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Steven Learner on Kaj Franck

THE FOUNDER OF THE COLLECTIVE DESIGN FAIR
FOCUSES ON THE PERFECT SIMPLICITY
OF A SET OF VINTAGE DRINKING GLASSES

IT WAS KATE SHEPHERD who gave me the first one. She just focused in on them, which, on reflection, is no surprise because, though she works as a painter, I think of her as a colorist. She gave me a second glass as a gift, and then I bought the other two myself.

They were all found in vintage shops, two in New York and two in Italy.

They are vintage versions of the Kartio glassware that Kaj Franck designed for Iittala in 1958.

Looking at the colors of this inadvertent set of four—amber, cool gray, green-gray, cobalt—they seem like a perfect array of lenses for Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses. In fact, some might think to use them for morning juice, but they were first put into use during a regular Friday night cocktail hour I got into the habit of hosting 10 years ago.

It would be pretentious to call these gatherings a salon, but each week, a mix of new people doing interesting things would arrive at my door with already invited friends. Those evenings were how I met perfumer Ulrich Lang and gallerist Nazy Nazhand, who mingled with “regulars” like Kate and Sara Meltzer of weR2 Studio. This was long before I’d started Collective, but meeting new people in a home setting, inadvertently building a community of friends who had great experience with art and design and how to appreciate and live with both, might have created a foundation in my mind. When I decided to launch Collective Design, I went to trusted friends and colleagues for input on what they would want from a fair for collectible design.

Sometimes I think about adding to the set. But I’d only acquire the vintage pieces, which have more delicately crafted edges and a more exaggerated taper from bottom to top. They’re very visceral objects. I recently looked the pieces up in the Iittala catalogue and was amused to see it calls Franck “the conscience of Finnish design.” But *conscience* is a great word: The aspiration of most designers is to express the simplest idea in the most direct way, and living with objects like these reminds me to do that. I’ve been very lucky to have found beautiful objects that I have collected and now live with. Part of why I do what I do and have done it for as long as I have is the pursuit of that. The Kartio glasses always added to the party by being excellent design objects that serve their purpose well. And they really do make the most elegant little martini glasses. ▣

The fourth edition of Collective Design runs May 4 through 8 at Skylight Clarkson Square in New York.