



## **2014: Kartell, 15 years of transparent design**

### ***From the birth of La Marie in 1999 to Uncle Jack in 2014, from 3.5 kg to 30 kg of transparent polycarbonate in a single mould***

Kartell is celebrating its first 15 years of transparent design in furniture, and is doing so with the Uncle Jack sofa (a member of Philippe Starck's Aunts&Uncles family), renewing a technological and aesthetic challenge it launched in 1999 with Philippe Starck. The company has invested huge human and economic resources to create a record-breaking product: 1.90 m long, 95 cm high, weighing practically 30 kg for the largest piece of transparent polycarbonate ever injected in a single mould.

The design world underwent a polycarbonate revolution at the start of the new millennium, when the La Marie chair went into production following its presentation at the 1999 Salone del Mobile. The chair, designed by Philippe Starck, was the first chair in the world to be made of polycarbonate. In the beginning was La Marie, with a simple and common name, that redrew the *domestic panorama 2.0* of industrially-made plastic objects and became the "mother" of Kartell's greatest and inexorable mission: to make plastic a noble material in the design industry, thereby assigning to it the expression of quality that had previously only been the prerogative of glass: transparency.

This polymer was first studied by E.I. Carothers at Dupont in 1928, although it wasn't exploited commercially until around 1960, by Bayer and General Electric. Thanks to its unique transparency, thermal resistance and mechanical properties, plus its good electrical properties, tenacity and hardness, polycarbonate quickly became very popular. However, more costly than polypropylene, and difficult to use for injection moulding, polycarbonate wasn't used for aesthetic purposes until the 1990s.

After years of research and numerous trials, Kartell was the first company in the world to use this precious and difficult material for aesthetic purposes when making furniture: it applied an injection process in a single mould that controls the material's transformation characteristics, successfully spreading it over the entire mould surface before it can solidify and break (thereby damaging the mould as well). Despite its many risks, Claudio Luti invested and persisted in this extraordinary innovation. For design, we contacted Philippe Starck.

La Marie and Uncle Jack are separated by some 25 kg and several years. During that time, we produced progressively larger and heavier products, like Ghost Buster, which weighed in at 18 kg and represented a veritable exploit for its variable thicknesses. Then came Tokujin Yoshioka's Invisible table, weighing some 20 kg, and whose ethereal appearance and smooth surface tolerated no imperfections. Now, fifteen years later, with our record-breaking product, we have reached the pinnacle of polycarbonate research, with Kartell's ambitious dreams and apparently impossible goals becoming reality.

**LA MARIE**, the world's first polycarbonate chair, was born in 1999. In designing it, Starck decided to "sacrifice" form in favour of the revolutionary material, creating a minimalistic, basic and modern chair, like its name that is simple, tidy and ordinary. Kartell presented it at the Salone del Mobile in Milan in a dramatic manner with a series of machines borrowed from Fiat arranged in a circle, striking the chair one after the other, to demonstrate its strength and flexibility. This spectacular presentation swept away any preconceived ideas that a chair as transparent as glass had to be just as delicate and fragile. La Marie represented the evolution of the material that deprived itself of its essence to the point of becoming a non-material. Its design reflects rigour combined with mystery and rationality; it's as if dream and reality, rationality and creative impulses melded perfectly to bring this material to life, making it unique and inimitable. Polycarbonate restores quality and nobility to plastic, thereby returning to the magnificent uses of the material typical of past decades.

## LA MARIE

*In the beginning, there was little.*

*Then, there was much.*

*Sometimes too much.*

*Then, fortunately, there was less.*

*Then nothing.*

*Which, sometimes becomes less than nothing.*

*Then, there was La Marie*

*(Philippe Starck)*

As transparent as glass, unbreakable, non-toxic, impact and weather resistant, polycarbonate proves to be the material of the future. And La Marie was the first in a long series of successful polycarbonate products produced by Kartell. From that point on, Kartell developed and expanded the concept of transparency that made it unique and original. For years, the Italian firm was a pioneer, the sole player and the undisputed leader in the use of polycarbonate in design.

In light of La Marie's success, Philippe Starck designed a second transparent chair for Kartell two years later: the world famous **LOUIS GHOST**. This time, minimalism was no longer necessary: Starck revisited the baroque forms of Louis XV chairs in a little armchair that polycarbonate made ultra-contemporary, in a totally new, fascinating and surprising blend of antique and modern; a courageous example of polycarbonate injection in a single mould. Producing this design was a veritable technological exploit for Kartell, with both the medallion-shaped back and the armrests presenting considerable difficulties. Evanescent and crystalline like its ancestor La Marie, Louis Ghost was also stable and resistant, withstanding all impacts, scratches and weather conditions; a character with great charisma and undisputable aesthetic appeal.

Philippe Starck explains: *"I didn't really have to design the Louis Ghost chair, because it is part of our western shared memory. It basically designed itself. It's a 'Louis something', we don't know what, but everyone recognises it and it looks familiar. It's here when you want to see it, and you can mix it if you want to be discrete. It's on the verge of disappearing, dematerialising. Like everything that is produced by our civilisation"*.

Over the years, Louis Ghost became not only an absolute best seller, but also—with over one million copies—the best-selling designer chair in the world. It is the chair that, on the one hand, consecrated Kartell as global leader in the production of transparent furnishings, and on the other, helped transparency become "accepted" aesthetically on a global scale, thereby revealing the material's functionality.

Polycarbonate and transparency, plus industrial moulding production techniques improved and became familiar: Kartell next launched the "Ghost" series, with the **Victoria Ghost** chair, more slender than her companion **Louis Ghost**, the **Charles Ghost** stools, the **Francois Ghost** mirror, and, the "baby" of the family, the **Lou Lou Ghost** chair for children

Claudio Luti states: *"The close ties between Kartell and Starck are born of a feeling that has grown stronger over the years. It's a partnership based on constant dialogue in sharing ideas and impressions, our incessant desire to innovate and experiment. We share a commitment to research in technological and functional innovation applied to design. With Philippe Starck, Kartell brought a series of bestsellers to life that transformed the very conception of design, imposing a series of innovations that have been imitated by many other companies, the first of which is transparency applied to plastics"*.

Colour has always been an essential theme at Kartell, and was also to become the protagonist for "invisible furniture": with pastel tones, bright hues and fluorescent touches that transformed the products into entities that absorb and filter moods, and generate emotions. The topic of **colour is a design within a design**, where the palette is unique and of intrinsic value: intensity and depth, combined with the volume of the material used create products with different characters.

Kartell continued its research into surfaces, using new technologies and high-performance materials. It dedicated special attention to experimenting with textures and new tactile, visual, aesthetic and chromatic effects. Over the years, it created a series of products, not with smooth shapes, but with elaborate surfaces

# Kartell

with a multitude of original exteriors: Patrick Jouin's cubic **Optic**, Marcel Wanders's **Stone** stool, Patricia Urquiola's **T Table** and **Frilly** chair, the Bouroullec brothers' **Papyrus** chair, and Tokujin Yoshioka's **Ami Ami** chair, leading to the latest creations in 2013 with Tokujin Yoshioka's **Sparkle** stool and table, in which the unique pleating of the plastic is reflected in the final result, and Eugeni Quitllet's **Shine** vases whose elegant geometries inspired by Art Deco combine with the sophisticated processing of the material to create a crystal effect.

*Transparency also took root in the lighting sector: the BOURGIE table lamp, with its pleated lampshade and baroque base, designed by Ferruccio Laviani, was the first to become one of the brand's bestsellers, and celebrates its first ten years of success in 2014.*

*Subsequent experimentation in design by the Kartell-Starck team led to the 2008 creation of yet another—apparently unattainable—challenge: the **MR IMPOSSIBLE** chair (nomen omen!), born of the idea of uniting two oval polycarbonate shells using laser welding instead of an adhesive. This was the first time in the world that a laser was used to join such large surfaces, and the result is an armchair that seems to “hover”, and that combines three-dimensional seduction with a strong two-tone appeal, thanks to the different colours of the two welded shells.*

*Here, the suggestions of intangibility specific to Starck's chair designs from La Marie onwards are confirmed even further by the lightness of the empty hemispherical shell and the four transparent legs.*

*Starck's transparency challenge for 2010 was **GHOST BUSTER**, a transparent cube weighing a full 18 kg, injected in a single mould, something that had never been done previously for such a large and heavy product. Here was yet another challenge that Kartell took up and won. Ghost Buster's surfaces alternate between fullness and emptiness, corners and curves, straight and sinuous lines, bringing to life an infinite play of perspectives and reflections that catch the eye, that fascinate and pique our curiosity. Transparency makes the cube impalpable, naked: it is, as Starck says, “an evocative image, a ghost of all those night tables that may have existed but that I never bumped into”.*

*With every challenge won, Kartell immediately sets itself a new goal that pushes the limits of feasibility even further. In 2012, it launched a new pioneering project: the first single-piece transparent table with a square top measuring 100 x 100 cm. **INVISIBLE TABLE**, designed by Tokujin Yoshioka, combines lightness and solidity, grace and elegance, practicality and style, purity and simplicity of its shapes. It is a table whose appearance is as ethereal and crystalline as glass, but has the tough and resistant temperament of polycarbonate.*

*The year 2014 marks the epilogue of this evolutionary and prodigious journey in using transparent polycarbonate injection technology. The Aunts&Uncles family, and especially the Uncle Jack sofa, are the boldest examples yet. However, this epilogue doesn't mark the end of the story, instead it is the beginning of new challenges: this technology's story actually has no end at Kartell, instead, it is “to be continued”.*

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