

40 years of Wirkkala's Ultima Thule

The birth of the Ultima Thule range of glassware in 1968, designed by **Tapio Wirkkala**, tells us a lot about his approach to design. The form he created for Ultima Thule is based on what is known as the ice glass technique, which Wirkkala was involved with in developing at the Iittala Glassworks. The rough surface structure characteristic of this technique was achieved by blowing into the mould. Always the innovator and always keen to roll his sleeves up, Wirkkala did this part of the job himself at first.



Wirkkala worked as a designer at the Iittala Glassworks from 1946 to 1965, when he moved over to his own design company. He designed a multitude of art pieces for Iittala over the years, many of which received awards at the Milan Triennial in the 1950s. The first of his mass production designs was the Tapio range, which was launched in 1954 and is still a popular feature of the Iittala range to this day.

Commissioned by Finnair

As a designer, Wirkkala often worked on commissioned projects, and Ultima Thule was the result of a commission from Finnair for its new route between Helsinki and New York, opened in 1969. Wirkkala also designed plastic tableware and cutlery for the same route. The plastic products were produced by Fiskars, the Iittala Group's parent company today.

Ultima Thule has become one of Iittala's most popular glassware ranges ever, and highlight Wirkkala's view that a simple end-product often calls for the most work. For someone holding an Ultima Thule piece in their hands, the image likely to come to mind is of a block of ice that has melted, as if by nature, into a glass. In reality, the rough exterior characteristic of these glasses was the result of years of development work:

"For years now, I have been pursuing the ideas expressed in these glasses. Earlier, I tried breaking up the surface by cutting, but only now do I think I'm on the right track when I get the desired result in the glass-blowing stage."

TAPIO WIRKKALA, eye, hand and thought, Museum of Art and Design & WSOY, 2000, p. 121

Nature was an important source of inspiration for Wirkkala, and he felt most relaxed and free of the pressures of his work as an international designer in Lapland. During the time he spent there, he was always whittling away at a piece of wood, sketching, or doing something else with his hands. The latter were very much an extension of his mind.

"Making things with my hands means a lot to me. I could even say that when I sculpt or mould nature's materials it has an almost therapeutic effect. They inspire me and lead me to new experiments. They transport me into another world. A world in which, if eyesight fails, my fingertips see the movement and the continuous emergence of geometrical forms."

TAPIO WIRKKALA, eye, hand and thought, Museum of Art and Design & WSOY, 2000, p. 21

A much-celebrated master of Finnish design

Tapio Wirkkala (1915-1985) has been described as one of the true masters of Finnish design. He shifted very fluently between different materials and areas of design in his rich body of work, and worked on everything from refrigerators to banknotes and shampoo bottles. As an artist, wood and glass were closest to Wirkkala's heart, and he never ceased to explore the opportunities they offer.

Wirkkala's international breakthrough came at the Milan Triennial in 1951, where he received three Grand Prix, for his exhibition architecture, glass design, and wooden sculptures. This success continued in subsequent Triennials and other international art and design forums. Wirkkala was awarded the Nordic Lunning Prize in 1954, elected a member of the Academy of Finland in 1972, and received the Prince Eugen Medal in 1980. The Finnish Glass Museum that he designed opened in 1981 with a retrospective show of his work, and the exhibition continued from there to Moscow, Mexico City, Paris, Milan, and New York.

Of all countries Wirkkala visited he had a very warm relationship with Italy. The director of Venini glassworks, Paolo Venini, got to know Wirkkala already in the 1950s. In 1965 Wirkkala started the collaboration with Venini in Murano. He studied carefully the Venetian glassmaking techniques and the result was a wonderful fusion of Venetian and Finnish technical and artistic traditions. Wirkkala's works for Venini were displayed at e.g. Venice Biennales in 1968 and 1970. Being true of his own, innovative nature Wirkkala combined elegantly the simple Nordic forms with ancient Venetian craft techniques in order to create truly new classics – works that remain timeless.

Read more:

- TAPIO WIRKKALA, eye, hand and thought. Museum of Art and Design & WSOY, 2000

Ultima Thule products 2008:

Cordial 5 cl, Cocktail 16 cl, Juice 18 cl, O.f. 20 cl, D.o.f 28 cl, Highball 38 cl
With stem: Cordial 6 cl, White wine 16 cl, Red wine 23 cl, Goblet 34 cl
Bowls ø 115 and 200 mm
Serving platter ø 370 mm
Ice-lip pitcher 150 cl

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