



Illustration by Carolina Moscoso

CULTURAL COMMENT

# DANSK AND THE PROMISE OF A SIMPLE SCANDINAVIAN LIFE

*A new monograph documents how Scandinavian design charmed America.*

By Alexandra Lange

February 20, 2023

In the summer of 1958, the sleek, modernist Statler Hilton in Dallas hosted the presentation of the Neiman Marcus Fashion Award, an annual prize created by the department-store president Stanley Marcus and his aunt Carrie Marcus Neiman. Onstage that day were Yves Saint Laurent, fresh

from the creation of his Trapeze line, which freed the waist; the children's couturier Helen Lee, known for bright, poofy girls' dresses; and a rather standoffish Danish housewares designer named Jens Quistgaard, plucked from the remote island where he lived, wearing antiquated knickerbockers and sailor's shoes. Under the headline "Designing Dane, Isle's Only Man," a reporter for the *Atlanta Journal* later warned, "All you men who have wives with roving eyes, blindfold them—HURRY! The bearded Dane . . . is in town today, and the ladies are giving him looks akin to those you gave Brigitte Bardot at the movies the other night—remember?" The next day, a trifecta of models, wearing Y.S.L. sweaters and Pucci pants, posed with an ice bucket designed by Quistgaard held high like a trophy. Danish design was having its "Mad Men" moment.

In a classic American twist, the brand that Quistgaard was promoting while wearing his "customary attire of Copenhagen," as another retailer put it, wasn't Danish at all. Dansk originated from Great Neck, on Long Island. " 'Dansk' is like when you sell vodka in the USA," Quistgaard told his biographer, Stig Guldberg. "You use its Russian name and you kind of keep the original letters on the bottle and brochures." Guldberg's new monograph from Phaidon, "Jens Quistgaard: The Sculpting Designer," seeks to disentangle the man from the brand, but the housewares consumer of 2023 treats the book like a catalogue. Yes, I would like Fjord flatware, which almost seamlessly combines teak with enamelled steel. Yes, I would like an enamelled Købenstyle casserole, whose lid serves as a trivet, in brilliant red or turquoise. Yes, I would like a wenge bowl with matching salad servers, which cleverly hook on the side. Yes, I will cook and eat an Emily Nunn salad, an Alison Roman pasta, a Smitten Kitchen bake, from any of the above. The life style that Quistgaard's design suggested—and that the Dansk founders Ted and Martha Nierenberg deftly promoted—so closely aligns with how we aspire to live now that the food-media juggernaut Food52, which acquired the Dansk brand in 2021, has begun a series of reissues and planned collaborations with contemporary designers.

In 1954, the Nierenbergs—Ted, an American entrepreneur; Martha, a biochemist and Hungarian Jewish refugee—were on a delayed honeymoon in Europe, seeking European design that might appeal to the burgeoning U.S. market for home goods. At the Center for Danish Arts and Crafts in Copenhagen, they asked for artist recommendations, and were presented with a pile of unlabelled photos of recent work. From that pile, they selected ten designs; eight of them turned out to be by Quistgaard. They called him right from the center, and, after he gave them the brushoff (“I was in the process of casting something, so I wasn’t interested in seeing any strangers”), the Nierenbergs showed up on his doorstep. “And that was the start of Dansk Designs. That afternoon,” he told Guldberg.

Absent the Nierenbergs, Quistgaard would likely have had a successful, if small-scale, career. He was the son of a sculptor, and he had dropped out of school and apprenticed with his father, a man who was stinting in his praise. Quistgaard did not attend the Royal Academy of Art, or socialize with other Danish designers who were achieving fame in the nineteen-fifties. His standoffishness, combined with a willingness to embrace industrial production, made him a figure of both disapproval and envy. But, like his peers, he understood that times, and homes, were changing. People didn’t want silver flatware, which was expensive, high-maintenance, and formal. And people didn’t want china serving dishes, which were too matchy-matchy and best suited to multicourse meals. Quistgaard’s stainless-steel-and-teak Fjord flatware, and his stove-to-table Anker Line casserole, were not only great to look at but pointed toward a more relaxed home life.

“Jens Quistgaard” is a designer’s book, tightly focussed on materials and construction details. This is apparent from the moment you pick it up, running your fingers over the embossed spine, which is colored and textured like the signature braided plastic wrapping of the Købenstyle pitcher. That wrapping, which resembles a woven wicker chair, is a good example of Quistgaard’s willingness to play to American tastes: he used stainless steel rather than costly silver for the body of the pitcher, but then dressed up the

industrial product with a handmade element, originally executed at a workshop staffed by blind people. “Born in the old world, designed for the new,” was how the promotional copy for the Købenstyle line read.

To better understand Dansk’s cultural milieu, one has to turn to “Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890-1980,” the catalogue for an exhibition of the same name opening at the Milwaukee Art Museum on March 24th, after a run at LACMA. (I have an essay on Scandinavian design for children in this catalogue.) “Goods were sold to American consumers by evoking a constructed ‘Scandinavian dream’ that paralleled the mythic ‘American dream,’ linking the ownership of such objects with comfortable, modern living,” writes Monica Obniski, curator of Decorative Arts and Design at the High Museum of Art, and co-curator of the exhibition with LACMA’s Bobbye Tigerman.

...mericans had begun to buy Scandinavian goods before the First World War, patronizing shops like Georg Jensen in New York City for silver and jewelry. But postwar prosperity, and an increasing number of modernist houses, provoked a boom in what we would now call life-style stores —Design Research in Cambridge, Adler Schnee in Detroit, Baldwin Kingrey in Chicago—which sold Dansk alongside products like Akari lamps, Marimekko textiles, and Alvar Aalto furniture. The stores would mix and match pieces by designers from across Scandinavia and around the world whose work emphasized craftsmanship, simplicity, and informality. Arrayed among true products of Scandinavia (or, in the case of Akari, Japan), Dansk seemed like a brilliant fake. Obniski describes how “for many Americans, the housewares company Dansk was the epitome of Scandinavian design, to the point that many did not realize it was technically an American company.”

If you grew up in an academic family in Cambridge in the nineteen-seventies, as I did, these objects were just part of the daily fabric, along with paper-globe lights, wooden Unit Blocks, and corduroy overalls. The modern home design sold at these stores was meant to, among other things, free

women from the kitchen by suggesting more casual ways of entertaining. Dansk, and others, made stacking stoneware plates meant for a buffet, and colorful pots that looked just fine in the center of the table. The low, wide-mouthed Købenstyle dish often referred to as a “paella pan” encouraged stews and casseroles rather than separate (and separately cooked) meat, starch, and veg. In their 1950 “Guide to Easier Living,” the American designing couple Mary and Russel Wright stressed efficiency and organization, creating a chart that showed how a cafeteria-style meal created fewer dishes to wash. The recent auction of Joan Didion’s possessions included her (rather dirty) yellow Købenstyle baker alongside a Le Creuset.

Quistgaard would eventually design a house for the Nierenbergs, who moved their operations from Long Island to Westchester. The house, completed in 1961, looks like a wooden ship improbably brought to ground in the exurbs, with a sawtooth metal roof, a staircase that strongly resembles Quistgaard’s famous Viking-helmet ice bucket, and custom brass hardware, including a monogram “N.” Although the house (now a wellness retreat) is grand, Quistgaard didn’t forget about the practicalities that Dansk customers cared about. “He based his design of functional analyses of the working procedures in the kitchen and of the most appropriate and logical positions for each individual item or piece of equipment for easy and convenient operation,” Guldberg writes. Drawers and cupboards with flatware and plates were placed so “close to hand that after spending a month or so in the house, without thinking, you would be able to stick your hand into a drawer or cupboard and grab whatever you needed,” Quistgaard told him.

What happened? The nineteen-seventies happened, and, with them, both the end of American domestic expansionism and a new weariness with modernism. The nineteen-eighties happened, and, with them, the offshoring of manufacturing and a decline in quality of production for Dansk and other housewares companies. The Nierenbergs sold the company in 1984, and Dansk International ended up as a subsidiary of Lenox, which continued to reissue pieces, many sold through Food52’s e-commerce platform. In 2021,

Lenox was down, Food52 was up, and the Web site made a deal to acquire the brand and its seventy years of archives.

“Food52 started as—and to a large extent still is—a community,” Dansk’s brand strategist Christine Muhlke told me. “There’s a shared aesthetic, a shared pleasure in cooking, bringing people together around the table.” She sees a direct parallel between today’s tastes and those recognized by Quistgaard and the Nierenbergs in the nineteen-fifties when “there was a shift toward something more casual. Servicemen returning home were much more travelled, too, and had been exposed to great design.” The pitcher with the wrapped handle, reissued by Food52 in early 2021 in four colors, sold out immediately and generated a fifteen-hundred-person wait list—and this in a time when most people seem to drink from giant pastel insulated cups. A sale of vintage Dansk, organized by Muhlke, mostly sold out within eleven minutes. “Millennials and Gen Z are all about circular retail,” she said, of people buying secondhand and valuing brands that use recycled materials and production processes that reduce waste.

When Quistgaard picked cobalt blue and flame red for his cast-iron Anker Line, he had no data beyond his own horror at the blandness of the competition. There’s some irony that, in order to free ourselves from the beigeness of West Elm, or that pink Instagram skillet, we have to turn to a long-dead bearded Dane or direct-to-consumer homages like Great Jones. But I’ll take it. On a day-to-day basis, what will make you happier—a Y.S.L. sweater or a cheerful set of pots? “I’m a zero-clutter person,” Muhlke said, “and I have three Dansk pots displayed on my stove like they are sculpture.” ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated the type of steel used in the Købenstyle pitcher.*