

DESIGN

With a new flagship store in Sydney, Georg Jensen is taking a more high-profile tilt at the luxury brand market than its creator ever imagined.

GREAT DANE

WORDS CAROLINE BAUM



Georg Jensen workshop, c1920; Georg Jensen, c1920 (inset); Henning Koppel's fish platter (opposite)

IF YOU THOUGHT the love affair between Denmark and Australia was the one that culminated in a wedding between a real estate agent from Tasmania and a prince whose name is not Hamlet, think again. There's a much bigger love-affair going on: the one between Denmark's most recognised luxury brand and Australia. Internationally, Australians are the biggest collectors of pieces by Georg Jensen and the most eager buyers of its world-famous designs after the Danish themselves. The most popular piece here is the Fusion ring, created in 2000 by Nina Koppel and inspired by the different musical elements of jazz. A trio of interlocking bands, it fits together like a puzzle, the elements of which can be worn singly or together. It's a design that exemplifies everything Jensen represents: modernity, versatility and a look that is fluid, sculptural and organic. Jensen has sold a staggering 20,000 of them here.

When 37-year-old sculptor, artist and silversmith Georg Jensen set up his first shop in Copenhagen in 1904, he deliberately aimed at a newly emerging professional middle class instead of the aristocracy, traditional patrons of silversmiths and jewellers. Having seen the lavish work of Europeans such as René Lalique, he decided to create

a more affordable collection, using more modest materials – silver rather than gold and semiprecious stones such as moonstones, agates and labradorite instead of more costly diamonds and other gems.

He soon realised his dream, with the bourgeoisie flocking to him for everything from soup tureens and silver coffee pots to hatpins. Jensen pioneered the technique of hand-hammering silver to enhance its lustre, but it was his designs, inspired by the beauty of nature at his idyllic birthplace of Raadvad, on the outskirts of the city, that set him apart. Jensen came from humble origins. As soon as he left school he joined his father, a grinder at the local knife factory, working in its foundry. It was a decision that shaped his destiny.

Like many other artists of the art nouveau era, (known as *skønvirke*, which translates literally as “beautiful work”) he took his inspiration from leaves, flowers, even insects for his patterns and motifs. But his distinctive style, marrying the decorative and functional, resulted in strikingly original, sensual shapes that were instantly popular, whether worn on a lapel or set on a dining room table.

A visit to the sparkling cutlery museum in the basement of the Georg Jensen store in central Copenhagen elevates the functional

habit of setting the table from the merely mundane, making it a ritual of elegance and ceremony. There's a spoon with a stencilled bottom for sprinkling a pattern onto fresh berries; a special utensil dedicated to serving a favourite Danish specialty of fish mousse; and a sharp, stiletto-like tool, a nut pick, for winking those stubborn bits out of a walnut shell. Overall, there are more than 220 individual pieces in the Jensen canteen repertoire – the trick is to know which implement to use for which dish. As a point of cultural etiquette, it's worth noting that even the open sandwich, that signature dish of Danish cuisine, is eaten with a knife and fork, especially when it involves slippery, tender herring and tiny arctic prawns.

Over the years, successive designers invigorated the brand, allowing it to evolve with the times. Jensen reached its pinnacle in the 1960s, when its cool, clean lines and androgynous pieces resonated with a new generation, which wanted jewellery and tableware that was unconventional, iconic and bold. Pieces created by Henning Koppel and Vivianna Torun Bülow-Hübe are now considered classics, but still look completely contemporary. Bülow-Hübe's minimalist bangle watch, first seen in 1967, challenges the whims of fashion, its blank

Strikingly original, sensual shapes that were instantly popular



Bülow-Hübe's minimalist bangle watch



DESIGN

face a bold statement of timelessness. A woman who combined practicality with aesthetic rigour, Bülow-Hübe designed the original version with a shiny mirror face to allow the wearer to check her lipstick as well as the time.

Hidden in the basement of the company's headquarters in a former Royal Copenhagen china factory on the outskirts of the city, the company's secret weapon is its archive. Not open to the public, this collection is the nerve centre that all today's designers refer to – what, in the luxury brand business, is called DNA, the heritage that gives a brand its pedigree. The archive consists of rows of dark-green, bound photo albums containing family snaps, but not of the conventional kind. Instead, they document every item ever created in the Jensen smithy. Prototypes of each piece are stored in boxes on adjoining shelves. The deceptively austere room is an understated treasure trove.


Above it, in a room flooded with natural light, the smithy is a place of quiet intensity and concentration where work is still created almost entirely by hand. Laser-cutting technology is very much the exception here, not the rule, giving the Jensen look an artisanal patina that no machine can replicate. Eighty silversmiths and craftspeople sit at workbenches or anvils cut from tree stumps. They hunch over a candlestick, a bangle or a piece of Holloware, filing, hammering and polishing with a selection of beautifully shaped tools – including some that Georg Jensen himself used. Women tend to specialise in chasing, the technique whereby the metal is raised to create a decorative relief. Some pieces feature one of Jensen's signature looks, developed in the 1930s: a liquid is applied and



A place of quiet intensity where work is created almost entirely by hand

then rubbed back to create the effect of oxidation. This deliberately darkened surface then highlights fine details and stone settings. Among the most labour-intensive pieces made here is Henning Koppel's exquisitely curvaceous Fish Platter, first created in 1954. A flagship of the Holloware Collection, it is a real test of a silversmith's skill to execute this deceptively simple shape. At just under 65cm long, the dish is made from two sheets of silver and takes an experienced silversmith between 500 and 600 hours to complete. Hardly surprising that it has a price tag of \$193,000.

Not all the pieces in the workshop are made of silver – stainless steel is a practical, popular option for contemporary serving dishes. Brushed to a soft finish, it looks nearly as fluid as traditional Jensen hammered silver, but has the advantage of being more robust and low-maintenance.

This year, Jensen is reinterpreting key pieces from its heyday. Koppel's Caravel Bowl, from 1957, previously available only in silver, is now produced in stainless steel, making it an affordable piece of designer homeware. Bülow-Hübe's Dew Drop jewellery, launched in 1955, drew on Viking motifs for its inspiration. Today, its strength gets a more feminine touch and a new look in gold, with amethyst and prehnite stones. Her classic Hidden Heart pendant retains its purity and playfulness. A symbolic heart is hidden in the top of the rounded shape. When viewed by the wearer, the heart reveals itself right side up – a perfect visual representation of love's ambiguity and mystery. And yes, a certain Australian princess is regularly seen wearing Jensen pieces. 

Georg Jensen, 60 Castlereagh Street, Sydney. (02) 9221 7419.
Visit www.georgjensen.com.au for cutlery and homewares.



Georg Jensen, Amagertorv, Copenhagen; Henning Koppel's reinterpreted Caravel Bowl (above)

