

## Artistic blossoming. Art Nouveau at Rörstrand in 1895–1920 18 February – 4 June, 2017

Winding shapes and inspiration from nature are typical of art and crafts in the Art Nouveau style from around 1900. The pottery is teeming with birds hovering in the air, or fish, algae and other creatures from the aquatic world. Chestnuts, pines and other plants from field and forest cavort with weeds and flowers from meadows and gardens.

Rörstrand was one of the porcelain factories in Sweden that recruited artists for industry at the time. With new technology and improved quality, the standard of their art ceramics was high, and the factory developed its own style that became internationally successful. The flowing colours, the glistening glazes and the soft contours that evolved in the creative and experimental environment never cease to fascinate.

This exhibition features Rörstrand's art ceramics from 1895 to 1920. Many of the works have been lent to us by Markus Dimdal, an engineer and writer and major private collector. Several of the pieces here were included in the art industry exhibitions in those days, and are now being shown after a long slumber. The links to the flora and fauna have formed the framework for our presentation, but the exhibition also seeks to highlight the technical variations and the historical context of the displayed objects.

The exhibition with its green installations is designed by the floral artist Gunnar Kaj, mainly known for his work with the decorations for the Nobel Prize Gala Dinner. The floral decorations on vases, bowls, dishes and urns are shown together with real flowers in a striking enactment here in the exhibition halls of the Thiel Gallery.

### Exhibition and show. Art ceramics for a new era. Room 1

The latest innovations in art and industry spread rapidly across national borders in Europe around the late-19th and early-20th century, via media and railways, but also thanks to the world fairs, which showed the innovations and the most astonishing new products. Rörstrand participated in several exhibitions and saw its major breakthrough with art ceramics at the Allmänna Konst- och Industriutställningen here on Djurgården in Stockholm in 1897. Ernest Thiel and his brother Artur helped organise this enormous event.

In this room, ceramics in a wide variety of shapes, colours and designs are shown, to give you an idea of how important these exhibitions were to the cultural scene in the era of industrialisation. The artists at Rörstrand experimented with different techniques: with black, white or coloured backgrounds, with decorations that were painted or sculpted, with decorative patterns, figurative scenes, or close-ups of flowers and leaves, and with plates and vases of every conceivable shape. The monumental pieces were important in setting Rörstrand apart from its competitors, but the diversity in style also reveals a creative urge to find new approaches.

The elegant style became the height of fashion and appealed to an international audience with a taste for luxury. The World Fair in Paris in 1900 was a great success for Rörstrand. The delicate colours and luscious plant decor of the vases were perceived as typically Nordic, and the magazine *L'Art Décoratif* wrote in 1898: "everything on these vases appears to have been created by the light touch of a Nordic sprite".

## The art of fire. Experiments and factory work. Room 2

The fierce heat of the kiln is crucial when turning the wet, pliable clay into hard porcelain. But many things can go wrong when firing, and the objects risk being destroyed or distorted. As one of the four elements, fire is essential to the creation of art ceramics.

L'art du feu – the art of fire – refers to glazes, and how a part of the artistic embellishment takes place in the kiln. Chemical substances are mixed into the glaze and form new patterns on the surface when they react to heat. The result is glistening, deep colours that flow across the surface, crack into crystals or resemble polished porphyry. The artist cannot control this process completely; instead, the materials, the heat, and chance determine the final appearance.

The Rörstrand porcelain factory was founded in 1726 and was originally located in Vasastan in Stockholm. Around 1900, the factory had some 1,000 employees and was one of Sweden's largest industries, in close competition with the Gustavsberg porcelain factory. Together, the two factories produced 70 per cent of Sweden's art ceramics, utility goods and industrial porcelain. Most of the decor painters were women. Many of the workers were provided with free housing, but they often had to work from 6 am to 9 pm. After the national general strike in 1909, some 90 of the 300 who had participated in the strike were dismissed. Fire also characterised the work at the factory. The hardest job was at the kilns, which were emptied when they had cooled to 100 degrees.

## Plants as inspiration. Impulses from far and near. Room 3

Art Nouveau – the new style – was named after a shop in Paris, Maison de l'Art Nouveau, which was run by the German art dealer Siegfried Bing. The new taste in styles was launched in art, crafts and architecture around the turn of the 19th century, in the desire to break away from the historicising tendency that had dominated the 1800s, and to create new design for a new era. Inspiration came from nature, from European crafts traditions, and from Japanese art and traditional pottery.

Artists were fascinated by plants and their capacity to endlessly come up with new, decorative variations. The earth was also present in the materials – Rörstrand made its own porcelain clay, using feldspar from its quarries in the Stockholm archipelago and kaolin clay from the UK. The local Nordic flora, with marsh marigolds, harebells and daisies, was favoured for floral decorations. The seasons, and the development of plants from bud to blossom and ripe fruit, were transformed into vase shapes and decorative patterns on objects to adorn elegant parlours. Pictures from one of Ernest Thiel's previous residences show his shelves with art ceramics from Rörstrand.

The interest in East Asian culture was especially strong in Europe, with numerous exhibitions in the 19th century. The French magazine "Le Japon Artistique" was filled with prints by Japanese artists. Craftspersons all over Europe were inspired by their compositions, with close cropping and airy perspectives. Rörstrand had several editions of the magazine in its library, and the prints were sometimes copied in detail for their early production.

Showpiece vases with motifs in flowing pastels against white, like the ones shown in this room, are perhaps what is regarded as the most typical expression of Swedish Art Nouveau

ceramics of this period. The technique is called underglaze, where the glaze, decor and porcelain fused into a totality, merging the motif and decor with the material.

### The deep, creative forest. Artists in industry. Room 4

The artistic ideas underpinning Art Nouveau were combined with social pathos. The Swedish philosopher Ellen Key voiced demands for higher quality in the design of industrially produced everyday goods. Beautiful objects should not be the privilege of the few; with artists working for industry, beauty could be available to all.

Alf Wallander studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, but made his major breakthrough as a designer for Rörstrand. His dramatic designs added to the factory's international success. His pieces dominate the room, with wood nymphs hunted by satyrs, yawning lynx, and sprawling thistles. There were several artists in the team that designed art ceramics at Rörstrand, including Mela Anderberg, Algot Erikson, Astrid Ewerlöf, Karl Lindström, and Nils Emil Lundström.

In Symbolist art, the forest is a place of emotion and contemplation – everything that did not belong in the modern urban lifestyle. Art influenced ceramics, as we can see from the dark forests with gnarled trunks, eerie moonlight and owls, or white swans that seem to bear tidings from another dimension. The new artistic ideals were stimulated by a blending of disciplines, where art inspired crafts and vice versa.

### The aquatic world. Dissolving aesthetics. Room 5

Underwater life was a new cornucopia of shapes and colours to Art Nouveau artists. The deep ocean was perceived as a secret world between reality and imagination. The water currents with shoals of fish and crawling crustaceans, floating algae and billowing jellyfish or sea urchins were a rich source of inspiration. The motifs merge with the undulating ceramic forms and watery colours into a striking harmony.

Around 1900, Rörstrand had succeeded in developing a range of art ceramics in its signature style – gaining international recognition and press coverage. The influential British magazine *The Studio* wrote about Alf Wallander's ceramics in 1897: "Especially charming is the ability of this artist to make material give illusion of movement of water, and his mermaids are most delicately modelled and seem to glide along the waves." Showpieces from Rörstrand were sold at the *Maison de l'Art Nouveau* in Paris, but also in St Petersburg, Berlin, Budapest, Vienna, New York, and Buenos Aires.

Art Nouveau ceramics that were designed at Rörstrand remained in production until the 1920s. New aesthetic ideals, increased domestic competition, and the economic crises after the First World War, prompted a reorientation in the 1910s, and the factory was forced to relocate in 1926 from Stockholm to Lidköping. The heyday of art ceramics around 1900 had come to an end, but Rörstrand has continued to work and the brand is still active today.

## The Corridor

### Le Japon Artistique, 1888–1891

Magazine, bound in six volumes

The library of Konstfack University College of Arts, Crafts and Design

In the late 20th century, Europe and North America showed a growing interest in Japanese arts. The art dealer Siegfried Bing in Paris helped to encourage this so-called Japonism. He traded with Japanese art and crafts and was the driving force behind the magazine *Le Japon Artistique*. Illustrated with Japanese woodcuts, it was published in French, German and English, and became a common reference point for an international community of collectors, artists and craftspersons. The Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh, the French jeweller Lucien Falize, and the Swedish Artist Algot Erikson at Rörstrand, are just a few of the European art practitioners who were obviously influenced by the imagery of the magazine.

The pictures on these pages have inspired some of the vases shown in this exhibition.

The Library, Thiel's family home, Villagatan 1-3, Stockholm

Anonymous photographer, 1897

The Archive at Thielska Galleriet

The image shows the interior of the library in the town house in Villastan, an exclusive area of Östermalm in Stockholm, where Ernest Thiel lived with his first family until 1897. The décor is typical of the turn of the century mix of styles, with a number of porcelain pieces that decorate the room. The shelf on the left shows two East Asian urns with lids, but the other pieces are art ceramics from Rörstrand: two tall vases in the back row, with monochrome underglaze painting, and in the middle a lower urn with seaweed and water sprites, designed by Alf Wallander. At the far right in the picture is a vase with the sea nymph and dolphins, also designed by Wallander. The image puts the magnificent pieces in a context - they were displayed as works of art, rather than being used as everyday objects.

It has not been possible to find any of these pieces for the exhibition.