

Aino Aalto: “A quietly flowing stream”

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Finnish designer Aino Aalto (née Marsio, 1894-1949) is often a footnote in her husband, icon of modern architecture, Alvar Aalto’s biography.

An article from the Finnish Design Shop states that Aino’s “...life’s work has been easy to ignore, for example, by naming her merely the muse of her



husband, Alvar Aalto.”¹ This unfortunate lack of attention to Aino’s individual career discounts the significant contributions that she made to modern Scandinavian design. Collaborative work played a major role during Aino’s relatively short career (ca.1920 until her untimely death in 1949), whether with Alvar or their collaborative design firm, Artek. The early, formative years of Aino’s life and education led to her prominent contributions with Alvar and Artek. A critical inspection of Aino’s notable pieces, along with comparisons of some works that have been attributed to her, Alvar, or them both, reveal the undeniable influences between the two partners. Finally, Aino’s place in history in light of Alvar’s status as a genius of Scandinavian design analyzes the couple’s personal professional partnerships.

Aino was born in 1894 in Helsinki, Finland, where she lived throughout her primary and secondary education. Aino was educated at the Helsingin Suomalainen Tyttökoulu (Helsinki Finnish Girls' School), and graduated in 1913. In 1920, at the age of 26, Aino was qualified as an architect after studying at the Helsinki University of Technology with Gustaf Nyström,

¹ Kari-Otso Nevaluoma, “Aino Aalto - the strict functionalist,” *Avotakka*, July 28, 2018, <https://www.finnishdesignshop.com/design-stories/classic/aino-aalto-the-strict-functionalism?>

“Finland’s foremost historicist architect.”² For about 40 years Nyström was Finland’s most well-renowned teacher of architecture, with a curriculum that combined artistic qualities with elements of engineering. The majority of students in architecture school, and specifically in Nyström’s courses, were male. As a student of Nyström’s, Aino gained experience, knowledge, and opportunities that were primarily afforded only to men. Nyström taught in the Classical tradition but emphasized the local Nordic and Finnish expressions of architecture.³ This undoubtedly influenced Aino’s later design tendencies, as she honored and emphasized the natural qualities of her home country. The design skills that Aino gained from her education with Nyström proved to be immediately beneficial, as she began working for architectural firms promptly after graduation. Aino worked for two other architects before joining Alvar’s office in 1924. Aino and Alvar married in October of 1924.⁴ In her dissertation “Empathetic Affinities: Alvar Aalto and His Milieus,” author Eeva Liisa Pelkonen describes the early attraction of the couple: “Obsessed by order and stability, Aalto was certainly drawn to Aino’s composed manner and human qualities.”⁵ Aino’s role as the down-to-earth, stable partner in their relationship would later impact their combined designs and individual recognition.

Following their marriage in 1924, Aino and Alvar continued to work collaboratively for the entirety of their lives together, whether in the Aalto firm or for Artek. The couple traveled to Italy (together on their honeymoon and individually prior to meeting) to tour the ancient classical architecture that they had studied in school. While in Italy Aino and Alvar were also particularly

² Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen, “Empathetic Affinities: Alvar Aalto and His Milieus” (PhD Diss., Yale University, 2003), 56.

³ Biografiskt lexikon för Finland, “Nyström, Gustaf,” last modified 2014, <http://www2.sls.fi/blf/artikel.php?id=3323>.

⁴ Richard Weston, “Aino Aalto,” *The Architects’ Journal* 221, no. 6 (Feb 17, 2005): 52, <http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxygw.wrlc.org/docview/200756487?accountid=11243>.

⁵ Pelkonen, “Empathetic Affinities,” 75.

interested in the country's vernacular architecture, which used indigenous materials and traditional building practices to meet the specific needs of the location. The examination and study of this greatly influenced what would become their recognizable Scandinavian ideals. A sketch from Aino's first visit to Italy (Image 1) shows her interest in architecture and its relationship to its site.



Image 1. Aino Aalto, "Sketch of the Forum in Rome," 1921. Institute of Classical Architecture & Art. <https://www.classicist.org/articles/aino-aaltos-enduring-contribution-to-20th-century-architecture-and-nordic-classicism/>.

Overall, Alvar is largely credited with establishing Finnish vernacular modernism, which is widely recognized as a significant aspect of the 20th-century modernist movement. As "standard-bearers of high style, the husband and wife team heralded a new era of collaborative enterprise" in their joint firm.⁶ It is difficult to define Aino's role in the Aalto firm, as she contributed and collaborated on a great deal of work, almost all of which is solely attributed to her husband. During the height of their career together Aino received some recognition for their works, although most of it went to her husband. In their book *Finnish Summer Houses* authors

⁶ Stephen Todd, "Hitting Pay Dirt," *The Australian Financial Review*, July 28, 2017.

Jari Jetsonen and Sirkkaliisa Jetsonen state that “Aino’s role was to be a key partner beside Alvar as he rose to world fame.”⁷ Aino mostly focused more on the design of interiors and furniture.

However, much of this is still just credited to Alvar. A quote from architectural historian Siegfried Giedion, a biographer of Alvar, poignantly describes the couple’s personalities:

"[Alvar] is restless, effervescent, incalculable. Aino was thorough, persevering, and contained. Sometimes it is a good thing when a volcano is encircled by a quietly flowing stream.”⁸

In 1935 Alvar and Aino, along with arts promoter Maire Gullichsen and art historian Nils-Gustav Hahl, founded Artek, a collaborative furniture design company. Artek had the goal of selling furniture and promoting a modern culture of living through exhibitions and other educational means. The name comes from the merging of Art and Technology, which was central to the international modernist movement, as seen with the Bauhaus’s motto of art and technology - a new unity.⁹ Artek “emphasize[d] the technical expertise in production and quality of materials, instead of historical-based, eclectic, or frivolous ornamentation.”¹⁰ In Artek, Aino was not merely Alvar’s supportive and helpful wife, but played a major role in establishing the firm’s identity and growth. Aino was the artistic director for Artek, in addition to designing individually and collaboratively with Alvar. Aino designed solo works, such as the Kirsikankukka textile (Image 2) and Pendant Light AMA500 (Image 3), and is sometimes credited on pieces that are recognized as Alvar’s, such as the Paimio Chair (Image 4) and a Paimio-like chair with her textile (Image 5). Following Hahl’s death in 1941, Aino took over as managing director, strengthening her status within Artek, as she now had undeniable control and influence over the

⁷ Jari Jetsonen and Sirkkaliisa Jetsonen, *Finnish Summer Houses* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), 48.

⁸ Siegfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 491.

⁹ Walter Gropius, “Program of the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar,” 1919. <https://bauhausmanifesto.com/>.

¹⁰ Bjørn Egging, *Alvar & Aino Aalto: Design: Collection Bischofberger* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).



Image 2.
Aino Aalto,
"Kirsikankukka
Fabric,"
ca.1933, cotton.
Artek.
<https://www.artek.fi/en/products/kirsikankukka-fabric>



Image 3.
Aino Aalto, "Pendant Light
AMA500, 1941, powder coated
shade, brass-plated ring, formed
sheet steel light fixture, plastic
cable. Artek.
<https://www.artek.fi/en/products/pendant-light-ama-500#info>

firm's action and production. According to the Finnish Design Shop, "Aino developed the company carefully, and its identity included genuine materials, an international approach and modern art right from the beginning."¹¹ It is impossible to hide Aino's role behind Alvar's immense status and widespread recognition, especially when considering their work with Artek. Despite it being unjustly uncommon to have women heading design firms during the early 20th century, Artek was co-founded by two women and two men, and would not have been possible without Aino and Maire's contributions. Aino was not simply an assistant to Alvar, but rather influenced and collaborated on their individual and collective projects.

Throughout her career Aino worked in a variety of media, including ceramic, photography, and interior design, but is most well known for her glassware design. One of Aino's notable solo works is her pressed glassware series, called Bølgeblik, which means rings of water (Image 6).¹² The concentric rings represent the ripples that appear on a body of water's surface after a pebble has been thrown in.¹³ Aino originally designed the series for the glass factory Karhula-Iittala's design competition in 1932, and won second place.¹⁴ The competition was organized with the aim of producing drinking glasses that would be suitable for mass production, therefore making them accessible for most people. This goal aligns with the motivations of various other international modernists during the time. Alvar also submitted a design to the competition, but lost out to Aino's Bølgeblik series. Aino's Bølgeblik series ultimately consisted of a pitcher, tumbler, sugar bowl, creamer, plates, and large bowls. The series gained immediate popularity and prompted other glass factories to copy them. The success only grew as time went on, and in 1936 Aino's design won the Gold Medal in the Milan

¹¹ Nevaluoma, "Aino Aalto - the strict functionalist."

¹² "Aino Aalto," Finnish Design Shop, https://www.finnishdesignshop.com/Aino_Aalto-d-37.html.

¹³ "Bølgeblik Bowl, 1932," Cooper Hewitt, <https://collection.cooperhewitt.org/objects/18729997/>.

¹⁴ Nevaluoma, "Aino Aalto - the strict functionalist."



Image 4.
 Alvar Aalto, "Armchair 41
 'Paimio,'" 1932, form-bent
 solid birch lamella, form-
 pressed birch plywood.
 Artek.
<https://www.artek.fi/en/products/armchair-41-paimio>.



Image 5.
 Alvar Aalto, Aino Aalto, "Aalto
 armchair 400 'Tank,' zebra
 fabric," birch with textile. Finnish
 Design Shop.
<https://www.finnishdesignshop.com/furniture-chairs-armchairs-aalto-armchair-400-tank-zebra-fabric-p-4374.html>



Image 6. Aino Aalto, “Bølgeblikk Tumbler,” 1932, pressed glass. The Museum of Modern Art. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/3573>.

Triennale. The Finnish Design Shop, which still sells the Bølgeblikk series states that “their simple design is what makes them a timeless classic – perfect for the table still today as it was in 1932.”¹⁵ Despite her relatively short career, Aino’s design skills are still valued by design historians and modern consumers, whether in long-lasting pieces such as the Bølgeblikk series or as seen in her collaborations with Alvar.

Two of the largest collaborative projects that Aino and Alvar completed were their summer home, Villa Flora (Image 7), in Alajarvi, Finland, and Villa Mairea (Image 8), in Noormarkku, Finland, for Artek co-founder Maire Gullichsen and her family. The interior and exterior of Villa Flora was designed primarily by Aino in 1926. During the 1920s Scandinavian designers greatly admired the simplicity of rural houses, especially those in Denmark.¹⁶ This simplicity is seen in Villa Flora’s basic pitched roof and unornamented windows and doors. Aino

¹⁵ Finnish Design Shop, “Aino Aalto.”

¹⁶ Jetsonen and Jetsonen. *Finnish Summer Houses*, 48.

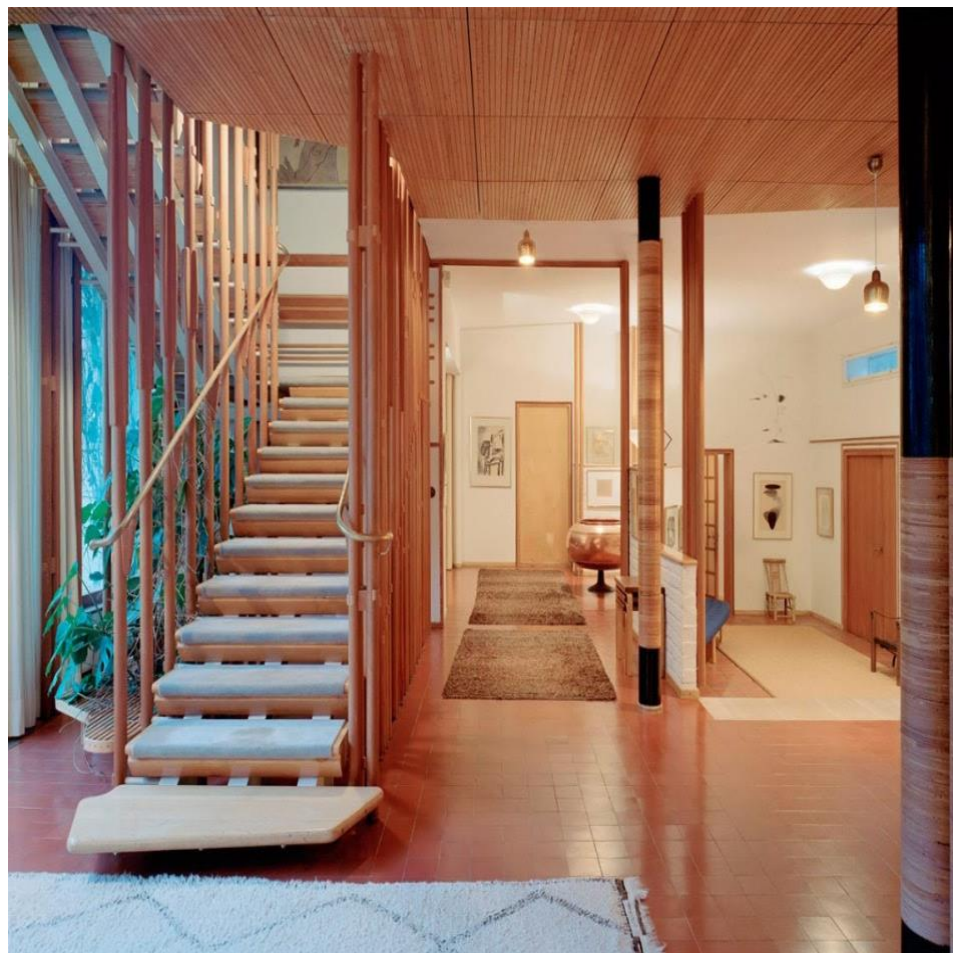


Image 7.
Aino Aalto,
Villa Flora, 1926,
Alajarvi, Finland.
Wallpaper.
<https://www.wallpaper.com/architecture/la-dolce-vita-a-finnish-show-explores-alvar-aaltos-summer-houses>.



Image 8.
Alvar Aalto, Villa Mairea,
1938-1939, Noormarkku,
Finland. ArchEyes.
<https://archeyes.com/villa-mairea-alvar-aalto/>.

Image 9. Aino Aalto,
Villa Mairea Interiors,
1938-1939, Noormarkku,
Finland. ArchEyes.
<https://archeyes.com/villa-mairea-alvar-aalto/>.



had free rein of the furnishings of Villa Flora, and chose to fill it with a mix of Alvar's and her own modernist designs. The home, a countryside escape for the couple, honored both of their design careers through the use of their furnishings within the home. Villa Mairea (1938-1939), on the other hand, is almost always entirely credited to Alvar, and is recognized as one of the greatest works of Scandinavian modern architecture. However, Aino designed the interiors, and embraced the opportunity to express modern and luxurious spaces that were different from her normal work.¹⁷ The warm colors and natural materials of Aino's interiors mirror Alvar's designs for the structure itself (Image 9). Villa Mairea is described as "a collage of materials" that blurs the lines between interior and exterior through the use of stone, wood, and glass on the outside

¹⁷ Nevaluoma, "Aino Aalto - the strict functionalist."

and timber boarding, rugs, and stone slabs inside.¹⁸ The two structures demonstrate the Aaltos' development of Scandinavian modernism over the decade between the two, as there is a more natural, vernacular sense to the second (Villa Mairea) that is just beginning to be visible in the first (Villa Flora). Aino is credited as designing Villa Flora while Alvar gets credit for Villa Mairea, with Aino's name as a footnote for the interiors. Unsurprisingly, there is a clear connection and influence between the designers, as evidenced through their architectural projects.

The similarities between Aino and Alvar's designs is evident on a smaller scale as well, as is visible when comparing Aino's earlier Side Table 606 from 1932 (Image 10) to Alvar's Stool E60 from 1933 (Image 11). There are undeniable parallels between the two, such as the circular seat, thin legs, and simple profile. The primary differences being their ultimate uses,



Image 10. Aino Aalto, "Side Table 606," 1932, steel tube, birch plywood. Artek.
<https://www.artek.fi/en/products/side-table-606>.



Image 11. Alvar Aalto, "Stool E60," 1933, birch, clear lacquer. Artek.
<https://www.artek.fi/en/products/stool-e60>.

¹⁸ "AD Classics: Villa Mairea / Alvar Aalto," ArchDaily, <https://www.archdaily.com/85390/ad-classics-villa-mairea-alvar-aalto>.

color, and the inclusion of steel in Aino's. Alvar's Stool E60 is described as "the most elemental of furniture pieces, equally suitable as a seat, table, storage unit, or display surface."¹⁹ The same could be said about Aino's table, as it was originally intended to be used as a stool for putting your shoes on, but later developed to become a side table. The simplicity of both designs allow for a flexibility of use depending on the owner's needs. The Side Table 606 takes a more machine-made approach with a steel frame and birch veneer seat in a dark color, while Alvar's is made entirely of light birch wood. Despite their differences, the two pieces complement each other quite well, as the machine and natural are brought together in modernism.

Yet another pairing of works by Aino and Alvar that demonstrates their intrinsic influence on one another's designs are Aino's Riihitie plant pots (Images 12-13) and Alvar's Savoy vases (Image 14), both of which were designed in 1936. Aino designed the Riihitie plant pots for the Aaltos' own home and presented them at the Paris World Fair of 1937, but they were not immediately put into production. However, the pots are emblematic of the natural strain of modernism that Aino and Alvar both designed in. An article by writer Stephen Todd describes the pots as follows:

"Amorphous, they served as a reminder...that true modernism is not just about hard, right angles and unforgiving materials. It has always been about judicious balance between the natural and the industrial, a peaceful cohabitation of the Cartesian and the spiritual."²⁰

The Scandinavian designs created by Aino and Alvar exemplify the repetitive fluidity of natural modernism. Despite a slow start to production, Artek still produces the pots today. Additionally, Artek still produces Alvar's iconic glass Savoy vase, which the firm also exhibited at the 1937 Paris World Fair. The legendary shape of the Aalto vase is derived from the Finnish landscape

¹⁹ "Stool E60," Artek, <https://www.artek.fi/en/products/stool-e60>.

²⁰ Todd, "Hitting Pay Dirt."



Images 12-13. Aino Aalto, “Riihitie Plant Pot B,”
1936, homemade ceramic. Artek.
<https://www.artek.fi/en/products/riihitie-plant-pot-b>.



Image 14. Alvar Aalto, Aino Aalto,
“Aalto Vase (Savoy Vase),” 1936,
clear glass. Artek.
<https://www.artek.fi/2ndcycle/en/available-now/1-16-2018>.

and lakes.²¹ There is an undeniable similarity between the fluid, undulating curves of the Savoy vases and the Riihitie plant pots. This is due to both the designers' influences on one another and their combined dedication to and inspiration from their native Finland. However, Alvar's Savoy vases may have contributed to Aino's Riihitie pots' delayed success; Todd writes that the "...iconic, wavy, opaline and clear glass vases produced at the same time by [glassware factory] Iittala simply grabbed all the attention."²² Iittala, a Finnish glasswork founded in 1881, was more well established at the time than Artek, which was producing, marketing, and selling Aino's Riihitie pots. The more well-known factory and its longer history may have contributed to Alvar's glass vases' greater recognition. Despite the similarities of their designs, Alvar's glass vases gained immediate, widespread popularity, possibly detracting from Aino's ceramic pots' success.

While Aino and Alvar pushed boundaries as a design couple at the forefront of modernism in the second quarter of the 20th century, they were not alone. Other designers, such as Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959), Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), and Charlotte Perriand (1903-1999), set the standards for architecture, furniture, and household objects. These designers were contributing to the incredible rise and development of a variety of styles and trends that continued to morph and develop over the 20th century. Additionally, another prominent design couple was making waves a continent away: Charles and Ray Eames (Charles, 1907-1978 & Ray, 1912-1988). Many comparisons have been made between the Aaltos and the Eameses, as both couples significantly contributed to their respective design movements while working and living life as partners. Stephen Todd even wrote that "Alvar and Aino Aalto were to Nordic

²¹ "Aalto vase 160 mm, clear," Finnish Design Shop, <https://www.finnishdesignshop.com/decoration-vases-aalto-vase-160-clear-p-201.html>.

²² Todd, "Hitting Pay Dirt."

Classicism what Charles and Ray Eames were to California Modernism.”²³ This comparison notes both the couples’ equal significance to their design movements as well as their importance of the husband and wife relationship in their professional work.

Architectural and design history has firmly placed Aino in Alvar’s shadow. There are a few connected reasons for this. First are the roles that the two took on in their partnership.

Design historian Lucy Ryder Richardson wrote that:

“Her design handwriting was a little stricter and less organic than Alvar’s but her designs fulfilled their purpose beautifully without shouting for attention. While Alvar provided the dramatic lead roles, Aino filled in all the gaps to create perfect harmony in everything.”²⁴

Aino’s more subdued, quiet personality (the quietly flowing river) naturally supported Alvar’s bohemian, expressive tendencies (the volcano). This is not solely because of Western society’s expectations of women and limitations in recognizing female designers, but also because of the difference between talent and genius. Alvar is widely recognized as a genius of design and one of modern architecture’s masters. Aino’s talent is undoubtable, and played an invaluable role in her collaborations with Alvar, but did not break boundaries. Also, Alvar continued designing and gaining recognition for decades following Aino’s death from cancer in 1949. Unfortunately, many historians regard Aino’s career as secondary to her husband’s, such as Richard Weston, who stated that “...almost nothing she designed independently comes close to the originality and refinement that Aalto sustained throughout most of his long career.”²⁵ While her oeuvre may not be as extensive as Alvar’s, Aino’s works and contributions to Artek are noteworthy examples of modern design. Had Aino’s life not ended abruptly with her unfortunate death in 1949, her career may have seen similar success to Alvar’s. If Aino and Alvar had continued to design together

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Lucy Ryder Richardson, *102 Midcentury Chairs and Their Stories*. (London: Pavilion Books, Limited, 2016), 14.

²⁵ Weston, "Aino Aalto," 52.

and push one another's ideas to their best, both figures could have the recognition within modern design history that they deserve.

While her name will rarely be seen without her husband's, Aino Aalto herself played a significant role in the creation and expression of Scandinavian modernism through furniture, textile, and interior design. Without Aino, the collaborative firm Artek would have been scrambled without their guiding director and do-it-all ace. The unfortunate lack of recognition for Aino's work during the Aaltos' careers created even more space for Alvar's work to take center stage after her death, further minimizing Aino's contributions over time. However, Alvar's designs would have suffered had he not had the support, collaboration, and influence of his wife, both in their professional and personal partnerships. Select works from Aino's career, such as the interior of Villa Mairea, the Bølgeblick series, her textiles for Artek, and many more, demonstrate her skill, eye for detail, and influence of what would become a hallmark Finnish design style. While Aino, as a designer herself, may not have broken boundaries, her contributions to the Aaltos' firm, Artek, Scandinavian design, and the modernist movement are undeniable.

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