

Arabia's history

1870s

Arabia's first factory buildings, for the manufacture of porcelain, earthenware and other types of pottery, were erected in 1874 on a plot of land carrying the same name on the northern outskirts of Helsinki. The buildings were commissioned by the Swedish ceramics factory, Rörstrand, which had been given permission by the Senate to establish a subsidiary in Finland on 25 November 1873.

Production started in the Arabia porcelain factory in October 1874. Ceramics production in Finland was still in its infancy at the time, but demand was growing at a fast rate thanks to the booming economy. The Swedish company was really more interested in the Russian markets, but access through Finland via the Arabia factory was easier due partly to the lower import duties.

Skilled workers were brought over from Sweden, supplemented by craftsmen recruited from other Finnish potteries. At the beginning of 1875, Arabia already employed 110 people. Within just a couple of years, the value of the output from the factory accounted for half of the total annual ceramics production in the whole country.

To start with, Arabia produced plain earthenware tableware and sanitary ware as well as dinner services with copperplate decoration. Usually, the dinner sets were for 12 or 24 people, as large dinner parties were the fashion in the second half of the 1800s. The sets were made up of numerous different types of dishes.

The models and decorations used in the Arabia products came from Rörstrand. Among the earliest decorations Willow, Japan and Fasan (Pheasant) reflected the fascination with the exotic Far East. The most popular of these dinner services was Fasan, which was in production from 1876 to 1950. It was based on the English design, *Asiatic Pheasants*.

The Arabia factory was awarded a silver medal for its sanitary ware in the Helsinki Public Industrial Exhibition of 1876 and in the World Fair of 1878, held in Paris.

1880s

In 1885 the Arabia factory became a limited company, Arabia Aktiefabrik, with 90% of the shares being retained by Rörstrand. The rapid "boom and bust" cycle of the late 1880s did not stop the factory from growing and developing. In 1881, Gustav Herlitz from Rörstrand was appointed technical director of the factory, and he became Arabia's managing director in 1893.

Arabia published its first illustrated catalogue in 1883. There was a constant stream of new dinner services with new decorations. The Helsingfors tableware set, which was introduced in 1882, was the first one with a decorative motif that had been named after a location in Finland. Other decorations of the time included Flora, Fuxia, Svea, Landskap, Victoria and Feston.

1890s

In the 1890s Gustav Herlitz expanded Arabia's production capacity quite considerably. Two new glazed-tile casting plants, new kilns and a decorating workshop were constructed. New body mixtures were introduced in order to improve product quality. The Swedish artist Thure Öberg and the Finnish architect Jac Ahrenberg were employed to improve the range of models produced at Arabia. By 1895, the factory employed 300 workers, half of whom were women.

A third of the output was still being exported to Russia in the 1890s. Domestic sales were hindered by fierce competition, particularly from German ceramics imports. In order to boost marketing, a salesman was employed to travel round the country with samples of Arabia wares. Arabia also co-operated to a significant degree with G.F.

Stockmann, founder of the Stockmann department store, and opened a sales exhibition in 1896. Success in exhibitions and fairs in Finland and abroad also promoted the products.

The Arabia range was supplemented with new decorated dinner sets, such as Speranza (1893-1912), Pomona (1893-1909) and Sing-Fo (1893-1909). In 1893 Arabia produced its first catalogue in Finnish.

1900s

Arabia's collection was awarded a gold medal at the Paris World Fair in 1900. A product range exclusive to Arabia was slowly taking shape, with some of the articles designed by various architects. Arabia started the production of its own models of tiled stoves, vases and sets of tableware. The company introduced new decorating methods to its products, such as multi-coloured transfers in domestic ware and lustre marbling in decorative objects.

Efforts were made to counter the severe depression of the early 1900s by increasing exports to both the east and the west. The higher excise duties in Russia, however, made Arabia's products too dear for the Russian markets, and successful exports to the North American markets were cut short when the American agent went bankrupt. Once again, Arabia resorted to boosting domestic sales and focused its efforts on developing co-operation with the wholesale trade.

Arabia's product range underwent major changes and saw many additions in the first years of the 20th century. New patriotic topics were introduced to the decorations, such as the Finnish "coat of arms" in 1903. The "Jugend" style copperplate decorations Capella, Ester and Hildur, for instance, appeared in the 1906 Arabia catalogue.

1910s

The First World War brought a change in the ownership of Arabia. In 1916, Rörstrand sold the entire share capital to Finnish buyers. Independence in Finland marked a period of vigorous growth for Arabia. Gustav Herlitz had handed over as managing director to his son, Carl Gustaf Herlitz. The new managing director drew up a programme of fundamental reform for the production facility, which was launched in 1919.

Over the next five years, the factory was completely modernized.

In 1912, Arabia organized its first design competition. It was won by Eric O. W. Ehrström.

1920s

Under the programme of reforms set in motion by the new managing director, Carl Gustaf Herlitz, new premises were built for preparing raw materials, moulding and casting work and for firing. Old factory buildings were also completely modernized. In addition, the factory started production in a completely new field – that of electrical insulators. In 1923, Arabia acquired Teknillinen Posliinitehdas Oy, a factory in Turku where Arabia's insulator production was later centralised.

Despite the improvement in production facilities, the deal did not produce the desired outcome, with imported goods continuing to flood the Finnish ceramics markets. This did not, however, deter Arabia's management from continuing the expansion programme. With a view to securing financing, Arabia's majority shareholding was sold to the German company Arnhold Group which was convinced that Arabia was a worthy investment target. However, as no funds became available for further development of the factory, Arabia's share capital was successfully repatriated in 1927 in a deal which also saw the shares of the Swedish porcelain factory Lidköping and those of Arabia's original parent company Rörstrand passing to Arabia, who held on to them until 1932.

Work could once again be continued with developing production. One of the greatest problems was the firing process. It was done in round kilns that had to be bricked up once they were full. In addition to the time required for firing, they also had to be left to cool for 24 hours afterwards. The solution was a continuous tunnel kiln which was installed in 1929. The tunnel kiln was the longest in the world, measuring 112 metres in length. A casting line for refractory bricks, up to then produced mainly for use in the factory, was built around the tunnel kiln.

Around this time, a revolutionary innovation took place in the manufacture of sanitary ware. A once-firing method was developed to produce toilet-bowls and wash-basins from a new vitreous porcelain material. Adapting the technique to the production of household articles brought a saving of one third in production costs.

An Export Department was established at Arabia in 1929. It targeted Sweden and Estonia as well as broaching North and South America across the Atlantic. Argentina became an especially successful trading partner. Before long, Arabia was exporting to over 30 countries.

Artists were employed, in particular to create new decorations for the products. The best-known of them were Greta-Lisa Jäderholm-Snellman, Tyra Lundgren, Svea Granlund, Olga Osol and Friedl Holzer-Kjellberg. On Greta-Lisa Jäderholm-Snellman's initiative the Beautiful Utility Ware Department was established in 1929.

1930s

Arabia illustrated progressive thinking in appointing an artistic director for the factory. Kurt Ekholm was appointed in 1932. He built up Arabia's renowned Art Department, but also influenced the design of utility ware by introducing new international trends.

The worldwide depression, however, meant a slump in demand for Arabia's products and the factory operated below capacity. The motto of the day was rationalization of production, in which Arabia was a pioneer. Work as a process was studied scientifically for the first time and steps were taken to automate production and efficiency was increased in certain individual stages of the manufacturing process.

Rationalization was also applied to the relationship between production and sales. Numerous special commissions had resulted in an inflated range of over 30,000 individual products. This made it very difficult, for example, to keep to the promised lead times. In 1936, Arabia established a Production Planning Department which had the task of matching production at the factory with the annual sales programmes.

An increase in sales required increases in production. A new building was completed in 1937 to house a second tunnel kiln as well as production and office space. At the start of the Second World War Arabia employed over 1,500 workers and produced more than any other European porcelain factory. The company's sales were now export-oriented, and it was in the interests of the whole country to keep production going to bring foreign currency into the country despite the war.

Arabia produced plenty of new models and decorative motifs, including ML-Laila (Greta-Lisa Jäderholm-Snellman 1935), AR-Sinivalko (Kurt Ekholm 1936) and AS-Maisema (Reinhard Richter 1936). Toini Muona, Aune Siimes, Michael Schilkin and Birger Kaipainen achieved success in exhibitions abroad. The 1937 Paris World Fair became the stage for the international breakthrough of the Arabia Art Department.

1940s

Despite the war, Arabia was given permission to extend the factory in 1941. The project was completed in two phases with final completion in 1947, by which time a nine-storey factory building had been constructed in Hämeentie Street in Helsinki, with a six-storey wing linking it to the old factory building. The new building housed the Art Department and the Decorating Department, with kilns. In 1945, Arabia appointed Kaj Franck to develop the product design function. The Arabia Museum, on the eighth floor of the building, opened its doors to the public in 1948. The kiln-hall contained three new kilns. With the extension of the production facilities the existing machinery was modernized and new machinery installed. "The large factory had become a giant", providing employment for over 2,000 people.

Due to the limited production caused by wartime shortages as well as the need to maintain the export operation, domestic trade was subject to sales quotas which were in force until 1949. The quotas meant that each central trading organization received a certain proportion of the factory's output which it then had to distribute amongst its member outlets. The majority of the goods sold in the domestic markets were seconds, since the prime quality products were reserved for export.

The factory expansion, post-war inflation, a rise in production costs and the price restrictions all made it a difficult time for Arabia. Wärtsilä Group provided financial assistance in 1947. It took over ownership of the factory at the end of 1948. When Counsellor Herlitz resigned as managing director, his place was taken by Gunnar Stähle (M.Sc. (Eng.)).

Following the war, Arabia's standing in the crucial export markets was weakened. If the company wanted to maintain its competitive edge, it was imperative to update the product range and develop the marketing strategy. In 1945, Kaj Franck was appointed to take charge of product design. Within a couple of years, his team of assistants had grown to such an extent that we can now say that that was the birth of Arabia's Product Design Department.

In 1942, Arabia launched its rice porcelain production, which Friedl Holzer-Kjellberg developed further. Olga Osol took over the development of the Department of Industrial Art. Kaarina Aho and Ulla Procopé came to Arabia as new designers and Raija Uosikkinen and Esteri Tomula as decorative designers. Rut Bryk, Sakari Vapaavuori, Annikki Hovisaari, Hilka Säynäjärvi, Ritva Kaukoranta and Kyllikki Salmenhaara all started work in the Art Department.

1950s

In the 1950s Arabia's product range was thoroughly updated. The Kilta range by Kaj Franck, which came onto the markets in 1953, was a leading example of this modernization process. At first, it was not an easy task to sell the updated product range, as it involved entirely new concepts relating to kitchen ware that a household might need. This took Arabia into the realm of modern communications and advisory work which included educating the public, consultation and press services. The showroom/outlet in the Esplanade in Helsinki – still located in the same spot – opened to the public.

In 1951, 1954 and 1957 Arabia's artists received numerous prizes in the Milan Triennials. Gunvor Olin-Grönqvist, Liisa Hallamaa and Brita Heilimo started work in the Department of Industrial Art and Oiva Toikka and Francesca and Richard Lindh in the Art Department. Visiting artists from abroad were invited to work in the Art Department. In export sales, Arabia abandoned the practice of using agents to sell products to retailers, instead commissioning importers to deliver the goods from their own warehouses direct to the retail outlets.

Firing techniques were modernized by adopting oil and open firing. In addition to the Kilta range, other new products included AR-Heini (Kaarina Aho/Raija Uosikkinen 1957) and Ulla Procopé's Liekki dishes (1958). At the end of the 1950s, Arabia set up its own serigraphy printworks for the production of transfer prints.

1960s

A new production material, stoneware, was introduced into Arabia's household range. The first tableware set made from the new material was Ulla Procopé's Ruska, well-known worldwide. The much-loved Paratiisi series by Birger Kaipainen was launched in 1969. Birger Kaipainen's popularity extended abroad: his Bead Birds enchanted the public in the Milan Triennial and were awarded the Grand Prix in 1960. Birger Kaipainen's Orvokkimeri (Sea of Violets) was on show at the World Fair held in Montreal in 1967.

Roller-moulding machines for plates and fully automated moulding units for cups boosted production in the period 1959-1961. The fully automated moulding units for cups which were introduced in 1967 further increased efficiency.

New lines in the 1960s included not just the Ruska and Paratiisi ranges, but also Valencia (Ulla Procopé 1960), BK-Paratiisi (Birger Kaipainen 1969), Palapeli (Kaarina Aho 1964), SN plant pots (Richard Lindh 1964) and the GB restaurant range (Göran Bäck 1968). The following new artists were employed by Arabia in the 60s: Heljä Liukko-Sundström, Inkeri Leivo, Anja Jaatinen-Winquist and Peter Winquist.

1970s

One of the most significant modernizations that was carried out in the Arabia factory in the 1970s was the completion of the automated moulding lines and two tunnel kilns in the new kiln-hall in 1979. Inkeri Leino's pure white Arctica was the first set of tableware to emerge from the tunnel kilns that was made from the new material, vitroporcelain. Artist Francesca Lindh created the Elämänpuu (Tree of Life) relief for the new kiln-hall.

The manufacture of sanitary porcelain was transferred to Tammissaaren Posliini in 1971. In the period 1971-1977, the Arabia trademark was also used by Nuutajärven Lasi (Nuutajärvi Glass) and Järvenpään Emali (Järvenpää Enamel). The oil crisis and the problems caused by cheap imports led to cut-backs in personnel and the product range. They were also the reason for a three-year period (1975-1977) of collaboration in marketing between Arabia and Rörstrand.

The production of annual plates with a Kalevala theme by Raija Uosikkinen was launched in 1976. New lines in tableware included M-Karelia (Anja Jaatinen-Winqvist 1970), EH-Faenza (Peter Winqvist 1973), Tea for Two (Gunvor Olin-Grönqvist 1978) and Arctica (Inkeri Leivo 1979). Artists Paul Envalds and Pauli Partanen were employed by Arabia.

1980s

In 1981-1983 new chamber and decorating kilns were installed in the Arabia factory. In 1984 Arabia's owner company, Wärtsilä, acquired Rörstrand. The deal meant that Arabia's old parent company now became its subsidiary. Production was boosted in 1989 by the introduction of the dry-press process for plates.

The Arabia Museum and Gallery were opened to the public in 1984, and in 1989 the Arabia Cultural Foundation was founded to support the Art Department and the museum. Rut Bryk's work "The Coming of Spring in the North" for the Finnish Embassy in New Delhi was completed in 1985. The first Pro Arte Collection was created in 1988. Kati Tuominen, Pekka Paikkari and Dorrit von Fieandt all started work in the Arabia Art Department in the 1980s. Visiting artists included Howard Smith, Rudy Autio, Minni Lukander, Jun Kaneko and Kristina Riska.

Kaj Franck modernized his Kilta series, and it was relaunched under the name Teema in 1981. Other novelties included Tuuli (Heljä Liukko-Sundström 1983), Saaristo (Inkeri Leivo 1985), Microset (Göran Bäck 1986), Teema (Kaj Franck 1987), Domino (Kati Tuominen/Pekka Paikkari 1987) and Harlekin (Inkeri Leivo 1989).

1990s

Arabia was acquired by Hackman in 1990, which made Arabia one of the trademarks owned by Hackman Group. The other trademarks were Iittala, Hackman, Nuutajärvi and Rörstrand. In the 1990s, Arabia design was awarded numerous different prizes globally. Arabia received the Design Plus prize in Frankfurt's Ambiente Fair for Kati Tuominen-Niittyliä's Storybirds pitchers in 1994, Heikki Orvola's 24h tableware in 1997, Pia Törnelli's Tilda range in 1998 and Pekka Harni's ABC bowls in 1999.

Pressure casting was introduced in the Arabia factory in 1993.

In 1997, Arabia's Cultural Foundation and the Hackman Anniversary Year Fund were merged to form the Hackman Pro Design Foundation. In addition to the collections in the Arabia Museum, the new foundation took charge of the Iittala and Nuutajärvi Glass Museums as well as the Cutlery Museum. Rut Bryk's work The Ice Flow was installed in the Finnish Presidential Residence, Mäntyniemi, in 1991 and Kristina Riska's installation in the Finnish Embassy in Washington in 1995.

In addition to the aforementioned prizes, Pekka Paikkari was awarded First Prize in the Faenza Biennial and Kati Tuominen the Grand Prix in the Mino international ceramics competition in 1999. Arabia launched new product lines, including Savoie (Camilla Moberg 1991), Moreeni (Heikki Orvola 1992), Storybirds (Kati Tuominen 1993), 24h (Heikki Orvola 1996), Illusia (Heikki Orvola/Fujiwo Ishimoto 1998), EgO (Stefan Lindfors 1998) and ABC (Pekka Harni 1998).