

New Classicism: Design of the 1920s in Denmark

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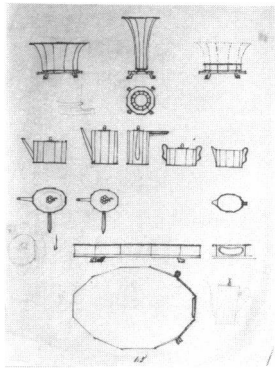
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**Fig. 7. Edvard Thomsen,
furniture for a sitting room.
Arkitekten, 1922.**



**Fig. 8. Edvard Thomsen, pen
and ink drawing, 294 x 228 mm,
silver designs for Carl M. Cohr,
1925–27. Collection of the
Royal Academy of Fine Arts,
Copenhagen.**

set designed by Bindsbøll for one of his contemporaries, the painter Thomas Marstrand. The case pieces at Øregaard are based on a similar modular system in Thorvaldsen's Museum. Other sketches by Thomsen show his experimentation with harpie and karyatid forms in designs for the Gymnasium. Between 1925 and 1927, Thomsen also produced a number of extremely refined silver designs for the firm of Carl M. Cohr. A series of thumbnail sketches reflect the geometrical purity and restraint that mark these designs (fig. 8).

Kaare Klint is regarded by many as the father of the modern Danish furniture tradition. In the 1910s and 1920s, he succeeded in bringing about a crucial synthesis as a culminating figure in the Danish classical furniture tradition, while at the same time establishing himself as a pioneer in functionalist studies. He became the first professor at the newly-founded School of Furniture at the Academy of 1924, which allowed him to disseminate his thinking among a whole generation of Danish furniture designers. Born in 1888, he began his training as a painter, studying for a period under the national romantic Jens Møller-Jensen. He never received formal training as an architect and instead undertook his first studies under his father, P.V. Jensen Klint and later under Carl Petersen. His roots were, therefore, firmly grounded in the “*Skonvirke*” period. However, while his father's generation had rebelled against the conscious emulation of period styles, Klint saw well-designed historical prototypes as a significant source of design solutions, both esthetically and functionally. Under his direction, the students at the Academy did meticulously measured drawings of classic furniture forms as the starting point of design. Klint began designing furniture around 1913 and as early as 1917 began his systematic studies of proportion, examining the relationship of human scale to furniture. Klint's interest in employing mathematical systems and human proportional studies predate, for example, similar research undertaken at the Bauhaus as well as the early furniture design of Le Corbusier, Jeanneret, and Perriand in the mid-1920s.

In 1914, Carl Petersen invited him to collaborate on the furniture designs for the Faaborg Museum.¹¹ Klint's most significant contribution to the project was the Faaborg chair (fig. 9), regarded as the piece that introduced a new era in Danish furniture. It represents the essence of Klint's style; the fusion of mathematically pure form with historic prototypes. The chair was executed in burred oak with a caned back and seat, and conceived in complete harmony with the design of the museum. The other furniture designed by Klint for the

11. Although Petersen was the senior architect of the Faaborg Museum, in a letter written to the art historian Emil Hannover on 21 May 1916, Carl Petersen states that while he and Klint collaborated on the Faaborg furniture, it was Klint who was the leader in the collaboration.

Fig. 9. Kaare Klint, Faaborg Museum chair within the setting of the museum. Chair originally executed in burred oak by N.M. Rasmussen, 69 x 72 cm. Photograph, the author.



Faaborg archive is equally refined. The cabinets are unadorned rectangles resting on a frame with bracket feet. The table is derived from Sheraton style. The sofa, however, is the most radical piece in concept. It has been reduced to a rectangular solid on a frame. A continuous curve unites the armrest, which is level with the backrest, and the plane of the seat. An unbroken arch forms the transition between the vertical plane of the armrest and the horizontal plane of the seat.

Klint worked on the renovation of M.G. Bindesbøll's Thorvaldsen's Museum for a period of more than thirty years, taking charge of the project after Petersen's death. One of his responsibilities was to design furniture to supplement the original pieces by the museum's architect M.G. Bindesbøll. Drawings for the furniture date from between 1916–17, the latest from 1925. One of Klint's finely drafted and heavily notated pencil drawings demonstrates how Klint employed a modular approach to his designs for a storage system for the museum. On occasion, the geometrical stringency of Klint's designs produced functional problems. The backrest of the elegant chair designed for the library of the museum is exactly perpendicular to the seat with a molding that cut uncomfortably into the back of the sitter (fig. 10). Generally speaking, however, Kaare Klint's best work from the period was marked by the balance of traditional form and function that would become the hallmark of Danish modern in the 1940s and 1950s.

New classicism, as a movement, was a short-lived phenomenon. It flourished during the first half of the 1920s and then fell suddenly from favor with the Danish showing in Paris in 1925. In many ways, the movement became the whipping boy of the avant-garde designers, led by Poul Henningsen, who carried the banner of international functionalism. Henningsen had seen the exhibition as an opportunity for Denmark to usher in a new era of modern design. In "Tradition and Modernism" published in *Kritisk Revy* in 1927, he outlined the major problems which he felt needed to be dealt with: the solution of design problems posed by modern technology, the application of modern industrial material in design, the creation of affordable, well-designed objects for everyday use. He contributed one of the few Danish objects at Paris that fulfilled these ideals, his PH lamp, created with the intention of industrial mass production. As a model, Henningsen cited the work of Le Corbusier in which the aim was not to create a new style, or spectacular visual effects, but rather to create design in harmony with the social currents of the time. In general, the pieces that Denmark exhibited at Paris contradicted these ideals. They were show pieces designed to compete for attention with the splashiest international competition.

When Henningsen attacked the new classicism, it was because he saw the movement as the last vestige of traditionalism and elitism. He based his judgments on the externals of style, and overlooked the theoretical and philosophical groundwork that the movement had prepared. He criticized the new classicists for their lack of penetration into the needs of modern society, but in part due to his strongly socialistic orientation, he refused to recognize the validity of the middle-class culture which the movement reflected. This social strata had always exercised and would continue to exercise a formative influence on Danish design. Progressive critics tended to overlook the important contribution that the movement made in preparing a receptive climate for functionalism. As the architect Edvard Heiberg stated in his essay *Defense of Classicism*, the new classicism introduced a modern way of thinking into architecture and design. It sought an objective basis for solving esthetic problems and



emphasized purism and a return to geometrical simplification.¹² In theory, new classicism advocated a systematic reduction to the most successful form functionally and esthetically. It further served as a springboard into functionalism for architects such as Rafn, Gottlob, and Thomsen and provided a basis for the more humanized brand of modernism that was to characterize the later work of Kaare Klint and his students. □

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Fig. 10. Kaare Klint, armchair
designed for Thorvaldsen's Mu-
seum library, burred oak ve-
neer, 60 x 74 cm, 1916–25.
Collection of Thorvaldsen's
Museum, Copenhagen.
Photograph, the author.
(See page 27.)

12. Edvard Heiberg, "Forsvar for Klassicismen," *Kritisk Revy*, October 1927, pp. 27–29.