

A timeless design...

In the beginning...

“We don’t just create beautiful objects. We believe in a timeless design that will never be thrown away.” That’s the philosophy behind Iittala, a glass factory established in the Finnish village of the same name in 1881 by Swede Peter Magnus Abrahamsson. There was a lack of skilled Finnish glassblowers at the time, so 17 glassblowers were imported from Sweden and the first glass objects were made in November 1881.

The company’s first in-house designer was Alfred Gustafsson, who in 1903 created the glass tumblers series *Great Men*. It was a passive protest against Russian rule and depicted men who were instrumental to Finnish culture and society.

Initially the company produced a range of blown, pressed, polished, painted and etched glass, but in the early 20th century decorative dinner sets were added to the range and Iittala became one of the first manufacturers to produce functional objects combined with progressive Scandinavian design.

The 1930s and ‘40s saw a progression into modernism and functionalism under the guidance of designers such as Alvar and Aino Aalto and Kaj Franck, who wanted to push the boundaries of glass design and at the same time create objects of functional beauty.

The Iittala philosophy

There are echoes of Arts and Crafts in the ‘form follows function’ philosophy of the Iittala designers, who believe that the designs they create should last a lifetime. “The effort put into quality design has paid off,” notes the official company web site. “The Iittala collection includes not only new design, but items that have been around for more than 80 years.” In 1981, Iittala was Finland’s largest exporter of glass, and in 1983 it was recorded as having 530 employees.



1932 *Bølgeblikk* stackable glasses by Aino Aalto.

A TEAM OF SEVEN SKILLED CRAFTSMEN, TWELVE WORK STAGES, 1100 DEGREE TEMPERATURES AND 30 HOURS ARE REQUIRED TO MAKE ONE MOUTH-BLOWN IITTALA AALTO (SAVOY) VASE.

Introducing the designers

Husband and wife team **Alvar and Aino Aalto** probably had the most influence in the development of Iittala. “The end user decides the use of the object,” said



The fluid, organic shape of the 1936 *Aalto* vase. Value around \$200.

Alvar, whose passion was to ‘free’ glass from geometric form and create an impression of organic, living forms. Having made his name as a master of modern architecture,

Alvar (1898-1976) designed concert halls, hospitals, libraries, museums and private homes but his most enduring creation was the Aalto vase, which was unveiled at the 1937 Paris World Exposition.

Aino Aalto (1894-1949) was also a qualified architect; she first met her husband in his architecture office in 1924. In an interview in 1976, her friend Maire Gullichsen said:

“When she is mentioned, one always says: the legendary Aino Aalto. She is the most aesthetic person I have ever met.” In 1932 Aino designed the *Bølgeblikk* stackable glass series. Inspired by the circles created when stone is thrown into water, the series won the Gold Medal at the Milan Triennial in 1936 and is still in

production today. In 1936, her exhibition architecture for Artek’s stand at the Milan Triennale was awarded the Grand Prix and at the same exhibition she was awarded the Gold Medal for her glass series. Aino also designed buildings, interiors, furniture and textiles.

Kaj Franck (1911-1989) was a minimalist designer who removed anything that he did not consider essential

from his designs. The recipient of a significant number of Finnish and international awards, he is represented at design museums around the world. His most famous designs include the ceramic *Teema* tableware series and the *Kartio* glassware series.

Timo Sarpaneva (1926-2006) has been described as having ‘a rare ability to be mesmerised and to worship beauty’. His designs extend from utility glassware and art glass to textiles and graphics, with a cast iron pot designed in the 1960s becoming an internationally recognised design icon. His *Orkidea* range was hugely time-consuming to produce – only a few could be made per hour – but often only one example would pass the stringent inspection of the Iittala directors as being fit for sale.

Tapio Wirkkala (1915-1985) was the artistic director of the University of Arts & Design in Helsinki for many years. A designer of glass, he also designed banknotes, sculpture, jewellery and graphic art. He was awarded three Gold Medals at the Milan Triennial in 1951, and another three Gold Medals three years

later. He produced more than 400 designs for glassware over his career, including the *Ultima Thule* range which is sought after by collectors.

Oiva Toikka

has worked in the performing arts for as long as he has been a glass designer and is the recipient of a string of design awards. His best-known glass design to date is the *Birds by Toikka* collection, introduced in 1962; varied in style



Birds by Toikka, introduced in 1962 and still in production today. Values range from around \$300 upwards.

and design, the birds are designed as both natural and in character.

Collecting Iittala glass

Most Iittala items are marked with the distinctive red circle with an ‘i’ sticker (if they are new), or inscribed Iittala or with the artist’s name. Signed pieces are the most collectable, particularly pieces by Wirkkala and Sarpaneva. The older Aalto vase is also highly collectable.