

Flight of Fantasy

For four decades, Finnish designer Oiva Toikka's name has been inseparable from his colorful glass birds. Yet his career, now in its second half-century, soars over much wider fields, lifted by an irreverent whimsy.

By Wif Stenger

SKY CURLEW

ONE OF THE FEW STILL-ACTIVE FIGURES FROM THE classic era of Finnish design, Professor Oiva Toikka is best known for his annual glass birds. Some are flights of fantasy while others portray specific species. His 2013 bird, for instance, muses on the bold gray spots of the mistle thrush. Like so many Nordic designers, Toikka takes inspiration from nature—though his own life is decidedly urban.

At 82, Toikka lives in a modest apartment in Helsinki's working-class Hakaniemi neighborhood. The artist lives alone, his glass-designer wife Inkeri having died four years ago. Every morning he walks around the block to the market square for oatmeal and coffee. Then, often, he begins to draw, either in his downstairs studio or in his small, art-filled apartment.

Recovering from a stroke in late 2012, Toikka remains active—and retains his trademark self-deprecating humor: “I always have ideas—at least bad ones,” he says in his gruff, avuncular voice, leaning back in his rocking chair.

“I’m working on something now with an architect who wants some amusing food-related drawings for a wall,” he says. “Then I have these eternal birds and annual eggs and paperweight cubes. I do at least three birds every year. There’s one coming out called the Butler, which is quite a big one. I called it that because it’s kind of chubby.”



BARN OWL

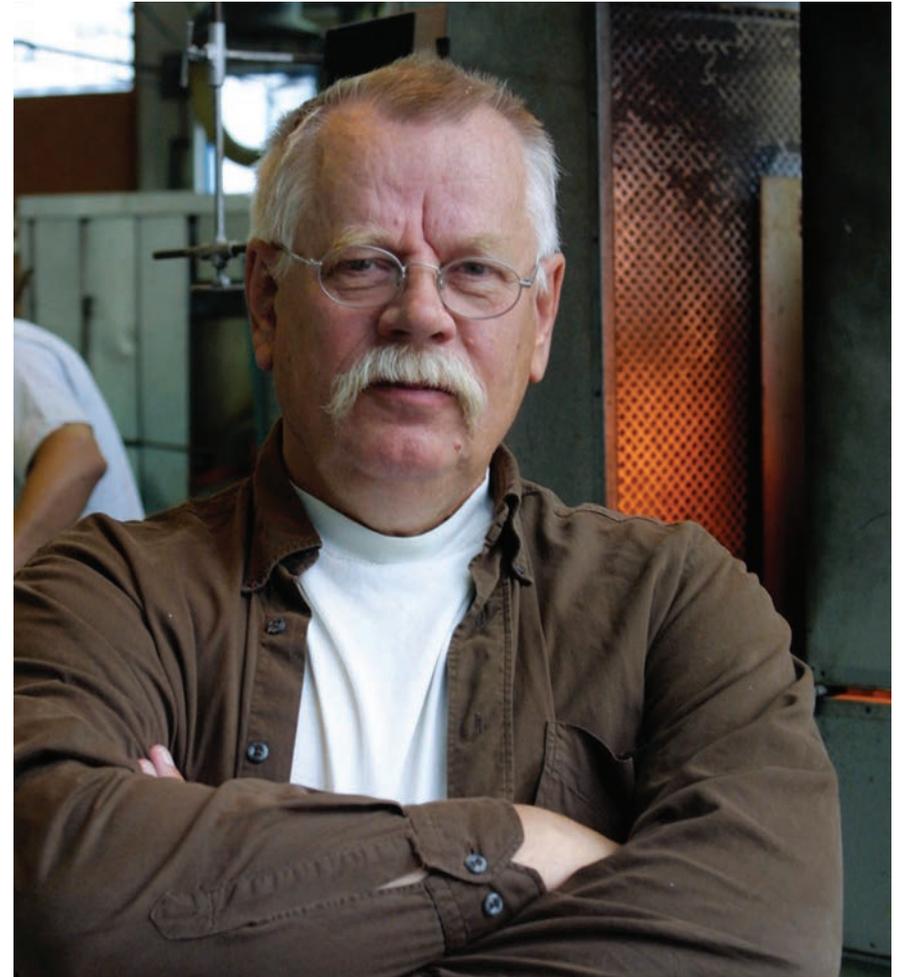
Over the past 40 years, Toikka has designed more than 400 birds for the Iittala company. They are mouth-blown and finished by a few master glassmakers at the Nuutajärvi Glassworks, some 100 miles from Helsinki.

Yet the bestselling birds have overshadowed his many other projects, which have ranged from ceramics and tableware to designs for textile manufacturer Marimekko. The latest, African Queen, a pattern for children, was designed as a benefit for UNICEF.

Over the decades, Toikka has also made stage and costume designs for the Finnish National Opera, the National Theater and the Helsinki City Theater. Sharp-eyed observers see cross-references between his big-stage works and those that fit into the palm of a hand.

“Yes, theater and opera have influenced my other work and vice versa,” acknowledges Toikka. “The opera has particularly inspired my glass and ceramics. The opera world has a very free use of color.”

Toikka’s use of color and free-flowing, organic complexity set him apart from other Finnish design giants such as Alvar and Aino Aalto, Kai Franck and Timo Sarpaneva—all fellow Iittala designers—who favored functionalist shapes and muted colors.



Though he has many more feathers in his artistic cap, Oiva Toikka, now in his 80s, is best known for his glass birds.

“I’ve never dreamed of doing that kind of design,” says Toikka. “Although I have done some ‘proper’ design items, even though not everybody thinks so. Some people think my things are too complicated—too many details.”

Among his more mainstream industrial designs are the Kastehelmi (Dewdrop) bowl and plate sets from 1964. To honor Toikka’s 50th anniversary as a designer, Iittala has brought the series back into production in clear and apple green.

“Kastehelmi was one of the very first things I did at Nuutajärvi,” he says. “And it succeeded just right.”

Toikka has worked at Nuutajärvi on and off ever since. At 220 years, Nuutajärvi is the oldest active glass factory in Finland. However, Iittala plans to close it in 2014, concentrating all its glass production in Hämeenlinna.

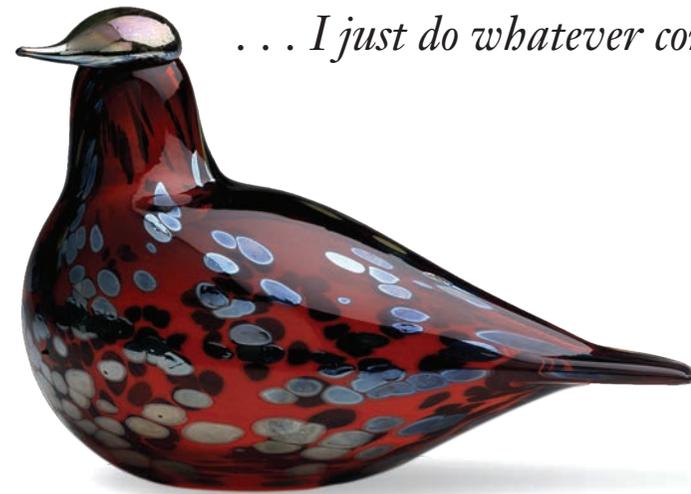
Toikka still visits the factory to oversee the glassblowers at work on his

■ *"I've never wanted to have a style. . .*

. . . I just do whatever comes to me."



FESTIVE CATCHER



RUBY BIRD



MISTLE THRUSH



RED CARDINAL



MAGPIE



WHITE WHOOPER SWAN

Toikka first studied glassmaking under the legendary Kaj Franck at the Ateneum Art School in Helsinki.

birds, paperweights and other objects.

The birth of the birds is a fairly brutal-looking process: sand quartz and soda are melted at 2600 degrees Fahrenheit, molten glass is clipped with shears and each nearly-finished bird is turned in a blowtorch flame like a chicken on a spit.

Toikka first studied glassmaking under the legendary Kaj Franck at the Ateneum Art School in Helsinki, where ceramics was his main subject. He soon landed a job with a local pottery workshop.

“I don’t know if the early stuff I did was much of anything. They were half sculptures, half utilitarian items. There were elks as well as birds. There was a kind of duck that worked out quite well. Its back was concave so that it formed a hole like an ashtray on its back.” Unfortunately this proto-bird by Toikka has not survived.

“Even then, it was fun to play with colors and try something a bit different. When they fired things in the kiln, they usually used quite a sweet turquoise, kind of a coppery green. I didn’t like it. So I asked for brown on the red clay, which was considered a rude combination. But at least it was different.”

By the late 1950s, he was working as an apprentice at the iconic ceramics firm Arabia (which, like Iittala, is now owned by Fiskars).

There he encountered designers who profoundly influenced his development, though he insists: “I’ve never wanted to have a style. I don’t need to have a style. I just do whatever comes to me.”

At Arabia, by his own account, he made a pest of himself by hanging around the studios of “stars” such as Birger Kaipiainen, Michael Schilkin and Raija Tummi.

“They were my role models. I visited them so often that it annoyed them. But it was terribly rewarding, these intelligent, talented, nice people. I learned such an unbelievable amount from them that I wouldn’t trade a day,” he muses.

Rather than being stereotypically Nordic, Toikka’s work reflects his interest and travels in Latin America and West Africa.

Toikka, who served as a village art teacher in Lapland, was born in the Karelian town of Säiniö, near Vyborg, then Finland’s second-biggest city.

Säiniö was also the home to the well-known graphic designer Erik Bruun and painter Unto Pusa—as well as to a large brick factory, all of which may have spurred his interest in design and ceramics.

“When I was a boy in Säiniö, our farm was self-sufficient. We always had at least four cows, two or three horses, sheep and one pig every year. And

chickens, of course. I was a shepherd. The wars were going on, and the fences had been destroyed during the fighting.”

After the Continuation War, when Oiva was 12, that part of Karelia was ceded to the Soviet Union and the residents were relocated elsewhere in Finland.

“When we were evacuated, we took our cows and other animals, and I took care of them wherever we were. We didn’t have our own land, so I grazed them alongside the roads and train tracks. I didn’t really take care of the animals, though: I just kept them company,” he recalls with a grin.

“I began drawing during the war, when there were very tough winters, very, very cold and lots of snow. I’ve drawn ever since; it stayed with me. I



HONORING AHTISAARI—AND PICASSO

Each November, the Finnish Foreign Ministry hands out two of Oiva Toikka’s Mediator Doves (above) as awards on Ahtisaari Day, which honors Finland’s former president and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Martti Ahtisaari.

The clear-glass birds are given to school pupils who have set an example in mediation and maintaining peace at their schools—echoing Ahtisaari’s conflict mediation in places such as Indonesia, Namibia, Kosovo and Northern Ireland.

“The Mediator was inspired by the dove that Pablo Picasso made just after World War II,” says Toikka, pointing to a ceramic plate (right) that holds a place of pride in his living room.



SINIMARIA KANGAS

Toikka is particularly popular in Japan, where one of his most avid admirers is Princess Takamado.

didn't make anything out of wood. I probably would have gotten hurt carving; I'm not good with my hands."

While he may claim not to be a craftsman himself, Toikka's visions have struck a chord worldwide. He has been the subject of one-man shows in more than a dozen countries including the US and the UK. Toikka's works are included in the collections of New York's Museum of Modern Art and London's Victoria and Albert Museum.

Toikka is particularly popular in Japan, where one of his most avid admirers is Princess Takamado. She has long been a collector of Toikka birds, even flying in to Helsinki to attend the opening of his 2010 Design Museum show and hosting him at a dinner in Tokyo. Last summer, Toikka gave her of a gold-flecked 2013 bird when she stopped off in Helsinki to see him after the wedding of Sweden's Princess Madeleine.

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, Toikka has had plenty of that. For instance, the Muurla glass factory—which was established years after he began the birds series—produces near-replica glass birds that sell for a fraction of the price of genuine Toikkas. Iittala, too, has commissioned similar glass birds, but they have not taken off in the same way.

"Yet the birds are not simply commercial gimmicks," asserts Prof. Jack Dawson in his 2007 book *Oiva Toikka: Glass and Design*. "They are sculptures from nature that bring to the industrialized, technologically obsessed urban world something of the spirit and sense of place that Toikka so obviously and intensely feels and engages with at Nuutajärvi."

According to Johanna Luhtala, curator at the Finnish Design Museum, "Now, in his 80s, Oiva Toikka has risen to take his place among the true artists. His unique works are now art—they're no longer just art glass."

Yet Toikka brushes off such high-flying praise.

"The public reaction is the most important for me, not what the companies or critics think. If the people adopt them as their own, like they have these birds, and the Kastehelmi, Flora and Fauna series, that makes me happy. It doesn't matter if the salespeople praise something to the heavens—the people make their own decisions," he says.

"Anyway, I've always thought that being proud is a form of stupidity. I don't want to be proud at all."

Wif Stenger is an American journalist who has lived in Finland on and off since childhood. He is an English news anchor with the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle).

