

# Alvar Aalto

## 1898-1976

**A**lvar Aalto was born in Kuortane, Finland, on 3 February 1898. He studied architecture at the Helsinki University of Technology from 1916 to 1921. He returned to Jyväskylä, where he opened his first architectural office in 1923. The following year he married architect Aino Masio. Their honeymoon journey to Italy sealed an intellectual bond with the culture of the Mediterranean region that was to remain important to Aalto for the rest of his life. Aalto moved his office to Turku in 1927, and started collaborating with architect Erik Bryggman. The office moved again in 1933, to Helsinki. The Aaltos designed and built a joint house-office (1935-36) for themselves in Munkkiniemi, Helsinki, but later (1954-55) had a purpose-built office built in the same neighbourhood. Aino Aalto died in 1949 and in 1952 he married architect Elissa Mäkineniemi (died 1994). In 1957 they designed and had built a summer cottage, the so-called Experimental House, for themselves in Muuratsalo, where they spent their summers. Alvar Aalto died on 11 May 1976, in Helsinki.



### Career

Although sometimes regarded as the first and the most influential architects of Nordic modernism, a closer examination of the historical facts reveals how Aalto (while a pioneer in Finland) closely followed and had personal contacts with other pioneers in Sweden, in particular Gunnar Asplund and Sven Markelius. But what they and many others of that generation in the Nordic countries had in common was that they started off from a classical education and were first designing in the so-called Nordic Classicism style before moving, in the late 1920s, towards Modernism.

In Aalto's case this is epitomised by the *Viipuri Library* (1927-35), which went through a transformation from an originally classical competition entry proposal to the completed high-modernist building. His humanistic approach is in full evidence there: the interior displays natural materials, warm colours, and undulating lines. The *Viipuri Library* project lasted eight years, and during that same time he also designed the *Turun Sanomat Building* (1929-30) and *Paimio Sanatorium* (1929-33): thus the *Turun Sanomat Building* first heralded Aalto's move towards modernism, and this was then carried forward both in the *Paimio Sanatorium* and in the on-going design for the library. But though the *Turun Sanomat Building* and *Paimio Sanatorium* are comparatively pure modernist works, even they carried the seeds of his questioning of such an approach and a move to a more daring, synthetic attitude.

Aalto was a member of the *Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*; attending the second congress in Frankfurt in 1929, and the fourth congress in Athens in 1933. It was not until the completion of the *Paimio Sanatorium* (1929) and *Viipuri Library* (1935) that he first achieved world attention in architecture. His reputation grew in the USA following the critical reception of his design for the Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair, described by Frank Lloyd Wright as a "work of genius".

It could be said that Aalto's reputation was sealed with his inclusion in the second edition of Sigfried Giedion's influential book on Modernist architecture, *Space, Time and Architecture*. The growth of a new tradition (1949), in which Aalto received more attention than any other Modernist architect, including Le Corbusier. In his analysis of Aalto, Giedion gave primacy to qualities that depart from direct functionality, such as mood, atmosphere, intensity of life and even 'national characteristics', declaring that "Finland is with Aalto wherever he goes".

Aalto's awards included the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture from the Royal Institute of British Architects (1957) and the Gold Medal from the American Institute of Architects (1963).

### Works

Aalto's wide field of activity ranged from furniture and glassware designs to architecture and painting. His vase designs are world-famous. He invented a new form of laminated bent-plywood furniture in 1932. Aalto furniture is manufactured by Artek, a company Aalto co-founded with his wife Aino Aalto, Maire Gullichsen (Ahlström-Gullichsen family) and Nils-Gustav Hahl. Aalto glassware (Aino as well as Alvar) is manufactured by Iittala. Aalto's career spans the changes in style from pre-modernism (Nordic Classicism) to purist International Style Modernism to a more synthetic and idiosyncratic approach.

