

Aino Aalto and the birth of Finnish Modernism.

This year will mark the 100th anniversary of Finland's independence, in 1917, from the Russian Republic. During that tumultuous period in European history, the Finnish people capitalized on events that unfurled within Russia after the revolution and jumped on the opportunity to establish their own declaration of independence in December 1917. During this year's anniversary celebrations, Finns across the country will be lighting candles in their windows as a symbolic gesture in remembrance of their silent protest to Russian oppression, but also as a sign that offered shelter to the young men who made their arduous route via Sweden, to become Jägers in Germany, during the First World War.

One year later, during the dawn of Finland's newfound independence, Aino Maria Mandelin (as she was then known) graduated as an architect from the Institute of Technology in Helsinki. A year later, her soon-to-be husband, Alvar Aalto, would also graduate from the very same Institute. The Great War, as it came to be known, finally grounded to a halt that same year. It was, no doubt, a difficult period to graduate from University, and as a qualified female architect, no less. Aino was 24 years old at that time. Imagine, if you can, being a young woman, living in Finland in the early days of the 20th century (or any other European country for that matter) and being faced with all the gender restrictions and social demands of an overwhelmingly male dominated society, as you set out on your journey in the world as an architect. But the war in Europe (just as in the revolution in Russia) had also smashed societal norms, and begun to question gender roles in particular. The old hierarchical systems, and the patriarchal dominance across Europe, was beginning to crumble — albeit slowly, and not universally. Finland however, was imbued with a new sense of freedom, of liberation, after the war. And it was in this optimistic state, that Aino first worked for a time for a bricklayer on a construction site and later for a carpenter, after graduating from the Institute.¹ Imagine that. Her life, however, would soon take a fortunate turn when they both met in the city of Jyväskylä, Alvar's hometown (and now the home of the Alvar Aalto Museum) roughly 270km north of Helsinki. Alvar Aalto had opened his newly formed architectural firm there, and Aino later joined him as a fellow architect. They married not long after, in

1924. A decade later, in 1934, both Aino and Alvar (along with Nils-Gustav Hahl, and their wealthy patron, Marie Gullichsen) formed the company Artek. It would become a major force in international design, one of the primary proponents of the burgeoning Modernist movement in Europe, and a source national pride to this day. Together, Aino and Alvar collaborated side by side — two architects designing buildings, interiors, furniture, lighting and glassware. Their work, while initially informed by the rationalist structuralism of the Bauhaus, also incorporated the organic, the curve, and the sense that its inspiration wasn't solely coming from the same source as the developing Modernist aesthetic. A case in point, is Aino's exquisite Tumbler, glassware design from 1932. As elegant and sublime today, as the day it was created. Sadly, unavailable from the Artek website, a variation, nonetheless, can still be found at your local IKEA showroom.

There is however, a recurring issue when viewing their work, and that is describing the role of Aino within the partnership, and the issue of appropriate credit. In many of the publications about the Aaltos, sole credit is assumed to go to Alvar, rather than collaboratively with his wife and partner Aino. As if Aino were merely some kind of assistant, or at worse “more of a good critic, than a good architect.”² But recent literature and an exhibition last year in the Bard Graduate Center in New York, have begun to show that that was not necessarily the case. The curator of that exhibit, Nina Stritzler-Levine, in an interview with *Metropolis* magazine describes how she found the first work order for Artek in an envelope. “It was for Viipuri. It was signed by Aino Marsio-Alto. Nobody thinks of Artek and Viipuri [the Aalto's stunning library in the former city of Viipuri, now called Vyborg, after it was annexed by the former USSR] —yes they think of the stool [the famous Stool 60] but they don't think of Artek connected to an architectural classic like that. Not only were they connected, the two were inextricably linked through Aino Marsio-Aalto.”³ Similarly, writing in 1984, Igor Herler also concluded, “Aino's share in the interior design work, particularly in these early years, must have been quite decisive.”⁴ A much needed reassessment of Aino's integral role is needed and a just published “*Artek and the Aaltos: Creating a Modern World*” edited by the aforementioned Nina Stritzler-Levine, promises to update our notions of Aino's role within Artek, as well as providing much needed new research on their close personal and professional partnership. Perhaps it is fitting that during Finland's 100th year anniversary,

that one of its greatest designers, Aino Aalto, will finally get the full credit she so rightly deserves.

¹ Metropolis magazine, New York 2016, p.12

² Goran Schildt, Alvar Aalto The Decisive Years, New York 1986, p.44

³ Metropolis magazine, New York 2016, p.123

⁴ Igor Herler, “Early Furniture and Interior Designs,” Juhani Pallasmaa, Alvar Aalto Furniture, Museum of Finnish Architecture, Finnish Society of Crafts and Design and Artek, Helsinki 1984, p.22



Aino Aalto, Tumbler, 1932