The Danish Tradition in Design

Behind all Danish art lies the recognition that art is identical with skill.

Viggo Kampmann
Prime Minister of Denmark

The Danes have taken at the flood a tide that should lead on to fortune, for their Arts of Denmark: Viking to Modern, which will be shown at the Metropolitan until January 8, has given pleasure to thousands of people in New York. The exhibition opened October 14 in a blaze of publicity concentrated on King Frederik and Queen Ingrid of Denmark. What seemed most
to attract reporters was the democratic bearing of Their Majesties, perhaps all the more impressive because theirs is the oldest monarchy in Europe. They were photographed one morning in Central Park among a crowd of children gathered around the Hans Christian Andersen statue, the King bareheaded in the Indian summer sunshine and smiling down at a seven-year-old who had just asked, "King, where is your crown?" Its absence may have disappointed the small boy, but the incident evidently warmed the hearts of grown-up newspaper readers.

There is a kind of "democracy" in the exhibition too that struck some critics, both pro and con, as a rather radical departure for The Metropolitan Museum of Art. This is the clear emphasis on craftsmanship as such, plus the fact that roughly half the showing, both in number of objects and the space they occupy, is devoted to useful creations made since 1900, many of which may be bought (though not, of course, at the Museum) by people of moderate means and no pretensions to connoisseurship in the fine arts. Far from being an innovation in these respects, The Arts of Denmark fits into a long and honored tradition at the Museum. In the ninety years since our founders laid down the principle, we have periodically displayed the finest examples of contemporary industrial design, with the hope of raising aesthetic standards for mass-produced articles. Denmark today is devoting a great deal of effort to industrialization, and its well-established tradition of fine design should prove a bulwark—indeed already has, as this exhibition demonstrates—against some of the less happy features of mass production.

One can certainly sympathize with the regret expressed by some critics that more objects from the earlier periods of Danish history could not be included in this already huge overseas shipment. Who would not want to see as many as possible of the beautiful flint and bone implements from the Stone Age, often skillful imitations of metal prototypes that must already have been in use further south in Europe? or of the elegantly simple yet barbaric weapons and jewelry fashioned during the fifteen centuries between the beginning of the Bronze Age and the Viking period? of the splendid church furniture of the Middle Ages, or the works of later sculptors and painters as well known as Thorvaldsen and Juel, only a token representation of which is shown here? But these limitations are the result of an unusually clear-cut purpose that has otherwise enhanced the intellectual coherence and visual pleasure of the exhibition.

First of all, the Danes have given their American audience a sense of the "real thing" in a style already very popular in this country. The contemporary rooms afford a richly comprehensive look at recent Danish achievement in metalwork, woodwork, ceramics, and textiles, from the ornamental style of the nineteenth century through a period of strict functionalism to the freer and more aesthetic design of today.
One can trace the development of Georg Jensen’s silver, for example, from his earlier decorative ornamentation to the absolutely simple planes and unusual forms of his later designs. A hundred shopwindows in New York feature more or less debased versions of the best Danish furniture of today. Only in our current exhibition, with designers like Hans Wegner or Finn Juhl, may we see the real craftsman’s respect for his materials: leather perfectly tanned, perfectly tailored, wood finished to show, not hide, its natural grain and texture, designed with an unornamented grace difficult yet still possible to achieve in machine production. The textiles include the work of independent weavers and textile printers who maintain their own workshops yet serve as advisers to the industry, like Lis Ahlmann or Paula Trock, as well as that of architects like Arne Jacobsen who take a hand in the smallest details of furnishing the buildings they design. Ceramics range from the then revolutionary earthenware designed at the turn of the century by Thorvald Bindesbøll to the clear glass made by Per Lütken in 1960.

Secondly, The Arts of Denmark proves visually that the style we call Danish modern is firmly rooted in a craft tradition of great antiquity. Tradition in all the arts, as T. S. Eliot pointed out, “involves, in the first place, the historical sense . . . and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. . . . Some one said: ‘The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.’ Precisely, and they are that which we know.” Recent news articles have given tantalizing glimpses of the striking likenesses between ancient and modern pieces in this exhibition: a Viking bracelet, for example, and one made in 1955 by Nanna and Jørgen Ditzel. But the design of the exhibition as strongly reinforces the controlling idea behind it, and less attention has been given to this in the flood of publicity surrounding the showing. The Danish architect Finn Juhl, one of the four originators of The Arts of Denmark and creator of some of its most outstanding modern furniture, also designed the exhibition itself. The illustrations in these pages show in part the devices he used to ensure continuity and avoid monotony—but only in part, for they cannot reproduce the colors, which play a very important role.

If the objects from past and present were so much in harmony one with another, it followed that modern surroundings ought to show both groups to equal advantage. And the “package”
had to be eminently portable; when he drew his original plans Finn Juhl knew the proportions of the Special Exhibition Galleries at the Metropolitan, but he had so to design The Arts of Denmark that it could go on to other museums yet unspecified. Scarcely an object, he says, now appears in the exact position he assigned it in the drawings, but the basic plan for a chronological arrangement remained valid and the variations were made on the spot as the exhibition was being assembled.

The proportions of the galleries, of course, could not be changed as they might have been for a permanent installation. Temporary devices, nonetheless, have changed them so that the spectator can concentrate naturally on individual objects, yet be constantly aware of what went before in time and anticipating what is yet to come. The most dramatic vista is, appropriately, at the entrance (see page 119), where a deep yellow fabric hung low overhead leads the eye all the way through the so-called Viking room to the gold of the medieval altar frontal, the greatest of the Danish national treasures shown. Directly above the altar frontal, a horizontal white fabric at right angles to the yellow one breaks the expanse of the brilliant blue wall so that the high ceiling may not create a meaningless emptiness. Skillful use of color prevents the Viking room itself from being overlooked in this deliberate focus on the altar frontal. The facing wall between the two rooms is painted a vivid green that contrasts with the blue seen through the doorway, yet connects it, by being a combination of the two, with the gold-colored fabric overhead. The side walls are hung with heavy white cloth, a soft-textured background against which to show the hard forms of the stone, metal, and pottery in the cases.

In other galleries, overhead draperies of room width, hung vertically in the first few feet of space below the ceiling (see page 124), again reduce the height of the rooms, and sometimes break up what might otherwise prove a distracting skylight pattern. But here they have a different function as well, quite opposite from what we saw at the outset: they divide the rooms into bays within each of which a group of related pieces may be grasped as a unit, yet not separated from the rest of the gallery.

In the contemporary rooms, decorative fabrics that are part of the collection are used to the same effect. Brilliantly colored ones, often with strong patterns as well, are hung flat against the walls, as in the illustration on page 121 of one of the most striking corners in the exhibition. Diaphanous ones, with patterns usually in the same color as the ground, are hung at right angles to the wall, so that objects beyond may be seen as
if through a mist. Colors echo, modulate, repeat each other, holding a given group together or leading the eye over a long distance.

Thus both form and color divide space into segments manageable to the viewer, yet give an impression of motion and continuity throughout the exhibition. The display cases have a corresponding lucidity and flexibility. Their long slender legs and shallow bases interfere as little as possible with the eye. They are of a single standard size, with all parts interchangeable, so that freestanding ones may be perfectly transparent, while in others both the texture and the color of floor and back panels may be varied to show best the particular objects they house. Translucent inner shelves are often used, their means of suspension all but invisible. In the modern section, the bases alone, without enclosing glass, serve as open tables for the display of ceramics and tableware. Like the transparent decorative fabrics, the freestanding cases punctuate space, allowing the eye to fix on a small area with no sense of confinement. The reflections of polished metal or porcelain in their glass walls add to the bright, open look so characteristic of the whole exhibition.

The clarity and the sense of intention that pervade The Arts of Denmark make it a literally shining example of the graceful practicality we have learned to associate with Danish modern. One may or may not agree with the Prime Minister that art and skill are identical—but to whatever extent they are, this design for displaying design is itself a work of art.

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