

Harri Koskinen: The Finnish connection

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A bag folded in geometric pleats that springs to life when picked up; a gently tapered vase in smoky gray glass; and a clutch of light pink, creamy white and dark green ceramics in softly-curved pentagon forms. Hidden among these shapes and textures are clues of an impressive design pedigree — they are all the result of a collaboration between the ever-innovative Japanese clothing brand Issey Miyake and the famed Finnish design company Iittala.

The Iittala X Issey Miyake Home Collection, titled Pause For Harmony, launched in 2016 with a mix of 30 textiles, glass and ceramic products, offering a perfectly balanced showcase of the two creative powerhouses. This was reflected further in new additions to the collection that were recently unveiled — a medley of bags, pouches, cushion covers and placemats crafted from textiles with Issey Miyake's signature pleats in autumnal shades of dark beige and harvest gold.

The idea of collaboration was dreamed up by Harri Koskinen, the award-winning Finnish industrial designer who, at the time, was design director of Iittala. He is now a consultant at the company and continues to work on the collaboration project.

Simple, minimal and functional, the line-up's products share a focus on timelessly high-quality craftsmanship and innovative materials — qualities for which both Iittala and Issey Miyake have long been famed.

"This is a collection for everyday use," explains Koskinen during a recent visit to Tokyo. "The most important thing here was to create an inspiring collection for daily life — to make your everyday life a bit better."

"My design philosophy is very straightforward — it has to be honest and there has to be a reason to do things," he adds.

Iittala, famed for its expertly hand-blown glassware, has played a prominent role in Koskinen's career ever since 1996, when he won a student scholarship for a summer trainee position at the Finnish company founded in the 19th century.

Nearly 20 years ago, Koskinen also discovered firsthand the world of Japanese design after receiving an out-of-the-blue invitation



Clockwise from above: Finnish designer Harri Koskinen; a selection of pleated bags in the Iittala X Issey Miyake Home Collection; latest Iittala X Issey Miyake Home Collection. IITTALA

from Issey Miyake himself to exhibit his work in Tokyo — a moment he describes as a "turning point" in his career.

Since then, Koskinen has worked on a string of collaborative projects with Issey Miyake as well as other Japanese brands including Seiko, Panasonic and Muji (he supervised a Found Muji exhibition in Finland last summer).

It was in 2012, shortly after Koskinen was appointed design director of Iittala in Finland, that the idea of a creative collaboration with Issey Miyake took root: "I thought it would be very delightful to match these two brands.

"Iittala has long been working with very functional things. Issey Miyake is a very innovative brand, really pioneering with



techniques, materials and pleating in a very interesting way. Both brands are symbolic and minimalistic, and really appreciate craftsmanship and cultural heritage."

Natural affinities between Japan and Finland have also perhaps contributed to the ease with which the two brands are able to combine their aesthetics and creativity.

"I think this affinity (between Japan and Finland) relates to the mentality of the people. We like to be quiet. It's very natural for us not to share all our thoughts all the time," he explains. "There are also the aesthetics of daily living that are similar. This was maybe more obvious in the 1950s or '60s — the wooden tools, the natural colors, the local decorations. There is a shared modesty."

With a smile, Koskinen describes the four-

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year process of creating the collaboration — in particular combining "hard and soft materials" — as "a great adventure," culminating in the inaugural collection two years ago.

The additional textile products more recently unveiled showcase Issey Miyake's iconic pleating techniques, with fabrics undergoing as many as 23 different manufacturing stages.

The striking palette of autumnal shades of gold and brown is also new to the collection, apparently inspired by the seasonally shifting hues of cornfields in Finland and rice fields in Japan.

The concept of daily rituals lies behind the curation of product types chosen for the Iittala X Issey Miyake collection — which range from cups and glassware to cushion covers as well as bags.

"It is great to start the day with a sort of ritual in the morning to help you get ready," says Koskinen. "The Finnish morning is very simple: I like to eat oatmeal and yoghurt with berries and coffee. So I need a plate and a mug. That is a ritual that I have every day."

It's clear that Japan remains a major source of inspiration for Koskinen, who runs his studio, Friends of Industry, in Helsinki: other Japan-related work in the pipeline ranges from a hotel project in Kyoto to a crafts collaboration in Iwate. Not to forget the seemingly timeless creative union between Iittala and Issey Miyake: "We are constantly adding new colors, small touches," smiles Koskinen. "It's like a train, it just keeps moving on."

For more information about Harri Koskinen and the Iittala X Issey Miyake Home Collection, visit www.harrikoskinen.com/FOI and bit.ly/iittalaxisseymiyake