



Armchair (Artek no. 402, Aalto no. 34)

Alvar Aalto

Not on display**Title/Description:** Armchair (Artek no. 402, Aalto no. 34)**Artist/Maker:** Alvar Aalto**Born:** 1933**Object Type:** Chair, Furniture**Materials:** Birch plywood, Fabric**Measurements:** h. 690 x w. 605 x d. 690 mm**Accession Number:** 31284**Historic Period:** 20th century**Production Place:** Europe, Finland, Oy Huonekalu-ja Rakennustyötehdas Ab, Turku**Copyright:** © Alvar Aalto Foundation

Armchair 42 designed by the architect and designer Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) in 1933 is a low-backed cantilevered armchair. The construction is based on a padded and upholstered seating panel that is suspended between two U-shaped wood frames. The concept of the free cantilever allows the chair to be supported without back legs, a concept that previously only had been applied to metal furniture by Aalto's European peers, among which Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), Mart Stam (1899-1986) and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) figure as the most prominent designers.

Aalto experimented with tubular steel furniture in the 1920s after his travels in Europe where he had encountered the innovative designs of tubular steel furniture and it is known that Aalto himself ordered a number of Breuer's chairs in 1928 among other cantilevered tubular steel chairs. [1] However, the abundance of wood as a local material resource in Finland together with the search for a material that created a more humane design ignited Aalto's experiments in wood towards the end of the 1920s. Wood was closer to Aalto both emotionally and aesthetically. These experiments resulted in furniture that were designed from laminated plywood formed to the desired shape. The bent plywood was a material that had more warmth and texture than tubular steel at the same time as it was very strong. The result was a lightweight, fluently integrated chair, that had its comfort enhanced by the springy, cantilevered bentwood base which also functioned as the armrests. The manufacturer, referred to this structure as both the 'frame' and 'spring'.

Aalto's designs are often defined by its adaptability which meant that many different chairs could be produced from one basic model. Aalto could obtain this variation through different combinations of arms and legs, 'jouset' (springs) and 'kehät' (rings). [2] The armchair 402 represents an example of the possibilities that Aalto saw in the element of standardized products. Creating a basic principle that was possible to vary in many ways reflects Aalto's thoughts on standardized products: "A standardized object should not be a finished product but on the contrary be made so that man and

all the individual laws controlling him supplement its form.” [3] Armchair 402 was upholstered and with padding but with same bent wood frame that other armchairs had, like the low-backed cantilever armchair 31 from 1932.

The element of adding a textile to the chair’s design also represents an important element of Aalto’s interior design, in which also his wife Aino Aalto (1894-1949) also had a central role. For Alvar and Aino Aalto textiles “were a substitute for living nature, for trees flowers and grass, the presence of which people need in interiors.” [4] The textile seat and back together with the wood and the soft undulating shapes of armchair 402 visualizes the importance of nature as a source of inspiration in Aalto’s oeuvre.

Therese Wiles, October 2021

[1] Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: A Life’s Work - Architecture, Design and Art*. (Helsinki: Otava Publ, 1994) p. 257.

[2] Alvar Aalto Museum <https://www.alvaraalto.fi/en/work/armchair-400/> [accessed 10 October 2021]

[3] Alvar Aalto “Rationalismen och människan” (Rationalism and Man) lecture at the annual meeting of the Swedish Crafts Association, May 9, 1935. in *Alvar Aalto: Furniture*, Juhani Pallasmaa ed. (Espoo; Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1984) p. 117.

[4] Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: A Life’s Work - Architecture, Design and Art*. (Helsinki: Otava Publ, 1994) p. 270.

Further Reading

Louna Lahti. *Alvar Aalto, 1889-1976: Paradise For the Man in the Street* (Köln: Taschen, 2019).

Kaarina Mikonranta. “Alvar Aalto - Master of Variation” in Pirkko Tuukkanen ed. *Alvar Aalto: Designer* (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto Foundation, Alvar Aalto Museum, 2002).

William C Miller, "Furniture, Painting, and Applied Designs: Alvar Aalto's Search for Architectural Form." *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 6 (1987), 6-25.

Juhanni Pallasmaa, ed. *Alvar Aalto: Furniture* (Espoo; Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1984).

Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: A Life’s Work - Architecture, Design and Art*. (Helsinki: Otava Publ, 1994).

Pirkko Tuukkanen, ed. *Alvar Aalto: Designer* (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto Foundation, Alvar Aalto Museum, 2002).
