



Armchair (Artek no. 403, Aalto no. 51)

Alvar Aalto

Not on display

Title/Description: Armchair (Artek no. 403, Aalto no. 51)

Artist/Maker: Alvar Aalto

Object Type: Chair, Furniture

Materials: Birch, Plywood

Measurements: h. 770 x w. 535 x d. 670 mm

Accession Number: 31518

Production Place: Oy Huonekalu-ja Rakennustyötehdas Ab

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Credit Line: Bequeathed by Lady Sainsbury, 2014

Armchair 403 also known as Hallway chair was designed by the architect and designer Alvar Aalto (1898-1976) in 1932 and is a lightweight wooden chair with armrests. The construction is based on a moulded plywood seat in one piece that is fixed on to the frame which is in solid wood and creates the back, legs, and armrests of the chair. The armrests feature finger-joining details which accentuates the properties of the wood and gives the chairs an element of handicraft although these chairs largely were the result of a standardized and industrialized process.

Aalto saw standardization as a possibility for variation which he could give the basic shape of the chairs variation by adding different treatment to the elements like paint or stain. 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." [1] The possibility of developing the production method of wooden furniture was important to Aalto and can be seen as a reaction towards the popular tubular steel furniture developed by his peers during the 1920s and 1930s in Europe which Aalto experienced too cold and hard. 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. [2] 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, a material that was easy to access and in ample supply.

The Hallway chair 403 was designed for the Paimio Sanatorium 1928-1933. Alvar Aalto's furniture was almost without exception rarely the result of professional design but was designed as part of architectural projects just as A. Lawrence Kocher sums it up in 1938: "The creation of new furniture was implicit in the development of a new architecture. The most obvious relationship lay in the formal elements. Straight lines, smooth and sanitary surfaces, simple proportions and pure color were as applicable to the chairs and tables within a house as to the structure by which the house itself was formed." [3] In this case the result was the Hallway chair 403 that was perfect for spaces like waiting rooms. The chair was lightweight which made it easy to move around, had smooth surfaces that was easy to clean, and the wood gave the furniture a visual and a tactile warmth. The Hallway chair 403 represents a humanistic approach to design of furniture in a space for patients to convalesce.

Therese Wiles, July 2022

[1] 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.

[2] 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.

[3] A. Lawrence Kocher "Furniture" in *Aalto: Architecture and Furniture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938). p. 13.

Further Reading

Breines, Simon, A. Lawrence Kocher, and Museum of Modern Art. *Aalto: Architecture and Furniture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1938).

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

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.

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

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