

The Standard



Number 3

Alvar Aalto's
Hand Grenade and
four other highlights from Artek

artek

Standards and Systems

Alvar Aalto's bent birch "L-leg" is the standardised yet versatile basis of many Artek furniture designs.



Alvar Aalto's Stool 60 in the light-filled drawing office of the Aalto Studio in Helsinki, designed by the architect in 1955.

In 1929, Alvar Aalto began designing standardised furniture for production. The rise of modernism around the world and the advent of industrial manufacturing in Finland made this the perfect moment for Aalto to test his belief that architecture and design were important players in a robust culture and economy.

Through the late 1920s, Aalto experimented with wood-bending, collaborating with the furniture manufacturer Otto Korhonen and developing what became known as the "L-leg," a solid birch piece bent to a 90-degree angle. Aalto called it "the little sister of the architectural column" since it, too, supported horizontal surfaces—table tops or stool and chair seats, for example. Patented in 1933, it formed the basis of a versatile system of standard components that became the foundation of Artek's furniture designs.

For decades, the L-leg was bent by hand; starting in the 1960s, high-pressure bending took over.

Soon after the 1933 debut of Stool 60, the first L-leg product, Artek began manufacturing the legs in four sizes, enabling the development of more than 50 different products, from seating and tables to storage furniture.

Aalto believed that standardisation in furniture design shouldn't prevent variety. Inspired in all his designs, including the L-leg, by the forms of the natural world, he called this concept "flexible standardisation." In his own words:

"I once claimed that nature is the best standardising committee in the world. But in nature, standardisation is applied almost exclusively to the smallest units possible—cells. The effect is millions of varying combinations, which will never become schematic. Another consequence is the endless richness of nature and the constant exchange of the organic within the organic growing formations. Standardisation within architecture should take a similar path."



Stool 60, Bench 153B, and Chair 66, shown here in white lacquered birch, illustrate the versatility of the bent-wood L-leg in Aalto's furniture designs for Artek.



The graceful lines of the Rival Chair, designed by Konstantin Grcic, allow the solid and laminated birch chair to swivel effortlessly from office to dining table.

The Rival Chair by Konstantin Grcic

The wooden chair is re-imagined in structure and function to make it equally comfortable at home, at work, or out to dinner.

The Rival Chair, Konstantin Grcic's first collaboration with Artek, addresses the disappearing boundaries in today's world between work and life, public and private. While deeply rooted in Artek traditions, Rival—the name is meant to signify confidence rather than competition—sheds new light on the idea of a wooden chair. The legs are milled from a single piece of solid birch, giving them a fluid quality more like that of moulded plastic than wood, while the back and armrests are made of laminated saw-cut birch. True to Alvar Aalto's construction principles, the design articulates the chair's individual elements, while the backrest is joined directly to the seat shell.

At the same time, Rival breaks new ground for Artek as the company's

first swivel chair. Exemplifying Grcic's fascination with technology and materials, its innovative aluminium "knot" mechanism is located under the upholstered seat cushion, inside the injection-moulded polypropylene seat shell. Grcic is also interested in the history and human aspect of design; the Rival, accordingly, doesn't look like a conventional office chair. With the look more of dining chair than a task chair, it works equally well at a desk, at the dinner table, or in a restaurant.

As Grcic put it, "The Rival stands astride the strong history of Artek and Alvar Aalto. It doesn't hold back, but proudly says, 'This is how we make furniture today.'"

Alvar Aalto's Pendant Light A110

For Alvar Aalto, a light was never just a light. After more than six decades, the Hand Grenade shines in three new colours revived from the archives.

An integral component of Alvar Aalto's architecture, interiors, and furnishings, lighting was an expression of his humanist philosophy, of the idea that even artificial light—particularly in Finland, with its long, dark winters—brings people closer together and can provide therapeutic benefits.

In addition to the psychological and optical aspects of light fixtures, Aalto also focused on their sculptural and sensual qualities: a light, he believed, should look beautiful whether it was on or off.

His lighting designs, accordingly, are as lyrical as they are precise. In 1955, Aalto even created a space

in his [Helsinki studio](#) devoted exclusively to his experiments with lighting.

The pendant light A110—also known as the Hand Grenade because of its shape—was designed for the Finnish Association of Engineers in 1952 and also used in the Council Chamber of the [Säynätsalo Town Hall](#). In this and other lighting designs, Aalto added a perforated, polished brass-plated ring at the bottom of the fixture's shade to diffuse light and thus reduce glare. Artek is re-introducing three colours from its archives for the A110—dark green, midnight blue, and red—to accompany the existing white and black versions.



The polished, brass-plated ring on Aalto's pendant light A110, better known as the Hand Grenade, diffuses light to minimise glare, exemplifying the architect's human-centred approach to lighting, buildings, and interiors.



Alvar Aalto in his office in 1945. At the time, the office was located in his Helsinki home, a building that he and his first wife, Aino Aalto, completed in 1936.

Alvar Aalto's "Organic Line"

The Finnish master's human-centred design ethos revolutionised architecture and gave form to Artek and its products.

Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) was one of the most important architects of the twentieth century. His 'organic line,' the hallmark of the humanistic modernism that characterised his buildings, furniture, and glass objects, still contributes today to the international influence of Nordic design.

Aalto once said that the architect's ultimate goal is "to create a paradise," whether in a house or a factory. His buildings are known for their dynamic relationship with nature, for their human scale, warm and sensual materials, meticulous details, and ingenious use of lighting. Aalto designed over 200 buildings, from town halls and churches to social housing and private residences. His best-known projects include the Paimio Sanatorium, the library in Vyborg, and the Villa Mairea, the house he

designed for Maire Gullichsen—one of the founders of Artek—and her husband, Harry.

For Aalto, architecture and furniture were equal players in a synergistic relationship. His first modern furniture designs, produced in 1931-1932 for the Paimio Sanatorium, brought widespread acclaim, and his iconic furniture pieces in bentwood—the classic Stool 60, for example—assured his place in twentieth century design history. Since its founding in 1935, Artek has promoted the worldwide distribution of furniture, lighting, and textiles by Alvar and Aino Aalto. Ground breaking when they first appeared on the market, the Aaltos' products reflect forward-looking ideas regarding mass production, standardisation, and new manufacturing techniques and still form the basis of the Artek range today.



Aalto's pioneering methods of bending wood paved the way for designs like the Tea Trolley 901.



The Floor Light A810 is a variation on Aalto's A809 model; both appear in his Villa Kokkonen of 1967-1969.



Artek's Zebra fabric embodies the Aaltos' conviction that design should add richness to everyday life.

Artek's Textiles and Patterns

For Aino and Alvar Aalto, fabrics were an integral element of domestic life and played a crucial role in Artek's design philosophy from its earliest days to the present.

From the beginning, textiles were integral to Artek's belief that beauty should be a part of everyday life. At first, the company didn't have its own in-house line of textiles. Yet from the very start, [Aino Aalto](#) (1894-1949) – architect, designer and Artek co-founder – scoured Europe looking for unusual fabrics and [Moroccan rugs](#) to use for the company's products. The patterns she found gave Artek's furnishings and interiors the exotic richness that set the company apart from its competitors and drew international attention.

One of the earliest and still most famous of these textiles is Zebra, characterised by a soft, sensual texture and striking visual depth.

It was likely inspired by a zebra-patterned textile that Aino Aalto bought from the Zurich design emporium Wohnbedarf in 1935. By 1940, Artek was commissioning fabrics from external designers like Kaj Franck, whose Putkinotko and Sitruuna patterns were among Artek's best-selling textiles of that decade.

1954 witnessed the arrival of another iconic Artek fabric, the graphic, geometric Siena, named for the architecture of the Italian city so beloved by Alvar Aalto, the fabric's designer. Today, Siena continues to enliven multiple aspects of everyday life in the form of home accessories like cushion covers, trays, and tea towels in Artek's abc Collection.



The Zebra fabric is probably most closely identified with Aalto's Armchair 400, also known as the Tank chair due to its wide laminated birch arms.



A later but no less iconic Artek textile is Siena, designed by Aalto in 1954 and named for the architecture of the Italian city he loved to visit.

Notes



1. Stool 60

Alvar Aalto's Stool 60, designed in 1933, embodies the essence of functionalist design. The L-shaped, bent solid birch legs are mounted directly to the underside of the round seat, eliminating the need for complicated connecting elements and allowing the stool to be stacked in a spiralling tower to save space. Over the years, the stool has been produced in numerous wood stains, lacquers, and upholstery fabrics. Since its introduction in 1933, several million units of Stool 60 (and its four-legged sibling, Stool E60) have been sold, making it one of the most cherished classics in the history of design.



2. "Flexible Standardisation"

The Aalto collection is based on the architect's concept of standardised individual components that can be easily combined and coordinated to create an extensive system of tables, chairs, and stools. Product formats like table sizes and heights are flexible, while

product surfaces and colours can be customised even for small projects. This combination of standardisation and variety ensures that Artek's furniture transcends social identities and functional categories, moving naturally between residential and work settings—one source of its timeless appeal.



3. Office Chair

Konstantin Grcic's Rival chairs, in the offices of the Tokyo advertising agency Plus D.



4. Helsinki Studio

Lighting, both artificial and natural, was an important aspect of Alvar Aalto's architecture. He even designed a space devoted specifically to lighting experiments at his studio in Helsinki, built in 1955. The space featured a balcony where an assistant could hold lamps at different heights so that Aalto could see their effects—a kind of experimentation that was typical for the architect.



5. Säynätsalo Town Hall

Completed in 1952, the Säynätsalo Town Hall is among Alvar Aalto's most significant works and holds a special place in the history of twentieth century architecture. The castle-like red brick cluster of buildings includes administrative offices, a council chamber, and library, as well as apartments and commercial spaces. A raised courtyard offers views onto the surrounding landscape, and the buildings' varied roof shapes allow the complex to blend in with its wooded environs on Säynätsalo Island near the town of Jyväskylä, Finland, where Aalto opened his first office in 1923.



6. Paimio Sanatorium

The Paimio Sanatorium is considered Aalto's most significant early building; it established his international reputation as an architect and designer and was the catalyst for his uniquely humanist interpretation of modernism.

Alvar and Aino Aalto designed the sanatorium's furniture and interiors to be beautiful as well as functional in order to enhance patients' wellbeing.



7. Library in Vyborg

Aalto's Vyborg Municipal Library in Russia (formerly Viipuri, Finland) is one of the masterpieces of modernist architecture. It was here that Aalto tested design solutions like the sunken reading well, free-flowing ceilings, and cylindrical skylights that would appear regularly in his later projects. It was also at the Vyborg Library that Aalto employed a furnishing system based on the standard component of the bent-wood L-leg.



8. Aino Aalto

The architect Aino Aalto, née Marsio (1894-1949) was a co-founder of Artek and close collaborator of Alvar Aalto for 25 years. Together, they managed his architectural practice as equals, with Aino responsible for some of the office's most famous interiors, including the Savoy

Restaurant (1937) and the Villa Mairea (1939). She also pursued independent projects, including the design of exhibitions, furniture, and glass, which were awarded prizes at the Milan Triennale. Aino Aalto was Artek's Design Director from 1935 and also its Managing Director from 1942 until her untimely death.



9. Moroccan Rugs

Moroccan rugs have played an important role at Artek since the beginning. They were the focal point of the company's first exhibition at its store in Helsinki in October 1936, and they've consistently appeared in the Artek shop ever since. Interiors designed by the Aalto office—like, for example, those at the Villa Mairea—have also often featured Moroccan rugs. According to Aino's travel journals and sketches, she first discovered the rugs in April 1935 when she and Aalto were travelling through Holland, Switzerland, and Germany. There, she explored forward-thinking stores like Amsterdam's Metz & Co. and Zurich's Wohnbedarf, the pioneering design retailer that long served as an inspiration for Artek.

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Artek was founded in 1935 in Helsinki by the young idealists Alvar and Aino Aalto, Maire Gullichsen, and Nils-Gustav Hahl "to sell furniture and promote a modern culture of living by exhibitions and other educational means." Today, the Artek collection of furniture, lighting, and accessories designed by Finnish masters and leading international designers comprises objects that are extraordinary in their clarity, functionality, and poetic simplicity. In the radical spirit of its founders, Artek remains one of the most innovative contributors to modern design, breaking new ground at the intersection of design, architecture, and art.

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