

THE INFLUENCES OF NATIONAL IDENTITY  
ON TWENTIETH CENTURY  
FINNISH FURNITURE DESIGN.

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THE INFLUENCES OF NATIONAL IDENTITY ON TWENTIETH CENTURY  
FINNISH FURNITURE DESIGN

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## CONTENTS

1. LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	I-II
2. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	III
3. SYNOPSIS.....	IV
4. INTRODUCTION.....	V-VI
5. PART ONE.....	1
6. PART TWO.....	12
7. PART THREE.....	23
8. CONCLUSION.....	32
9. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	34



# LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. North Karelian sofa-bed; 19th century.  
(Pirrako, Slavo, Helsinki, 1978)
2. Karelian wall-chest; 19th century.  
(Pirrako, Slavo, Helsinki, 1978)
3. Karelian 'milk-souring cupboard'; 19th century.  
(Pirrako, Slavo, Helsinki, 1978)
4. East Karelian kitchen interior; 19th century,  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1979)
5. Karelian two-seater rocking chair; 19th century.  
(Pirrako, Slavo, Helsinki, 1978)
6. Furniture designs by Yrjö Blumstedt, 1898;  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1979)
7. Iris room, Paris Exposition 1900;  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1979)
8. 'Koti'-chair, 1897; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)
9. Hvittrask chair, 1902; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)
10. Suvi-Merijoki chair, 1902-1903; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)
11. Chair for Keirners library, 1907; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)
12. 'The black villa' chair, 1908; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)
13. Chair for Hans Saarinen, 1908; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)
14. Watercolour for interior at Hvittrask, 1901; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)
15. Chair for Hvittrask dining room, 1918; Saarinen.  
(Scand. Mod., 1982)
16. and 17. 'Blue suite' chairs and table, 1929.  
(Space Place, 1989)
18. Saarinen house round table and fluted back side chairs,  
1930. (Space Place)
19. Arm chairs and table from Saarinen house living room,  
Cranbrook, 1930. (Space Place, 1989)
20. Paimio sanatorium armchair, no. 41. Aalto.  
(Artek cat.)

21. Chair nr.44.Aalto  
(Artek cat.).
22. Bent laminated plywood chair,nr.42.Aalto.  
(Artek cat.)
23. Reclining chair with woven canvas cover,nr.43.Aalto.  
(Artek cat.)
24. Reclining chair,nr.417.Aalto.  
(Artek cat.)
25. Bed with black and white cover,nr.416.Aalto.  
(Artek cat.)
26. Sauna stools,nr.656.Aalto.  
(Artek cat.)
27. Fan leg stool,nr. x 601.Aalto.  
(Artek cat.)
28. Bent frame chair,nr.41B.Aalto.  
(Artek cat.)
29. Stacking stool.1935,nr.67.Aalto.  
(Artek cat.)
30. Domus chair,Ilmari Tapiovaara.  
(Scand.Mod.,1982)
31. Sauna stool,1952,Antti Nurmesni.
32. Chair for Museum of Applied Arts Cafe,1988.Stefan  
Lindfors.

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### SYNOPSIS

Part one of the thesis will examine the roots of Finnish national identity and show how socio-geographic and historical factors are responsible for the development of a design ethos. This will be demonstrated by discussing the effects of environmental and social factors on the Finnish temperament and showing how national characteristics have been translated into the creation of environments and objects

The second part of the thesis deals with the period from 1900 to the beginning of World War Two and looks at how different generations have interpreted their nationality and how this has influenced Finnish furniture design. This is achieved by examining the Karelian revival and the Finnish Jugend, which were both overtly national in their nature and which borrowed from the external forms of Finnish culture to express their nationalism, and comparing them to the Finnish Functionalists, who used as their impulse the utilitarian principles of the Finnish culture. The goal is to demonstrate how both these movements were strongly influenced by their national identity, although that identity exerted itself in different ways; the Jugend and Karelian movements expressed national emotions while the Functionalists reflected national principles, both however were manifestations of national identity.

Part three covers the period from World War Two until the present and deals with the crisis of identity in Finnish design prompted by the advent of industrial design. It also looks at the standpoints of contemporary design and the effects the new situation has had on furniture. This is achieved by examining the effects that industrial design has had on the industrial arts and how the crafts tradition has reacted to the changing face of industry..



## INTRODUCTION

Coming to an agreement on the meaning of the term national identity is not as easy as it first appears. It is at its best an ambiguous term, meaning different things to different people. How then does one define a country's national identity? Is it how they perceive themselves, or is it how others perceive them to be. For the purposes of this thesis the term 'nation' refers to an entity, social, cultural and political to which a group of people can relate and identify with on terms of equal understanding; national identity is thus defined as the result of the fusing of a nation's various characteristics into an identifiable whole. Every person is a product of their environment, they are a product of their society and culture, which is in turn a product of a geographical and political unit. If a person is a product of their environment, then any object they create is also a product of that environment and to this extent the influences of national identity on the creation of objects is confirmed. Design then, whether this is conscious or not, must reflect the culture from which it has originated. The extent to which the culture and its values are reflected in the object depends largely on the stimuli that the designer chooses to accept. Thus the material expression of national identity is not a constant and varies with the social and political changes in a country's history and the way in which history is mapped by objects is verified.

The object of this thesis has been to trace the extent to which identifiable elements of national identity have affected Finnish furniture design. It has been interesting to note the different ways in which the same nationality can affect the creative process, the way in which certain periods of history have chosen



different elements of Finland's culture as a basis for expression. By first examining aspects of the Finnish national identity and their origins it has been possible to demonstrate how that identity has been responsible for the development of a design philosophy, how the values of the culture have clearly been incorporated into the creation of objects. Furniture holds a special place in Finnish design history, due both to the importance of the interior in Finnish culture and the ability of furniture design to act as a vehicle for the national principles of rationalism and humanism. Furniture, more so than any of the other industrial arts, clearly reflects the application of these principles of democratic idealism.

It has also been my aim to show how solutions, developed by previous generations, can have as much relevance today as they did in the past. The quality of solutions should be the determining factor, not their novelty, replacing old ideas with new ideas for the sake of progress is a futile exercise. Our goal should be an evolution of ideas, a process of developing and building on previous learning, maintaining the essential and intelligent solutions from our past to encourage the creation of a system of ideational inheritance. Lessons learnt in the past should be applied to the present, we must understand, as the Finnish have, the importance of incorporating tradition within contemporary concerns; therein lies the solution for a 'movement towards sanity in design'.

PART ONE: THE ROOTS OF FINNISH NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF A DESIGN ETHOS.

Until as recently as the end of the nineteenth century, Finland was a country almost completely isolated from the rest of Europe both culturally and physically. Due to its harsh climate and isolated geographical position, Finland developed a culture quite distinct from other European countries. Even its Scandinavian sister countries, Sweden and Denmark, although separate in their identity from continental Europe, nevertheless fostered a court culture akin to those in the rest of Europe and were influenced to a certain extent by cultural developments in the royal courts. Their design and culture evolved differently under the influence of the elitist cultural movements of Europe. Finland, on the other hand, never had a court culture and continental influence was slight during the developing stages of Finnish design. Foreign influences took time to be filtered through poverty and distance until they adapted to the harsh northern conditions of Finland. These unique conditions for the development of a separate identity prevailed in Finland for centuries, especially in the wild northern and eastern regions of the country which were to provide the inspiration for much Finnish design later on. The main western, if it could be called western, influence on Finland during the 18th and 19th centuries was that exerted by Sweden. Sweden's influence was strong only in southern Finland however, and a situation existed somewhat similar to that in Ireland at the same period. Much of the western Finnish population spoke Swedish and had adopted Swedish culture, but the harsh and almost eternally cold but beautiful regions of the east such as Karelia were almost untouched by western influence.

'Swedes we are not, Russians we can never become, so let us be Fins' (Mus.Fin.Arch,1984,p61). Finland was, and also is to this day although to a lesser extent, an entity politically and culturally between east and west. It has been said of Finland: 'It is a country that lies between east and west but somewhat to the north' (Gaynor,1984,p43). This situation has resulted in Finnish design asserting its independence from the other Scandinavian countries. Finland is still very much a Scandinavian country, but it is a trait of those countries that although they share many cultural similarities, they still maintain their individual identities. The extent to which Finland is a culture between cultures can be felt to this day, in fact contemporary Finnish designers can be heard speaking of the effects of 'europeanization' on modern Finnish design (FFF,1989,P12). Due to this cultural isolation and perhaps even under-development, the roots of all identifiably Finnish culture came from the folk tradition. And this folk tradition was allowed to develop unhindered, to evolve and adjust amidst the harsh realities of life in a near arctic environment. A populist Folk culture arose with its own architecture, textiles, ceramics and furnishings, suited ideally to the temperament and environment of the Finnish people. Self-sufficiency became the way of life, with all the objects of the populist culture being created by the people and for the people. The architecture and furnishings of the folk tradition were functional and rational but above all human and this is the legacy that Finnish design has inherited.

The Fins pride themselves on their unique relationship with nature. It is their own claim that they have an understanding of nature unparalleled in Europe. The Finnish people like to compare



their understanding of nature to that of the Japanese. This understanding of nature has grown from a need to harmonize with nature in order to survive. In a country that endures below zero temperatures for most of the year it was necessary for the people to understand and come to terms with their surroundings rather than battle with them. The impact that changes of season have had on the Finnish people helps to explain the fixation that has led to the use of natural materials and organic forms wherever possible. This special relationship with nature is evident in almost all Finnish furniture design from the folk craft tradition through to Finnish adaptations of foreign art and design movements of the 20th century, such as the Art Nouveau or Jugendstil, as it was known in Scandinavia.

The love and understanding of the nature of wood and the rational use of that material evident in Karelian peasant furniture, led the master of Finnish furniture design, Alvar Aalto, to comment: 'One would have to search to find an affinity to nature more logical in its beauty.' (Mus.Fin.Arch, 1984, p130). The Finnish people have learnt, using nature as their teacher, one of the most fundamental but least understood design principles, that form and function are two sides of the same concept, in good design neither should ever be an afterthought.

The influence of climate on Finnish design should not be underestimated, in fact it may be the single most important factor in the development of the humanist philosophy. Finland is on exactly the same latitude as Alaska. The environment, although dramatically beautiful, is harsh, and this has resulted in the development of a culture which places heavy emphasis on creating a human environment; functional yet constantly aware of the human

aesthetic need. The long hard winters and short summers have nurtured an interest in the home and furnishings unparalleled elsewhere in Europe, 'During certain periods this interest has almost developed into a cult'(Scand.Mod.1982,p29). The early 20th century Finnish architects, such as Gallen Kalela and Eliel Saarinen, who held as their ideal the complete harmonization of interiors and exteriors, were by no means covering new ground. The peasant people of Karelia had been doing this for centuries. So when, at the turn of the century, Kalela and Saarinen began to build modern buildings on the principle of the unified environment, they were not starting from scratch. 'Country people made no distinction between crafts and design, interiors were all of a piece and everything worked.'(Gaynor,1984,p61) They had good teachers in the peasant people of Karelia. In fact traditional rural Finnish architecture is ahead of many of us in the west, certainly as regards energy efficiency. For centuries the rural Finnish people have been using a form of double glazing in their homes. Examples of ingenuity exist in keeping out the cold that have been passed down through generations; for example the practice of growing wild lichens on the insides of windowsills to prevent drafts is still in evidence today, a perfect example of a practical and efficient but very aesthetically pleasing solution. The whole Finnish philosophy of interiors can be seen to stem directly from the need to create their own environment amid a harsh and stark climate. Finland's climatic and environmental extremes have produced the ethos by which every Fin lives and can be seen to have led to the enormous importance attributed by the Finnish people to interiors and furnishings. The significance attached to furnishings can be seen in some of the roles the chair, for example, has played in Finnish society. In 18th and 19th century

rural Finland a groom would carefully make a carved back wedding chair for his bride as a symbol of his love and respect for her. To save space much traditional Finnish furniture was built in the form of wall benches and window chests; this resulted in special significance being placed on the free standing chair, since it became a place of honour for the master of the house or a special guest. Another socially and culturally important Finnish interior is the sauna. The sauna is a Finnish invention, in use in the country for over two thousand years. All of Finland's great furniture designers, past and present, have at some stage designed their own saunas and sauna furnishings. Finnish sauna furnishings exhibit some of the best traits of functionalism, rationalism and humanism evident in Finnish furniture design; and there are enough saunas to furnish, there is one sauna for every four people in Finland. The significance attached to the sauna and the way architects and designers approach them today can tell us a great deal about the Finnish people and the qualities they aspire to. In 19th century rural Finland the sauna was still the room where babies were born (it was the most hygienic, with heat and access to water), the first living quarters while the main house was being built, the laundry and workhouse, the smokehouse for drying meat, the place for looking after the sick, and of course in its primary role, the bathhouse. The sauna is a creation befitting the Finnish temperament, a multi-functional utility aimed at improving the quality of life. To these ends its furnishings and layout represent the national spirit of functionalism and humanism. As Finnish architect Hans Slangus has said, the sauna 'stands for the purification of mind and body that are part of the bathing experience, the goal is to bare one's soul as well as body.' (Gaynor, 1984, p121).



Although the Finnish people had a strong identity and culture of their own, Finland had not been free of outside interference since the 12th century. Finland and Sweden had formed one kingdom for six hundred years up until 1809, with Sweden as the dominant partner exerting her own strong cultural influences on the Finnish people, particularly in the west and south of the country. The east of the country was relatively independent, if not politically then culturally. Finns shared equal rights with Swedes, although Swedish was the language of official business. It was only after the national revival of the 19th and 20th centuries that Finnish regained the upper hand as the nations language. However 1809 saw the end of Sweden's control of Finland when a war between Sweden and Russia left the country as a Russian grand duchy with limited political autonomy. Over the next 150 years Finland was to become a political, cultural and ideological battleground between east and west. The first decade of this century was a crucial period in Finnish history, this decade saw the birth of the Finnish cultural movement, an increased awareness of identity and a pride in Finnish national history. Increasing Russian oppression, resulting in the removal of self rule in 1899 and the introduction of a program of Russianization, only served to strengthen the movement for independence. The independence movement was led by writers, musicians, artists, architects and designers, who found a new lease of life and gathered their inspiration from popular tradition and national character. Architects and designers like Brummer, Saarinen and Lindgren devoted all their energies towards creating a distinct national design. The mobilizing of design and architecture gave expression to the Finnish national heritage and resulted in the Finnish entrance to the Paris exposition of 1900. The political and cultural importance of this event was immense. Finland's entry

literally took the exposition by surprise and was the stand that aroused most interest among the spectators and judges. Its pavilion, designed by Gesellius, Lindgren and Saarinen, had such an impact that suddenly Finland became a current topic among European cultural circles. The pavilion achieved a brilliant modernity yet:

' The great granite doorway, the ornamentation with bears squirrels and pine cones, and a tower whose form is said to have been taken from that of Finnish rural church towers conferred on it a distinct national character.' (Scand.Mod., 1982, p65)

The interior was no less spectacular: the 'Iris room' decorated in the Karelian style, with light, mostly undecorated birch wood furniture by Arttu Brunner and Eliel Saarinen was unlike anything else at the exposition. It can safely be said that this was the beginning of the international recognition that Finland was to receive. But this also meant that design was inextricably linked in the Finnish mind to national pride and national self-determination. Design became an expression of nationalism and the Paris exposition became a political gesture.

The October Revolution in Russia in 1917 gave the Fins the chance they had been waiting for and they declared themselves an independent Republic. The revolutionary government in Russia accepted the Finnish move but maintained a contingent of Russian troops in the country. However the Russians refused to cede the eastern part of Karelia to Finland. The Karelian region had formed the basis of Finland's cultural revolution and spawned the national romantic or Karelian movement. The Russians' refusal to allow the integration of this territory into the Finnish Republic has left a bitter feeling amongst many of the Finnish people. Eastern Karelia is now a Soviet Republic, but the present Soviet situation may

create an interesting situation in the near future. A Karelian revival in the 1990's is no longer an impossibility.

The role that design has played in the national struggle explains the high status and respect that designers and craftsmen have maintained in Finland. Design became the expression of national identity in a material form, but more than that, because its roots were in the popular tradition, it also came to be seen as the expression of the socially just society. The resulting role of designers and craftsmen as keepers of the nation's spirit, along with the rational nature of the Finnish crafts tradition, ensured the maintenance and continuity of the crafts after industrialization. Unlike other European countries, there was no industrial revolution in Finland, rather there was an industrial evolution. Industry was not seen as a means of supplanting the crafts tradition; a special relationship developed, due both to the work of craft and design organizations and to the naturally utilitarian nature of the Finnish craft tradition. Finnish design groups such as the Friends of Finnish Handicraft (founded in 1879) and the Finnish Society of Crafts and Design and the newly established College of Applied Arts in Helsinki, worked hard to create an important connection between crafts and industry. They succeeded where groups in other countries had failed due to the strength that the crafts and design had attained during the cultural revolution. They also succeeded in persuading industrialists that good design meant better sales. Industry in Finland did not compete with the craft tradition. The craft tradition was able to harmonize with the new rationalism and thus maintain a strong element of humanism in industrialization. It is also an ability of the Finnish people, inherited through centuries of battling with foreign cultures, to adopt and adapt outside



influences to an existing culture. This faculty, developed as a means of self-preservation, has resulted in the Fins lacking the self-destructive nature of other European countries. They were able to learn from their past that humanism had to be a part of utilitarianism, that visual and tactile aesthetics can serve a function and therefore need not be divorced from functionalism. 'Art into industry,' became the motto of Finnish craftsmen and designers, and this is precisely what happened; the crafts of glass, textiles, ceramics and furniture became industrial arts. Industry became a tool to be used by craftsmen and designers, a symbiotic relationship developed, resulting in more workers being employed in furniture workshops in Finland than in any other Scandinavian country in the 1920's (Sparke, 1986, pp35-37)). Ultimately what happened in Finland was the fusing of a utilitarian peasant culture with industrial efficiency and socially oriented functionalism. Unlike the English arts and crafts movement for example, the Finnish crafts did not dismiss industry as an ogre, irreconcilable with tradition. Although there have been dissensions between industry and the crafts in Finland, particularly in the 1950's, the adaptation of the crafts into an industrial framework was seen as an extension of traditional or inherited principles. In the simplest terms, Finland did not discard its past, but learnt from it.

This brings us to one of the main elements in 20th century Finnish design: the 'new - old' folk tradition, the belief that a dynamic interaction between past and present will produce works of art and design that are suffused with the spirit of the people. This belief has nurtured a national pride in tradition and a respect for quality craftsmanship in the Finnish people. There is a respect for the past in Finland that has not been eroded by the

blind lurchings of progress. There is a belief that discarding the past is like discarding centuries of learning. It is not romanticism, it is realism, it is impossible to understand where you are going if you do not understand where you have come from. This also lends a certain stability to Finnish design work, an identifiable element - perhaps the spirit of the people. Although some contemporary Finnish designers say they feel a need to escape from the strong traditions the Finnish industrial arts have imposed, none would promote a faceless international design, and nearly all believe in the need to incorporate tradition within contemporary concerns. This philosophy shared by the other Scandinavian countries, in particular Norway, is best summed up by a quote from the Norwegian painter Gerhard Munthe:

'Tradition is not what many people believe it to be - ancient romance or history. The first condition demanded of a nation by tradition is that it can be absorbed by it and tradition therefore, depends largely upon the developing power of the nation itself.' (The Studio, vol. 8, pp 221-23)

It becomes apparent that Finnish design, particularly its interiors and furniture, is inextricably linked with the country's geography, climate and historical development, in fact with the nation's identity. The historical, social and political importance of craftsmen and designers has resulted in the high status that the industrial arts enjoy to this day. But inherited respect alone would probably not be enough to sustain a design tradition. What has ensured the maintenance of the Finnish tradition is its adaptability. Any rigid structure or system is bound to fail eventually; it is the country's ability to adapt foreign movements and culture to Finnish society, whilst retaining certain guiding principles or tenets, that has ensured its survival. Only the vital aspects of foreign cultures have thus been adopted, and the design

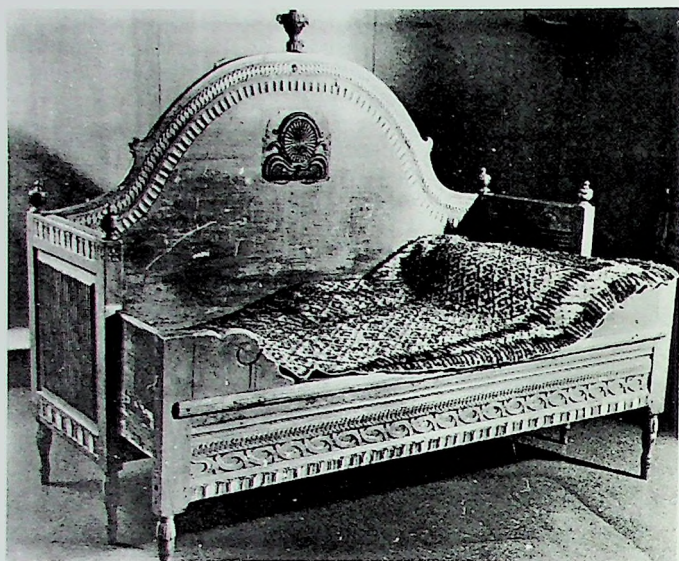
remains distinctively Finnish as the foreign elements are reconciled with Finnish design principles. A series of embodied design principles, humanism, functionalism and rationalism, alongside what has been called 'the unrestrained and exuberant joy of creation', (Scan.Mod, 1982, p255) have become a style.



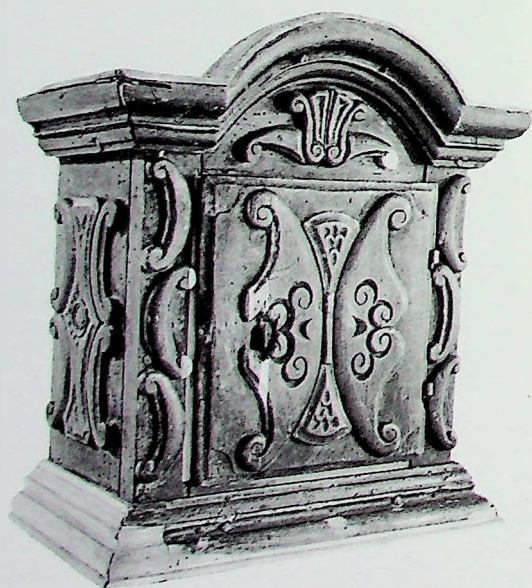
## PART TWO: FROM NATIONAL ROMANTICISM TO A NATIONAL INTERNATIONAL STYLE

As has been seen, at the beginning of the 20th century Finland was a country seething with unrest, struggling for political and cultural independence against Russian domination. But the turn of the century also saw new intellectual and artistic stirrings and a newfound self assertiveness in social and political spheres. Through their political struggle the Finnish people had gained a new view of their history and a new view of the future. This newfound spiritual independence manifested itself in the Karelian movement which had its roots in the end of the previous century. The arts and crafts united together and sought their inspiration from what was considered the pure Finnish culture of the Finno-Ugric peasants. The heroic Finnish epic the 'Kalevala' was committed to writing for the first time and was the inspiration for symphonies, tapestries, literature and paintings. The new union of all the arts in Finland was seen as an expression of nationalism, and in an effort to express their national identity they raised Finnish creativity to a new level.

For Finnish furniture designers there was a rich treasure in Karelian furniture. These rational, functional, yet beautifully decorated pieces were an inspiration for designers such as Gallen Kalela, Eliel Saarinen and Yrjö Blomstedt. Good examples of the ingenuity and aesthetics of Karelian peasant furniture can be found in the sofa-beds popular in northern Karelia dating from around the 18th century (fig.1). During the cold winters it was often

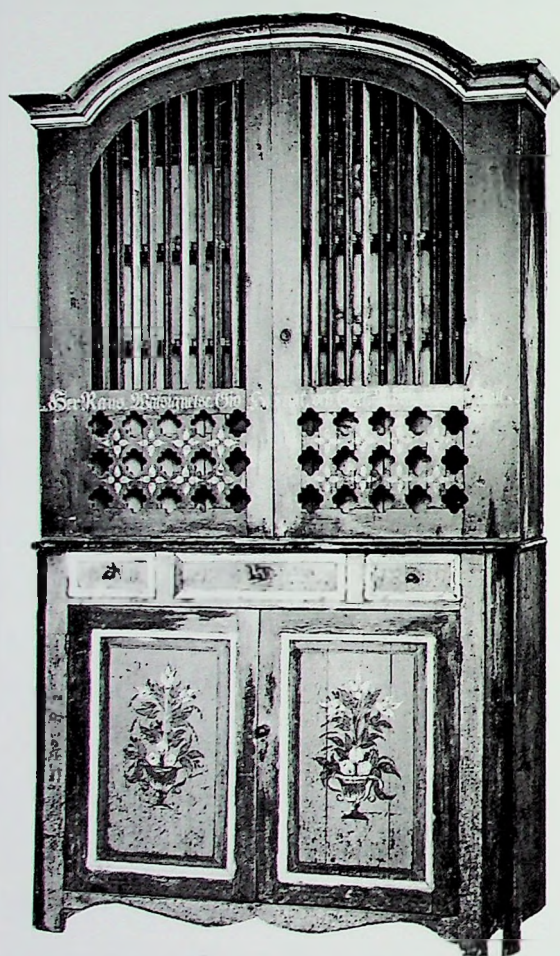


1. North Karelian sofa-bed; 19th century.  
(Pirrako, Slavo, Helsinki, 1978)



2. Karelian wall-chest; 19th century.  
(Pirrako, Slavo, Helsinki, 1978)





3. Karelian 'milk-souring cupboard'; 19th century.  
(Pirrako, Slavo, Helsinki, 1978)



preferable to sleep in the kitchen, where the tile stove kept the room warm throughout the night, as a result the kitchen usually contained a sofa bed. The sofa-bed had relatively high sides and a very high and usually decorated back piece, only the front part was left open. The front section, which was pushed in during the day to save space, was often beautifully carved with sometimes quite complicated geometric patterns, similar to those on the ryijy rugs. The sofa-beds, which were always painted, could also be found in the guestrooms and sometimes in the living quarters. The use of natural motifs was popular in Karelian furniture, stylized representations of flora were sometimes painted on panels or introduced into carved patterns. The 'milk-souring cupboard' (fig.3) is an example of this, the two front panels are decorated with painted floral arrangements and part of the 'milk ventilation system' is in the form of flower shaped vents. The top part of the cupboard consists of two doors with vertical slats and the flower shaped ventilation grill, the purposes of which were to allow the circulation of air needed for the souring process. The use of geometrically stylized motifs and patterning can also be seen on the two-seater rocking chair and the wall-chest (figs.2 and 5). The helmet dome shape used in the front and side carvings of the rocking chair was a popular Karelian motif and was later borrowed by Karelian revivalists such as Saarinen, who used it as the basis of his 'Koti' chair in 1897 (fig.8). The use of ready made shapes from nature was sometimes employed in Karelian furniture, the two seater rocking chair, for example, used two halves of a section from a tree-trunk as its base.

'The Karelian furniture maker's art, which, because of the lack of technical aids, used parts ready made by nature, achieved at its best a truly brilliant richness of forms and a surprising virtuosity in putting together nature's own shapes into an elegant and practical



4. East Karelian kitchen interior; 19th century,  
(Mus. Fin. Arch, 1979)



5. Karelian two-seater rocking chair; 19th century.  
(Pirrako, Slavo, Helsinki, 1978)

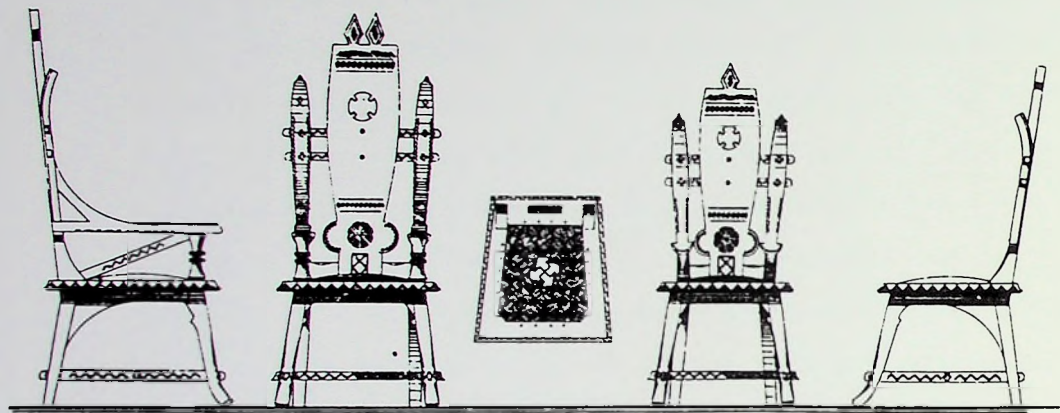
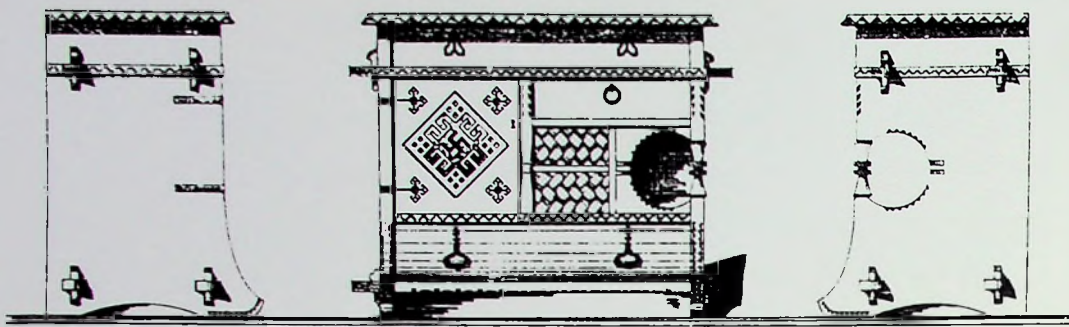


totality.' (Alvar Aalto, ARCHITECTURE IN KARELIA, UUSI SUOMI, 1941).

In 1893 the publication of a study of Karelian buildings and decorative motifs (Karjalaisia rakennuskia ja koristemnoteja), by Finnish architects Blomstedt and Sucksdorf, aroused much interest among their contemporaries such as Gallen Kalela and Eliel Saarinen. The book, which has been called an 'ethnographical study with Kalevala-romantic overtones' (Mus.Fin.Arch.Abacus, 1979p, 77) helped to consolidate the growing interest in Karelian architecture among Finnish designers and architects. Yrjo Blomstedt's furniture of this period made liberal use of Karelian architectural motifs in its design. Examples of Blomstedt's furniture designs from 1898 (fig.6) are elaborate, heavily decorated, yet quite delicate pieces. The decoration used is not purely architectural in its origin, patterns taken from Finnish textiles are also evident, particularly in the front panel of the chest, the base of the chest is also reminiscent of the runners of a sleigh. The backrests on the chairs again include the use of the stylized flower motif evident in Karelian furniture.

Eliel Saarinen is probably one of the architect/furniture designers associated most readily with the movement. Certainly his work is amongst the best examples of the style. Saarinen was and remained a strong nationalist throughout his life. When, during the thirties, Finnish designers began to adopt functionalism as their national banner he was unable to accept their renunciation of romanticism so that national romanticism influenced his work until his death in 1950. Saarinen was responsible, amongst others, for the furniture in the Iris room at the Paris Exposition of 1900 (fig.7), which was an example of his belief in the unified environment. Other examples





6. Furniture designs by Yrjö Blumstedt, 1898;  
(Mus.Fin.Arch., 1979)



7. Iris room, Paris Exposition 1900;  
(Mus.Fin.Arch., 1979)

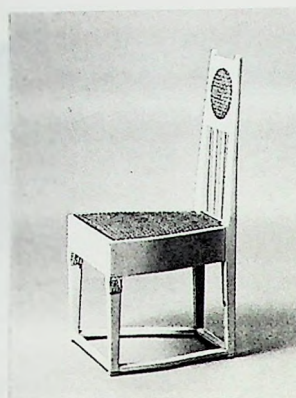
of his work in the Karelian revival style are to be found in some of the furniture of what was called the 'artist's paradise' of Hvittrask in eastern Finland. Hvittrask [white lake] was built by Arman Lindgren, Herman Gesellius and Saarinen as a residence / studio for themselves and their families. They built the entire house in the revival style using traditional ryijy [rya] rugs in the interior and Karelian architectural motifs both inside and outside. Saarinen designed much of the furniture for the Hvittrask interiors over a period of 15 years. He designed his first piece of furniture for the residence in 1902, a simple white high backed chair for his own bedroom (fig.9). The painting of furniture was clearly an influence from the vernacular Karelian furniture, which was often painted, as in the case of the northern Karelian sofa-bed. Saarinen's furniture from the first half of the decade, such as the Hvittrask piece and the 'Suur Merijoki' chair of 1903 (fig.10) are quite simple pieces in a distinctly vernacular style and contrast greatly with those of Blomstedt, although both drew their inspiration from the same source. Saarinen was never over zealous in his application of decoration, figure 14 shows a water colour by Saarinen for an interior at Hvittrask, each element in the interior has a decorative theme and the overall effect is one of an integration of patterns. The use of the black and white striping patterns, which can be seen on the chairs in this interior is an element which has been applied to much Finnish furniture and textiles, it appears again in the 1930's in Alvar Aalto's chair number 44 (fig.21) and bed number 417 (fig.25), and most probably draws its inspiration from the birch bark of the Finnish forests.

The influences of the Art Nouveau movement began to reach Finland through contact with Swedish designers towards the end of the 1890's and the two movements of Karelianism and Art Nouveau ran





8. 'Koti'-chair, 1897; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)



9. Hvittrask chair, 1902; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)



10. Suvi-Merijoki chair, 1902-1903; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)



11. Chair for Keirners library, 1907; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)

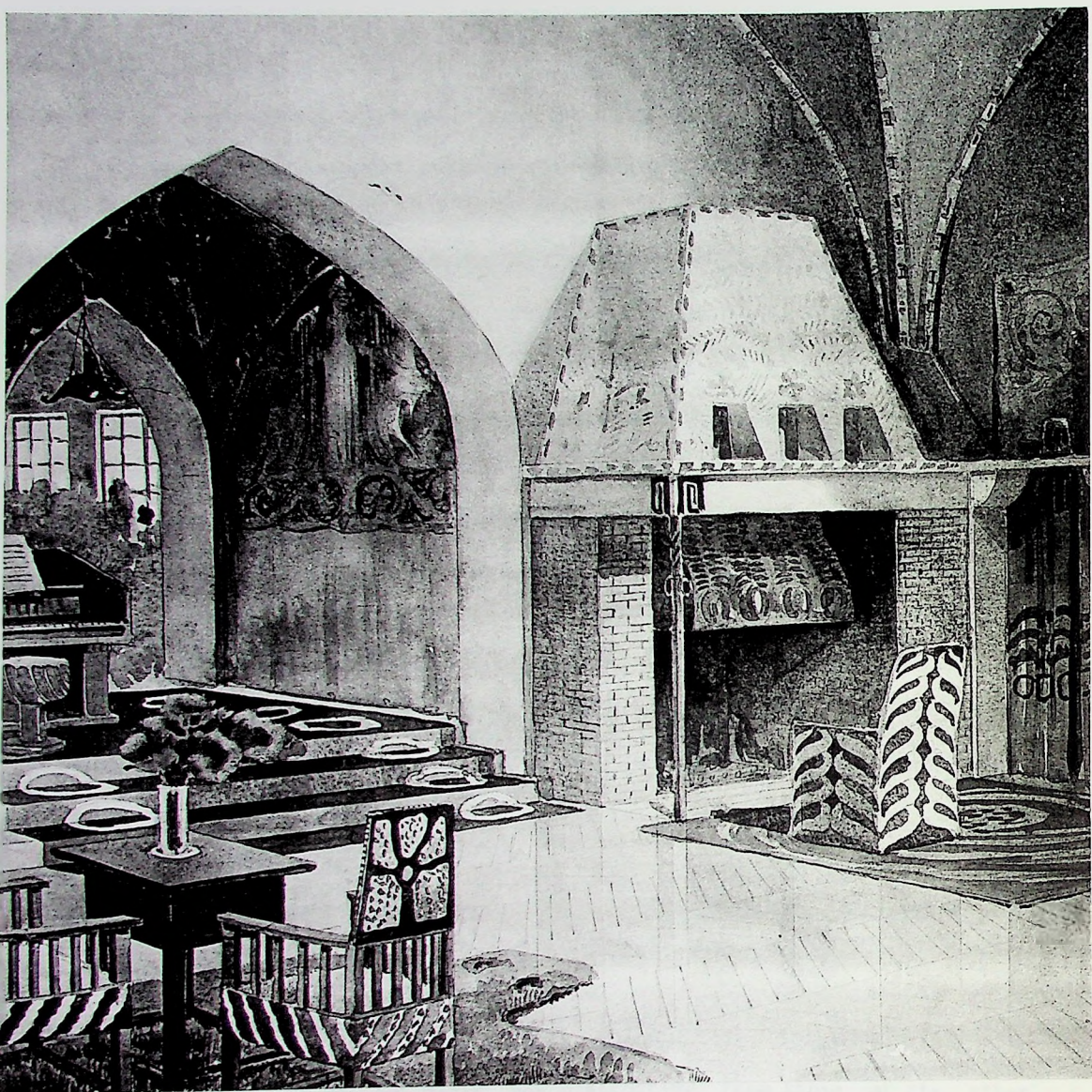


'The black villa' chair, 1908; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)



13. Chair for Hans Saarinen, 1908; Saarinen.  
(Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984)





14. Watercolour for interior at Hvittrask, 1901; Saarinen.  
(Mus, Fin, Arch, 1924)



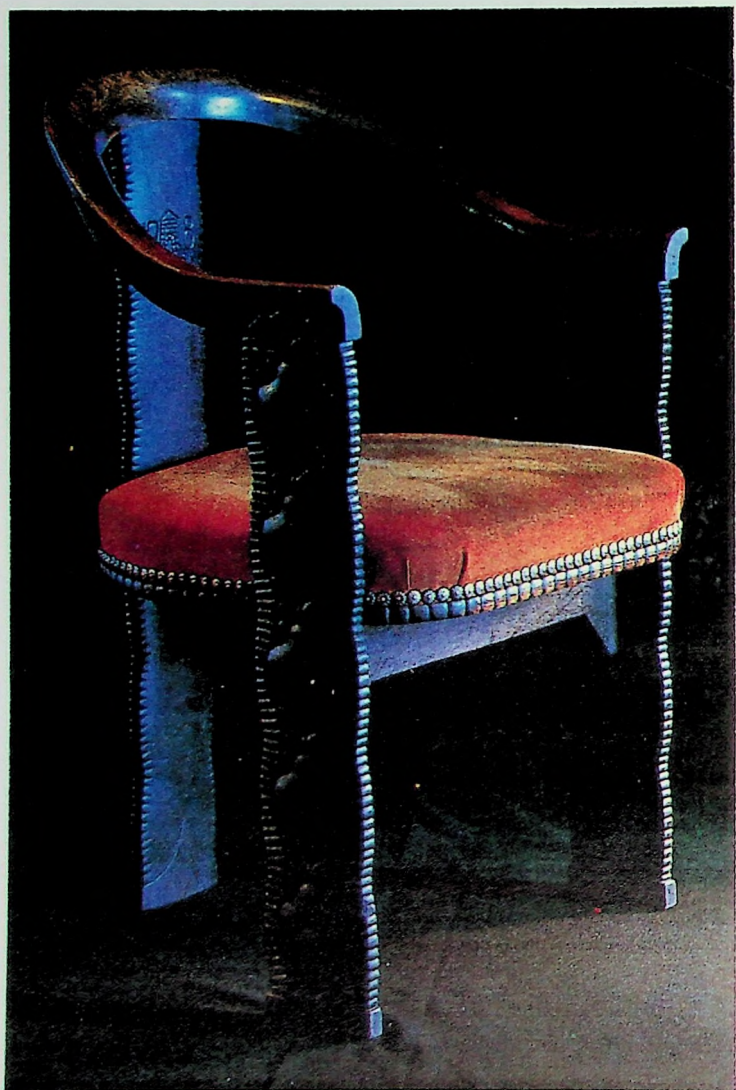
more or less concurrent to each other, or it might be more accurate to say they adopted each other. Of the Scandinavian countries Art Nouveau reached Sweden first where it became known as the *Jugendstil*. Finnish designers, such as Lindgren, Saarinen and Kalela, adopted the new style which soon became known as the Finnish *Jugend*, but they received it very much on their own terms. The Finnish *Jugend* was a joining of National Romanticism with Art Nouveau and there is a strong national element in the work it produced. It was a very easy step for a furniture designer to move from the Karelian to *Jugend* style as both were developments of National Romanticism and both prided themselves on their nationalism. But equally as important as its clearly national flavour, is the part the *Jugend* played in raising the status of the crafts. The new influence was joined with the awareness of traditional crafts that the Karelian revival had produced and under the influence of the *Jugendstil* the crafts attained the status of the other arts.

The principles of Art Nouveau were ideally suited to the Finnish temperament due to their combination of a passion for nature with a concern for aesthetic quality and national integrity. Finland's variation of the style was distinctive from those of the other Scandinavian countries. The Finnish adaptation was more geometrically stylized with an emphasis on abstract patterns that remained a hallmark of Finnish design well into the 20th century. Nature themes used in the work, Nordic flora and fauna, forests, snow, wildlife and wildflowers became symbols of the Finnish artistic and spiritual heritage. Eliel Saarinen's work again gives excellent examples of the Finnish *Jugend* style. One of the main influences of the *Jugendstil* was to refine Finnish furniture design. The Art Nouveau principle of aestheticism was applied to

furniture design and a move away from vernacular structure became evident. Saarinen's furniture became less heavy under the influence of the Jugend and he seems to have developed a particular fondness for the round backed chair (figs.11,12,13 ). The contrast between Saarinen's rather formal pieces of 1902-3 and the progressively stylised pieces such as the 1918 Hvittrask chair (fig.15) shows the influence the Jugend had on his work. The nature themes employed by the Jugend appealed to Saarinen and the side panels of the 1918 oak and leather Hvittrask chair reflect the use of the material used by creating a pattern of acorn shapes on the chair's side panels. Saarinen, like many other designers of his generation, found in the Jugend a wonderful medium for aesthetic and national expression. In fact Saarinen designed pieces in the Jugend style well into the thirties. Between 1928-30 Saarinen designed some beautiful furniture in the style for his home in Cranbrook in America, where he had moved from Hvittrask in 1925. The furniture exhibits the stylized geometric treatment and delicate colour schemes representative of the style, and has such a visual unity and timelessness that reproductions of his blue suite (figs.16,17) have recently been used to furnish the entrance area of Procter and Gamble's new headquarters in Cincinnati, constructed in 1982. However the Jugend style had actually reached the peak of its popularity by the 1900 Paris exposition and had almost completely disappeared by the beginning of the First World War. The Jugend played a brief, if fruitful role in Finnish design, National Romanticism however continued to exert its influence on Finnish design up until the thirties when economic conditions and changing social attitudes paved the way for the functionalists.

During the 1920's trends which had begun before World War One continued to be felt, social differences between groups became less





15. Chair for Hvittrask dining room, 1918; Saarinen.  
(Scand. Mod, 1982)



16. and 17. 'Blue suite' chairs and table, 1929.  
(Space Place, 1989)







18. Saarinen house round table and fluted back side chairs,  
1930. (Space Place)



19. Arm chairs and table from Saarinen house living room,  
Cranbrook, 1930. (Space Place, 1989)



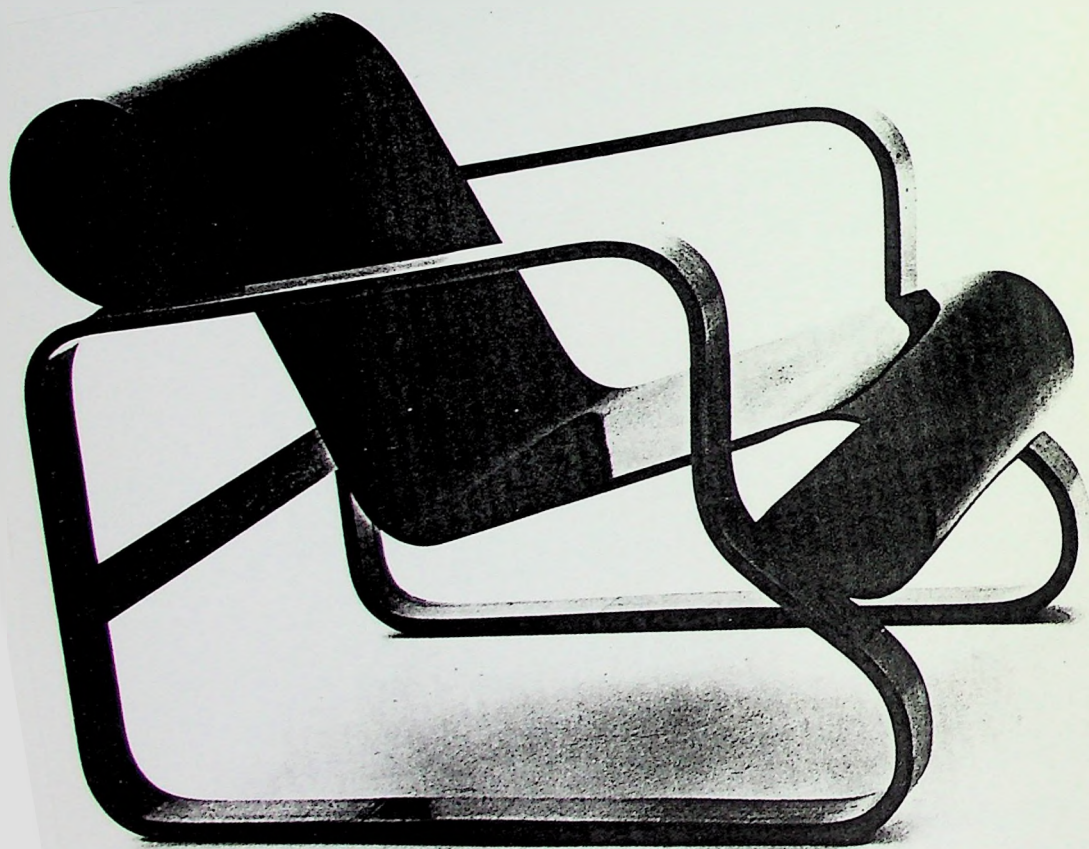
marked and scientific and technical innovation began to change the face of the world. A social awareness and increased industrialisation in Europe heralded the birth of Functionalism. In the Scandinavian countries, as elsewhere, the contrasts between old and new became more pronounced as the effects of modernisation, communications, and advanced methods of technological innovation began to take hold. In Scandinavia the cause of the Functionalists in Europe was answered by the publication of Swedish critic Gregor Paulson's book 'VACKRARE VARDAGSVARE ', (more beautiful things for every day use) in 1919. In Finland the industrial expansion of the twenties, followed by the economic depression of the thirties, created the perfect environment for the dominance of Functionalism over the romantic movements of the previous decades. An antagonism began to develop between the newer and older generations of designers in Finland. The younger designers repudiated the narrow Finnish element of National Romanticism, they felt that the Karelian and Jugend movements had romanticised the traditions and culture of Finland without reflecting its spirit or essence. The Finnish Functionalists looked at their past and saw perfect examples of rationalism, humanism and functionalism, the elements they understood to be the basis of Finnish culture. The Functionalists' relationship with the past did not involve any imitation of its external forms, rather a revival of its spirit. Further cause for antagonism between the groups was the Romantics' distrust of the international nature of Functionalism. The Jugend movement, although based on Art Nouveau, was unbiasedly national in its application, whereas the Functionalists actively sought to appeal to a wider audience outside Finland. The period between 1908 and 1918 had seen a dramatic expansion of the Finnish furniture industry, due in the main to increased trade with Russia. The

Finnish furniture industry was entirely based on handcrafts and the use of the native and plentiful birch tree. By 1918 there were 175 carpenters' workshops in Finland, compared to only 35 in 1908 (Sparke, 1986, pp35-7). The time was right for an international market.

Alvar Aalto the best known and most important of the Finnish Functionalists, had little respect for the Jugend movement, which he called 'that ridiculous flowering of the birch bark culture, in which everything clumsy was considered so very Finnish.' (Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984, p32). He also fostered a personal dislike of Eliel Saarinen, naming his little daughter's cat after him in a calculated act of disrespect. Aalto admired the old Finnish carpenters who had translated the forms of Continental Baroque churches into original wooden constructions in the 18th and 19th centuries. He recognized in their adaptations a confidence in themselves and a willingness to look outwards, qualities which he felt to be the substance of Finnish design.

When we see how past ages have been able to be international and unprejudiced yet have remained faithful to themselves, we can with open eyes accept the influences of ancient Italy, Spain and the new America. (Aalto, Mus. Fin. Arch., 1984, p156)

For the Finnish Functionalists, wanting to appeal to an international audience was only logical. One of the main tenets of Functionalism was that products should be suitable for mass production. Functionalism concentrated on the relationship between design and use and required a full exploitation of new materials and technology. In Europe, Marcel Breuer, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, among others, began designing and producing tubular steel furniture. But the furniture proved to be expensive and metal's lack of emotional associations, which the Moderns saw as one of its



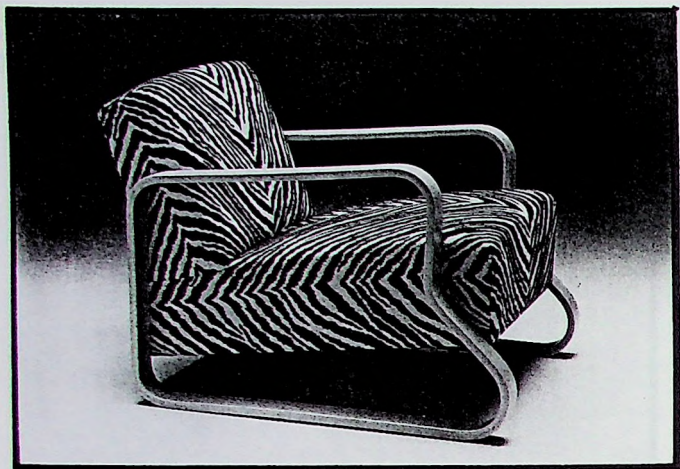
20. Palmio sanatorium armchair, nr. 41. Siza.  
(Artek cat.)



chief virtues, ensured that its intended recipients, the mass market rejected it. The basic principles of rationalism and mass production appealed to Aalto, but the dismissal of the human need conflicted with his beliefs in humanism. Aalto believed very strongly in using nature as a teacher, he identified aesthetics and sensuality as human needs: 'We should work for simple, good, undecorated things, but things in harmony with the human being.' (Mus.Fin.Arch., 1984, p37). The Finnish Functionalists were as much a product of their tradition and culture as the Jugend or Karelian movements. The important question is why we act on certain impulses and ignore others, / in the case of the Finnish modernists it was a case of being:

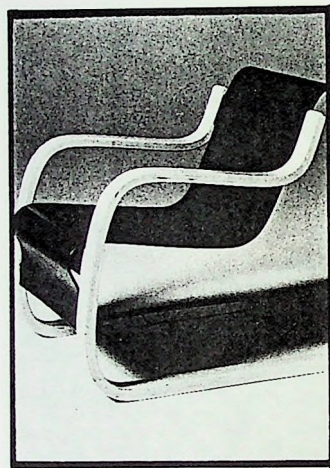
drawn by temperament to soft forms, but also of a greater proximity to the world of nature than to that of abstract geometry. (Scand.Mod., 1982, p72)

Aalto's style in furniture design can be characterized by an application of the human functions which schematic functionalism largely ignored. He did not attribute any decisive authority to rationalism's masters on the Continent. Aalto refused to adopt ready made solutions, / the basic principles of the movement were enough, / from these he could draw his own conclusions and adapt the doctrine where ever he felt it was necessary. Marcel Breuer's furniture attracted Aalto in its capacity as a standard industrial product built on the dynamic principles of springiness, but its use of metal, a tactily unpleasant material and the use of geometrical principles of form did not appeal to him. A problem that had begun to occupy Aalto's mind was how to translate Breuer's springy tubular steel into wood. The breakthrough came when he found a means of using birchwood as a bearing frame. The result was Paimio armchair which he developed for the Paimio sanatorium in 1929 (fig.20). By using a springy plywood back fixed to a closed

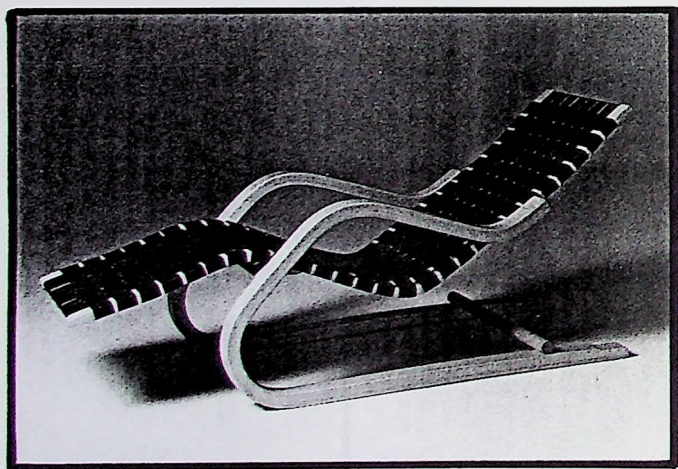


21. Chair nr.44.Aalto  
(Artek cat.).

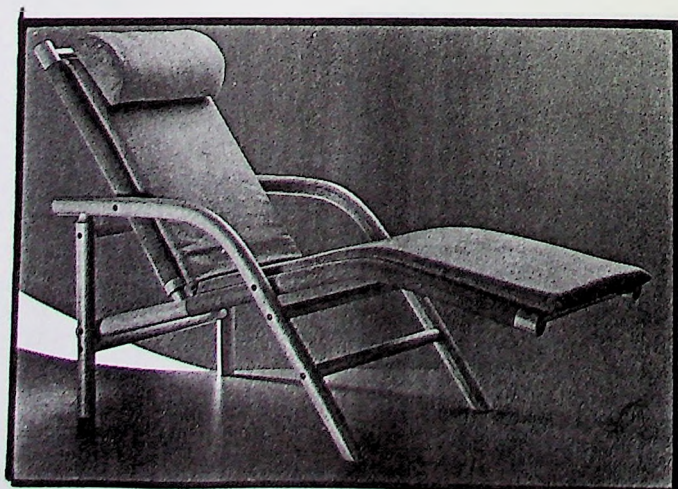
22. Bent laminated plywood chair,  
nr.42.Aalto(Artek cat.)  
(Artek cat.)



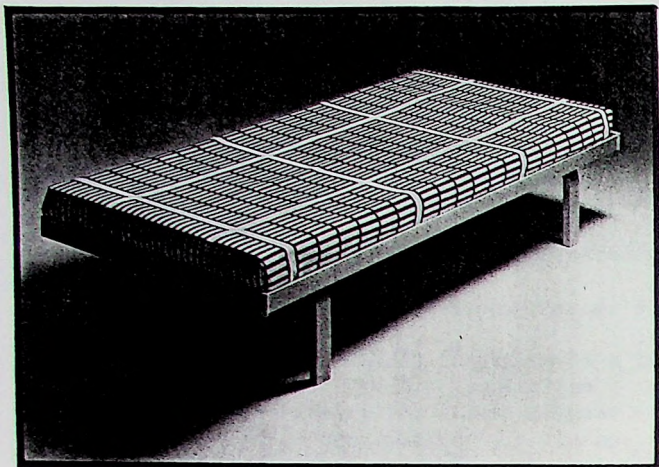
23. Reclining chair with woven  
canvas cover,nr.43.Aalto.  
(Artek cat.)



24. Reclining chair,nr.417.  
Aalto.(Artek cat.).  
(Artek cat.)

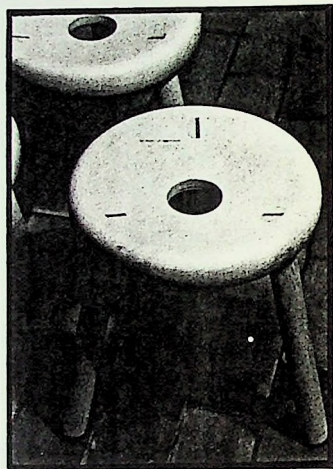






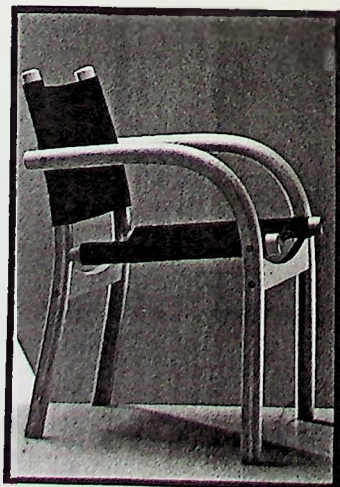
25. Bed with black and white cover,  
nr.416,Aalto.(Artek)  
(Artek cat.)

26. Sauna stools,nr.656.  
Aalto.(Artek cat.)  
(Artek cat.)



27. Fan leg stool,nr. x 601.  
Aalto.(Artek cat.)  
(Artek cat)

28. Bent frame chair,nr.41B.  
Aalto.(Artek cat.).  
(Artek cat.)



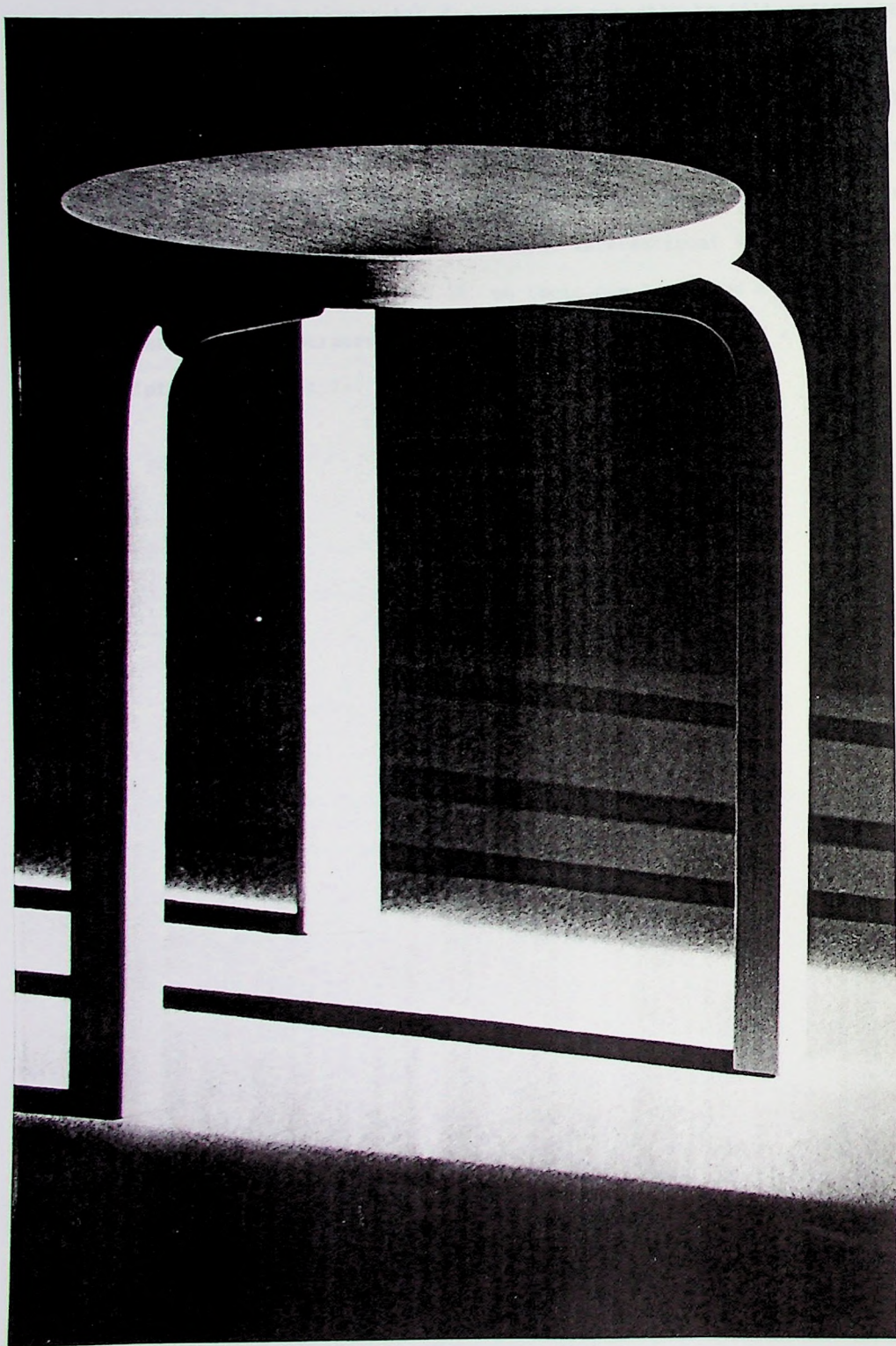


frame Aalto succeeded in making a wooden chair soft. Through applying the Finnish organic philosophy, Aalto was able to create a chair more sensual, more comfortable, cheaper and more widely available (to this day) than Breuer's 'Wassily' chair of 1923.

Flexible wooden furniture is a result of experiments made at the Paimio sanatorium. At the time of those experiments the first tubular steel furniture was just being constructed in Europe. Tubular and chromium surfaces are good solution technically, but psychologically these materials are not good for the human being. (Alvar Aalto, THE HUMANIZING ARCHITECT, Technical Review, 1940)

Finnish furniture designers thus produced Functionalist furniture that was at once modern and traditional, mass produced yet reminiscent of handicraft. Much, if not most, of Aalto's furniture could be produced by hand or by machine. The pioneering work carried out by Aalto and the application of organic principles to functionalism laid the way for what was to become known as the **Scandinavian modern** style. The Finnish functionalists created the first commercially successful modernist furniture. Aalto's 'Blond look' furniture, as it became known, attracted worldwide recognition, particularly in Britain where an exhibition was organized in 1933 to tumultuous acclaim. Alvar Aalto's furniture, in particular, succeeded where the European Functionalists had failed, in removing the barriers between high culture and popular **taste**. The Finnish philosophy of humanist design brought modernism into homes that would otherwise never have touched it.

Functionalism fitted **easily** into the Finnish interpretation of design. Finland was ahead of the other Scandinavian countries in applying organic philosophies to modernism, and the 1930's saw functionalism adopted as the national banner. For the first time Finnish design became commercially successful on an international scale, for a long time Alvar Aalto's company Artek, set up in 1935



29. Stacking stool. 1935, nr. 67. Aalto.  
(Artek cat.)



to produce and market his designs, was not able to fill orders for the furniture world-wide. One of Aalto's designs, the simple but effective stacking stool (fig.32), which he once exclaimed 'will sell thousands!', had by 1985 sold 1.5 million, proving that good design will sell on its own virtues. Functionalism was an international movement or a movement international in flavour, yet Finnish designers adopted it on their own terms and adapted it to their own temperament to create what could be termed a National-International style.



### PART THREE : CRISIS AND EXPLORATION

An enormous amount has happened in Finnish design since the Second World War. At present Finnish design is only beginning to settle after the ideologically turbulent years of the sixties and seventies. For a time Finnish design seemed to be cut adrift with designers sailing in every possible direction but with no clear goals. The solid cultural and traditional basis of design in Finland, the industrial arts, appeared to be in great danger of losing its foothold in industrial production and the advent of industrial design created a national dilemma for Finnish design.

Finland was more adversely affected by the Second World War than any of the other Scandinavian countries, fighting two wars between 1939 and 1944. Russia invaded Finland twice, first in the 1939 Winter War, and again in the 1944 War of Continuation. In 1944 Finland allowed Germany to station troops in Northern Finland, as the German troops retreated under Russian attack in 1944 they burned towns villages and forests behind them. Finland suffered heavy losses, about 100,000 Fins died and about 50,000 were permanently disabled. Russia annexed southern Karelia and other regions as well, however some, not all, of these territories were returned under a 1948 treaty of friendship. Finland also had to pay Russia \$225 million in war reparations. The destruction and the price the Fins played was devastating, but even under these adverse conditions creativity went on, if not unhindered. Shortages led to the inventive use of materials

in design work. Paper and birch bark were used in the creation of textiles and wallpaper, giving a new, if ironic twist to Aalto's dismissal of a 'birch bark culture'. Aalto himself was extremely hindered in his work through a lack of the glue necessary for the construction of his plywood furniture.

The war years, due to the countries isolation, were also a period for national retrospection. Swedish art historian Dag Widman has referred to the war years in Scandinavia as 'a period of idyllic retrospection and decorative formalism' (Scand.Mod.,1984,p 134), although, in the case of Finland at least, the word idyllic may not be entirely accurate. But this period of isolation allowed designers to re-examine the preceding decades and a certain rekindling of Romanticism returned to Finnish design. The initial years after the war are amongst the most remarkable in Finland's design history. The new generation of young talent, trained, mostly by Arttu Brummer, before the war, turned rebuilding into a creative challenge. From the ashes arose what has been called Finland's golden age of design. Ilmari Tapiovaara was a central figure in the post-war reconstruction work, he believed strongly in ethical responsibility and social commitment and his work and played a leading role in the implementation of the functionalist principles in the fifties. Tapiovaara's Domus chair (fig.33) could be termed soft modern in its approach, it represents many of the features of that style in its softening of form and sensibility. The energy and variety in the design of the period was remarkable by any standards and was recognised as such. At the Milan Triennale of 1951, the Finnish pavilion, designed by Tapio Wirkala, received more medals and awards than that of any other country. The 1950's saw many changes in Finland as elsewhere. A rising standard of living and



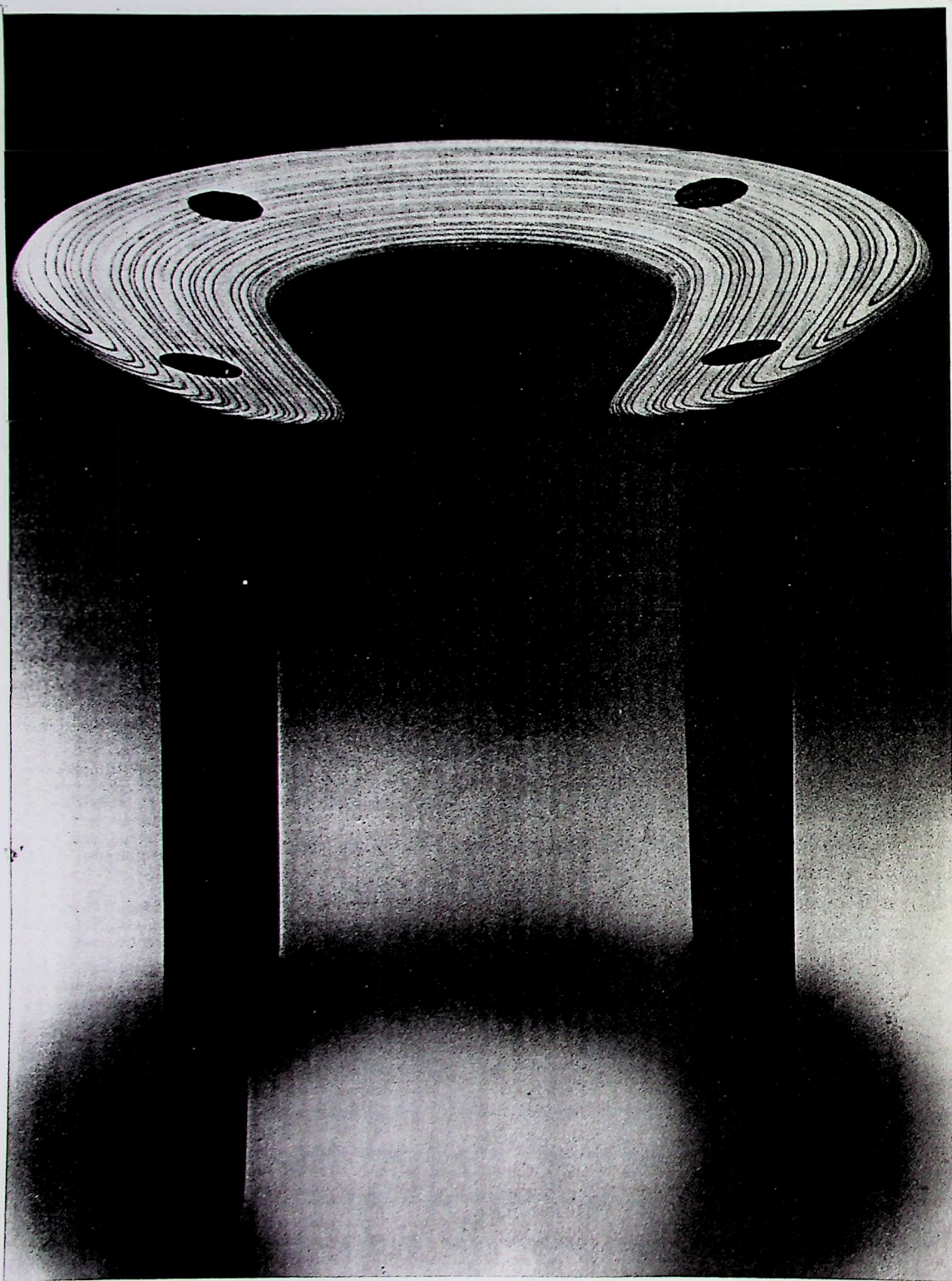


30. Domus chair, Alvaro Siza.  
(Scand.Mod., 1982)

an optimism and belief in progress characterized the early years. Increased urbanization and the building of more homes than ever before created an emphasis on home furnishings. Furniture needed to be rational and aesthetic and for the first time the principles of Functionalism from the twenties and thirties began to be implemented on a large scale. Designers in this period also emphasized the importance of educating the public to a higher degree of design awareness and put pressure on the government to organise programs and become actively involved. By this time the Jugend had been rediscovered and Romanticism was no longer a dirty word among adherents to the Functionalist principles. Again the process of absorbing the traditions of the past was in play. The rediscovery of the Jugend was partly a reaction to the strict principles of Functionalism and a further softening of the style became evident in furniture design. It was also a product of the more overt form of nationalism that comes with periods of war.

The fifties were also a period of co-operation between the Scandinavian countries and the concept of Scandinavian design won world recognition. Scandinavian design or the Scandinavian modern style, which received so much attention at the time, was in fact the soft modernism that had been developing in those countries since Functionalism. Soft modernism was simply an extension of the process of applying humanist and organic principles to European Functionalism - the process Alvar Aalto had initiated in the late twenties. The fifties were a period of idealism and confidence in Finnish design, but the end of the decade also witnessed the beginning of dissension between the crafts and industry that was to have serious consequences for both. The main root of this dissension can be attributed to the triumph of industrial design over the industrial arts. Industrial





31. Sauna stool, 1952, Antti Nurmesni.

designers have a talent for collaboration in industry that the crafts lack and industry preferred to work with industrial designers than with crafts people. As a result industry in the sixties became less and less attractive to crafts people and these years were coloured by the anti-industrial nature of crafts. Furniture design was not as adversely affected by this trend as the other industrial arts of glass, ceramics and to a lesser extent textiles, but definite changes were taking place which have set the contemporary stage for Finnish furniture design. Designers began to take sides, some opting for the role of craftsmen and others of industrial designer, or more accurately in the case of furniture design for the new / old folk tradition, or a more anonymous international design. Designers such as Annti Nurmesniemi and Yrjo Kukkapuro produced examples of international furniture design, using welded plastic and metal, materials that had previously been loathed by Finnish designers for their lack of humanity. It is worth noting however that Annti Nurmesniemi also produced fine examples of wooden organic ? furniture at this period (cover picture), providing an example of the diversity that was entering Finnish design at this point. Many traditionalists and advocates of the crafts began to return to the old system of independent workshops after what they termed, not without a hint of bitterness, their emancipation from industry. This situation created a serious identity crisis for Finnish design. The very basis upon which Finnish design had built itself and upon which it had brought itself to world recognition, was the interplay between hand produced goods and mass production. This was the very backbone of twentieth century Finnish design and the whole concept of the industrial arts seemed to be at stake.



The roots of Finnish design in the early twentieth century were rooted firmly in the principles of the peasant-folk tradition. This had been its strength; from the inherited doctrine of rationalism, functionalism and humanism, Finnish design had reached the pinnacles of creativity and originality. Without this solid ground the whole concept of 'Finnish' design was in danger of disappearing. Many young Finnish designers were now rejecting the role of industrial design and industrial designer altogether and seeking artistic liberty and creative freedom. Designer craftsmen were becoming less and less concerned with functionality and rationalism and concentrating totally on artistic freedom. This in itself is, or was not a bad thing, but it rejected the fundamentals of Finnish identity, which had always relied on the harmonious unification of form and function as its basis. It is not wrong to say that industry had forced this lamentable situation, seeing in the industrial designer a willing collaborator who would work more easily on industry's terms. It was a shifting of balance between the importance of industrial profit over the importance of ethics and creativity which prompted the situation. But a number of factors helped arrest this rapidly deteriorating state of affairs. Many industrial designers were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with their role, seeing themselves as being dictated to by industry. Traditionally industry had been seen by Finnish designers as a means of furthering the ends of good design. Through co-operation with industry designers had attempted to implement the ideal of 'more beautiful things for every day use'. Industrial designers were feeling increasingly uneasy with their status as a means of marketing. It became a matter of integrity, Finnish industrial designers looked abroad and saw designers, in Britain and the

United States especially, becoming tools of a marketing strategy. The concepts of integrity and ethics were given a certain amount of lip service in those countries, but the reality was obviously that marketing and industry, along with the dreaded profit motive, were dictating to designers. Industrial designers in Finland wanted more control and began to see their roles in a wider spectrum of environmental and social importance. Industrial designers also lamented the decreasing involvement of the crafts in industrial design. They began to see their traditional values as paramount to the success and substance of Finnish design. Design in Finland in the seventies thus became increasingly concerned with reconciling the industrial arts with industrial design and of readjusting the balance between industry and designers.

Industry has reacted to the independence of industrial designers and the anti-industrial mood of the crafts by giving a lot more freedom to designers than in the seventies. The very fact that designers in Finland were in a position to initiate a change of heart in Finnish industry, indicates the strength that design in Finland has achieved. Designers would not have been in a position to affect these changes were it not for the unique importance of design in Finnish history and society. The integrity that the designers displayed is a testament to the Finnish design ethos and striving towards harmony that is their national inheritance. Many crafts-designers are now returning to industry, although some have maintained their anti-industrial nature and prefer to work independently.

But perhaps the most significant development in contemporary Finnish design has been the new role adopted by many industrial



designers. A large number of Finnish designers are today involved in both industrial design and the crafts. They operate both in and out of main stream industry, thus providing themselves with an outlet for creative expression and participation in the field of industrial design. The crafts maintain their link with industry and industry benefits from the designers wider experience. This has helped to ease the divisions between the crafts and industry which could very easily have spelt the death of the industrial arts in Finland. Designers in Finland today are still very much in touch with their traditions and past, if in a less overt way. Just as Alvar Aalto believed in reflecting the spirit rather than the external forms of the past, so contemporary Finnish designers use their past as a set of guiding principles. Furniture design, of all the industrial arts, has changed most in its nature due to the advent of industrial design, and for that reason it has been necessary to discuss the effects of industrial design on the industrial arts. Furniture was always the medium that best portrayed the traditional principles of functionalism, rationalism, and humanism, but the events of the previous two decades have created a larger diversity in Finnish furniture design and the result is the forging of two distinct groups. The first group has its roots firmly in the realm of the crafts and industrial arts and employs tendencies of the new / old folk tradition with a distinct national basis, using the visual consistency of the past as an inspiration. The second group is more international in its flavour although in the same sense that the Functionalists of the twenties and thirties were, and is closer to industrial design in its nature.



32. Chair for Museum of Applied Arts, Helsinki, 1988.  
Stefan Lindfors.



Stefan Lindfors is a good example of the new generation of young Finnish industrial designers. His work spans the range from rainwear to jewellery and furniture. He has just finished designing the interior and furniture for the cafe of the Museum of Applied Arts in Helsinki. His chairs for the cafe are excellent examples of the functional international style, but clearly adhere to the Finnish design principles. He is, unlike his soft modernist predecessors, extremely interested in using metal, but many of the problems associated with metal in the past, for example its tactily unpleasant nature, have been overcome since then, the huge variety of surface treatments now possible can make metal look and feel warm and comfortable. Contrary to what is happening in Continental Europe as regards furniture design, Finnish designers recognise the stupidity of ignoring functionalism, as Stefan Lindfors says: 'I consider function as the prime factor. A chair that does not work is not even art.' *ed.*

Lindfors is also representative of contemporary Finnish designers in his belief in the designer's responsibility, both socially and environmentally. The onus is on the designer not to compromise, but to offer the best solution he can, a solution that is socially just and environmentally safe. The integrity of design as a profession in Finland is a lot more credible than elsewhere. Morality is still an issue:

It's a load of crap blaming it all on industry. If only designers could all get together and decide to heed their consciences and stick to it, it's obvious that industry would follow. (Nyberg, 1989, p9)

Finnish design is at present hard to define and that may very well be the essence of the changes taking place. Designers are broadening their horizons and experimenting with new ideas, a

large diversity exists in all industrial disciplines, not least of all furniture design. Yrjo Sotamaa, vice chancellor of the University of Industrial Arts in Helsinki, has likened it to:

...being on an expedition in the midst of an intriguing transformation, and part of the excitement lies in nobody really knowing where were heading and what were going to find when we get there.(FFF,1989,p6)

One thing however is clear, young Finnish designers have a faith in themselves, coupled with an integrity and ethics which will not allow them to be compromised by industry or by marketing. Many young Finnish designers today are struggling to free themselves from the strong traditions the Finnish industrial arts have imposed on them. They wish to use their own experience and individuality to express themselves. But ranked high on the list of important elements are ethics and a responsibility to society. These are the very elements which are integral to the Finnish design tradition, this very integrity is part of the legacy of the Finnish national identity.

The departure points are no longer our own, Finnish culture only, but come from many different quarters...but I don't mean by that we should aim at totally anonymous, faceless international design which has no clear moorings. I think it's necessary to have a base a frame of reference for what you are doing, and that's where national identity comes in.(Yrjo Sotamaa{FFF,1989,p7})



## CONCLUSION

Finnish design represents a striving towards harmony and rationalism and an understanding of Humanism and Functionalism. The Finnish people have developed an empathy for their surroundings that has produced some of the most coherent design in Europe. The Finnish cultural identity has manifested itself in different ways, but the constant striving towards harmony has been a feature of all Finnish design. Finnish furniture design has never relied solely on the use of external motifs and traditional forms for inspiration, although this has obviously played its part, more often Finnish national identity is evident in furniture design through the application of principles. These principles are the basis of the Finnish identity and temperament and furniture represents their manifestation in a material form. Through necessity the Finnish people have developed a design sense. Throughout the century, Finnish designers, whether they were influenced by Romanticism or democratic idealism, have had as their goal the complete integration of form and the creation of a human environment. It is this fundamental understanding of the human aesthetic need that exemplifies the Finnish character.

The continuity in Finnish design lies not so much in the inheritance of external forms as in the application of the national character to objects. The ability of contemporary Finnish designers to move between disciplines, such as industrial design and the crafts, is a reflection of the

national temperament, the conflict is minimised by the realisation that functionalism and humanism can be applied to both. The socially and environmentally conscious nature of contemporary Finnish design is evidence of the strength and continuity of the principles of the Finnish design ethos. The nature of their idealism is a direct result of their cultural stimulus. Although their work may be more international in its nature, the impetus behind their work has its roots firmly in their national identity, demonstrating 'how successfully national origins can be blended with the demands of internationalism.' (Museum Applied Arts, 1985, p6)



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