

Three Estonian Designers

Nithikul
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Revealing Hand and Material Traces in Everyday Objects

Nithikul Nimkulrat (b. 1974) is a Thai textile artist, designer, and researcher who has lived in Tallinn and enjoyed Estonian culture for over five years. After being a Professor and then the Head of Department of Textile Design at Estonian Academy of Arts from 2013 to 2018, she moved to Toronto to take the position of Tenured Associate Professor in Material Art and Design at OCAD University.

Design may be a relatively new field in Estonia, only becoming known in the 1990s. However, its root can be traced back more than a century when some design areas were called applied arts, which implied the inclusion of a craft process or “a period of intensive involvement in handwork”^[1].

Raivi Keiv. Porcelain Meets Wood. Photo: Katrin Press

While craft is still inherent in many forms of Estonian design practice today, the term seems to have an inferior connotation in the Estonian modern economy as its translation to Estonian creates a mismatch between something old-fashioned opposed to something forward-looking, which people in the Estonian design scene expect to reach.

This listicle aims to shed light on the exceptional craftsmanship of Estonian design products for everyday life and to consider it a key characteristic that makes Estonian design distinguishable. As access to mass production is extremely limited, small handmade production is commonplace in Estonia. By examining hand and material traces in works created by three Estonian designers, the importance of the craft that is culturally built into Estonian design may be more clearly understood as “a dynamic process of learning and understanding through material experience”¹²¹. The selections of design products include: 1) wooden eyewear frames by Karl Annus of *Framed by Karl*; 2) leather bags by Stella Soomlais; and 3) tableware by Raili Keiv. The everyday objects they design reveal unique hand and material traces that tell the story of the process of making them.

Karl Annus / Framed by Karl

Wood is lightweight and possesses naturally neutral, yet unique colours and patterns, all of which are attributes that one would look for in a pair of comfortable and beautiful eyeglasses. While *Framed by Karl* is not the first or only wooden eyewear maker in the world, what distinguishes their frames from others' are designs that remain true to the material. The type of wood veneers selected for a bespoke frame are still recognisable in the finished product. The material is treated according to the features and qualities of that particular type of wood. Wood continues to be wood in its original colours without disguising itself as another material.

Every wooden eyewear frame by *Framed by Karl* is 100% custom handmade, considering the client's unique features, personality, and preferences. The hand-crafting process starts with selecting and gluing multiple layers of wood veneer to make plywood, then includes bending and cutting the plywood according to the design, sand brushing, and the final polishing. The slow process requires tremendous concentration, patience, and skill from the maker. During this crafting, the eye focuses on the moving hand that controls the tool, to manipulate the material in the holding hand according to the design.



Wooden eyeglasses in use.
Art director: Helene Vetik
Photo: Ken Oja
Model: Laura Streimann
Makeup and hair: Eliise Brigita Mõisamaa
Styling: Kärt Hammer



Seven types of wood veneers used for making frames: alder, ebony, mahogany, maple, padouk, sapele, walnut.
Photo: Ken Oja

Since the entire process is totally hand-crafted, every step takes time, which means that a pair of eyeglasses can take a month to create and the number of eyeglasses made cannot be massive. Hence, the product is special, not only because each pair are specifically made for a client's features and preferences, but also because of the respect to the material and the handicraft process the design and creation entail.



Process of making a wooden frame.
Photos: Maxim Dubovik and Ken Oja

Stella Soomlais

Stella Soomlais's leather bags and accessories combine minimalist aesthetics with functionality. Every bag is made of high-quality, vegetable-tanned cow leather of European origin. Each bag design is also crafted to minimise cutting waste. Any large leather remnants and scraps are used to create smaller bags and accessories. Aiming at producing environmentally-sustainable products, the studio only generates about 2–4% material waste and has an ultimate goal of reaching zero-waste production in 2020.



Library Backpack.
Photo: Renee Altrov



The leather of a bag changes after a long, loving use, and can be repurposed and reprocessed.
Photos: Propapanda



Round 2 – Smaller leather items from the repurposing and reprocessing of a used backpack.
Photo: Propapanda

Although leather is a biodegradable material, the process takes a long time. For this reason, the design of every bag follows the circular economy ideology; meaning that the bags are easy to care for, the details of the bags can be repaired or replaced, and the leather itself can be reused to make new items in a product line called *Round 2*. The leather of Soomlais's bags therefore has multiple life cycles, and is being used to its fullest potential.

In order to generate multiple life cycles for the leather, the design process of one large bag, a backpack for example, comes with a hidden process that includes the design of other smaller items. These small items can then be made once the owner of the bag has returned the used product after a long, loving use. This multi-layered design process would not be achieved without the meticulous craftsmanship of the designer and the maker. The *experienced* material is reprocessed and given a new life in a different form of bags or accessories while material traces remain to tell the leather's experience. Every bag is individual as the natural material never be identical; an information stamp of the completion date, the maker's name, and a serial number, is also included on each item.



Porcelain Meets Concrete: Reuse.
Photo: Riand Davidson.



Process of working with used porcelain plates and industrial concrete. Photo: Riand Davidson.

Raili Keiv

Porcelain is the primary material used by Raili Keiv for creating her tableware. While the designer stays focused on the functionality of the objects, she has been extremely experimental with the possibilities and limitations of porcelain, and extended her material repertoire to include other materials such as wood and concrete. Materials which, according to the designer, are both substances and inspirations for her designs. When using materials other than porcelain, Keiv looks to understand whether a moulding process similar to porcelain is possible.

In *Porcelain Meets Wood*, the designer gains inspiration from the Estonian forests that cover half of its land, and use two materials – warm wood and cold porcelain – in dialogue. In search of harmonies in both materials, she transforms porcelain into wood and wood into porcelain. By doing so, each material manifests the visual characteristics of the other material through the craft of the designer.

Other than porcelain, the other material Keiv has worked with is concrete. Concrete is usually correlated with built environment or large-scale architectural objects. In her series *Porcelain Meets Concrete: Reuse*, the designer utilises concrete moulding to connect two pieces of old porcelain plates. The resulting trays demonstrate material traces in which industrial robust concrete is negotiating with fine and fragile porcelain.

It is apparent in Keiv's tableware that, together with the designer's sensitivity to materials, no other process can replace the hand-crafted process. Peaks of hand and material traces are clearly seen in her works. Each piece of tableware is unique, even though all pieces are made using the same materials, methods, and processes.

A high quality of material and craftsmanship, only achievable by small-scale, local production and close teamwork between designers and makers, are evident in every piece of the above designers' works.

We should keep and maintain our things for years and consume and dispose less in the first place. One way to do this is to be surrounded by everyday functional objects that are unique to our personal preferences and do their job well – products with aesthetic sustainability^[3], such as the works by the above three Estonian designers.

[1] Adamson, G. *Fewer Better Things: The Hidden Wisdom of Objects*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018, p. 20.
[2] Gray, C., & Burnett, G. *Making sense: An exploration of ways of knowing generated through practice and reflection in craft*. In L. K. Kaukinen (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Crafticulation and Education Conference*. Helsinki: NordFo, 2009, p. 51.
[3] Harper, K. H. *Aesthetic Sustainability: Product Design and Sustainable Usage*. London: Routledge, 2018.