

# An Era in Glass: Soviet Estonian Glass Factory *Tarbeklaas* and Finnish Glass Design

TRIIN JERLEI

The aim of this article is to analyse the production of the factory *Tarbeklaas*, mostly the theory behind it, and to discuss the extent to which the Estonian and Finnish glass industries were connected in the Soviet period. Despite the differences in background systems, it is possible to find parallels in the political intentions of design, as well as in the designs themselves and in the reception of glass design. The idea is to examine why similarities in design discourses arose in the different societies, what the differences and similarities were, and to compare objects as consequences of various social and political processes. This article will try to avoid both strict opposition and equation, instead using comparison of facts and theories as a method. Used sources include both articles and books, mostly by Estonian and Finnish authors, as well as the archives of the Tallinn University library and the Estonian Museum of Applied Arts and Design. The article is based on a master's dissertation presented at the University of Brighton in 2010.

As in every realm, mass production was strictly regulated in Soviet Estonia. The role of party and political order cannot be overemphasised: mass production is always dependent on economics, politics and, through them, the political order. Within the socialist bloc, differences were noticeable regionally, as in Western countries. Therefore, opposition was never complete and was primarily subject to a specific time and place. Culture and society are essentially complex structures. Homi K. Bhabha has written that cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in the relation of Self to Other.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in relation to western Europe, Soviet Estonia cannot be seen as simply an opposing homogeneous entity; rather, it was a mixture of oppositions, parallels and similarities. Because of its location and similar language, Finland was the main connection between Estonia and the world outside of the Soviet Union, especially because people in northern Estonia were able to pick up Finnish radio and television signals. As a result, most Estonians had at least a vague idea of everyday life in other parts of Europe, which played an indisputable role in the development of life and understanding for them. The main travel destinations for the artists of *Tarbeklaas* were other Socialist countries, such as Poland, Czechoslovakia and the German Democratic Republic. Several employees had relatives outside of the Soviet Union who sent materials about glass art and design. Some Western design magazines were available in libraries; even Estonian publications occasionally featured illustrated articles on Finnish design. A few exhibitions on Finnish

<sup>1</sup> H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 35.

applied arts and design reached Estonia. Western industrial art was not condemned by the Soviet power as the liberal arts were; emulating Western designs was instead favoured. In 1967 the head of the plastics factory *Norma* even stated that most of its industrial production was influenced by Western examples. Modern design, at least, was seen as universally high-quality and the country of origin added no ideological dimension to it. Even more, it was permissible to publicly acknowledge that 'imperialist countries' might be more advanced in this field than the Soviet Union.

After Nikita Khrushchev, Soviet power aimed to make everyday life more comfortable and up-to-date, and more material resources were devoted to industrial enterprises. As objects played an important role in people's lives, it was crucial that they mirror socialist ideals. An artist in *Tarbeklaas*, Ingi Vaher, emphasised the educational aspect in an article: people's aesthetic upbringing was an important part of the Soviet educational system, but only industry could reproduce the applied arts products to the extent of being able to influence the taste of the wider public. According to Vaher, with the hectic pace of life at that time, the consumer had no time to delve into excessively decorated objects; therefore, the objects had to be aesthetically quickly graspable. Here, one can draw parallels to Scandinavian social-democratic ideals: design is important not only for improving people's everyday life, but also for improving their minds. Regulating production symbolically meant regulating the social classes.

An important difference between Finland and Soviet Estonia was the position of the industrial designer in the

factory. In Finland, the designer's ideal was, according to Marianne Aav, to be a Renaissance genius, an artist-artisan-designer.<sup>2</sup> In Soviet Estonia, the situation was different. In *Tarbeklaas*, as in the other factories of that period, the role of designer was filled by artists who had several tasks: designing new products, executing more advanced decorations (mostly engravings and cuttings) and designing propaganda materials. There was no separate department for experimenting with materials and the artists had very little time. It could take a year or two until a design made it to production.<sup>3</sup>

Objects with very clear Finnish influences, mostly in terms of shape, were produced. An important difference between Soviet Estonian and Finnish glass products was surface finishing. In *Tarbeklaas*, most objects were produced with several different ornaments: this was a cheap and simple way to increase the variety of products. In addition, Estonia had had strong engraving traditions since the time of the Lorup factory. In Finland, however, cuttings and engravings were rarely used. Engraved objects were not praised or even allowed in exhibitions, as ornament was considered old-fashioned.<sup>4</sup> Surface finishing marked the difference in glass objects in the two systems. Cuttings and engravings give a slightly historicist

2 M. Aav, *A Union of Art and Industry from Iittala to Milan and Beyond*. – Iittala: 125 Years of Finnish Glass: Complete History with All Designers. Eds. M. Aav, E. Viljanen. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche, 2006, p. 128.

3 A.-M. Laev, *Uute toodete juurutamisest ENSV Kohaliku Tööstuse Ministeriumi ettevõtetes* [About the introduction of new products in the enterprises of the Ministry of Local Industry of the Estonian SSR]. – *Kohalik Tööstus: informatsiooniseeria* [Local Industry: information series] 1973, no. 8, p. 29.

4 K. Koivisto, *Kolme tarinaa lasista: suomalainen lasimuotoilu 1946–1957* [Three stories about glass]. *Lasitutkimuksia* 13 [Glass Research 13]. Riihimäki: The Finnish Glass Museum, 2001, p. 149.

appearance to *Tarbeklaas* products. The laconic surface of Finnish glass design was more suited to modern paradigms.

In discussing Finnish or Soviet Estonian design, it is important to remember that in a certain context the country of origin can act as a brand. Since there was only one factory producing everyday glassware in Soviet Estonia, *Tarbeklaas* equalled Soviet Estonian glass. Although Finnish and Soviet Estonian glassware was produced and circulated in different systems, there are similarities in the myths created around the products. The positive image of Scandinavia as a region of the Western world only helped to reinforce the myth of Scandinavian design as being democratic in essence. Soviet Estonia had, within the Soviet Union, achieved fame as 'the West in the Soviet Union'. Estonian design was beginning to represent the desired Western culture, as were Czechoslovakian, Polish and East-German design. Both Finnish and Soviet Estonian design embodied something that was yearned for: Finland's democracy, traditions and nature, and Soviet Estonia's democracy and 'West' status. In reality, these qualities were ascribed by the consumer rather than visible in the form itself – the objects produced in both countries mostly followed contemporary design trends rather than a deeper ideology. Both *Tarbeklaas* and Finnish glass factories earned fame and profit through semiological associations.

Simple, modern forms gave neutrality to 20th century glass objects: the same object could be used for different purposes and, as it did not change, for a longer period of time. For that reason, glass objects often became design classics: they were easily preserved and therefore 're-discoverable'. Nowadays, the position

of glass design is, due to history, very different in the two systems, although the major differences in political and cultural climate have almost disappeared. In Finland, 20th century design is one of the most important export articles; in Estonia, Soviet design is just beginning to be acknowledged. Among wider audiences, *Tarbeklaas* glassware is appreciated mostly for nostalgic reasons. As the glassware is no longer in production, it can only be found in second-hand stores; however, almost every household still has at least one object left. In the 21st century, after Estonia regained its independence and *Tarbeklaas* ceased to exist, these objects have, at least in the private sphere<sup>5</sup>, attained the same status as many other Soviet products: they have become icons exploited by the post-postmodern yearning for the past. A transformed world makes people crave 'simpler times', embodied in the Estonian context by the Soviet period, the childhood years for most current adults.

<sup>5</sup> The image of Soviet design within the public sphere is much more complex.