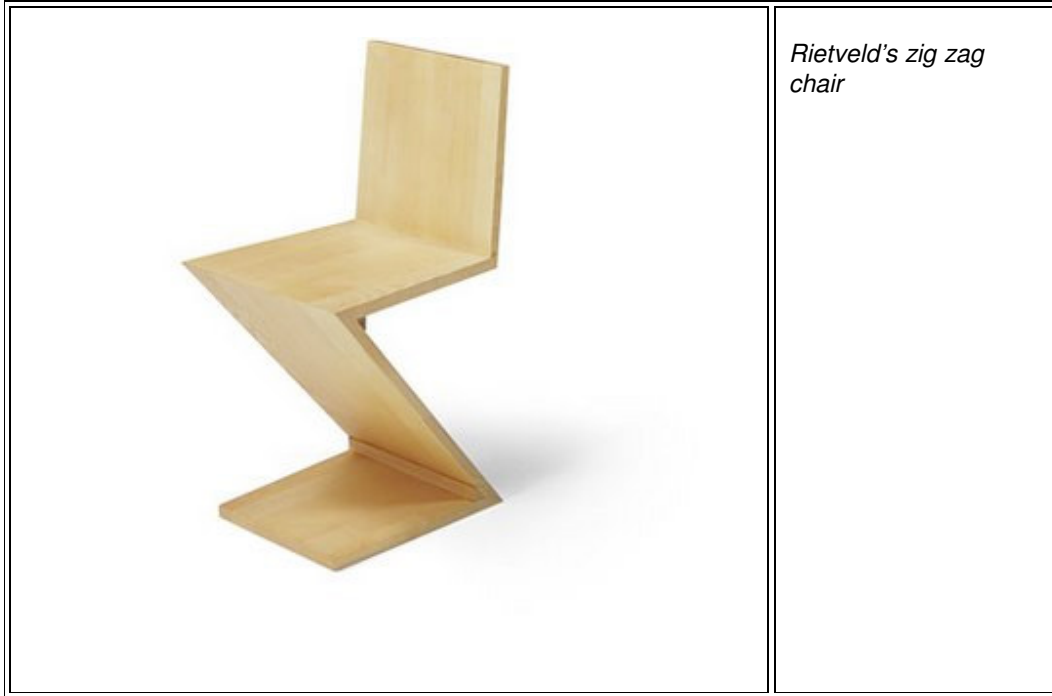
The later half of the 20th century saw a cohesive 'Scandinavian design' develop based on democratic ideals and using new materials such as form-pressed wood, plastics, anodized or enamelled aluminium, pressed steel and low cost mass production. This produced an international golden phase for Scandinavian design.

In the post-war years Scandinavian art became more diverse as each country responded to modernity in different ways*. All the countries shared a socially democratic recognition of social equality, industrialisation and urbanisation as factors of modern life. These developed differently in each country, giving a special identity to the design traditions of each. However, to the rest of Europe, these features displayed unifying qualities such as humanism, tradition, moderation, handcrafted perfectionism, modesty, quietude and purposefulness*. This was reflected in the use of simple, uncomplicated, minimalism, stylisation, functionality and low cost mass production of the designs.

Post war Scandinavia used the emerging technologies and materials in a uniquely northern European way. In response to the fashionable machine production look the Scandinavians produced smooth looking work with finished edges and curvy corners. This can be seen in the work of Hans Wegner in his famous mass produced chair created in 1949, which combined delicately turned teak legs with an oak backrest and woven seat.



The designs of the later half of the 20th century became less craft like in appearance and more mechanical. Biomorphism, for example, was combined with hard geometric edges and the manufacturing possibilities of new plastics were celebrated. The Verner Panton Stacking Chair created in the 1960s was the first single molded fiberglass chair. It bears influence of the art nouveau as well as Netherlandish designer Rietveld's zig zag chair:



'Scandinavia Design for Living,' an exhibition at Heal's department store in London in 1951, became the first exhibition to collaborate all forms of Scandinavian design outside the Nordic world. The following decade saw successful exhibitions in America with 'Design in Scandinavia' (1954-57), in Paris with the exhibition 'Formes Scandinaves' 1958, and in the Triennial exhibitions in Milan during the 1950s. These enormously successful exhibitions helped to solidify the international concept of Scandinavian design as light, modest and functional, and as a representation of Scandinavia*. Largely due to these exhibitions Scandinavia became highly influential in the development of modernism. Scandinavian products became icons of modernity and good taste.