

2018 PHILIP JOHNSON EXHIBITION CATALOGUE AWARD

Nina Stritzler-Levine and Timo Riekko, Editors

Artek and the Aaltos: Creating a Modern World

Bard Graduate Center, New York with The Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki, 2016

Artek and the Aaltos: Creating a Modern World is an impressive investigation of the innumerable design projects Aino and Alvar Aalto developed for the Artek furniture company. The publication makes two unique contributions. First, it draws attention to the roles played by both architects in co-founding Artek, stressing Aino's pivotal but heretofore unrevealed position as art director of the company. Second, it provides a fresh and meticulous account of the history and mission of the company, based on thorough research in the Artek archives.

This ambitious project unveils deficiencies in the existing historiography of Artek and retrieves hidden actors—including Maire Gullichsen a Finnish art patron and a key figure in the founding of the company. It introduces concepts of standardization, experimentation, and production line methods to the discussion, tracing their influence on the marketing of products and their relation to interior design and to the arrangement of architectural space.

A collaborative team of scholars contributed to the publication. They have explored aspects of the Artek strategy beyond the pure production of goods and emphasized the novelties connected with the making of advertisements, manifestos, and exhibitions.

Artek and the Aaltos is a book of almost seven hundred pages and includes no fewer than two thousand images—among them sketches, posters, and photographs—most of which were previously unpublished. This bounty is presented in a compact format that sometimes challenges the eyes even as it thrills the mind.

The chapters that focus on the international exposure of Artek design in Europe and in the United States reveal another unexplored epoch. Crossing the ocean in the early 1940s, the Artek company became a leading furniture importer in the United States and made “Aalto design” a winning marketing slogan.

The four final chapters are a compendium of the Aaltos' furniture and design products, including the many versions of the celebrated bentwood chairs, glass items, textiles, and lighting.

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