

The Standard



Spring / Summer 2016

The Domus chair by
Ilmari Tapiovaara
and four other highlights from Artek

artek



The Domus chair by Ilmari Tapiovaara, originally crafted in pressed birch ply with a solid birch frame, also comes with an upholstered seat and back for contemporary times.

The Domus Chair by Ilmari Tapiovaara

How a piece of highly pragmatic design became an object of desire at home and abroad

The Domus Academica in the centre of Helsinki is a student housing complex that dates back to 1946, when Ilmari Tapiovaara and his wife Annikki were given responsibility for the design of its interior. They focussed particularly on producing a single, especially versatile chair that could have many uses throughout the building. "A chair," Ilmari declared, "is not just a seat. It is the key to the whole interior."

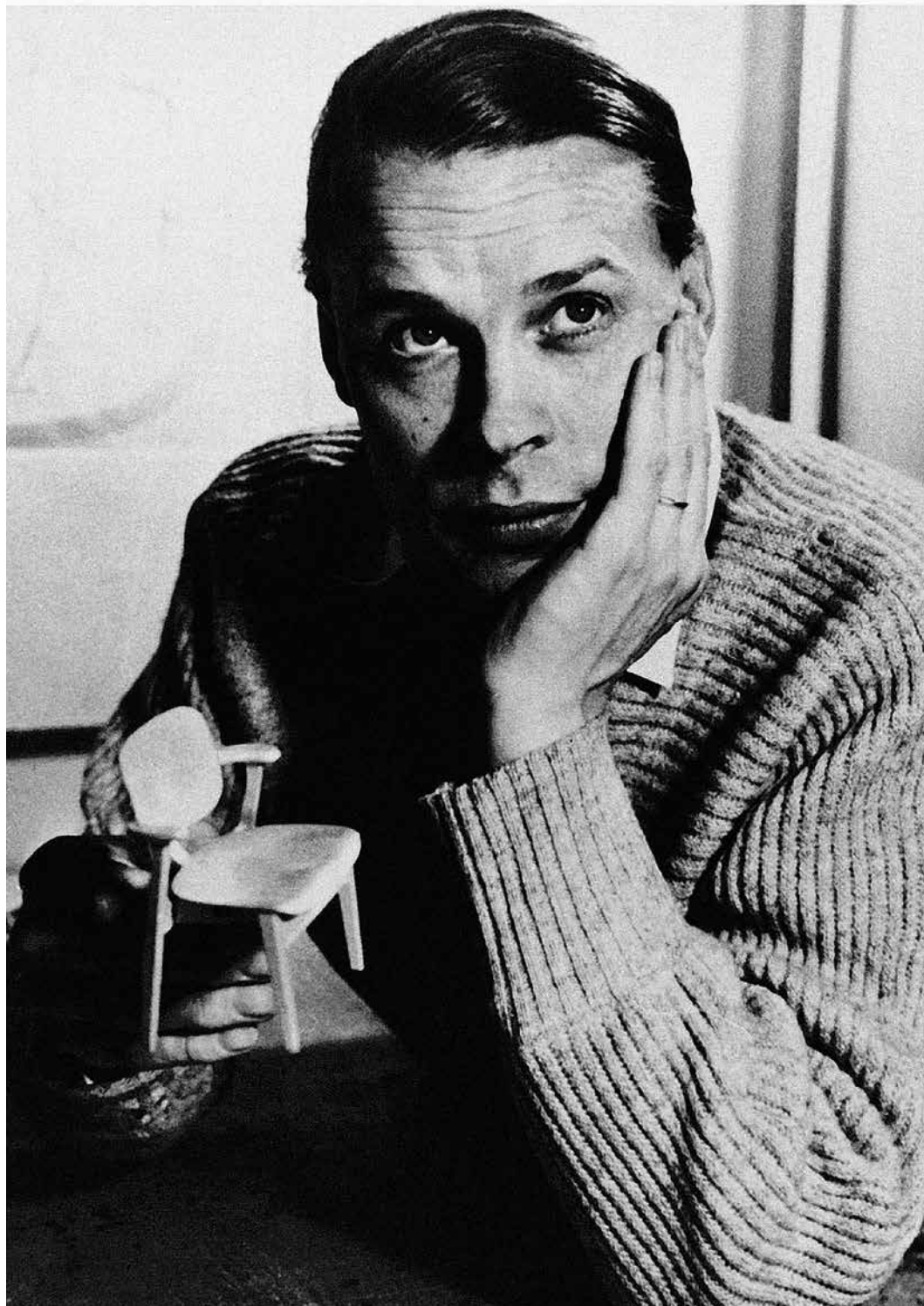
The chair's primary use was for reading in the students' individual rooms. Tapiovaara designed it so that the parts that came into contact with the body were made of form-pressed plywood with three-dimensional contours, making the chairs comfortable to sit in over long periods. The structural components were made in solid wood. He then considered the arm rests, which he

reduced in size so the chair could be placed close to a desk or dining table. A lounge version was also produced for Domus Academica's common areas.

Though created for such a specific environment and immediately popular among schools and institutions, the Domus chair became a highly desirable product, especially abroad. It was Finland's first successful post war design export, receiving the Gold Medal at the Milan Triennale in 1951, the greatest accolade of the period. In the UK, it was sold as the Stax chair and in the USA as the Finnchair, distributed by the furniture giant Knoll. It has been part of the Artek collection since 2010, along with several of Tapiovaara's other designs.



In 1960, Ilmari Tapiovaara designed the Kiki lounge chair using oval steel tubing for a sharply drawn frame.



Tapiovaara, seen here in the 1940s holding a model of the Domus chair, was influenced by his time in the heavily forested region of Karelia, where he discovered the importance of vernacular design and the beauty of wood.

A Finnish master

The well-travelled Ilmari Tapiovaara saw modernism as a direct route to democracy and an appreciation of the vernacular as a way to understand humanity

Finnish designer Ilmari Tapiovaara (1914-1999) was an adventurer both in his travels and his work, journeying to foreign countries and far into what modernism could achieve. His legacy in the Artek collection is a specific one: highly resolved pieces such as the Mademoiselle chair with its finely ribbed back and the Domus chair with its crisp construction clearly on display.

Ilmari Tapiovaara was one of 11 children, many of whom showed artistic flair. His brother Nyrki went on to become one of Finland's leading film directors, and Ilmari for a time designed the posters for his productions. A disciple of Alvar Aalto, he believed, like his hero, that the world could be improved through good design, and it was his life's ambition to enable widespread access to it. Tapiovaara gained inspiration and knowledge abroad, too, exploring life

in London and then in Paris, where he spent two months in the studio of Le Corbusier. From 1941 to 1944, he found himself less voluntarily in Karelia, on Finland's Eastern front, helping secure the country against the Russian army during the Second World War. There, the designer realised that the local forest culture could enhance what he'd already learned about modernism from the Finnish and French masters.

In his subsequent and highly successful design career, Tapiovaara—who worked extensively on United Nations design projects in Paraguay, Mauritius, and Yugoslavia—never lost his desire for democracy, his belief in local culture and craft, and the value of merging the vernacular with the modern.



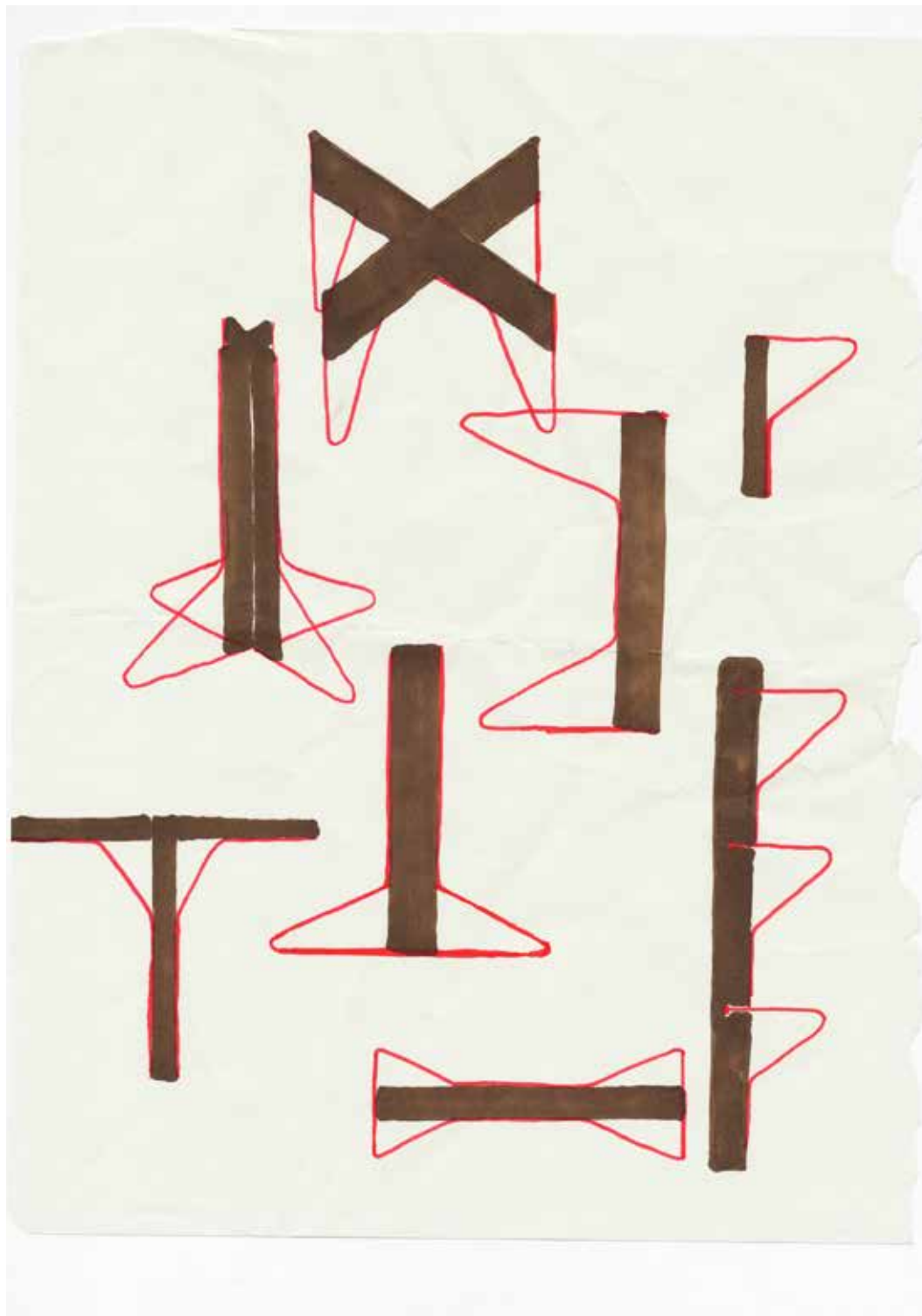
The Mademoiselle lounge chair, designed by Tapiovaara in 1956, combines the traditional spoke back, an age-old construction method, with the smooth curves of the seat's softly-rounded edge.



The 1955 Pirkka stool—part of a range that includes benches, tables, and chairs—demonstrates how much Tapiovaara drew on Finnish rustic design to create products suited to clean modern interiors.

Ronan & Erwan Bouroullec

System addicts: why a French double act was the right way to take Artek into the future



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The Bouroullec brothers' original sketches convey the versatility of a system that relies on a wooden strut and a ribbon of metal to deliver endless variations on a support structure.

Artek has an unusual problem. Its products, some designed 50 or even 80 years ago, still seem ridiculously relevant and fresh. Its preferred materials—Finnish grown wood, linoleum, upholstery in natural fibres—have effortlessly stood the test of time. And yet every collection needs an injection of new blood from time to time. So in 2014, Artek approached the Bouroullec brothers, siblings who grew up in Brittany in the northwest of France and have worked together in Paris since 1999. Like Artek's original designers, the Bourullecs look for intelligent systems on which to base meaningful series of furniture. From this basis, the aesthetics emerge—inevitably strong, simple, and spare given the rigour of their method.

For Artek, the brothers developed a method for a wooden component to meet a slim metal ribbon, which in turn becomes a table leg or shelf

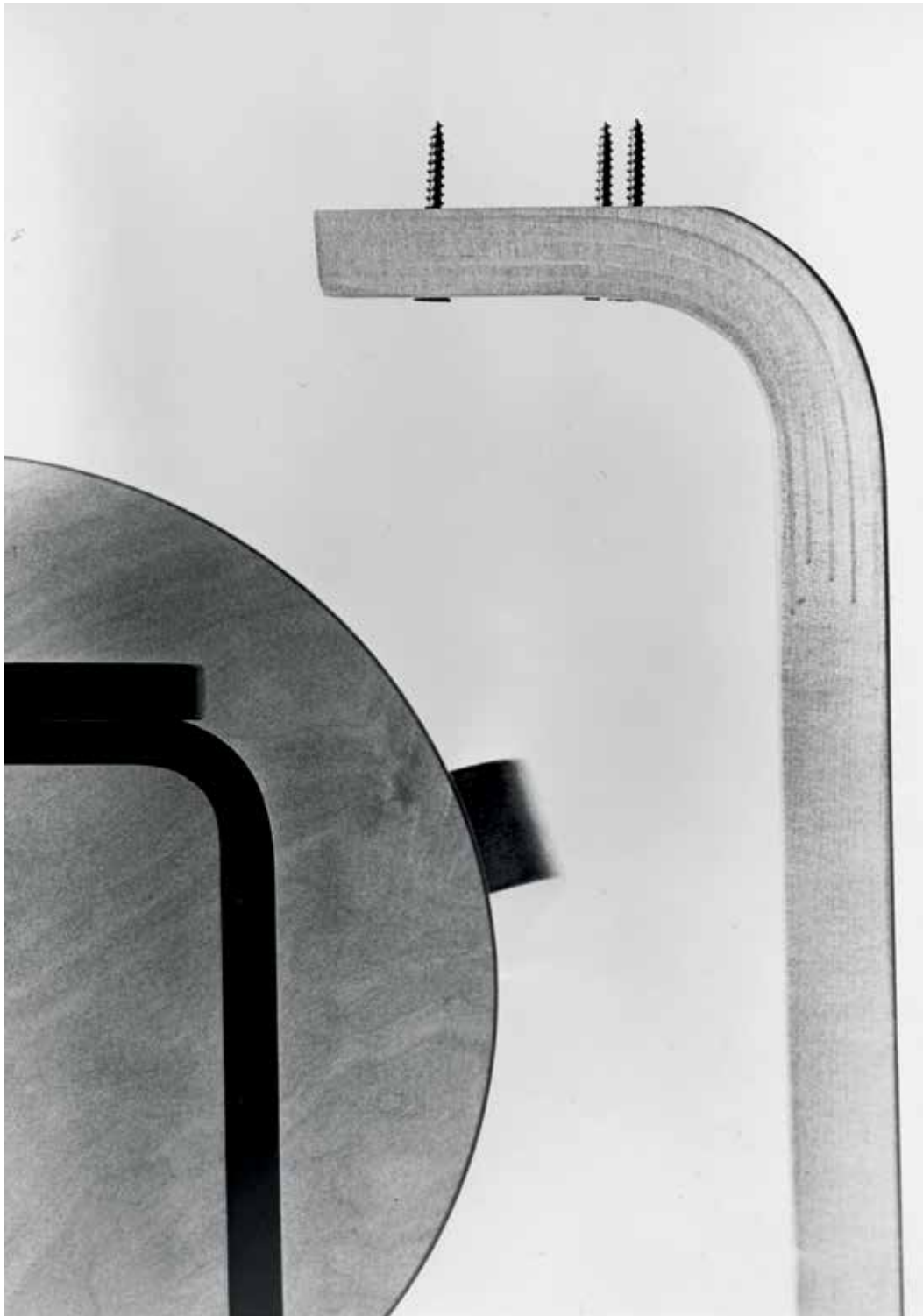
support. To this they added surfaces that already existed in the Artek archive—wood, laminate, linoleum—in super slender contemporary forms.

The project nearly didn't happen at all. "Artek has been important to us since our very beginnings as designers," the brothers explained at the launch of the collection. "We weren't sure if anything new was needed. But once we realised that we shared a love of systems with Artek's founders and previous designers, we set ourselves the task of developing pieces that would look good next to an Aalto stool."

Having grown up in the countryside and next to the sea, the Bourullecs say they share certain Finnish values: a love of simplicity, a need for contemplation, and a desire for design to be a democratic pursuit. Both in their lives and in their products, these are the qualities that prevail.



The Kaari range by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec was launched in 2015. Key to its success is the highly readable structure of each piece in the series.



Alvar Aalto's L-leg, patented in 1933, marks him out as a master of invention. Note the scores in the bent section, which are responsible for the piece's flexibility.

Alvar Aalto's bentwood

For the master of Finnish modernism, everything goes back to wood and the wonderful things it can do

The fact that many of Artek's products are made entirely in wood traces back to the company's Finnish origins—it is the country's most available natural resource—as well as the enthusiasms of the designer and architect Alvar Aalto. Aalto—together with his wife Aino, the art patron Maire Gullichsen, and the art historian Nils-Gustav Hahl—established Artek in Helsinki in 1935. The name is a conflation of the words Art and Technology.

Alvar Aalto was fascinated by the elastic and organic qualities of wood and the way they could be exploited to create furniture that was strong but also possessed a unique fluidity of style. At a time when design was underpinned by longstanding traditions of construction, of joints and screws, Aalto was about to change all the rules.

An early invention was the L-leg, patented in 1933—a continuous piece

that turned through 90 degrees. It was made by cutting slits into a piece of solid wood, then filling them with layers of veneer dipped in glue—this offered enough flexibility to bend the wood through such a tight angle. He went on to produce the Y-leg, with two 90-degree bends, and the fan-shaped X-leg (five or more thin, interlinked L-legs).

Everything from the elegant cantilevered Armchair 400—ground breaking when first launched in the 1930s—to the famous 3-legged Artek stool and the Armchair 41 designed for the Paimio sanatorium have benefitted from Aalto's investigations into bending wood. The classic pieces are still made at the original Artek factory in Turku, the process of their production relatively unchanged, their organic qualities as ideologically and aesthetically relevant as ever.



Alvar Aalto's Chair 66, developed in 1935 using the L-leg, is a high-backed dining chair that is easy to move thanks to its handle-like seat back.

Artek 2nd Cycle

The functionality and clarity of Artek furniture means it can enjoy several lifetimes of love

Artek was never just a furniture company. When it was established in Helsinki in 1935 by designers Alvar and Aino Aalto—along with arts patron Maire Gullichsen and art historian Nils-Gustav Hahl—its mission was to disseminate a socially responsible ideology as well as beautifully designed furniture. Sustainability was built into the brand from the start through the use of Finland's most widely available natural resource, wood, and through the creation of products that were built to last, both physically and emotionally.

Being made from natural materials means that Artek products age gracefully, acquiring a patina of maturity and developing their own history over time. As a result, products from different eras can live harmoniously together. There's nothing nicer than seeing a battered three-legged stool that's survived several

decades of family life sitting next to a recently acquired one, its birch still wearing the silvery gleam of newness.

In 2007, Artek started to retrieve old furniture by Aalto and other Artek designers such as Ilmari Tapiovaara, finding pieces in flea markets and schools, offices and old garages. Four years later, the company opened the 2nd cycle store in central Helsinki to set about redistributing these lovely aged pieces.

Artek 2nd Cycle proves the Aaltos' original ethos better than anything: a coherently conceived piece of furniture constructed in natural materials can, indeed, live many lives and be loved many times. What could be more desirable—or sustainable—than that?



The 2nd Cycle store in Helsinki leads to a fascinating world of reacquired Artek originals.



A pair of Stool 60, as functional as ever in their post-new condition, bearing the marks of a life well-lived.



An example of Alvar Aalto's dainty bentwood chair found in the 2nd Cycle store, this one painted baby blue by a previous owner.

Notes



1. Domus lounge chair
Ilmari Tapiovaara, 1946



2. Mauritius
Ilmari Tapiovaara on the beach in Mauritius in 1974, where he worked with development cooperation projects for the United Nations Industrial Development Organization. Tapiovaara was exceptionally international from an early age and believed that by bringing the artefactual worlds of different cultures together, we also bring their people and nations closer to each other.



3. Finnish values
Finland is a young, relatively egalitarian country. From the start, architecture and design

made significant contributions to the development of its national identity. The great international success of Finnish design promoted the development of Finland's widely acclaimed design culture, with which Artek is closely associated. In Finland design is understood not as an elite luxury, but as an integral part of life. Finnish design is exemplified by clarity and functionality as well as the pairing of beauty with everyday practicality. In the self-image of the Finns and the way they are perceived from the outside, the characteristic natural features and topography of the country—the endless forests, the countless lakes and rivers, the Nordic climate—continue to play a central role today. With one out of five families owning woodland, the Finnish affinity for nature is not a cliché, but a reality of society reflected in Finnish design. Designers such as the Aaltos and Tapio Wirkkala were consistently influenced by forms of nature and worked primarily with natural materials.



4. Intelligent systems
Aalto originally designed the L-leg for Stool 60, but it soon established itself as a versatile standard element of the Artek collection. L-legs in various sizes are used in the construction of numerous seating designs, tables, and cabinets, creating a comprehensive furniture system. This idea of systems and standards in furniture design, characteristic

of Aalto's work, created a flexible range of essential products to furnish private homes, offices, or public spaces such as restaurants, hotels, schools, libraries, or community centres. Many of the products were originally conceived for a specific project but travel easily between the private and public realms.



5. Armchair 41 "Paimio"
Alvar Aalto, 1932
In 1928, Alvar Aalto won the architectural competition to build a tuberculosis sanatorium in the Finnish city of Paimio and was also commissioned to design the building's interior. Initially intending to use the new typology of tubular steel furniture, he ended up deciding the material was too cold and 'psychologically too hard' for a place of healing. Instead, he experimented with wood and created a novel style of furnishings based on this warm and supple material. With its light, organic form, it set new standards in modern furniture design.



6. Armchair 400
Alvar Aalto, 1936
As voluminous as it is comfortable, Armchair 400 was initially created by Alvar Aalto in 1936 for an exhibition at the Milan Triennale, where it was promptly awarded a prize. The chair owes its nickname "Tank" to its distinctive wide and sturdy armrests made of laminated birch and to its robust upholstery.



7. Artek factory
Artek's products are not manually constructed one-off pieces, but are rather manufactured in series. The nature of its products, however, and above all the materials it uses stand opposed to purely mechanical and fully automated processing. Artek products continue to be fabricated semi-industrially according to strict quality criteria with a relatively high proportion of handcraftsmanship. In the production of the Artek collection—in particular the designs by Aalto—various specialized woodworking techniques are put to use, including a number that have been specifically developed or refined for the purpose at hand.



8. Sustainability
Artek works principally with natural materials. The use of regional resources and materials also had an economic reason at first: in the 1930s, Finland was still not very industrialized, and imports from abroad were expensive. But soon, long before the idea of sustainability turned into a popular buzzword, regional sourcing became a conviction. Since time immemorial, natural materials, especially wood, have proven themselves as an instantly familiar part of human existence. They possess a natural beauty, are ecological, change over time, and show traces of life and usage. The Artek Classics have proven timeless and maintained their appeal over decades. The contemporary products share the Classics' clarity, functionality, and poetic simplicity. Artek products are hence more relevant than ever, offering enduring and authentic solutions rather than serving unrestrained and uninformed consumption.



9. 2nd Cycle Store
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Art Direction: Something Fantastic
Texts: Caroline Roux
Copyediting: Jenna Krumminga

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04/2016

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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