



Armchair 41 “Paimio”

Alvar Aalto

Not on display

Title/Description: Armchair 41 “Paimio”

Artist/Maker: Alvar Aalto

Born: 1930 - 1930

Object Type: Chair, Furniture

Materials: Plywood, Birch

Technique: Bent, Laminated

Measurements: h. 655 x w. 860 x d. 610 mm

Accession Number: 31517

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The Paimio chair designed by the architect and designer Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) in 1931-32 is perhaps one of Aalto's most famous designs for a reclining chair. The framework is constructed from two laminated birch sides bent into a closed curve which forms arms, legs and floor runners. Attached to these two sides is the seat moulded from a single sheet of plywood which is fixed at four points. This created a seat that appeared to float but also gave it elasticity. It was a way of making a wooden chair "soft". [1]

The shape of the chair was the result of a series of experiments at the end of the 1920s in which Aalto made laminated wood studies, almost like abstract sculptures with three dimensional qualities. When Aalto referred to his bentwood furniture, he spoke of a wish to learn "the language of wood fibres." [2]

A source of inspiration for the shape was the central Finnish landscape with its sweeping curves. Another source of inspiration can be traced to Aalto's travels in Europe during the 1920s where he had seen the tubular steel furniture that designers at the Bauhaus school and Le Corbusier had developed. However, the Paimio chair can also be seen as a protest towards the cold properties of tubular steel furniture. Wood was closer to Aalto both emotionally and aesthetically. Aalto believed that the reflectivity and conductivity were some of the disadvantages of metal, while wood was a natural material with traditional associations. [3]

Additionally economic factors can also be seen as a contributor in the creation of Aalto's furniture. Wood was Finland's most important raw material, one that was easy to access and in ample supply. The Paimio chair represents a stylistic transition in shape, materiality and in its standardized production method.

Alvar Aalto's furniture was almost without exception rarely the result of professional design but was designed as part of architectural projects. The Paimio chair was designed as part of Aalto's complete design for Paimio Sanatorium, 1928-1933. The Sanatorium was the first new building to be fully furnished by Aalto - together with his wife Aino Aalto (1894-1949). Aalto planned all the details like washbasins, cabinets, bathroom shelves, door handles, lighting, colour schemes and furniture.

From the layout to the designs of furniture and fittings, the attention to the patients' physical and psychological well-being and recovery was the force of the design. **Thanks to the wood, the Paimio chair was not only warm to touch, but hygienic, easy to clean and light to lift. Aalto stated that the angle of the backrest was designed to ease patients' breathing.** [4]

The chair is also an example of Aalto's first international success, as one of the objects that was presented in an exhibition at London's Fortnum and Mason department store in November 1933. The "Wood Only" exhibition was organised in collaboration with *The Architectural Review*, initiated by the critic P. Morton Shand (1898-1960). [5]

Therese Wiles, September 2021

[1] Göran Schildt, "The Decisive Years" in *Alvar Aalto: Furniture*, Juhani Pallasmaa ed. (Espoo; Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1984) p. 75.

[2] Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: A Life's Work - Architecture, Design and Art*, (Helsinki: Otava Publ, 1994) p. 255.

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

[4] Louna Lahti, *Alvar Aalto, 1889-1976: Paradise For the Man in the Street* (Köln: Taschen, 2019), p. 25.

[5] Kaarina Mikonranta "Alvar Aalto - Master of Variation" in Pirkko Tuukkanen ed. *Alvar Aalto: Designer* (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto Foundation, Alvar Aalto Museum, 2002) p. 79.

Further Reading

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

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