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Yuka Takahashi is an industrial designer with a Master of Arts degree from Aalto University in Finland. Specialising in product, furniture, and spatial design, she is committed to sustainable design and engages in material experimentation. Yuka is also passionate about promoting design literacy through international workshops, seminars, and exhibitions focused on sustainable practices.

Her career began with a Bachelor of Arts in industrial design from Kobe Design University in Japan. She was the sole in-house industrial designer for a Japanese tool manufacturer, where she created a range of successful products launched before moving to Finland in 2002. In 2007, she co-founded HARNI-TAKAHASHI LTD. DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE with Prof. Pekka Harni. Notable works include the limited-edition MOON tableware set for Arabia Finland. Her achievements include the EcoDesign award and recognition for her furniture piece ADB&B as "The Most Interesting Product" at the 2016 Habitare furniture fair in Helsinki.

Annansilmät-Aitta:

A Century of Craftsmanship with Inclusion for the Visually Impaired

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Abstract

This article explores Annansilmät-Aitta, a Finnish handicraft store established in 1919, which has a long-standing commitment to supporting individuals with visual impairments.

Originally founded to create job opportunities for this community, the organization has evolved over the past century to offer high-quality handcrafted furniture and interior objects that are produced and beloved in Finland. Annansilmät-Aitta not only serves as a distributor for crafters but also sources materials and provides training and teaching opportunities, facilitating social inclusion for visually impaired individuals.

The article highlights the organization's rich history, its renowned products, and its collaborative efforts with various associations. It also addresses current challenges, including the lack of young people in the workforce of craftsmen members and funding issues, while noting the potential for international market possibilities.

This article is based on interviews with Simo Parviainen, the sales manager of the organization, and two of the skilled artisans, underscoring the importance of preserving traditional handicrafts and fostering new talent in the field.

Keyword: *Visually impaired, Handicraft, Artisans, Finland, Inclusion, Nordic Design, Tradition*

Introduction

This article introduces an outstanding inclusive organization in Finland that supports individuals with visual impairments through handicrafts. It highlights the organization's rich history, renowned products, and collaborations with various associations, while also addressing current challenges. Insights are based on interviews with interviews with Simo Parviainen, the organization's sales manager, and two skilled artisans.

Annansilmät-Aitta

Annansilmät-Aitta is a Finnish handicraft store that has been operating for over 100 years since its establishment in 1919. The organization focuses on supporting crafters with visual disabilities and fostering job opportunities through traditional handicrafts. Their most famous products include rattan furniture, baskets, and various household brushes and sauna products made from high-quality raw materials.

While many disability-supporting handicraft organizations exist worldwide, Annansilmät-Aitta stands out for its extraordinarily beautiful and practical products, which reflect a high level of Nordic design tradition and craftsmanship. These items are cherished and passed down through generations in Finnish homes and summer houses. Today, the business entity is owned by the Helsinki and Uusimaa Visually Impaired Association, the largest association of its kind in Finland, with roughly 2,300 members. Various regional associations also support local visually impaired people, offering a

range of services under the Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired.

Annansilmät-Aitta serves as a sales channel for both consumers and wholesale clients while also functioning as a material distributor, sourcing high-quality raw materials from around the world for crafters. Additionally, it provides teaching and training for crafters with visual impairments in collaboration with a network of associations. These crafters have varying degrees of visual impairment and reside throughout Finland, with the majority supplying to Annansilmät-Aitta located in Southern Finland. Their conditions range from low vision to partial sight and complete blindness.

Most crafters are independent contractors rather than salaried employees, allowing them to work flexibly within this region. Their non-exclusive contracts enable them to sell their products independently to their customers while also supplying Annansilmät-Aitta, which sells approximately 75 to 80% of their handicraft items.

History of the Store

The first store in Helsinki was established by the Blind Association of Tampere in 1919, originally named Sokeain Käsityökauppa, which translates to "The Blind Crafts Store" and located on Laurinkatu. Prior to this, already similar shops had been set up in Tampere and Vyborg. The Helsinki Society for the Blind acquired the business in the early 1920s, and in 1924, the store relocated to Annankatu in Helsinki, where it operated until 2010. At its peak, the stores were located in major cities across southern and central Finland, including Tampere, Jyväskylä, Vaasa, Turku, and Hämeenlinna, including three locations in Helsinki. The name Annansilmät-Aitta was adopted in the late

1990s as a more appealing alternative for the store and organization evoking images of a begonia flower and a traditional Finnish multi-purpose granary.



"This is the best-selling chair we have," Simo Parviainen notes and continues

"In the 50s and 60s, these chairs were very popular in Finland. After the Second World War, many people became blind due to the conflict and engaged in this type of handicraft work."

*Lumikenkä chair
photo ©ANNANSILMÄT-AITTA*

Following the completion of the Iris Centre building in Helsinki, which houses the headquarters of the Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired, Annansilmät-Aitta moved to new premise there in 2004, including a compact warehouse and workshop space for crafts. The Iris Centre itself is a spacious facility that serves as a service and activity hub for individuals with visual impairments situated in Itäkeskus, Helsinki.

In the last several years, those stores have mostly closed their doors, with only one showroom remaining in the Iris Centre. The primary direct-sales channel has shifted to the online store, which Simo Parviainen regrets, as many customers prefer to touch and try

products before purchasing. When items are available only online, even with an emphasis on durability, customers cannot physically test them. The higher prices associated with handcrafted items made from quality materials may lead customers to hesitate compared to cheaper, mass-produced alternatives.



Juttu stool, designed in 1961 by the internationally renowned Finnish designer Eero Aarnio



Annansilmät-Aitta showroom in Iris center in Helsinki

Timeless Treasures: The Revival of Furniture Heritage

In recent years, the furniture repair service at Annansilmät-Aitta has gained popularity. This trend indicates that even durable products from the 1950s and 1960s or later, often handed down through generations, can show signs of wear and tear after decades of use. Nevertheless, many people are eager to care for and preserve these cherished items. Numerous chairs, tables, and swings have been skillfully restored and revitalized by visually impaired artisans.



**Left: Old chairs and tables waiting to be repaired.
Right: Different type of brushes. Photo: Yuka Takahashi**

Future of Organization: Challenges and Opportunities

Thanks to its long-standing activities and traditions, the organization has established a well-functioning system that supports visually impaired crafters and artisans without barriers. However, it faces various challenges common to any business, including those unrelated to visual disabilities.

Currently, the ageing of members and funding issues pose significant challenges to the organization's future development. Advancements in digital technology and equipment have significantly enhanced the lives of individuals with visual impairments, providing access to communication tools such as computers and smartphones with accessibility features, in addition to optical devices. The IT revolution and changes in work styles over the past few decades have created more versatile job opportunities for young people in this community. While this is a positive development, fewer young individuals are showing interest in training for and pursuing careers as craftsmen. Additionally, the rising average age of the organization's members is partly due to many individuals losing their sight as they age, often requiring them to change jobs and start new careers. The organization, indeed, welcomes individuals from diverse backgrounds and situations.

This current situation may have made government support more hesitant than in the past. On a positive note, there is potential for international market expansion, with customers from countries like Japan, France, and Germany showing interest in importing

their high-quality, authentic products. However, without adequate funding, it becomes challenging to educate and promote training for young people, hindering their sustainable development and continuity.

In my interviews with the artisans at Annansilmät-Aitta, when I asked, "Do you like your work?" the response was a firm "Yes." One of the brush artisans, Arto Rantanen, smiled and said, "I have been making hundreds and thousands of brushes over my 33 years of work. If I didn't like it, I wouldn't have done it!"



***Arto Rantanen, demonstrating how he crafts brushes using various tools.
Photo: Yuka Takahashi***

Handicraft is not an easy profession and requires a certain amount of training; however, it is a fulfilling career that offers the joy of creating useful items, and visual impairment is not a barrier.



One of the skilled artisans, Jarno Maja, is busily working on building new furniture and making repairs at the Iris Center. He is also proficient in using a sewing machine to create cushions for the chairs, among other items.

Photo: Yuka Takahashi

Providing opportunities for younger people to experience this work may significantly influence the emergence of future masters in the craft, while seeking potential public funding can ensure the sustainable continuity of this esteemed tradition.

Conclusion

Annansilmät-Aitta has played a vital role in supporting individuals with visual impairments in Finland for over a century. By providing job opportunities, high-quality handcrafted products, and a platform for social inclusion, the organization has not only preserved traditional handicrafts but also fostered a sense of community among its crafters. Despite facing challenges such as an ageing workforce and funding issues, Annansilmät-Aitta continues to adapt to the changing market landscape, including a shift towards online sales. The commitment to quality and craftsmanship remains evident in their beloved products, which

reflect a rich heritage of Nordic design tradition. As the organization plans for the future, it is crucial to cultivate new talent, seek potential public funding, and explore international market opportunities to ensure sustainable continuity. Through the dedication of its team and the passion of its artisans with visual impairments, Annansilmät-Aitta stands as an exceptional example of the enduring value of Finnish traditional handicrafts and the importance of inclusivity in the work community in Finland.

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