

**Ultima Thule, Beyond Known Borders:
Exploring the Relationship between
Design and Finnish National Identity**

If you ever get invited to dinner in Finland, it is likely that either the wine, the dessert or the schnapps will be served from Ultima Thule glassware. How did this series become so popular and what does it tell about Finnishness?



Fig. 1. The flight attendant on the left is serving drinks from the Ultima Thule glasses designed by Tapio Wirkkala, May 1969. Courtesy Finnair.

While the Americans were preparing to set foot on the moon in 1969, the national Finnish airline company Finnair launched its first transatlantic flight from Helsinki to New York in May of the same year. No effort was spared to make this a tremendous success. Finnair acquired the newest American-made Douglas DC-8 aircrafts, flight attendants received special training in order to deliver high service, and caviar and Finlandia vodka were ordered in copious amounts to be served in the first class.¹ 'Finnair wanted to showcase everything that being Finnish represents, including design, style and service.'² Many well-known designers were employed to design the interior, resulting in a 'flying exhibition of Finnish applied arts.'³ A major task was assigned to the renowned designer Tapio Wirkkala, who was commissioned to create a porcelain dinner service, cutlery, and glasses. The icy-looking Ultima Thule glasses were acclaimed as providing 'the finishing touch' to the table settings (fig. 1).⁴ This case shows how design

was employed to create a positive image of Finland and promote its national cultural identity.

British design historian John Walker has noted that 'for materialist historians the concept of nation is extremely problematical.'⁵ National identity is a common trope in design scholarship, mainly because it is common to write histories on a national level and to describe developments and occurrences within the borders of a country. However, many authors in different countries, seem to describe national design in terms of a definite, continuous style.⁶ These texts often insist on the idea that there is, and has been, a continuum of form, character, mentality or style, resulting in limited, fixed, and essentialist views on national identity. Nations cannot be considered as having fixed identities. However, Walker points out that nations should rather be considered as 'imagined communities', imagined by its inhabitants as American political scientist Benedict Anderson has famously argued.⁷ Therefore,

Walker suggests that nations are historical, ideological, and political constructs with fluid identities, changing from time to time, and likewise we should consider their cultural identities as constructed rather than fixed.

Only recently have design scholars shifted focus from the concept of a continuous national identity to engender a more contextualised approach to national design history in which, for example, social and economic aspects are taken into account, as well as less 'high-design' objects.⁸ As a case in point, a fair amount of articles aim to deconstruct the seemingly fixed idea of Scandinavian design as 'blond, humane and democratic'; others reveal which actors were involved in promoting and profiling a country like Finland at world exhibitions and other international exhibitions.^{9 10} This article deconstructs a fixed idea of national identity through a close analysis of one glassware series. Why has the Ultima Thule series become so popular and what does it reveal about its relationship to Finnish national identity? Theories on national identity will be raised in order to provide insight into how the national history of Finland relates to these notions, after which the role of design in promoting Finland abroad in the 1950s and its construction will be addressed. This will be followed by an analysis of the production, mediation and the reception of the Ultima Thule glasses as well as their reflection on Finnish national identity.

The Birth of the Finnish Nation

Whereas nationalists might tend to think that Finnish people have been an ancient community for many centuries, the birth of Finland as an independent nation *state* is fairly recent. Ruled by Russia and Sweden, Finland only became independent in 1917.¹¹ However, as a duchy of Russia from 1809 until 1917, Finland was a fairly autonomous province with its own parliament.¹² Although various traditional theorists have claimed that nations were formed through shared ethnic ties, language, or religion, this view has been rejected by Anderson.¹³ According to him, nations should be considered 'cultural artefacts of a particular kind' constructed by inhabitants, rather than as a natural or ancient phenomenon.¹⁴ These 'imagined communities' are characterized by 'a deep, horizontal comradeship', the beginnings

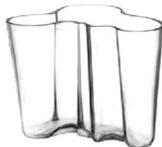
of which lie in the cultural roots of nationalism.¹⁵ Indeed, a variety of minorities of different ethnic backgrounds and language groups were living in Finland, such as the Swedish-speaking Finns, the Sami, who were mainly living in the North of Finland, and other minorities like the Roma gypsies. Nevertheless, a national movement arose due to a growing consciousness of a Finnish community in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was not primarily due to a shared language or ethnicity that a national movement came into being at that particular moment, but for various other reasons, one of which was a growing discontent with Russian rule, incited by disadvantageous economical motives, which could not be expressed politically.^{16 17}

The search for a national identity however, was expressed through other means. In 1875, Zacharius Topelius wrote *Boken om vårt Land* (The Book About Our Land), in which he expressed that 'the inhabitants of this country are very much like one another'.¹⁸ Topelius discerned characteristics like perseverance, stubbornness, longing for freedom, toughness, and patience as typical virtues of the Finns.¹⁹ Obviously not all inhabitants of the province exhibited such features, but since the book was a primary-school reader for many decades, it contributed heavily to the stereotypes of Finnish people, and is an explicit example of how 'imaginings' of national identity are constructed. As British sociologist Ernest Gellner explains, education was crucial to instigating literacy and standardizing language as a way to spread books in which shared history, culture and characteristics were conceptualized and intensified.²⁰ Gellner also notes the importance of industrialization and urbanization which increased the organisation and infrastructure of cities and therefore the spread of education and books like *Boken om vårt Land*.²¹

Another very important book in the search for 'Finnishness' was entitled *Kalevala*, published as early as 1840.²² Interestingly, *Kalevala* derived from myths told or sung in Karelia in the Eastern part of Finland, along the border with Russia.²³ This book was gradually considered the national Finnish folk epic and served as a major source of inspiration for many artists. Among them were artists and designers who founded the 'Friends of Finnish



1932
Aino Aalto
Aino Aalto



1936
Alvar Aalto Collection
Alvar Aalto



1948
Aarne
Göran Hongell



1952
Teema
Kaj Franck



1958
Kartio
Kaj Franck



1988
Kivi
Heikki Orvola



1998
Tools
Björn Dahlström



1999
Origo
Alfredo Häberli

Handicraft Society' in 1879. This society was known for actively 'adapting and reforming the vernacular tradition that could be understood as national-Finnish, in terms of content.'²⁴ In order to distinguish a particular Finnish style within handicrafts, 'authentic' traditional patterns from Karelia were adapted and presented as typically Finnish.

Both these examples reveal that the national Finnish cultural identity was actively constructed through selective cultural expressions derived from specific regions, in order to legitimize the nation. These cultural developments encouraged the Finnish people to believe and imagine that they were a unified community, despite the various groups with different cultures and languages. Throughout the history of Finland, the nation has continued to hold an insecure position between the East and the West, which seems to have resulted in a strong, continuous conceptualization of the national identity on various levels.²⁵

The Golden Age of Finnish design

Russia declared war on Finland in 1939. After losing the province of Karelia, Finland surrendered in 1946; the 1950s were marked by a slow recovery. Finland was obliged to pay war reparations to the Soviet Union until 1952, resulting in bitterness, poverty, and shortages leading to the rationing of many products.²⁶

Despite these circumstances, the 1950s also contained a miraculous shift for Finnish identity in the field of design. Olavi Gummerus, head of Ornamo (the Finnish Society of Arts and Crafts), was determined to promote Finnish design abroad in order to prove that Finland was not trapped behind the Iron Curtain.²⁷ Another goal was the creation of export markets, which were urgently required in order to gain economic prosperity. Particularly the Finnish contribution in 1951 to the Milan Triennial Exhibition of Decorative Arts turned out to be a great success, as Finnish designs won twenty-five medals. Newspapers were thrilled, and hailed the designers as if they were Olympic medal winners, with a resounding 'We won at Milan.'²⁸ Design critic Annikki Toikka-Karvonen wrote that '[...] the success is convincing proof that the Finnish spirit has something original to give humanity and that it is able, through independent effort, to find its own ways of expressing its visions, its poems, without the need to appear as an apprentice or imitator of those who are apparently more powerful.'²⁹ Finnish design was portrayed as mystical, which was a quality also assigned to the designers. One of the most successful designers was Tapio Wirkkala, who later became known as the 'patriarch and symbolic figure of Finnish design.'³⁰ The 'Miracle of Milan' was soon to be repeated at the triennials that followed. Encouraged by the successes

Fig. 2. Iittala catalogue 2013, pp. 6-7.
Courtesy Iittala.



in Milan, Gummerus coined the term ‘Finnish Design’ in the end of the 1950s.³¹

Following the victories in Milan, various travelling exhibitions in collaboration with other Scandinavian countries were organised, like the ‘Design in Scandinavia’ exhibition, which toured through the US and Canada from 1954-7. Joining forces with other Nordic countries was merely due to practical reasons; it was not a means to unify their design cultures.³² While distinguishing itself from the international modern style and identifying, to some extent, with the ‘democratic’ modern aesthetics of other Scandinavian countries,³³ the overwhelming success encouraged Finland to profile its design as unique; ‘Finland was the Nordic “other”, stubborn and exotic, rough and even awkward, sometimes extraordinarily elegant, but always emotionally moving.’³⁴ Mysticism, intuition, and primitivism were emphasized, as were honesty and authentic functionalism.³⁵ Concurrently, these abstract notions were linked to imagery of Finnish nature, which often served as a backdrop to these international exhibitions. Unsurprisingly, foreign critics soon verbalized these self-perpetuated stereotypes and propagated such beliefs internationally. Through the promotion of Finnish design and its accolades, Finland’s self-esteem received an enormous boost.³⁶ However, the exhibited

objects misrepresented Finnish material culture, as hardly anyone within Finland was able to afford any of the designs presented at the Milan Triennials; many people were still struggling to acquire primary necessities.³⁷

This one-sided identity of Finnish design, actively constructed by designers, organisations and journalists, and mainly mediated through exhibitions and national newspapers, had a huge impact on the national self-image as well as on the design industry. Even nowadays, Finnish design from the 1950s is very popular. A large part of the collection of Iittala, of which part is depicted in a spread from their recent catalogue, consists of designs that reveal the recycling of traditional forms — a preservation of ‘the idea of the Finnish golden age’ (fig. 2).³⁸ The legacy of the 1950s has been very persistent in terms of boosting national self-esteem, but also visually.³⁹

It must be noted that Alvar Aalto, another famous Finnish designer, was already very successful in the 1930s in Finland and abroad. The modernist aesthetics from the 1950s owe much to his designs from the 1930s. This could entail that it was mainly the successful active promotion of the designs that turned the 1950s into a ‘golden decade of Finnish design’, rather than a new aesthetic. However, as becomes clear from Iittala’s catalogue, Ultima Thule, designed

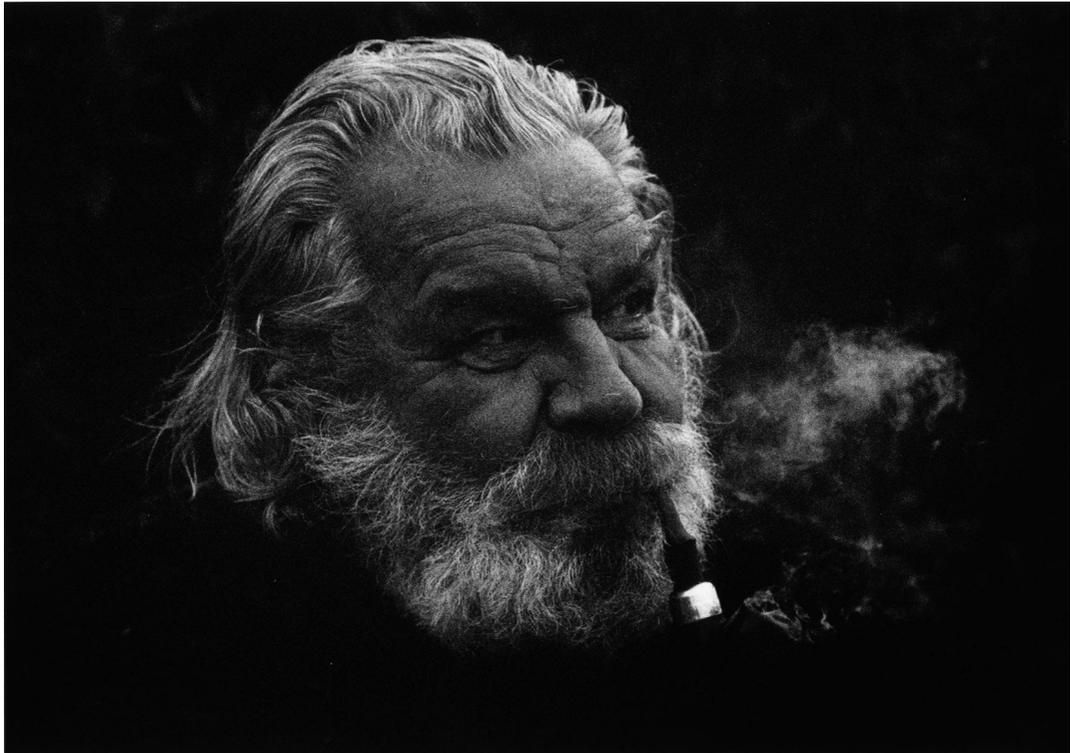


Fig. 3. Tapio Wirkkala. Courtesy of Tapio Wirkkala Rut Bryk Foundation. Photograph taken by Maaria Wirkkala, daughter of Tapio.

in 1968, can be considered as a notable visual exception to these aesthetics.

Ultima Thule: beyond known borders

By 1969, implementing design had become a conscious strategy in the creation of a positive national image, and commissioning Wirkkala was no small coincidence. The Finnish public held him in high esteem since 1946, when he won first prize in a design competition and began work at the Iittala glass factory. In the midst of Finnish international success in the 1950s and the stereotyped descriptions that accompanied it, Wirkkala was often portrayed as a silent, patient, and at times stubborn man, not averse to drinking a glass of vodka.⁴⁰ Furthermore, he was described as 'a mysterious northern shaman', a genius who was able to intuitively design organic objects because of his closeness to nature (fig. 3).⁴¹ While Wirkkala was born in the city of Helsinki, and was used to travelling around the world, he owned a summer cottage in the north of Finland. He enjoyed spending time there, and

it was mainly this image that was propagated through media channels. Again, it seems that select features, those of Lapland, were instrumentalized for the benefit of a positive national image.

It seems unlikely that Wirkkala designed the Ultima Thule glasses specifically for the new transatlantic route, since he expressed that he had long been pursuant of 'the ideas expressed in these glasses.'⁴² Together with his colleague, designer Timo Sarpaneva, Wirkkala developed the still-mold blowing technique to produce the rough, icy surface look at Iittala's glass factory.⁴³

Still-mold blowing was cheaper and more efficient than the common technique of turned-mold blowing. This was an important innovation, as Iittala needed to produce glasses on a larger scale in order to compete with other European glass producers after Finland had become a member of the European Free Trade Association in 1961.⁴⁴ Even before they were used on the flight in May 1969, both Finnair and Iittala had already heavily promoted the glasses in the windows of Stockmann, Finland's largest department store.⁴⁵

The design of the glasses is clearly reminiscent of a piece of ice, which is intensified by

the name of the design, Ultima Thule (fig. 4). 'Ultima Thule', was coined by the Roman poet Virgil to denote 'a far-off land', and in many classical European stories it has been used to name different regions in the north. The ancient term suggests that the design has mythical properties, having originated in a Nordic region with a harsh, cold climate, unknown to most people. This name was in line with the romanticised idea of Finland being a far-off and primitive country, and it seemed to be highly appropriate for the occasion of promoting Finland as an exotic travel destination. By referring to the cold region of the North in its name, visually resembling a piece of ice, and being not designed but *created* by the mysterious Wirkkala, it could be argued that the glasses embodied the mythical image of Finnish identity, closely connected to nature.

The Ultima Thule glasses became very popular and were soon extended into a series, comprising more glasses in different sizes, a pitcher, and various bowls.⁴⁶ The series was an extraordinary commercial success and became the most popular series of all time in the history of Iittala; and most of the glasses are, to this day, still in production.⁴⁷ Finneri re-launched the Ultima Thule glasses on its 75th anniversary in 1998, and they have been in use ever since.⁴⁸

The success of the Ultima Thule series led *all* glasses produced at Iittala in the following years to be given the rough, icy surface of the original design, something which was also widely imitated by competitors.⁴⁹ The newer series were labelled with names like Paadar, Aslak, and Niva, which are names from Lapland, once again emphasizing exoticness. Although these glasses became a big commercial success, applied-art critics were not enthusiastic, allegedly because of their 'exotic ice aesthetic'.⁵⁰ The icy texture broke with prevailing functionalist and modernist ideas, and it is possible that some critics even considered the glasses to be *kitsch*, as they imitated the appearance of ice in a highly artificial manner.

After war reparations had been settled in 1952, the shift towards a consumer society at the end of the 1950s and beginning 1960s was 'dramatic'.⁵¹ Within the span of one generation, material welfare increased enormously. Consumers became affluent and were enabled to no longer only read about design objects, but to finally buy them as well. At the same time, factories like Iittala improved their production methods in order to satisfy greater demands. Furthermore, rapid urbanization, among other developments, resulted in nostalgia for 'the rural lifestyle of the past' that was soon to



Fig. 4. Tapio Wirkkala, Ultima Thule Model No. 2052, 1968, still-mold blown glass, produced by Iittala Glassworks, 1968 onward. (photo: Anna de Jong)

become idealised.⁵² The special relationship between Finns and nature had always been stressed, but found a new expression in the beginning of the 1970s.

The popularity of the Ultima Thule series was due not only to increasing affluence, but also to the fact that it was the supreme embodiment of the Finn's nostalgia for nature. Apart from the design, the designer, and the conscious marketing strategies that resulted in the object being 'endowed with culturally specific meanings',⁵³ consumers proved to have played a major role in the ongoing reconceptualizing of the Finnish identity, as they bought Ultima Thule en masse.

Ultima Thule: The Ultimate Finnish glassware

Subjective imaginations of national identity have been continuously recycled and projected onto the Ultima Thule glasses, even though the glassware is visually very different from previous Finnish design classics. This confirms that there is no such thing as a fixed Finnish cultural identity, but that there is a reoccurring rhetoric, which is flexibly applied in order to emphasize a continuum of 'Finnishness'.

It seems that design objects are grateful vehicles for creating a positive image of a country, and this explains why the relationship between design and national identity is often misleading, or at least complicated. Considering the active promotion of Finnish design since the 1950s, and its importance for the increase of national self-esteem, it comes as no surprise that Finns consider 'design' itself to be a vital part of their identity, just as Finnair expressed with the launch of the Helsinki-New York route.

- 1 Senja Larsen, 'Space Age Leap to New York', *Finnair Blog*, 14 May 2009. Accessed through blogsfinnair.inoob.fi/2009/05/14/newyork40/ on 1 July 2013.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Tuula Poutasuo, 'Futurism and Everyday Goods', in: Marianne Aav (ed.), *Tapio Wirkkala, Eye, Hand and Thought* (2000), Helsinki: Taideteollisuusmuseo, 2002 (2nd edition), pp. 200-221, p. 203.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 John A. Walker, *Design History and the History of Design*, London: Pluto Press, 1989, p. 119.
- 6 German products are often defined as being of high quality, whereas Dutch design is related to the well-known Droog designs and typified as modernist but also as 'conceptual'. It seems that material culture is often linked to national stereotypes and seems to be tied to specific moments or periods in time which have become generalized and exclude more mainstream products to be found in those countries. See Walker, op. cit. (note 5), p. 123.
- 7 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (1983), London/New York: Verso, 1991, pp. 6-7.
- 8 See Pekka Korvenmaa, *Finnish Design, A Concise History*, Helsinki: University of Art and Design, 2010.
- 9 Kjetil Fallan (ed.), *Scandinavian Design, Alternative Histories*, London: Berg, 2012, p. 4.
- 10 Such as Jørn Guldberg, "'Scandinavian Design" as Discourse: The Exhibition *Design in Scandinavia, 1954-57*' in: *Design Issues* 27:2 (2011), pp. 41-58.
An important contribution was provided by Kjetil Fallan. In *Scandinavian Design, Alternative Histories* (note 9), Fallan has brought together various essays, which show how certain designs in different Scandinavian countries have been mediated and how they have been embedded in larger networks, as to emphasize the variety in design culture and to deconstruct the existence of a fixed notion of 'Scandinavian design'.
- 11 Korvenmaa, op. cit. (note 8), p. 15.
- 12 Jason Lavery, *The History of Finland*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006, p. 51.
- 13 Various strands within theories on nationalism such as primordialism view nations as natural, ancient phenomena with fixed (ethnic) identities.
- 14 Anderson, op. cit. (note 7), p. 4.
- 15 Ibid., pp. 6-7.
- 16 Mikko-Olavi Seppälä, *Vuosisadan Kampanja*, Helsinki: Suomalaisen Työn Liitto, 2012, pp. 11-24.
- 17 For a concise history of Finland, see Lavery, op. cit. (note 12).
- 18 Jari Ehrnrooth, 'The Ambivalence of Finnish Culture' in: Marianne Aav and Nina Stritzler-Levine (eds.), *Finnish modern design: Utopian Ideals and Everyday Realities, 1930-1997*, New York: Yale University Press, 1998, pp. 13-34 (18). The book was originally published in Swedish but was translated into Finnish as *Maamme Kirja* in 1876. Interestingly, Finland is denoted as a 'country'

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- despite the fact that it would not become independent until 1917.
- 19 Ibid.
 - 20 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983, p. 35.
 - 21 Although Finland would long remain a largely agrarian society, the industrialization began around the 1870s. See Korvenmaa op. cit. (note 8), p. 15.
 - 22 *Kalevala* was written down by Elias Lönnrot (1802-84); prior to this, *Kalevala* only existed in Karelia as songs about the heroic man called Väinämöinen.
See Leea Virtanen, 'Folkore' (1993) in: Päivi Molarius (ed.), *From Folkore to Applied Arts, Aspects of Finnish Culture*, Lahti: Gummerus Kirjapaino Oy, 1993, pp. 11-34 (13).
 - 23 Much to the regret of many Finns, Karelia is no longer part of Finland as it was yielded to the Russians after WWII.
 - 24 Korvenmaa, op. cit. (note 8), p. 31.
 - 25 In the Netherlands, the dominant design discourse is made up of selective examples which often link the Calvinist religion to sober forms in design like Rietveld's famous chairs, as well as to the allegedly 'dry' humorous designs of Droog. Another prevalent stereotype is the ability of the Dutch to be able to work successfully together due to their century-old common 'fight against the water'. This is used to explain successful collaborations between designers. Whereas these stereotypes might not be untrue for specific periods in time, they result in very narrow views on design in the Netherlands. Many of these books mostly include high-design objects while excluding 'ordinary' material culture. Concurrently, minorities and their material culture are often excluded. See: Mienie Simon Thomas, *Dutch Design: A History*, London: Reaktion Books, 2008; Aaron Betsky, *False Flat. Why Dutch Design is so Good*, London: Phaidon, 2004; Renny Ramakers and Gijs Bakker (eds.), *Droog Design: Spirit of the Nineties*, Rotterdam: 010, 1998.
 - 26 Visa Heinonen, 'Design, Consumption and the Construction of the Welfare State in the Post-War Period' in: Paula Hohti (ed.), *Boundless Design, Perspectives on Finnish Applied Arts*, Helsinki: Avain, 2011, pp. 151-168 (153).
 - 27 Jaakko Autio, 'Finnish Design Exports: Cultural Exports in an Economic Framework', in: Paula Hohti (ed.), *Boundless Design, Perspectives on Finnish Applied Arts*, Helsinki: Avain 2011, pp. 37-56 (45).
 - 28 Harri Kalha, *Muotopuolen merenneidon pauloissa: Suomen taideteollisuuden kultakausi: mielikuvat, markkinointi, diskurssit*, Helsinki: Apon, 1997, p. 276.
 - 29 Annikki Toikka-Karvonen, cited in Kalha op. cit. (note 28), p. 278.
 - 30 Juhani Pallasmaa, 'The World of Tapio Wirkkala', in: Marianne Aav (ed.), *Tapio Wirkkala, Eye, Hand and Thought* (2000), Helsinki: Taideteollisuusmuseo, 2002, p. 11.
 - 31 Autio, op. cit. (note 27), p. 45. This term appears to have signified the becoming of Finnish design as a powerful brand, though at this point it was mainly the Finnish self-esteem that grew rather than the export markets. Fallan points out that a distinction should be made between 'Scandinavian Design' and 'Scandinavian design'. The latter is an analytical category whereas the first should be considered as an actor's category. The meaning of this term is related to a specific sociocultural context which becomes clear with the example of Finnish Design. See Fallan, op. cit. (note 9), p. 2.
 - 32 Autio, op. cit. (note 27), p. 46.
 - 33 Guldberg, op. cit. (note 10), p. 48.
 - 34 Kalha, op. cit. (note 28), p. 281; Autio, op. cit. (note 27), p. 46. These characteristics are reminiscent of Topelius' description of Finnish virtues.
 - 35 Kalha, op. cit. (note 28), p. 281.
 - 36 Kevin Davies, 'A Geographical Notion Turned into an Artistic Reality', in: *Journal of Design History* 15:2 (2002), pp. 101-116 (101).
 - 37 Heinonen, op. cit. (note 26), p. 151.
 - 38 Paula Hohti, (ed.), *Boundless Design, Perspectives on Finnish Applied Arts*, Helsinki: Avain, 2011, p. 16.
 - 39 Autio, op. cit. (note 27), p. 55.
 - 40 Pallasmaa, op. cit. (note 30), p. 11.
 - 41 Autio, op. cit. (note 27), p. 50.
 - 42 Kaisa Koivisto, 'Serial Production At the Iittala and Karhula Glassworks', in: Marianne Aav (ed.), *Tapio Wirkkala, Eye, Hand and Thought* (2000), Helsinki: Taideteollisuusmuseo, 2002, pp. 113-131, p. 121.
 - 43 Jennifer Opie, 'A Master of Finnish Art Glass' (2000) in: Marianne Aav (ed.), *Tapio Wirkkala Eye Hand Thought* (2000), Helsinki: Taideteollisuusmuseo, 2002, p. 66.
 - 44 Koivisto, op. cit. (note 42), p. 121.
 - 45 Ibid., p. 120.
 - 46 Most of the pieces were in production throughout the 1970s and 1980s.
 - 47 Koivisto, op. cit. (note 42), p. 120.
 - 48 Ibid.
 - 49 Ibid., p. 121.
 - 50 Ibid.
 - 51 Heinonen, op. cit. (note 26), p. 167.
 - 52 Minna Sarantola-Weiss, 'Creature Comforts: Soft Sofas and the Demise of Modernist Morality in 1970s' in: Kjetil Fallan (ed.), *Scandinavian Design, Alternative Histories*, London: Berg, 2012, pp. 136-151, (146).
 - 53 Igor Kopytoff, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process' in: Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things. Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 68.