

Kyösti Kakkonen Takes Us Inside His Impressive Collection of Finnish Design

Collectors' Tip, Interviews

In the world of design, Kyösti Kakkonen's collection can hardly be matched. The Finnish collector has a remarkable career behind him, during which he managed to amass over 10,000 pieces of the finest ceramic and glass design spanning over a century.

For 35 years, the prominent businessman and collector **Kyösti Kakkonen** has been carefully selecting pieces that will make his collection, including classical pieces from the golden age of Finnish design (from the 1930s to 1960s) but also contemporary examples of Finnish glass art and ceramics. The collection is considered the most significant collection of unique and limited-edition Finnish glass and ceramics in the world.

The recent project with the EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art will see a part of the Kakkonen Collection exhibited in a new 1000m² exhibition space. Around 1300 works are lent to EMMA in a long-term cooperation agreement and specific highlights from the collection will be exhibited annually. The project is expected to continue for many years, bringing the best of **Finnish design** to wider audiences. *Collection Kakkonen* at [EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern](#) in Espoo, Finland, opens on **November 10th, 2022**.

The artists from the collection draw both from local and international trends and traditions in creating pieces that testify to the enduring appeal of glass art and ceramics. We asked Kyösti Kakkonen to tell us more about his collection, artists, and the upcoming exhibition and to share some advice for young collectors.



Kyösti Kakkonen, EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art. © Ari Karttunen / EMMA 2022

It All Started with Toini Muona

Widewalls: You own the most significant collection of unique and limited-edition Finnish glass and ceramics in the world. When did you start collecting, and what drew you to ceramics and glass?

Kyösti Kakkonen: It all began with the world-class Finnish ceramist Toini Muona. My first experience with collecting was in 1988 when I had the great opportunity to acquire her entire surviving oeuvre after her death. I would say this was the start of my love affair with Finnish design which continues to grow to this day.

My interest in glass was also sparked by chance and opportunity. Shortly after the acquisition of Muona's oeuvre, I acquired a glass vase called Serpentine by Finnish artist Gunnel Nyman and, with this acquisition, started my glass collection.

Widewalls: Your collection today includes more than 10,000 items. How has your collection, but also the idea of collecting, evolved?

KK: My collection is constantly evolving. In the beginning, I started collecting works by well-known, awarded Finnish modernist designers. Through collecting and studying, my knowledge and understanding of design have developed and expanded, along with the time periods my collecting interests span.

For instance, after acquiring ceramic works by Alfred William Finch from the turn of the 20th century, I then began to collect works from the end of the 19th century too. Over the years, my collection of modernist design has grown to be so vast that, more recently, I have started to collect contemporary design pieces as well.



Alvar Aalto - Savoy vase, 1937. Collection Kakkonen / EMMA - Espoo Museum of Modern Art. © Rauno Träskelin

The Collection Kakkonen

Widewalls: What are some key names in your collection, and what periods does it cover?

KK: My collection includes works by a vast number of artists and designers, the majority of which are from the golden age of Finnish design in the 1930s – 60s.

It features some key names from this era, including Alvar Aalto, Rut Bryk, Kaj Franck, Birger Kaipiainen, Toini Muona, Gunnel Nyman, Kyllikki Salmenhaara, Timo Sarpaneva, Michael Schilkin, Nanny Still, Oiva Toikka, Helena Tynell, and Tapio Wirkkala, among many other great talents.

Spanning from the golden era through to the present day, my collection also includes exciting next-generation figures that are shaping the future of art and design, such as Jasmin Anoschkin, Alma Jantunen, Heini Riitahuhta, Kristina Riska, Markku Salo, Kim Simonsson and Kati Tuominen-Niittylä.

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As art reflects the image of its time, I have been keen to include contemporary works in my collection to capture the present moment. My interest in contemporary makers is growing as we speak, and, as a matter of fact, I have been acquiring further contemporary design pieces over the past weeks.



Birger Kaipiainen - Bead Bird (curlew), 1960. Collection Kakkonen / EMMA - Espoo Museum of Modern Art. © Ari Karttunen / EMMA 2022

Finnish Design

Widewalls: Your collection is focused on Finnish design. What makes it unique when compared to other design traditions in Europe?

KK: Finnish design has oftentimes been put in the same box as Scandinavian design, which is not true. In fact, we have a characteristic design of our own that shows a particularly distinctive relationship with nature.

Many of our designers have drawn from nature, which is also visible in the names of the work; Tapio Wirkkala's works, such as Lichen, Chantarelle, and Northern Lights, to name a few, are all inspired by the nature of Lapland where he lived and worked. In addition, Oiva Toikka's Glass Forest, Gunnel Nyman's Calla or Rose Petal are all great examples of this particular connection.

The visual language of nature, such as the golden ratio, is something deeply engraved in us as humans, something that we are used to, and something that our souls look for. I could say that we have an inborn need to see the beauty that comes from the natural form. A great example of this is a famous design piece by Alvar Aalto, the Savoy vase, which beautifully captures the movements of the ocean's waves.

In addition, Finnish glass makers have special skills and tastes in working with transparent glass. The combination of transparent glass and the natural form creates something so timeless, unique, and simple. This beauty is further deepened by the play of light and shadow in the works. Simplicity is something that we share with the Japanese and the inspiration from Japan is visible in our design, as evident in Toini Muona's works.

Widewalls: How did the Finish design develop over the decades? What would be some of the dominant trends and styles that define it?

KK: The connection between Finnish design and nature is something that has remained throughout the years. In Finland, we have a special bond with nature and this idea of 'returning to nature and its sources' can also be seen as a trend of today. Walking in nature, picking mushrooms and berries, going fishing and hunting...these are all common traditions to us.

I could say that honouring tradition is something that defines the current design as well. The direction of contemporary design is forwards, but the traditional themes are brought into the present and explored from today's perspectives.

Boldness can also be said to be one of the trends of today, which shows in different ways in different artists' works. For example, Jasmin Anoschkin's use of colour, forms, and themes could be described as bold. Additionally, contemporary designers and artists also deal with bold themes, such as gender, in ways that would not have been approved of in the 50s, for instance.



Alma Jantunen - Ahti from series Hvitträsk, 2021

The Exhibition at EMMA

Widewalls: A new exhibition space dedicated to Collection Kakkonen will open soon at EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art. Can you tell us more about this project?

KK: On Thursday, November 10th, in the museum's largest project to date, EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art will open a new 1000m² exhibition space dedicated to my collection. Of its 10,000 items, I'm delighted to have lent over 1,300 pieces in a long-term cooperation agreement, which will evolve over time.

After touring the world through many international design exhibitions, it is particularly special to see the works find a home in Finland. Located in Espoo's Exhibition Centre WeeGee designed by professor Aarno Ruusuvuori, the new space interweaves Finnish wood into the exhibition design to bring these wonderful works closer to nature – the very source of inspiration for many of their Finnish creators.

I hope the collection itself will also serve as an inspiration to all who visit, with the project adding to Finland's reputation as the epicentre of design.

Widewalls: The exhibition will be divided into several thematic parts. Can you walk us through them?

KK: The exhibition is curated by EMMA's curator Aura Vilkkuna and the themes have been designed by EMMA's team. The exhibition begins with The Story of the Collection and is divided into thematic displays – all drawing inspiration from the works in the show. From here, there is a section called Art and Design which looks at the parallels between both of the fields that my collection bridges.

Then, Touching Beauty considers changing tastes and fashions while Molten Glass, Fired Clay explores the works from a more technical perspective. For example, what the creation process entailed, what kind of techniques were involved, and what different materials were used.

The next section, Forms of Power, shines a light on the historical context of some of the more confronting works in the collection. Giving contemporary viewers the opportunity to unpick some of the challenging symbolism behind the imagery, it illuminates how artists have wielded their influence to create instruments of power.

Art for Every Home then reflects on the rise of glass and ceramics in post-war Finland, with the era seeing the establishment of many of the designs we call classic today; this section also invites viewers to question why these pieces became so iconic, what they mean to people, and what could be the next 'classic' moving forward.



Tapio Wirkkala - Jäkälä / Lichen (vase) 1950. Collection Kakkonen / EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Ari Karttunen / EMMA 2022

Strategies for Collecting

Widewalls: After 35 years of collecting experience, what would be your advice for young collectors interested in ceramics? What lessons from your rich career would you like to pass on?

KK: I must admit that the beginning is always the hardest. I, myself, started with the well-known, established, and internationally recognized key figures of Finnish design. However, if you start collecting today, these kinds of works are no longer available, and the prices can be out of reach for a young collector.

When starting, an important factor is to choose your own perspective on collecting. It can be simply acquiring pieces that you like and want to display in your own home; in this case, you need to be committed to the pieces in a different way. The perspective is much different than that of building a more calculated collection. When building a collection, the collector needs to have a long-term vision.

Collecting requires constant studying of current trends and following upcoming talents and their careers. You will also need to view the work more critically and evaluate if the piece will stand the test of time.

Questions that I often ask myself are: will this be interesting still in 50 years? Is the message of the work deep enough?

You always need to think that you are acquiring the most interesting piece in the market. I would also recommend collecting the works of various artists, rather than just one, to gain a wider and more diverse collection.

Another tip, of course, is to trust the opinions of professionals. If you do not think your own competence is strong enough, it is always good to talk with an expert.

Widewalls: What is next for you after the EMMA exhibition?

KK: I have a strong will to further develop the collaboration and exhibition with EMMA over the coming years. The vast and accumulating long-term loan allows the exhibition and its displays to evolve and progress over time. EMMA is a major partner in this collaboration, and I have a strong trust in the museum and its professionals.

In addition, the support of the City of Espoo has been extremely valuable. Also from an international perspective, I could not imagine a better location for my collection than EMMA as it has a very interesting profile in straddling the intersection of art and design - one which will only be strengthened through this exhibition.

Because my collection is so wide, it allows me to have this vast project that is ongoing and developing with EMMA, while simultaneously having exhibitions and artwork loans on view in different exhibitions around the world. I have 12 exhibitions already booked with prestigious institutions in Japan, and finally, from the beginning of next year, that programme will start running. Before Covid, it was quite common to constantly have different exhibitions ongoing at the same time in different parts of the world and I'm glad to see this getting back to normal.

I am, and will continue to be very active and ambitious in developing my collection. For instance, last weekend I attended three different auctions and, as it happens, I always find something new and interesting to acquire!



Birger Kaipiainen, Collection Kakkonen / EMMA – Espoo Museum of Modern Art. © Rauno Träskelin