

PH Lamp

Light and Truth

Danish lighting designers in the 1920s focused on the quality of light, and especially the problem of glare. They realized that even without inventing a new type of light source, the method of shading a lamp could greatly alter its effect. Designer and architect Poul Henningsen (1894-1967) came up with an ingenious “three-shade” solution, which he elaborated in later years. His PH4-3 table lamp (1966) is one popular version of his original series.

In the decade before World War I, Henningsen had studied architecture in Copenhagen. Upon graduating, he became an art critic and journalist, though he also did some work as an architect. Starting in 1924 he began to design lamps, for the firm of Louis Poulsen. In Paris, Henningsen’s PH lamp won a prize in 1924, then attracted much attention at the 1925 “Art Deco” exposition. For the next fifteen years, versions of the PH lamp were exported all over the world.

Henningsen continued to write and edit material in the fields of film, theater, and literary criticism. He wrote for at least one anti-Nazi publication, and during 1943-45 received political asylum in Sweden. After the war he returned to Denmark, again pursuing issues in both lighting design and politics. He wrote for, and edited, several journals, including the left-wing *Social-Demokraten*. In design, he favored practical methods of manufacturing “democratic” products for the masses, even if those methods were fairly traditional. That meant rejecting design for design’s sake, and favoring the utilitarianism of the Good Design movement.

Henningsen’s solutions were inspired by the soft glow of the petroleum oil lamps of his youth. He used a combination of methods to achieve that. By assembling shades from separate elements, he both minimized reflections, and directed the light down toward the table. By letting some light escape up, he reduced the contrast between the table lighting and the room lighting. Similarly, he found ways to diffuse the intensity of the light within the shade, so that the shade itself was not so starkly bright. And by tinting the inner side of one of the shade elements red, he filtered out some of the harshness of the incandescent bulb.

Similarly, Henningsen’s Artichoke Lamp (1957) dissipated glare with