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Eero

Stendig

Paul McCobb

Guido Gambone

Blenko Glass

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The following is excerpted from an interview with Charles Stendig by John Sollo and Cara Greenberg that took place in New York City in May 2000.

After the war, I kicked around for a few years working in foreign trade and with importing firms. One day I answered an ad in *The New York Times* and went to work for Raymor [Richards-Morgenthau], an importer, manufacturer and distributor of modern-design chinaware, lamps and decorative accessories, as a salesman in their Midwest territory. At that time, 1950 or '51, there were very few modern design stores and I had to convince jewelry shops and small gift shops to take on our items. The big department stores were our main source of business, and Russel Wright's "American Modern" dinnerware was our biggest seller. But the commission on it was very low, so I concentrated on selling Raymor's line of imports, which paid a more handsome commission.

That's how I became acquainted with the work of some of the best American, Danish and Italian designers. Irv Richards, the principal of Raymor, had an artist's eye for good design. You couldn't work for him without developing your own eye for design and a lust for the chase. He introduced so many Italian designers—Sottsass, Gambone, Fantoni, Ernestine, and others whose names we've forgotten.

Finland

After leaving Raymor around 1955, I tried several things without much success. I imported exotic wood coffee tables from Mexico and tried to represent California furniture manufacturers in the New York market. It was hard going. Then one day, I met a man in a bar. He was a government representative from Finland and suggested I try importing furniture from Finland. He gave me the name of a factory; we exchanged some letters; they sent me some catalogues. Pretty good modern designs, but I didn't feel they were quite right for the American market. I suggested we send an American designer over to help make the designs more suitable for our market.

The Finns agreed, so I approached Joseph Carreiro, who taught design at the University of the Arts at Philadelphia College of Art and Design. He and I arranged to go to Finland for two weeks during his Christmas holiday.

It took four stops and 23 hours to get to Helsinki in a Finnair prop plane. The airport consisted of a single hut piled high with snow. An old man who spoke no English threw our bags into an old Cadillac and off we roared over the ice to Lahti, the Grand Rapids of Finland, a town full of furniture factories. It turned out that the one we had picked, Asko, was the largest in all Scandinavia, a huge modern plant with about 1,500 workers. We had a marvelous time, and in our two weeks there, met with the cream of Finnish designers. Eero Aarnio was on staff at the time, as was Jussi Peippo and Ilmari Lappalainen. Tapio Wirkkala, Olli Borg and Ilmari Tapiovaara worked for Asko on a freelance basis. We were the first Americans to visit them since the end of World War II. Our company remained the exclusive distributor of Asko contract furniture in the U.S. for the next twenty years.

At that time, the major wood in America was black walnut. The Finns' woods were birch, oak, ash and beech - light woods that weren't popular in the American market. But we felt light woods were right for these designs. We were in the contract market, not residential. We sold primarily to architects and commercial interior designers. We didn't have to compete with Thayer-Coggin and the others, so we were able to get away with it.

