

ANTIQUES

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Offering Beauty To the People

Can quality of design improve the quality of life? Can it change society? The Swedes take the radical proposition that good modern design can help cure society's ills. This aesthetic philosophy was probably first promoted in Sweden by the socialist reformer Ellen Key (1849-1926), who was profoundly influenced by the English reformers John Ruskin and William Morris. Like them, she felt mass production was hurting aesthetic quality.

In 1897 Key wrote "Beauty for Homes," an article championing the importance of the uncluttered domestic interior. Beautiful surroundings made people happier, she said, and she lobbied for the aesthetic education of the lower classes. "Above all, one must not believe that beauty is a good fortune that only a few can obtain," she wrote.

She suggested that manufacturers employ artists to design beautiful things for domestic use. For Key, beauty was found in simple, practical things without ornament. She dreamed of a world in which only such things would be made available. "Only when nothing ugly can be found to be purchased; when the beautiful is just as affordable as the ugly is now, can beauty for all become a certainty," she wrote.

Key's writings had enormous influence in Sweden. As the daughter of an important politician father and one of the nation's wealthiest women, she knew many of the leading intellectuals and politicians of her day. She wrote books and was a popular speaker on the lecture circuit. Her ideas were slowly embraced. In 1914 the Swedish Society of Craft and Design opened an agency to encourage contacts between artists and manufacturers. Edward Hald, an early designer with a fine arts background, for example, went to work for Orrefors, the Swedish glass company founded in 1898. Hald had studied painting with Matisse in Paris.

"Painters became interested in working with various design media and brought a different kind of pictorial representation to the task," said Nina Stritzler-Levine, the curator of exhibitions at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture in Manhat-



National Museum, Stockholm

A 1919 Orrefors vase by Edward Hald, who had studied with Matisse.

tan. "You see this particularly in Swedish glass."

In the 1930's Swedish designers were admonished to give up individuality to serve the needs of democracy. In 1925 the architect Uno Ahren wrote: "How easy it has been for some time to use originality to draw attention to oneself — but what we need now is the ability to efface ourselves. Artistic form applied to practical artifacts without any 'artistry' being visible; that is the characteristic hallmark of the truly modern."

Sweden's brand of modernism, called Functionalism, had taken hold by the late 1920's. The Stockholm Exhibition of 1930 included exhibits on modern apartments with inexpensive, factory-made furnishings and housewares. It was thought these were spaces appropriate for the many Swedes migrating from the countryside to the cities.

The Stockholm Exhibition had international repercussions. Henry Russell Hitchcock, curator at the new Museum of Modern Art in New York, visited it on one of his tours of Europe; in a letter to Alfred Barr, the Modern's founder, he called Stockholm "the ultimate center of modernism in 1930." Two years later Hitchcock and Philip Johnson initiated modernist architecture in the United States with the pathbreaking show "The International Style."

Ultimately, Key's social-aesthetic vision contributed to the formation of the Swedish social welfare state. "In Sweden, design is really connected with politics," said Cilla Robach, a curator of applied arts at the National Museum in Stockholm. "Key was trying to create a new society, which she thought would evolve through life at home. She felt if you improved your home, you would have children with a better mentality. For her, a good home environment would create a good human being."

Key saw the home as the building block of the social welfare state. "In 1932 the Social Democratic Party of Sweden won the election, which would be equivalent to the Labor Party's coming into power in England later on, and politicians and designers came together to try to build a better society," Ms. Robach said. "The welfare state was an experiment that probably succeeded more in Sweden than anywhere else because the Social Democrats were in power for so long."

Ms. Robach served as the design curator for "Utopia and Reality: Modernity in Sweden: 1900-1960," an exhibition the Bard Graduate Center through June 16. The show was organized by the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, where it was shown last year in a much expanded version.

It traces the origins of modernism

in Sweden in several media. The paintings, photos, film clips, drawings, housewares, furniture, textiles and examples of graphic and industrial design are meant to illustrate how Swedes adapted their utopian ideals to the reality of everyday life in the first half of the 20th century.

"It is the first interdisciplinary exhibition we have done that examines the ways in which painting, sculpture, photography, architecture, urbanism and design relate in a given period of time," Ms. Stritzler-Levine said. "We hoped to show how the media relate — or diverge."

Modern classics in the show include furniture designed by Erik Gunnar Asplund; fabrics like Terrazzo, created in 1943 by Josef Frank for the Stockholm store Svenskt Tenn; the Hasselblad 1600F camera from 1948; and the Praktika stackable stoneware bowls designed in 1933 by Wilhelm Kage for Gustavsberg. "These icons are almost impossible to find either at flea markets or in antiques shops in Sweden now," Ms. Robach said.

Older visitors will feel nostalgic for the Saab 92001 that Sixten Sason designed in 1945, the red plastic Cobra telephone prototype designed in 1941 by Ralph Lyotell and Hugo Blomberg, or the Electrolux Kitchen Assistant, an electric mixer that Alvar Lenning designed in 1940.

Some works fall in the intersection of art and industrial design. "Apple," a glass Orrefors vase designed by Ingeborg Lundin in 1955, is more a work of art than a vessel. "It could be a vase, but it's more a sculptural glass form," Ms. Stritzler-Levine said. To my mind, Orrefors steals the show. The engraved glass bowl called "Girls Playing Ball," which Hald designed for Orrefors in 1919, is ravishing, almost like a Matisse sketch in glass. As Derek E. Ostergard, the founding dean and associate director of the Bard Graduate Center, noted, Orrefors became an international symbol for modernism, a model of how art and industry could work together.

Nonetheless, this is not glass for workers but art glass for the elite. "You must realize art glass and art ceramics were being made at the same time as the more affordable things," Ms. Robach said. "Swedes rationalized buying art glass by saying such things were luxury productions made for foreign countries."

Or, as Mr. Ostergard put it: "Such luxury objects created the modernist vision that the others followed. They led the way."