

# Artek and Alvar Aalto



**A**rtek was founded in November 1935. The name of the company, **Art + Technology**, reflects its objectives and methods of operation. The intention was to offer to its wide range of customers, practical, economical, hygienic and above all Modern furniture that reflected its own time. The furniture was to represent the values of an urban and efficient lifestyle.

In the company's founding meeting on 26.11.1935, Maire Gullichsen and Alvar Aalto became the main shareholders. Other shareholders were: Nils-Gustaf Hahl, Artek's first managing director; P.W. Puhakka, the managing director of Huonekalu- ja Rakennustyötehdas, the company that produced the furniture designed by Aalto; Aino Marsio-Aalto; architect Aili-Salli Ahde; professor Carl Hahl; and architect Arne Ervi.

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By Mia Hipeli

### Marketing

**A**lvar Aalto-designed furniture rapidly became popular in the 1930s, particularly after the Aalto-designed Paimio tuberculosis sanatorium, Turku Sanomat building and Viipuri Library had been presented in the press. The marketing of the furniture was promoted through housing exhibitions. Already the Bauhaus-inspired Minimum Apartment Exhibition held in Helsinki in 1930 acquainted Helsinki inhabitants with a new kind of interior design based on lightweight movable furniture and standard dimensioned interiors. The content of the exhibitions was educational, pedagogical, and enlightening.

The exhibition "Only Wood" held in the Fortnum & Mason department store in London in 1933 opened an opportunity for sales in Britain. To conquer the British market, the company Finmar Ltd was founded. The head of the company was Mr. Faulkner and backup support was provided by Geoffrey Boumphrey. Philip Morton Shand, who had been actively involved in CIAM (*Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne*) since its inception, brought Aalto's furniture designs and innovative wood handling skills to wider attention in articles published in the *Architectural Review* and *Architects' Journal*. Several models that later achieved the status of classics, such as the wooden stackable chair (model n° 6119) and an easy chair (model n° 2) were already in production at that time. The manufacturer was *Huonekalu- ja rakennustyötehdas*, which still today manufactures Artek furniture under the name *Huonekalutehdas Korhonen Ltd*. Cooperation did not begin, however, according to expectations, partly due to Aalto's own impracticality and continuous production problems.

In addition to Finmar, other retailers in northern and central Europe were Svenska Artek in Sweden, and Palag A.G, with SIDAM and Wohnbedarf as its retailers, in Switzerland. Particularly Wohnbedarf displayed the designs of Alvar Aalto and Artek in their own shops as well as in interior design exhibitions they themselves designed. Its market area included, in addition to central Europe, also Italy, and Sigfried Giedion's active role was significant in the presentation of Aalto furniture. Giedion was one of the founding members of CIAM, and its first secretary. He gave visibility to Aalto's works in articles, exhibitions and his own books on Modern architecture and design.

Aalto-designed furniture was on display at the Brussels World Expo in 1935, where the Swiss pavilion was furnished with Aalto's furniture. The furniture was presented as models sold by the retailer Wohnbedarf, without strongly emphasising Artek. There could hardly have been a better showcase for the founding of Artek. A lot of business would have been generated, but delivery difficulties by Huonekalu- ja Rakennustyötehdas and the lethargic approach to marketing made the export of furniture from Finland difficult. The following world expos, Paris in 1937 and New York in 1939, provided the next visible showcases. The Finnish pavilions were designed by Aalto and the interior design relied mainly on Artek furniture.

New York's Museum of Modern Art held an Aalto solo exhibition in 1935 in which in particular furniture and glass objects designed by him were on display. Simultaneously with the 1939 New York World Expo, an exhibition of Artek furniture toured the USA. For the purpose of retail in the US market, Artek Pascoe Incorporation was founded on the initiative of Clifford Pascoe. The cooperation between Artek and Artek Pascoe ended, however, following economic and design protection disagreements.

Svenska Artek, under the directorship of architect Frölen, was responsible for the Swedish market. Corre-

< Alvar Aalto in the Viipuri Library, 1935.  
Photo by Gustaf Welin. ©Alvar Aalto Museum.



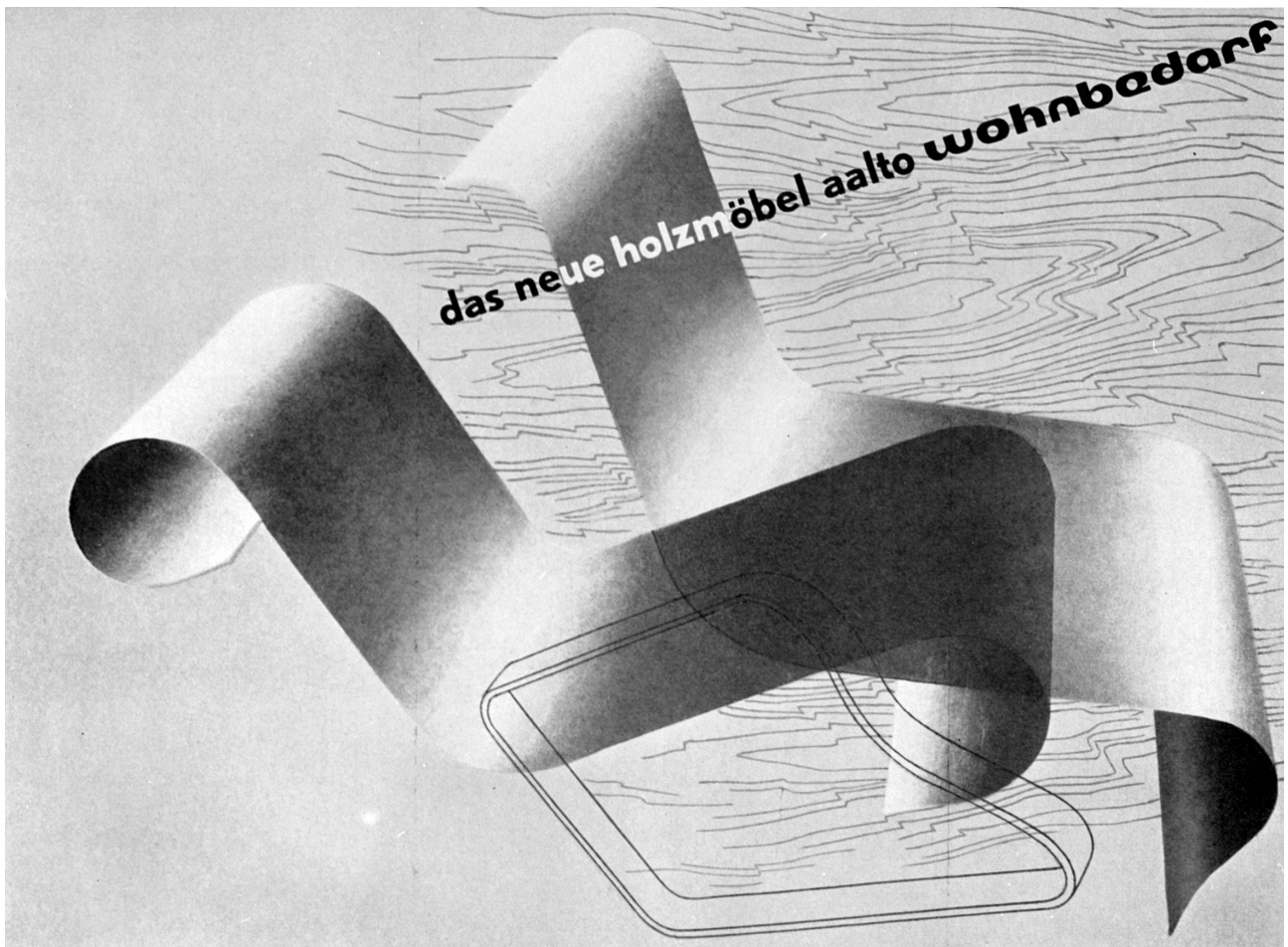


Figure 1. *Wohnbedarf* advertisement, ca. 1935.

spondingly, Metz & Co in Amsterdam was responsible for the Dutch market.

Already before the founding of Artek, Aalto's furniture had been on sale in the interior design and furniture shop Koti-Hemmet founded by architects Elna Kiljander and Marianne Strengell in Helsinki in 1934. The furniture was sold and advertised from the very beginning under the names of Alvar Aalto and Artek. But there were, of course, other designers involved.

### Exhibitions and Galerie Artek

The display of modern art in connection with Artek was tied to the personal interests of the central characters in the company, Maire Gullichsen and Nils-Gustaf Hahl. Maire Gullichsen spoke passionately for the display of modern art in Finland and her personal contacts and energy played a central role in this. The central idea was that through the sales of Aalto's furniture it would be possible to maintain an interior design shop and office as well as organise cultural events and exhibitions. Through the *Galerie Artek*, very important exhibitions of contemporary artists were brought to Finland, such as an exhibi-

tion of French painting held at the Kunsthalle Helsinki in 1938 with works by, among others, Léger, Picasso, Utrillo and Braque.

Before opening their own gallery space, exhibitions were usually held in the Artek shop and the exhibition architecture was designed by Aino and Alvar Aalto. In addition to the furniture series, Aalto put on display bent wood compositions based on industrially manufactured furniture parts or furniture production methods, the oldest of which were manufactured already at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s. In 1997 the operations of *Galerie Artek* merged with *Galleria Anhava*, the name under which it continues its operations in Helsinki still today.

### Collection

From the very beginning, Artek furniture has been produced by the company Huonekalu- ja Rakennustyötehdas, founded by Otto Korhonen in 1910. The cooperation with Aalto began after 1927 when the Aaltos had moved from Jyväskylä to Turku. Korhonen was interested in the new use of wood in furniture. He developed a process of steam bending when working with plywood and solid

wood parts. The cooperation between Aalto and Korhonen was close, and the first chair models manufactured were metal-legged with a bent plywood seat. In the early years the furniture was also produced by smaller manufacturers, among others Kolho Oy, which produced furniture other than the bent wood models.

One of the early standard furniture models that was sold widely was the stackable chair, that had been awarded a prize at the 1930 Finnish Fair. It was patented by Otto Korhonen but the model was designed by Aalto. 'Standardization' and 'industrial production' were terms employed when exporting abroad Aalto's building fixtures and furniture design.

The commercial success of Aalto-designed furniture proceeded at the same pace as his architecture became more well known. Aino Aalto's role as the designer of the new models was significant, albeit, due to marketing, she has been forgotten behind Alvar Aalto's more recognizable name. Aino also worked as head of Artek's drawing office that operated from the time of the founding of the company. She also had her own models in production, but many of them were buried under the names of

Artek and Alvar Aalto. She emphasised her independent, professional role in Artek by signing the drawings with her surname Marsio-Aalto or initials A.M-A. She was the soul and driving force of Artek between 1935 and 1948 as the head of the drawing office and during the 1940s as the managing director. The structural solutions for the

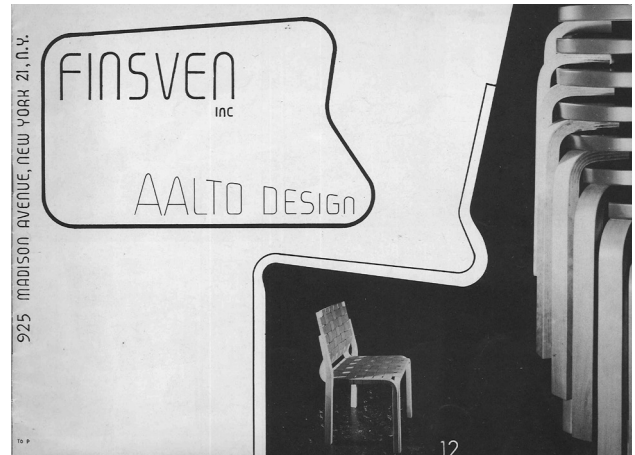


Figure 2. Cover of "New Furniture Incorporated", New York, 1939.

Figure 3. Finsven's Aalto Design Collection for Modern Living, 1955.





**ARTEK** aalto - furniture

HELSINKI - FABIANINKATU 29, FINLAND



*Representatives :*

<b>HEDEMORA, SWEDEN</b> Svenska AB Artek	<b>ANTWERPEN</b> Archi-d'Art	<b>CHICAGO, ILL.</b> Baldwin Kingrey Inc.
<b>LONDON</b> Finmar Ltd	<b>LYON, FRANCE</b> Stylclair	<b>DALLAS, TEXAS</b> Ensle O. Oglesby
<b>AMSTERDAM</b> Metz En Co N.V.	<b>NEW YORK, N.Y.</b> Finsven Inc.	<b>SAN FRANCISCO, CAL.</b> Thomas D. Church



**In reliable hands all over the world**

Figure 4. Artek Aalto furniture catalogue, Helsinki.

chairs and tables, in particular the construction of legs, are interesting. The construction and production method of the bent L-leg was patented in 1934. The strength of the leg was increased by plywood strips added to the radially sawn grooves in the bend of the leg. The same construction was also applied to other larger pieces of furniture. The Y-leg is, as the name describes, a Y-shaped slender corner solution; the X-leg was further developed from this.

From the very beginning, Moroccan wool carpets and oriental baskets have been included in the Artek sales collection. These were easily combined with Modern furniture. During the war years, the scarcity of materials made it necessary to look for innovative solutions and

surrogate materials. A shortage of materials and labour led to part of Artek's production being moved to Hedemora in Sweden. An extension was built for Artek's own production in an existing joinery workshop. An exhibition and sales pavilion designed by Aalto was built in 1945 for the 500-year anniversary of the founding of the town of Hedemora.

#### **A Small but Efficient Design Office**

Artek's own first shop and drawing office was located in the centre of Helsinki at *Fabianinkatu* 31. During the war years Artek's activities slowed down. There were fewer commissions and the shortage of materials hindered production. The years of material shortages forced

people to be creative. The technical potential existed but in practice the limitations with materials prevented their realisation at that time.

Aino Aalto died in 1949. From Artek's point of view, the loss was great, not to mention Alvar Aalto's personal loss of a spouse and colleague. Interior designer Maija Heikinheimo stepped into Aino Aalto's place as Artek's managing director and head of the drawing office until 1962. She also designed many furniture models of her own for the company. She had worked together with Alvar Aalto already between 1937 and 1939 and again from 1945 onwards. The cooperation produced several models in the 1940s and 1950s, some of which are known as Maija Heikinheimo's own designs, and some of which are variations of Alvar Aalto's own models.

Aino Aalto instigated a practice in Artek whereby new employees studied and redrew the archive drawings. The individual model markings were preserved, but the date on the drawing was changed according to the date when it was redrawn. This practice presents challenges for today's researchers; it is almost impossible to date designs based on the date written on the drawings. All in all, however, Artek's archives are admirably extensive and well-preserved. Products have been presented in the media and trade fairs, the models have been photographed and the many stages of product development have been preserved in the drawings archive.

After Maija Heikinheimo's time in the 1960's it seems that Artek was looking for a new direction. In addition to Aalto's old models, the production of several different designers was added to the sales collection. Interior designer Ben af Schultén became Artek's third artistic director in 1976.

## Lamps

Aalto usually used his own lamp models as lighting fixtures for the spaces he designed, but also other suitable lamps were used. The best known are the PH lamps by Danish designer Poul Henningsen that Aalto used in his apartment in Turku and later also in his home on Riihitie in Munkkiniemi, Helsinki. On top of the grand piano in his home on Riihitie is still a paper prototype of the PH table lamp.

The company Taito Oy manufactured metal lamps designed by Aalto before the start of cooperation with the family company Valaistustyö Oy run by Viljo Hirvonen. Hirvonen had worked at Taito Oy before founding his own company, and we can presume that he and Aalto became acquainted via Taito Oy. The cooperation between Aalto and the master metalsmith Hirvonen was very close from 1952 onwards. They developed the final models from prototypes. Very few actual working drawings have

been preserved. Valaistustyö also manufactured metal legs for Aalto's furniture, the so-called Rautatalo door handles and other fixtures. After Valaistustyö terminated their operations in 1975 following the death of Hirvonen, the production moved to the company Valaisinpaja Oy, in Kirkkonummi, the company nowadays known as Cariiti Oy. The production of the Aalto-designed lamp models sold by Artek has been moved elsewhere. After Valaistustyö, door handles were manufactured at the Primo factory at Kellokoski, and on special commission at the Koristevalimo Sievä workshop in Vantaa.

## Artek in Alvar Aalto's Architecture

Aalto's architecture and furniture complement each other. Typically, the fixed furniture and details of many of Aalto's projects were designed in Artek's drawing office. Printed textiles were designed not only by Aino, Elissa and Alvar Aalto, but also by many of Artek's long-term designers.

From 1963 onwards, that is, after the death of Maija Heikinheimo, the majority of the interior designs of new buildings from Aalto's office was carried out in the architect's own office. An interior designer was included amongst Aalto's office staff. Aalto had an equally flexible approach to furniture and interior design as he had to his architecture. If the need or technical production methods so required, alternative methods and materials were sought for the production process. Because his design tasks, however, also often included interior design, it became a natural part of the overall design process. This is manifested as a skilled handling of the overall appearance. The furniture complements the architecture through the forms, materials and details.

Artek's main showroom is still located in the centre of Helsinki, though its furniture can be purchased from retailers all around the world. Artek's unique drawing and photo archives are situated in the archives of the Alvar Aalto Museum in Jyväskylä.

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