

UPSALA-EKEBY

THE CLASSICS

A new theme in the permanent Upsala-Ekeby exhibition.

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UPPSALA KONSTMUSEUM

Interest in design and home decorating has never been greater. We readily follow furnishing tips of flashy home decorating magazines and television programmes geared to inspire and present new life styles. Trends come and go, but what stands the test of time and continues to be popular? Upsala-Ekeby ceramics once were a common feature in many Swedish homes. Although the products can still be found in homes to a certain extent, they are nowadays more likely to appear in museums, private collections and antique shops. Our objective with this exhibition is to further stimulate the interest in Upsala Ekeby ceramics.

The mid 1900s constituted Upsala-Ekeby's most dynamic period and is often referred to as its "artistic golden age". At this point the company was rapidly expanding, with production at its peak, an exceptionally successful artistic strategy, and with more artists employed than ever before. It was also during this time, the 1950s in particular, that women designers at Upsala-Ekeby came to the fore, with Ingrid Atterberg, Hjördis Oldfors and Mari Simmulson as the shining stars.

The exhibition lifts forth well-known and unique items from the Art Museum's own collection. The new theme, ***The Classics***, puts a focus on seven of the most influential designers, Harald Östergren, Anna-Lisa Thomson, Sven Erik Skawonius, Vicke Lindstrand, Ingrid Atterberg, Mari Simmulson and Hjördis Oldfors.

Company History

Upsala-Ekeby was founded in 1886 as a limited company and factory. The latter was built on land containing clay well suited to making bricks and tiles, including those for the tiled heating stoves called kakelugnar. The initial annual production of these stoves was five hundred. It increased to 30,000 in the first decades of the 20th century. In 1887, the first potter was employed to throw vases, bowls and ashtrays. The company had a shaky start economically, with consequential crises and a reconstruction, but it did increasingly well during the 20th century. Arts and crafts, too, developed significantly, thanks to Swedish and other exhibitions, the most important being the 1914 Baltic Exhibition in Malmö, the 1923 Göteborg arts and crafts exhibition, the 1925 Paris exhibition and the 1930 Stockholm exhibition.

Upsala-Ekeby acquired a number of other companies in these decades; its acquisition of Upsala Kakelfabrik in 1917 was a turning point, for it then had some 300 employees. A number of artists were employed about 1920, among them Gabriel Burmeister, Harald Östergren, Edvin Ollers, Einar Forseth and Allan Ebeling. Swedish domestic central heating began to cut demand for tiled stoves, and the company increasingly aimed at producing wall tiles and utilitarian goods.

The wind changes

The 1930's saw a change in Upsala-Ekeby's production of utilitarian goods. Never having as good a reputation as that of its stoneware, the designs of its earthenware products were uneven and uncertain. Wishing to alter them and raise their status, the company engaged two artists, Anna- Lisa Thomson and Sven Erik Skawonius, and to acquire stoneware production bought the porcelain factory in Gävle in 1935. One of the artists' problems was that their work comprised only originals for exclusive exhibitions. The market was not ready for sales of their unique products, so ordinary production was consequently of a lower class. International

sales by Upsala-Ekeby stopped in the 1940's. Intensive negotiations to resume exports and imports began in the mid 1940' s. Swedish demand for coffee cups and simple plates was immense. While the artists had greatly influenced what was produced for sale, they and the management disagreed over what was good taste and what the customers wanted. In 1944, Ingrid Atterberg came to Upsala-Ekeby as a much appreciated designer; in 1949 Mari Simmulson was employed. Each in her own way made a strong impression and enriched the company's production.

The decade of arts and crafts

Upsala-Ekeby reached its apogee in the 1950' s, together with the raised status of arts and crafts and the many new ideas introduced by Vicke Lindstrand, the leading artist in 1942-50. All exports rose and buyers' interest grew rapidly. Sven Erik Skawonius again took over as the group's artistic leader. When Upsala-Ekeby's creativity and ceramics' production peaked in the 1950' s, its employees included some forty potters who threw goods, and a larger number of others who did castings. Although the company participated on a large scale in the H55 Homes exhibition in Helsingborg in 1955, the decade ended on a minor key.

The end approaches

Swedish ceramics found it increasingly hard to cope in a market swamped with cheap products but, despite that, Upsala-Ekeby acquired yet another porcelain factory, that of Rörstrand, in 1964. Turnover among the artists increased and more of them stayed for short periods. Artistic standards had to give way to a more standardized production. The 1970' s was a long tale of acquisitions and closures. In the late 1960' s and early 1970' s, Swedish domestic interest for new products depressed demand for tiles: wallpaper and plastic matting was wanted, not wall and floor tiles. Upsala-Ekeby stopped its arts-and-crafts' production in 1973, sold off its existing inventory and invested in other things, among them glass and cutlery, during the following years. What had

happened? Higher Swedish wages are usually blamed for closures but much suggests the company delivered late and with the wrong quality when demand was greatest. Frequent acquisitions and a widening of the group's activity could be other reasons. Swedish quality consequently decreased, nor were artists employed to renew production and, in 1978, the closure of the company's activity was a fact. Now modernized, the factory buildings house quite different activities.

What about the exhibition?

Many Swedish households contained ceramics from Upsala-Ekeby and some homes still do, but Upsala-Ekeby products are probably now more common in museums, antique shops or among collectors. Therefore we hope that the exhibition will support and expand the newly-awakened interest in Upsala-Ekeby ceramics by affording visitors the delight of recognition while also offering surprises, as we will be showing unusual and unique objects in a special way. Photographs from the factory, depicting the history of the workers and the clay they used, form a backdrop for the objects designed by the artists.

The exhibition's point of departure and foundation comprises objects from the Art Museum's own collections, which were donated by Proventus AB shortly after the Upsala-Ekeby factory closed down in 1978. The exhibition will change over the years - objects will be exchanged, complemented or be specially focused upon in order to shed light on new aspects of the exhibition.

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Curator

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