editorial

1  CULTURE, EXPORTING, AND THE EXPORT OF CULTURE
   Esa Laaksonen

articles

on architecture

3  WEAVING THE MONUMENTAL SURFACE:
   FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH, COLUMBUS, INDIANA
   Russell Rudzinski

essays

on architecture

14  "WOLF'S PENCIL - KEITH'S GUITAR":
    ACROBATICS BETWEEN COOP HIMMELBILIAU AND THE ROLLING STONES
    Claudio Conenca

on Aalto

23  IN SEARCH OF THE FORGOTTEN WALL IN THE EARLY MAIREA
    Hyon-Soo Kim

on Aalto

29  THE AMPHITHEATRE AND FAN-SHAPED FORMS:
    ACOUSTIC FORMS IN AALTO’S AUDITORIUM DESIGNS
    Markku Norvasuo

on Aalto

36  FURNITURE, PAINTING, AND APPLIED DESIGNS:
    SMALL REHEARSALS IN ALVAR AALTO’S SEARCH FOR ARCHITECTURAL FORM
    William C. Miller

on design

50  MAGIC AND DREAMS FOR THE JUNGLE OF LIFE: INTERVIEW WITH ERWAN BOURGULLEC
    Asdis Olafsdottir

on photography

56  THE NATURE-LANDSCAPE AS A WAY OF ILLUSTRATING A NATION
    Kati Linronen

books

59  ELADIO DIESTE: AWESOME ARCHITECTURE AND CHARITABLE MENSCH
    Suzanne Frank

62  EDITOR’S CHOICE
    Esa Laaksonen

in time

64  IN & AROUND
AALTO

WILLIAM C. MILLER
FURNITURE, PAINTING, AND APPLIED DESIGNS:
SMALL REHEARSALS IN ALVAR AALTO’S SEARCH FOR ARCHITECTURAL FORM

ALVAR AALTO’S lyrical, sensuous design drawings poignantly record his process of generating form (Figure 1). These pencilly lines made with soft pencil on tracing paper expressively describe the emergent, sinuously shaped spaces and forms of his buildings. While capturing the essence of Aalto’s architectural production, these sketches could, simultaneously, represent the design of a piece of furniture, a light fixture, or a glass vase. Aalto’s furnishings, paintings, and applied designs exhibit an uncanny thematic resemblance to the formal and spatial configurations of his architecture. This similitude, which inextricably links his entire corpus of work, expresses a fundamental condition governing his design sensibilities. These elements were more than mere accents within a spatial setting or decorative ensemble. The design and crafting of a chair, a light fixture, or a glass bowl was as much an architectural proposition – albeit in miniature – as the design of a building. Engaging in furniture and applied design provided Aalto with the opportunity to explore compositional and tectonic issues at a variety of scales and in different mediums, and this directly influenced his conception of architectural space and form.

This thematic continuity infusing all the realms of Aalto’s production crystallized during the period between 1927 – when he moved his office from the provincial town of Jyväskylä to the more cosmopolitan city of Turku – and the death of his first wife, AINO MARSSO AALTO,1 in 1949. These two decades, bracketed by his Nordic classic period and postwar architectural maturity, were the most important in his career. In moving from relative obscurity to a prominent position within the modern architectural movement, Aalto’s furniture and applied designs played an instrumental role in the evolution of the unique complexity and thematic comprehensiveness characterizing his architecture.

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*1 An earlier version of this article first appeared in The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, no. 6. Fall 1987. For this printing, while editing and content refinement to the original article were made, the concepts and ideas remain similar.

The end notes for the article are those that originally appeared with the earlier version. Since 1987, Aalto scholarship has increased significantly and where deemed appropriate, additional references have been added in the endnotes. (References to recent scholarship are contained within brackets.)

Figure 1. Sketches for the Essen Opera House (Germany), 1961-65. ALVAR AALTO MUSEUM.

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During his first decade of practice, Aalto worked in a style termed Nordic classicism. Until recently, little was known of this work owing to the lack of scholarly inquiry into the classical roots of Scandinavian modernity and Aalto’s own depreciation of its value: a situation only rectified since his death.¹ Suffice it to say, before international recognition was achieved in the thirties, the Aaltos had a substantive body of architectural and furniture production to their credit. Their buildings of the twenties like those of their Scandinavian contemporaries were in a mannered classical style composed of simple geometric forms characterized by sparsely decorated surfaces rendered in stucco or wood (Figure 2). Elevations, while divided in a tripartite fashion (base, middle, and cap), received vertical emphasis through well-proportioned arrangements of solids and voids (wall and windows). Classical elements, if used, were often exaggerated and non-canonical in their application. Despite classical overtones, these buildings were often asymmetrical in composition, incorporating freely disposed plan arrangements accommodating functional necessities and contextual particularities.

A catholic relationship between the Aaltos’ architecture and applied designs existed during the 1920s. Furniture and other decorative elements were designed to be stylistically compatible with specific spaces and settings. Exaggeration also played a role in the Aaltos’ furniture and decoration. Although influenced by a number of traditional and contemporaneous sources, elements in their furnishings and decoration appear intentionally distorted or mannered: table and chair legs which were either thinner or more boldly profiled than normal; balusters which whimsically modified the conventions of the ‘split spindle’ motif; oddly proportioned knobs and turned pieces; and the addition of idiosyncratic decoration (Figure 3). As Igor Hérler has noted, these designs have a ‘daring versatility and stylistic colorfulness which threatened the limits of “good taste”’.² Interiors were often decorated with illusionistically painted scenic wallpaper or classically inspired motifs. Abstract images of masonry rustication, austere picture moldings and door and window frames, and stenciled friezes were among the vocabulary of appointments the Aaltos used.
Beneath this classicist production with its emphasis on stylistic continuity ran two thematic undercurrents that were to inform Aalto’s designs during the 1930s: the influence of painting, and an intellectual and experiential appreciation of the landscape and nature. Aalto began painting in his youth and while he painted various subjects, Finland’s forest and agricultural landscapes provided continual inspiration. He emulated Finnish landscape painters such as Eero Järnefelt, Pekka Halonen, and Tyko Sallinen, whose compositions were rooted in nature and who were masters of capturing Finland’s complex landscape. Early paintings resembled Järnefelt’s works, while Halonen’s and Sallinen’s influence became dominant as Aalto matured. Sallinen, in particular, brought to Finnish landscape paintings qualities Aalto specifically admired. Reviewing a Sallinen exhibition in 1922, Aalto complimented the artist’s portrayal of “primitive Finnish landscape,” finding value in the non-romanticized presentations of “the Finnish earth, its wounded landscape, even in its violated forests and its desolate suburban developments.” But it was “Sallinen’s landscape, with its hills and single curving line dominating the composition of the whole picture,” that Aalto found most arresting.

From Sallinen, Aalto became interested in Cézanne and his method of composing space. Cézanne, who avoided ‘Euclidian’ space and normal perspective, built his paintings into a comprehensive spatial system by overlaying and juxtaposing multiple sets of environmental fragments and elements upon each other. In the continuous process of reconciling element with whole, Cézanne discovered that solidity and monumentality in painting depended as much on the relationships between individual pieces as on the generalized concepts. His process of composing a spatial whole from bits and fragments of the environment, rather than relying on geometric unity, corresponds to the compositional sensibility Aalto evolved during the thirties. Cézanne’s intention was to create an order of art corresponding to the order of nature, and for Aalto this would appear a more authentic way to relate his architecture to the natural order than did abstract geometry.

Landscape was more than a subject matter for painting. Aalto’s knowledge of the physical and cultural properties of the Finnish environment provided the intellectual and experiential foundation for his eventual appropriation of nature as a compositional strategy for his architecture. The landscape, natural and cultural, formed a continuum constituting an organic system within which architecture actively participated. While his sensitivity to the particulars of the Finnish landscape was inculcated from his youth, Aalto’s appreciation of the essential involvement of architecture with the natural continuum is seen in a 1925 newspaper article entitled, Architecture in the Landscape of Central Finland. When writing this, within a year after honeymooning in Italy, Aalto was attempting to foster a Nordic renaissance in provincial Finland: an important intellectual tenet associated with his twenties classicism. For this reason he drew upon similarities between the Italian landscape and the forests of central Finland to articulate architecture’s fundamental interdependency with its larger environmental situation, be it city or country. For Nordic architects during the 1920s, the village-studded rolling hills of northern Italy proffered a vital illustration of an architecture that effectively beautified, civilized, and humanized the extant natural order. Architecture was the quintessential ‘human touch’ in nature, imparting a civilizing aura to the landscape. In advocating an interactive relationship between culture and nature, where architecture enhanced the particular qualities of a setting, Aalto commented, “What I wish to say is simply that with a few well-placed and forceful accents, the region would take on a distinctive cultural character due to the fact that the landscape of central Finland is made up of sweeping curves.”

Landscape and painting converge into two interrelated themes that reach fruition in Aalto’s work during the next decade: sinuosity, and nature as a compositional tactic for design. Before achieving their mature expression in his architecture, the evolution
of these themes, particularly sinuousity, is best witnessed in Aalto’s furniture and applied designs.

Moving to Turku in 1927, Aalto enjoyed a modest national reputation. Relocating to Helsinki in 1933, he had achieved international recognition. His international stature resulted from four buildings—the Standard Block of Flats (1927–28) and Turun Sanomat Newspaper Building (1928–29) in Turku, the 1929 Turku 700th Anniversary Exhibition (in association with Erik Bryggman), and the Painio Tuberculosis Sanatorium (1929–33)—and significantly, from his furniture and applied designs. Aalto’s conversion to functionalism, as modernism was termed in Finland, coincided with the move to Turku. His buildings, competition entries, and furniture designs appeared to immediately embrace functionalism’s focus on rational technique, serial production, and machine aesthetics.

What Turku provided, along with an active architectural community, was a connection to Stockholm and the continent. The significance of this rests in the context Aalto made as a result of his travels. Provided entrée to the continental architectural avant-garde by Swedish architect Sven Markelius, Aalto soon found himself in the company of Walter Gropius, Sigfried Giedion, André Lurcat, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Helene De Mandrot, and Le Corbusier, among others. He nurtured these contacts, for during the Turku years he travelled to Denmark, Holland, France, Switzerland, and Germany; attended the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne meetings in Frankfurt (1929) and Athens (1933); and participated in the 1930 Stockholm Exhibition opening and the Nordic Building Congress in Trondheim that same year. In this way Aalto kept abreast of continental trends and ideas, often holding news conferences or authoring articles upon his return to Finland, to report recent international architectural developments.8 Aalto’s association with the European avant-garde, coupled with his direct experience of the canonical works of the modern movement, enhanced his leadership position as a functionalist in Finland.

His quick mastery of functionalist tenets was wryly commented upon by Hilding Ekblund in 1930:

“With the same ardent enthusiasm as the academics of the 1860s drew Roman baroque portals, Gothic pinnacles, etc., in their sketchbooks for use in their architectural practice, Alvar Aalto noses out new, rational-technical details from all over Europe which he then makes use of and transforms with considerable skill.”

The Painio Sanatorium (Figure 4), a potent symbol of the healthy new world modernism promoted, demonstrates Aalto’s mastery of functionalist ideals. Conceptually, it is a clearly articulated set of discreet ‘functional’ elements, expressed, in turn, in the machine esthetic of concrete, stucco, steel and glass. Moreover, Painio is emblematic of the social programs of modernism: a rational design embracing the health-giving properties provided by sun, light, and fresh air. Despite its machined, industrial appearance, Painio went beyond the normal conventions of modernist composition. Volumetrically, its discrete elements are not unified geometrically as is Gropius’s more regularized Bauhaus building (1926), but stand as individually configured pieces that collide together in a more haptic way. Here, as in Cézanne’s work, unity resides in assembling an experiential, formal whole from diverse, particularly figured elements and pieces.

Aalto’s conversion to functionalism had an immediate impact on his furniture. While he was forced to specify ‘modern’
The Folk Senna chair of 1929, based on GUNNAR ASPLUND's Senna Chair (1929), introduced a continuous, one-piece molded plywood seat and back that was intended for serial production. Though Korhonen instructed Aalto in molding laminated plywood into curved shapes, the design had handcrafted legs joined at the seat. An upholstered cover was added because as Göran Schildt observed, the chair "was hard as stone and as slippery as ice." Attaching the legs remained a problem, so a fixed tubular steel base capable of mass production was developed. It was MARCEL BREUER's 1928 cantilever chair that influenced this modification. In its final version, a springy base of thin, continuous steel tubing was added to the continuously molded plywood seat and back. Aalto referred to this design, which could be stacked, as "the world's first soft wooden chair." This chair combined modern serial production with Finnish wood processing technology, a synthesis informing all Aalto's subsequent furniture designs. Aalto now felt confident enough to enter four chair and two table designs in a competition sponsored by Thonet-Mundus in Berlin (1929), though he did not place.

The next problem involved forming a wooden frame or base that would maintain its shape and be capable of mass production. Taking the molded seat back from the 1929 chairs, Aalto studied various frame configurations made from laminated birch. To investigate the shaping potentials of laminated wood, Aalto with Korhonen's assistance began a series of experiments or exercises (Figure 5). These laminated wood studies, or abstract sculptures, seem to capture in three-dimensional form the expressive qualities Aalto found arresting in painting and the Finnish landscape during the 1920s: "the single curving line" of Sallinen's paintings and the "sweeping curves" of the central Finnish landscape. The freedom of line exhibited in these studies fosters a compositional kinship between painting, sculpture, and the resultant furniture designs. The sinuous nature of these experiments transformed into the expressive curved elements seen in the five new furniture designs de-
veloped for the Paimio Sanatorium during 1931–32: an armchair with laminated birch sides bent into a closed curve (Figure 6); an upholstered version of the same design; a stackable armchair with birch legs; an armchair with cantilevered frames of laminated birch; and a table with closed curve, laminated birch frames and molded plywood top and tray.

Preference for wood furniture resulted, in part, from concerns Aalto had about modern steel furniture and which he expressed in his 1936 talk Rationalism and Man: "We have concluded and we should be agreed upon the fact that objects that properly can be given the label rational often suffer from a notable lack of human qualities." Aalto criticized modern furniture for appearing 'rational' from a production standpoint, yet failing to properly address human psychological needs. The reflectivity and conductivity of metal were among its disadvantages, while wood was a natural material having traditional associations. This critique of metal furniture did not lessen Aalto's desire to serially produce furnishings. In his own estimation, the most important furniture development was the 'bent knee' leg (ca. 1933). A solid piece of birch was sawn open at the end in the direction of the fibers, then thin wood slats were glued into the grooves and the wood was bent into the desired angle (Figure 7). The 'bent knee' leg yielded the three-leg stackable stool with round seat (Figure 8), and a series of chairs with round seats and molded plywood backs of varying heights that initially appeared in the Vippuri Library. During this time, two wooden wall screens were developed—a fixed one, and a flexible, undulating one—along with the laminated triangular shelf consoles, or brackets.

Hoping to increase commissions, the Aaltos moved to Helsinki in August 1933. Though the next several years were a low point in their architectural production, it proved the opposite for furniture and applied designs. That November, through the assistance of F. Morten Shand, they mounted an enormously successful furniture exhibition in London. The exhibit included wood studies and early examples of the Aaltos' glass designs. As significant works in themselves, wood experiments and glassware became regular features in the Aaltos' exhibitions. The success of the show resulted in Shand forming Finmar to market Aalto furniture in England. The next year, under the auspices of Sigfried Giedion, they mounted another show in Zurich. Giedion's furniture companies, Palag and Wohnbedarf, had been manufacturing, retailing, and exhibiting several Aalto furniture designs since 1931. The international recognition his furniture achieved due to these exhibitions resulted in an extraordinary increase in sales throughout the world. But, for a variety of reasons the Turku fac-
tory was unable to meet production and export demands.

The resolution of this situation occurred in 1935 and involved MAIRE GULLICHSEN, member of a prominent industrial family, and Aalto's friend, art critic NILS GUSTAV HAHN. Hahl and Gullichsen intended to open a modern art gallery in Helsinki, but when Hahl found himself as an intermediary for resolving the production and export conflict between Finnmar, the Turku factory, and Aalto, he perceived a broader opportunity. He introduced Gullichsen to Aalto, proposing the three form a company that would assume responsibility for the production and marketing of Aalto's furniture.

The result was ARTEK. Since its inception, ARTEK has continued to develop and promote Aalto furniture in addition to acting as an outlet for modern artistic ideals. Otto Korhonen and Aino Aalto also assumed essential roles in ARTEK. Korhonen was responsible for manufacturing and technical development, while Aino took on the managing directorship after Hahl's death in 1941.

The Aalto name became associated with glassware in 1932, when Aino won second place with a stepped-section, compressed-glass tableware series entitled Bölgeblick for a competition sponsored by Karhula and Iittala. Placed into production under the name Aalto, the series won Aino a gold medal at the 1936 Milan Triennale. Alvar's entry in the competition, a set of stackable glasses titled Karhuii and intended for use in the Paimio Sanatorium, was purchased but never produced. In 1933, Alvar won second place in a competition sponsored by Riihimäki, with a five nesting piece set called Riihimäki Flower. For the 1937 Paris World's Fair, the Aaltos were invited to participate in a competition sponsored by Iittala, Karhula, and Riihimäki. Alvar placed first with an entry entitled The Leather Pants of an Eskimo Woman (Figure 9). The irregularly-shaped, curved form of this design was the precursor of his famous Savoy vase (Figure 10). The sinuous configuration of the Savoy vase, and its numerous variations resemble the undulating shapes that concurrently appeared in Aalto's architecture. Like the wood experiments, glassware designs provided another opportunity to investigate the crafting of free-flowing, painterly shapes in three-dimensional form - small rehearsals that became architectural space and form.

With completion of the Viipuri Library in 1935, Aalto's functionalism began to transform or be redirected. Here in the undulating wooden ceiling of the lecture room the influence of applied designs becomes manifest (Figure 11). The flowing shape of the ceiling thematically captures the sinuous vitality witnessed in Aalto's furniture and glassware. The next year, the Aaltos' house in Munkkiniemi was finished. Though
exhibiting the collage-like composition of elements seen in Paimio, it is the tactile, traditional material vocabulary used for the house that is of interest. Stone, whitewashed brick, and wood cladding—incorporating common vernacular details—contrast the machine imagery used in the early thirties. These two buildings, coupled with concerns articulated in his contemporaneous writings, signaled Aalto’s movement away from the industrial techniques of modernism. In his 1940 essay, The Humanizing of Architecture, he wrote: “Technical functionalism cannot create definite architecture.”

It was the failure of industrial technique to integrate the individual into the continuum of nature that Aalto found unacceptable. Industrial processes should be subordinated to humanistic values in Aalto’s mind, and such values were defined through the individual’s harmonious interaction with the totality of nature. His earlier appreciation of the landscape and the role architecture assumed in providing a ‘human touch’ to the site or setting solidified into a conception of nature as a continuous organic system that included both society and the individual. Nature, characterized by the fact that it is diverse yet efficient, generic yet particular, and irrational yet rational, provided a model worthy of emulating in design. By using such a model, Aalto felt he could revitalize the relationship between nature, architecture, and the individual in a more harmonious, empathetic way than was afforded by industrial technique. In his 1938 lecture The Influence of Construction and Materials on Modern Architecture, he stated:

“In opposition to the view that sees established forms and uniformity as the only way to achieve architectural harmony and successfully controlled building techniques, I have tried with all I have said here to emphasize that architecture’s inner nature is a fluctuation and a development suggestive of natural organic life. I would like to maintain that this is finally the only true style in architecture.”

The basic element of nature, instrumental to its organic unity, is the biological cell. The infinite variety of forms and types characterizing nature’s diversity evolve from the cell. Constantly commenting on the importance of biological cells and cell structures, Aalto emphasized the variety of forms they produce. In the 1935 lecture Rationalism and Man, he proposed an analogy between cell structures and architectural composition.
"Nature, biology, is formally rich and luxuriant. It can with the same structure, the same internmeshing, and the same principles in its cell's inner structure, achieve a billion combinations, each of which represents a high level of form. Man's life belongs to the same family: the things surrounding him are hardly fetishes and allegories with a mystical eternal value. They are rather cells and tissues, living beings also, building elements of which human life is put together. They cannot be treated different from biology's other elements or otherwise they run the risk of not fitting into the system: they become inhuman."

Variety was celebrated in nature through its rich, complex forms, and stemmed from nature's smallest unit, the cell. The cell was a generic module, a small building unit or element with unlimited capacity for variation in its eventual shape or configuration. In using nature as a compositional tactic, Aalto's intention was to create an architecture achieving the same variation witnessed in nature. Only in this way, in contrast to the techniques of industrialized processes, could he create an order of architecture corresponding to the order of nature. Aalto sought the same flexibility and latitude as nature to compose and configure architectural elements, spaces, and forms. As architecture is not nature but human intention and action, he required an organizational structure and a cellular unit to compose architecture in an analogous manner. In achieving this Aalto neither attempted to replicate natural forms nor have his buildings appear as a contrived naturalism. Rather, architecture would provide the humanizing connection between the individual and nature.

The organizational strategy Aalto developed combined two notions: first was the Cézanne-influenced method of composing a spatial whole from bits and fragments, and second was a more traditional method of establishing place and expressing program. Conceptually, as diagrammed in Figure 12 (the Seinäjoki cultural center complex), Aalto often began his building designs by defining and shaping a place - a spatial void - within the environment (#1). This was a civilizing space in the form of a courtyard or small square within the continuum of nature. In Seinäjoki there are two such spaces: a plaza in front of the church, and another defined by the city hall and library. Once place was defined, he positioned specially crafted and figured spaces and forms within the composition. These specially configured spaces (#2) were generated from the ceremonial or honorific activities of the program: church halls, auditoria, library reading rooms, town hall council chambers, etc. (in Seinäjoki all four are present). These spaces received expression through exaggerated shaping and profiling in both plan and section, as well as volumetrics - sinuous, non-rectilinear forms recalling the configurations of Aalto's furniture or glassware. In addition to occupying important locations in the plan, these honorific spaces became important expressive, vertical forms which provided a 'human touch' within the larger landscape setting. Binding objects and place together was a neutral, common building order that housed the ordinary, utilitarian functions of the program (#3). Low horizontal building masses functioned as a datum, weaving the specialized forms and spaces of the composition together. Here in Aalto's work, like Cézanne's, unity is achieved through assembling an experiential whole from diverse, particularly figured and elaborated elements and pieces rather than from geometric abstractions.

Importantly, this tactic embraced the generic yet particular and diverse yet efficient
qualities Aalto found in nature. A majority of his building complexes used this organizational strategy: from his own house and the Villa Mairea, to the 1937 Paris Pavilion, the Siivonäkä Town Hall, the Jyväskylä Pedagogical Institute, and the Seinäjoki and Rovaniemi cultural center complexes, and his architectural office, among others. This generic and efficient strategy yielded a variety and diversity of architectural results that are as impressive as they are memorable: each Aalto building and complex is its own unique and particular realization.

Furniture and glassware, objects of everyday use, became the metaphor of nature’s cell for Aalto. Within them, one sees the rational yet irrational quality nature has: not only could be serially produce these objects from natural materials, but also, ironically, their sinuous, tactile forms contrasted the machine imagery association with modernism. Moreover, in the continuously molded seat back and closed curve, laminated frames of his chairs, and the undulating containment of his vases, Aalto found his biological cell. Here was the metaphor: generic module, the architectural unit capturing “nature’s infinite capacity for nuance.” Capable of unlimited variation – for at differing scales it could become a ceiling, a wall, a space, a building form, a door handle, or a light fixture – this Aal toesque biological cell provided a thematic foundation for his work. And it could manifest itself at all scales throughout his buildings: in re-looking at the sketches for the Essen Opera House (Figure 1), they could be design sketches for a glass vase, a piece of furniture, an architectural element, or the space or form of a building. Aalto’s architecture, like his applied designs, now exhibited more sinuosity in the shaping of spaces, forms, and elements, and more tactility and sensuality in material usage.

As Aalto’s mature oeuvre attests, these simple strategies combined to result in an infinite variety of architectural solutions. Just as biological cells combine into the rich profusion of forms found in nature, this strategy allowed Aalto infinite variation in both the composition of his building forms and their expression. The flexibility this offered was not dictating a set of results, but in establishing a mode of action. This variety and diversity of form and expression is seen in three major works Aalto designed before 1940: the Finnish Pavilion for the 1937 Paris World’s Fair, the Villa Mairea for Maire and Harry Gullickson (1938–39), and the Finnish Pavilion for the 1939 New York World’s Fair.

The Aaltos won both first and second place in the competition for the Paris Pavilion. The unbuilt submission had a great undulating balcony weaving through the scheme: a Sallinen-inspired painterly curve resembling the flowing lines of Aalto’s recent furniture and glass designs, and the Vitupuri Library lecture room ceiling. The Pavilion as built – a large hall formed about a recessed space with an enfilade of rooms terraced around an external courtyard – was a symphony in wood construction with detail qualities reminiscent of traditional Finnish buildings. In contrast to earlier machine aesthetics, the Pavilion had a tactile, sensuous material vocabulary that was ruggedly sophisticated. The curving balcony of the unbuilt Paris entry reappeared in the initial design sketches for the Villa Mairea.

Though this design was rejected, the final composition of the villa contained a number of curved, figural elements set within the more common building order (Figure 13). The figural forms defining the major horrific spaces and elements of the dwelling were executed in wood to contrast the whitewashed walls of the L-shaped form of the building. Internally and externally Mairea abounds with textural expressions (Figure 14), with materials juxtaposed to each other in an incredibly rich experiential ensemble. The design for the Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 New York Fair is dominated by a large, curved wooden wall that steps into the space (Figure 15). This continuous undulating surface resembles an unfolded Aalto vase or the molded seat back of a Paimio chair, enlarged to monumental, space-defining proportions. In New York, the tectonic and compositional influences of Aalto’s applied designs reached their full expressive potential as architectural space and form.
During the 1940s, Aalto resumed painting while maintaining his interest in designing furniture and building specialty items. Following the 'bent knee' leg came the continuously laminated Y leg, and fan-shaped X leg. Bent at two 90 degree angles, the Y leg was used for stools, tables, and a stacking chair. The X leg, used primarily for stools, is made from sawn 'bent knee' pieces and dowelled into the seat. The fan-shape of the X leg resembles the form of numerous Aalto auditorium and concert hall spaces, again recalled in the sketch of the Essen Opera House (Figure 1). Following these developments only slight modifications to earlier furniture pieces occurred. Lighting fixture design occupied Aalto's interests also. Originally designed for specific buildings these fixtures, like furniture and glassware, were put into production for use in other projects. As evidenced in his design sketches, light fixtures continue the legacy of themes seen in Aalto's architecture and furniture. Other specialty items which exhibit the tactility and sinuosity associated with his building designs include door handles and pulls, rounded ceramic tiles, fountain sculptures, and the monumental sculptures found in his late works.

Aalto's painting are abstract and nonrepresentational after 1940, yet appear based upon themes from nature. Curved organic shapes and lines dominate these compositions - albeit some incorporate geometric figures - with thickly-applied paint adding surface tactility. The similarity between these painterly, two-dimensional forms and the tectonics of Aalto's buildings is more than obvious. An oil painting from 1963 (Figure 16) resembles not only the council chamber profile and coloration of the tile-clad Seinäjoki Town Hall (1963–65, Figure 17), but the overall form of the Neue Vahr high rise in Bremen, Germany (1959–62), and the expressive volume over the library and meeting room in the Scandinavian House in Reykjavik, Iceland (1965–68). In later paintings, Aalto mixed sand with the oils, adding more texture to the surface of the canvas. Painting had returned to an active position in Aalto's production, providing a mode of studying formal considerations and relationships in the abstract - akin to the role of wood studies and glassware assumed as small rehearsals in form-making during the 1930s - before being concretized as architecture.

Furniture and applied designs, coupled with artistic production, proved essential to the conceptual and thematic development of Aalto's multivalent architecture. Yet despite this role, his chairs, vases, light fixtures, and door pulls have a power and dignity of their own. Their power resides in the fact
that while appearing serially produced, they retain a handcrafted quality based upon their materiality and means of assembly: works never far from the influence of the 'human touch.' As beautiful objects, they are nonetheless intended for the everyday use of the common individual. Like his architecture, Aalto's furnishings and applied designs serve as necessary reminders of our individual humanity and dignity in a world of ever-increasing superficiality.

Acknowledgements (1967)
I extend my sincere appreciation to The American-Scandinavian Foundation for a Finnish Fund Grant, and the National Endowment for the Humanities for a Travels to Collections Grant, that provided the necessary support for my research associated with this article. Special thanks go to Mrs. ELISSA AALTO for her generosity and assistance in granting me access to the Aalto office archives, and to Ms. SIRKKA VALENTO, head of the archives of the Museum of Finnish Architecture, for her assistance.

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Acknowledgements (2006)
My sincere thanks is extended to the University of Utah Research Committee for the creative grant, [re]confronting Aalto, which has offered me the opportunity to reassess Aalto’s work, and my own scholarship and critique of it over the past several years.


3 Behler, p. 55.


5 Schildt, The Early Years, pp. 32–67, covers this in particular.


7 Schildt, The Early Years, p. 209.

8 Examples of Aalto’s articles and interviews in the popular press during the late 1920s and early 1930s are listed in William C. Miller, Alvar Aalto: An Annotated Bibliography (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), pp. 7–14. [Today the archives of the Alvar Aalto Foundation in Helsinki have available the numerous newspaper articles and unpublished manuscripts Aalto produced in addition to his known published work. Currently, Göran Schildt, ed., Alvar Aalto in His Own Words (New York: Rizzoli, 1997), is the most complete publication of Aalto’s writings and lectures.]


10 Schildt, The Decisive Years, p. 38.
11 Ibid., p. 36.


16 Timo Kinnunen, "Glassware by Aino and Alvar Aalto," Arkitekki, no. 8 (1980), pp. 48-54, provides the most comprehensive assessment of the Aaltos' glass designs during the thirties. [Recent works on the Aaltos' glassware include: Alvar and Aino Aalto as Glass Designers (Savonlinna, Finland: Insua-Nestor Oy, 1988), and a second edition published in 1996.]


18 Aalto, "Rationalism and Man." Taken from Schöld, Sketches, p. 31.

19 For discussions on the particulars of Aalto's ordering sensibilities see: Demetri Porphyrios, Sources of Modern Eclecticism: Studies on Alvar Aalto (London: Academy Editions, 1982); Miller, A Thematic Analysis of Alvar Aalto's Architecture," and Schöld, The Early Years, pp. 242-259. (When the centennial celebration of Aalto's birth in 1995, numerous assessments of Aalto's work and career were published and continue to be available.)