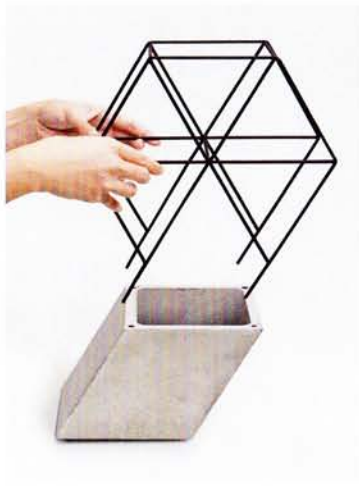


# Modern Design Review

A masterclass in chair design with Yrjö Kukkapuro  
Martino Gamper in an Arts & Crafts mash-up  
Daniel Rybakken on the irrepressible quality of daylight  
A nod towards New Minimalism  
The theory of colour by Scholten & Baijings  
Woodism

Spring/Summer 2014





Top: Truss Vase by Thinkk Studio 2012; Snow Vase by Maxim Velčovský 2010–2012; Urn by Hilda Hellström 2011.  
 Middle: Pressed (epoxy clay) by Floris Wubben 2013; Considered Objects by David Taylor 2013; Gardenias Vases by Jamie Hayon 2013.  
 Bottom: Wooden Forms by Peter Marigold 2011, Static Bubbles by Nendo 2012; Single Flower Vase by Daniel Rybakken 2012

# A vase is a vase

Art critic and curator Nicolas Trembley has recently found himself something of a spokesperson for ugly vases. It's a strange and unsolicited situation that began when he exhibited his own collection of East German Sgrafo and Fat Lava vases in Geneva in 2010. He charted uncommon territory, exploring a typology of ceramic that was industrially produced, anonymous and largely unloved. He elevated the unpretentious East German vase, and in doing so turned himself into something of a ceramics hero. He has had more cause than most to consider the position of the humble vase in its historical context. Here, Nicolas meditates on this very subject for us.

Text by Nicolas Trembley

'What is interesting is that the vase, from the dawn of time to today, has not changed. It has the same function: to hold water for domestic use. It is a receptacle in all styles, following every artistic trend, prolonged in extravagance and decorative strangeness.'

This statement came about while in conversation with Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec about my unusual vase collection. What was important with the East German vases was to change their context and question them, to see if they were interesting, even though they were not meant to be: they were meant to be crap, to be passé. I wondered whether putting them into an 'art' context would mean they might be seen as artistic. And they were. I searched for validation for these vases, from the art world and from the design world. Because without it, a vase is just a vase. Can it be a form of art or design?

During that time I looked at artists such as Picasso who had used the vase as a medium. But when I met with the Bouroullec brothers, I realised the importance of the vase as a design typology. They told me that the vase is one of the first objects that a design student might work on because its function is so elementary. A vase is just a container for water, made from plastic or ceramic or any material, so it allows the designer to express themselves. To make a table or chair today is complicated: you can't produce such furniture without a manufacturer; there are many rules that must be adhered to. But with a vase, as long as there is a container for water and an opening for a flower, the function is taken care of. If a designer wants to be free, one of the only functional objects where you can be totally creative is the vase.

Archaeology has proven the endurance of the vase: it is one of our oldest artefacts. It is one of the few design objects that transcends all

of those years and, importantly, that remains recognisable. What is interesting is that vases really take the shape of the moment, the fashion of the moment. You can always see that one vase is from one period and another is from another. You could tell a story of taste and culture and form simply through the demonstration of vases through the ages. Because they take on the moment, the *air du temps*. This is because the vase is a tempting, 'guilt-free' platform for expression for designers. The inbuilt function need not be explained, leaving them free to explore. Designers like Sottsass – he was the master of the vase – were especially good at this. And it is still used by designers, big and small, in the same way today.

I have never put any flowers in my vases. I really see them as sculpture, and I believe that is what they were intended to be; cultural, sculptural, decorative. Even though my Sgrafo vases were (and are) sold as functional objects, some of them have necks so small you cannot put a flower in them in any case. Which encourages the conclusion that it wasn't their first reason for being.

The idea of display and the vase is interesting as well. For me, it has always been a big part of the collection of vases, this question of how to display them. Display magnifies them and their purpose. I love display, especially graphic displays from old museums. In many cases, anonymous, cultural artefacts not considered an artwork (that is a new idea) were elevated by this kind of museum display. That is what I tried to do with my collection of anonymous vases, and that is what we all do at home every day with our own vases. Before they were just tools. But to put them on a pedestal, to dramatise their context and say, 'Look, they are also beautiful,' is really about giving every vase its chance to be famous.

The humble vase has found itself at the centre of historical events and design movements without even trying.

Here are five parties that it managed to crash:

**Dutch Golden Age:** Once, tulips were the real estate of the moneyed world – their inflated value in the late 17th century during 'tulipomania' inspired Delft to create ostentatious pyramid vases for their presentation. **The birth of mass consumption:** When the ancient Portland Vase landed in the hands of Josiah Wedgwood in the 18th century, all hell broke loose. Wedgwood's skilled reproduction had Georgian London going gaga for vases and that association between what's on your mantelpiece and 'taste' has been with us ever since. **Finnish nationalism:** In 1937 Finland was a proud, but very young, new nation. The Savoy Vase by Alvar Aalto was a design that articulated everything the reserved Finns were trying to say about their modernity, ingenuity and relationship to nature. The vase can now be found in nearly every Finnish home. **Postmodernism:** At its fervent height, all bolshy pattern and aggressive colour, postmodernism was reinventing design as an emotion-inducing discipline. The king of this style sensation was Ettore Sottsass and the vase was one of his favourite instruments. **The modern art world:** The influence of the modern art world as we know it today – high prices, big commerce and bigger kudos – began in the 1980s, and its defining moment came when a painting of a bunch of sunflowers in a humble vase tripled any previous record price.