

Finland through French Eyes: Alvar Aalto's Pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition of 1937

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How Modernist architects and designers won recognition is often related to international events, and none were more important than the international fairs and exhibitions held periodically since the second half of the nineteenth century. By the very nature of their program, these exhibitions favored a nationalist reception of the works erected within them. It is for this reason that the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne (International Exhibition of Arts and Technologies in Modern Life) held in Paris in 1937 had powerful and long-lasting consequences for international opinion of the work of Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), the Finnish architect and designer who built the Finnish Pavilion there.

Owing to the site of the exhibition, French critical writings played an especially influential role. The common distinguishing characteristic of the French critics was that they mistakenly perceived the work of Aalto to be an idealized image of Finland. This error, beyond the political untruths and partial truths it conveyed, was an enormously simplistic interpretation of the Finnish Pavilion.

Aalto's project was a work of both architecture and interior design. It was one of the first structures in which he used undulating lines and metaphors of the countryside, two elements that he developed in his later work. French critics were not particularly sensitive to his use of them, perhaps because they could not be satisfactorily interpreted simply along nationalist lines. For Aalto revealed his national inspirations subtly: despite being Finnish, these elements remain difficult to pin down because Aalto used them in personal and original ways, and blended them with other, avant-garde influences. It is revealing to examine the differences between the mythologizing of the French period criticism of Aalto's Pavilion (which affected other contemporary interpretations of his work) and the realities of his oeuvre.

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French Reception of the Finnish Pavilion

The principal French critical reviews of the Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne of 1937 were published in three journals, *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, *Art et Décoration*, and *Cahiers d'Art*. The type of presentation by country that *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* used in 1937 to present the whole of the buildings of the Nordic countries and, within this group, of Finland, was a determining factor in inscribing Aalto and his work firmly in a national context.¹ Within this generic presentation, Aalto's Finnish Pavilion was discussed at the Paris Exposition (Fig. 1) along with three other buildings of which he was the author—the Viipuri Library (1927-1933), the sanatorium at Paimio (1928), and a factory near Oulu (1930)—as well as buildings by the following other Finnish architects: Oiva Kallio, Erkki Huttunen, Johan Sigfrid Sirén, as well as the firm of Aarne Hytönen and Risto-Veikko Luukkonen and that of Otto Flodin and Eero Seppala.

The criticism of the Finnish Pavilion offered in *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* was colored by concepts of nationalism and Modernism. Finnish architecture was viewed as the product of a young nation (independent of Russia since 1917, and not 1919, as the magazine claimed). What is remarkable here is the nature of the converging modernities that the journal discerned in the Finnish political, social, and architectural realms:

Even more than in the Scandinavian countries, Finnish architecture has passed almost without transition from the traditional rustic timber house to some of the most expressive works of our new age; for the independence of this country coincided with that of modern technologies. The Finnish architect did not have to struggle against the inertia of a public accustomed for generations to traditions now grown meaningless, nor against his own prejudices. . . . Rather, using the hard-won experience of peoples who evolved earlier, Finland had only to build, and had nothing to tear down. This is why her architecture seems to us so homogeneous, so unequivocally and so effortlessly “modern”: it could only be thus in a land that has been able to remain young and free.²

The critique of Aalto's Pavilion presented in the magazine framed the issue in completely national terms.³ Simplicity and rationalism were seen as the principal qualities of the work, and its use of wood was considered a natural element reinforcing that simplicity. The work was also termed a “total creation,” though the elements of the interior decoration were left unmentioned. The conception of such a work was possible only because

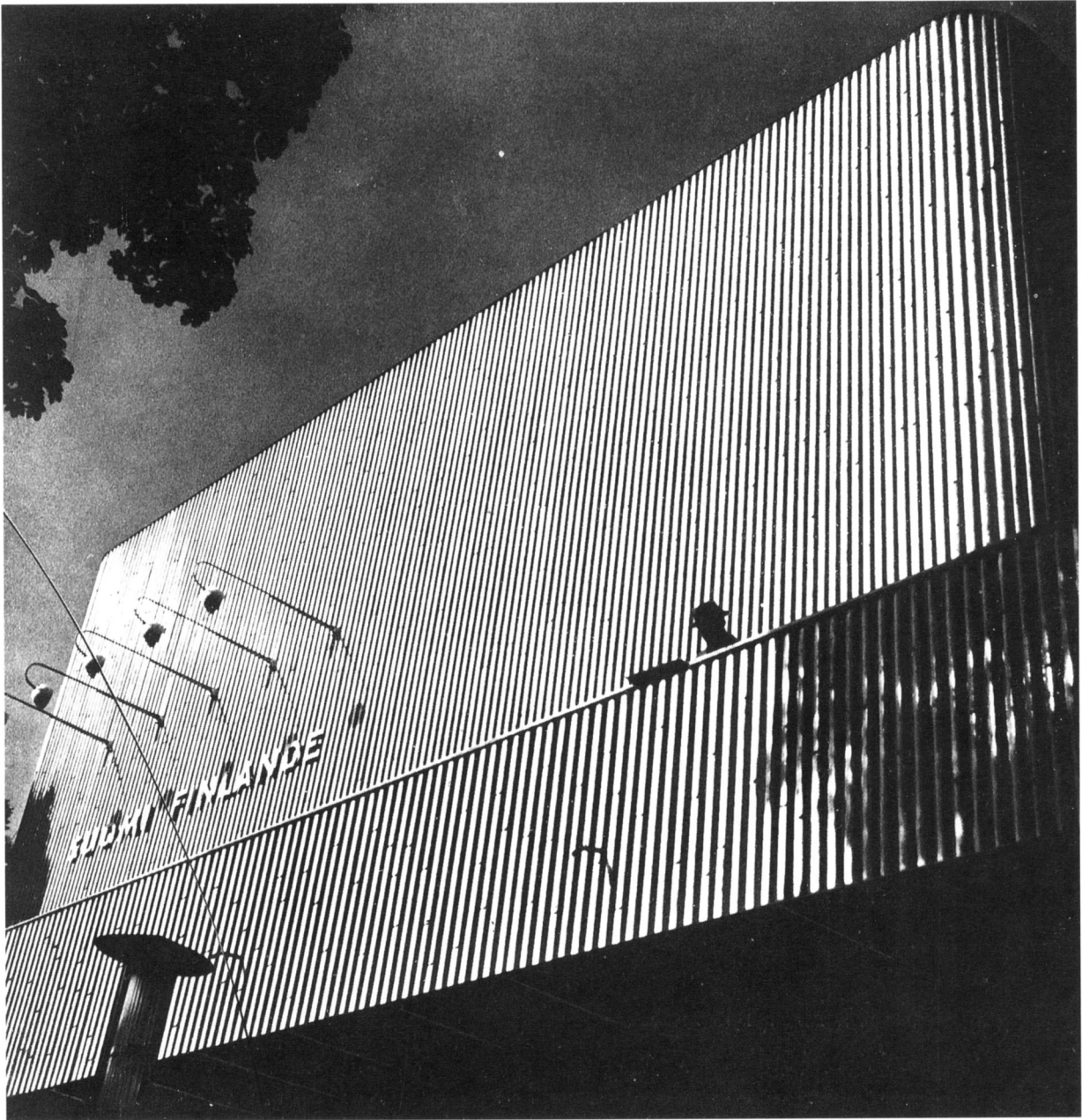


FIGURE 1
Alvar Aalto (1898-1976), Finnish Pavilion,
Exposition Internationale des Arts et
Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, Paris,
1937. Photo: Museum of Finnish
Architecture, Helsinki.

“the people” of Finland, from whom the architect had sprung, were “entirely free of any formal tradition,” a situation that distinguished Finland from countries like France where “the past history of art has become too heavy a burden with regard to our feeble experience of new technologies and conditions.”

The “simplicity” of the Pavilion was also the principal quality heralded by the review *Art et Décoration*, along with a specifically Nordic capacity to ally “gravity and grace” and “distinction and joy.”⁴ As in *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, the interior design was not mentioned, nor were the objects presented inside the Pavilion.

Only Christian Zervos, in the journal *Cahiers d’Art*, went so far as to discuss the interior design of the Pavilion.⁵ In so doing, he connected Finland and forestry, and then forestry and the Pavilion: “The initial plan conceived by the architect was based on the forestry industry, the most important in Finland. Thus it was to form the general backdrop to the Finnish participation in the 1937 Exposition, and for this reason, the Pavilion has all its visible surfaces covered with wood.”⁶

In treating the principles of the interior decoration, Zervos discussed the “conception of the whole” that Aalto had proposed, but which the Finnish commissariat had refused. First, according to Zervos, who correctly interpreted Aalto’s initial (unexecuted) conceptions, the architect saw a presentation of the forestry industry and its products as essential to the exhibition, while related sections would present additional Finnish industries, illustrating “the cultural and economic issues related to these materials” and the “social position of Finland.” Nearly all of the sections would include what both Aalto and Zervos called a “tourism exhibition” through photographs showing views of lakes. This dominant feature of the Finnish landscape was Aalto’s choice of tool for promoting tourism in his country.

Zervos failed to perceive that the exhibition did not reflect the full reality of Finland and that Aalto was making his own choices in presenting his country. Those choices reflected his very positive interpretation of the guidelines adopted by the Finnish Fair Committee, which stated explicitly that the exhibition should picture Finland’s level of development in terms of social progress, education, and culture, and should show Finland as a country for tourists and sports. Aalto saw the “social position” of Finland, to be represented in a social section, as extremely advanced. This was in some aspects an exaggeration, which was not perceived by Edmond Labbé, the French commissioner general of the exhibition, who pointed out⁷ that according to Aalto’s presentation in the pavilion, Finland had not one single illiterate, and its workers were

of higher professional skill than those in other countries. Yet for Labbé this social position was harmonious with rural daily life. For instance, Labbé reported of children going to school on skis in winter, which was a reality of the country. In addition, Aalto put a special focus on the positive aspects of the status of Finnish women.

The fundamental basis of these French accounts of Aalto's Pavilion lies in the nationalist beliefs of the nineteenth century, not merely in the critical perspective of Modernism. Nationalism is supreme in these texts, and even the typical overall confidence of the period in Modernism seems rooted in the sense of Finland as a young country, one independent for barely two decades. The "politicization of the cultural," which Patrick Cabanel has designated as typical of nineteenth-century nationalism, is pervasive here.⁸ Indeed, the praise of simplicity, of works at once beautiful and modest, echoes aspects of French criticism of the Finnish Pavilion at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900, which was constructed by Eliel Saarinen, Herman Gesellius, and Armas Lindgren.⁹

The nationalist basis of the earlier French texts was twinned with a new Modernist confidence in 1937. This confidence, however, was first of all directed toward what might be termed the "unanimist" or homogenous body of the Finnish nation, especially in the text published by *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*. That the Finnish Pavilion was a part of an international exhibition reinforced the rhetorical function of its various displays of assembled photographs and their accompanying commentary and figures concerning Finnish life and economy. Zervos's article is extremely important in this sense. Giving proof of a blind (and typically Modernist) trust in statistical illustrations, Zervos deprived himself of a scientific position by not offering an interpretation of the statistics. For example, he could have examined such questions as: What was the historic reason for the importance of wood? What were the consequences of the distribution of the Finnish population between urban and rural areas? Were these consequences positive in the short, mid-, and long term? Commenting on statistics without any attempt to interpret them also led him to confuse the interior design conceived by Aalto with what it contained—its political, social, and economic presentations. The main reason for Zervos's very positive comment on Aalto's design was his enthusiasm for statistics expressed in the design. This mismatched identity would in turn become the premise of the analogies frequently made between Aalto and his country, between his work and Finland.

In the work quoted above, Cabanel underlined that in nineteenth-century Europe, "A culture is first of all national, that is, distinct, and unique."¹⁰ Certainly French critics placed Aalto within a nationalist

conception inherited from the nineteenth century. The talent that permitted the actual production of the work was not attributed to the architect, but defined as the natural product of the architect's place of birth, and credited to the nation itself. This vision has a serious limitation. There exists a latent contradiction between the notions of national character or genius and of a European avant-garde network. Quite logically, the French reviews did not mention the latter. For example, Aalto's relations with Swedish architects, which dated to the early 1920s, as well as his participation in the second meeting of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), held in Frankfurt from October 24 to 26, 1929,¹¹ and the international connections he forged at those meetings, were all completely ignored in the French vision. Instead, the French reviews turned Aalto into the natural product of a heroic land.

The Reception of Aalto's Designs in London and New York

An analysis of the criticism of German and Scandinavian writers would go beyond the scope of this article, but it is interesting nonetheless to compare the French accounts of the Paris Exposition Internationale of 1937 with texts in English relating to two other events held during the 1930s outside Finland, but which also played a key role in the recognition of Aalto's work: the exhibition of his furniture in the London department store Fortnum and Mason in 1933, and the exhibition "Architecture and Furniture: Aalto" held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1938.

Regarding the Fortnum and Mason exhibition, articles full of praise were published in two British periodicals, *Architects' Journal* and *Architectural Review*.¹² The exhibition presented furniture designed by Aalto and by his wife, Aino Marsio-Aalto, as well as various of Aalto's experiments with curved pieces of wood, which the critics saw as stages in the designer's work. Both articles pointed out that the birch Aalto used was the most common type of wood in Finland. They also stressed the modernity of the forestry industry in Finland. Unlike the French, the British critics did not perceive the work of Aalto to be an idealized image of Finland. Also, the British did not focus on Aalto's continental European dimension: for example, they did not mention a relation between his furniture and that of the Bauhaus. These articles adopted an essentially pragmatic tone, in total contrast to the romantic nationalism of the French criticism.

The preface to the catalogue published to accompany the 1938 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York¹³ was written by

John McAndrew, curator for architecture and industrial arts, and it situated Aalto as one of the young architects whose work, while belonging fully to the International Style, was nonetheless distinct from what was produced in that style during the 1920s. According to McAndrew, two new elements characterized Aalto's mark on the Modern movement: first, the use of materials such as wood, which had previously been associated with premodern building; and second, the replacement of the rectilinear forms of the first phase of Modernism, which related to early Cubism, with undulating lines: "To the heritage of pure geometric shapes, the younger men have added free organic curves; to the stylistic analogies with the painters Mondrian and Léger, they have added Arp."¹⁴ The national character of Aalto's work was purportedly revealed by this evolution: "Personal and national qualities are more apparent than a decade ago."

In the rest of the text, it emerges that what McAndrew considered "national," and at the same time "Scandinavian," was not the use of undulating forms but rather the use of wood, the principal Finnish construction material. McAndrew concluded by discussing Aalto's wooden furniture designs. In the remainder of the catalogue, Simon Breines praised the Finnish Pavilion at the Paris Exposition of 1937: "Most critics agreed that this Pavilion was one of the two or three most distinguished in Paris, and that it represented a vigorous expression of the work and culture of the Finnish people as well as a personal triumph for Aalto."¹⁵

A comparison of McAndrew's and Breines's texts with the French reviews is provocative. In both cases, nationalism underlies the praise offered for Aalto's work, but there are still profoundly different conceptions of the term. In the American criticism, national character is not seen as exclusive of personal qualities, and thus of the originality of the creator. The Finnish Pavilion represents an expression of a people, but the architecture of the Pavilion and the people are not considered to be merged. In the French texts, on the other hand, the architecture and the Finnish people are viewed as completely merged, so much so that in the end the aspect of the Pavilion as a work of art is annihilated. In the American reviews, however, this fusion does not take place and the status of the Pavilion as a creative work of art is again made possible. National character, identified solely with the material of wood, is no longer considered the only source of inspiration, because the American texts acknowledge a convergence between Aalto's work and that of the continental European artistic avant-garde. Finally, the nation, far from being an ideal territory, is also seen as reactionary, and therefore capable by that fact alone of posing obstacles to the realization of modern ideas.

Accordingly, the rest of the catalogue describes the various difficulties faced by the first modern Finnish architects, asserting that the implantation of Modernism in Finland confronted conservative attitudes—“traditional prejudices”—found both in the public and in architectural milieux, which were then marked by a “chaste classicism” coming from Sweden and Denmark. Aalto, Erik Bryggman, and other, unnamed architects, however, were depicted as having overcome the problems posed by these attitudes.¹⁶

In contrast with the French reviewers, American writers displaced the object of the heroizing process from the nation as a whole to Aalto himself: Aalto became a hero fighting for the success of modern ideas in his own country. The French simplified his work by seeing it as exclusively national, whereas the Americans uncovered its complexity. McAndrew discerned two distinctive traits in Aalto’s work, the use of wood and of undulating forms, and noted their presence in the Finnish Pavilion at the Paris Exposition of 1937. The American placed these two traits in quite distinct categories—the first was national, the second avant-garde—and he credited Aalto with having been able to combine them.

The Political Heroization of Finland by French Critics

The French reviews initiated a political heroization of Finland, and simultaneously simplified Aalto’s work at the 1937 Paris Exposition by reducing it to its material, wood. The weight of these two processes opened the way to considerable misunderstandings.

The French texts in question reflected the larger French conception of the nation as a “unanimist” whole, defined by its shared values and goals. In this conception, conflict is by nature nonexistent since the nation is a priori constituted by the common and converging will of its elements. The reality of the Finland of the 1930s did not, however, correspond with this underlying scheme. On the contrary, extreme political and linguistic tensions, an inheritance and prolongation of the events of Finnish independence, were the rule in Finnish society at this time.¹⁷ Violence, massacres, and civil war had marked the Finnish achievement of independence in 1917. These upheavals began with the Russian Revolution, and pitted a White civil guard, originally created to expel Russian troops from Finland, against a Red socialist guard, created by revolutionary elements close to the Russian Bolsheviks. After Russia recognized Finnish independence at the start of 1918, the conflict turned into a civil war, which the Whites won in May 1918. These cataclysmic

events left a deep mark on Finnish society, one that endured at least until 1936.

The French reviews ignored, for example, the life of Finnish political parties in the 1930s, when the so-called bourgeois parties opposed the leftist parties. The former considered the Finnish Social Democratic party as “the enemy,” a suspicion founded on historical memory. Certain elements of the Social Democratic party had in fact been connected with Russian revolutionaries, but it was also true that the Social Democrats quickly distinguished themselves from the Communists and adopted a parliamentary position. Concretely, this tension meant that, apart from a brief period in 1926, the Social Democratic party did not participate in any government before 1936, while its members were excluded until 1933 from admission into the civil guard (the private army originally formed against the Communists that took the place of an official Finnish army). As for the Finnish Communists, they were the object of a violent campaign of liquidation in the early 1930s. The Lapua movement emerged to prevent their assembly, while in 1930 the Suomen Lukko organization was formed, with the support of all the bourgeois parties, to use legal means to end Communist activities. So extreme were these movements that there was even talk in 1932 of outlawing not only the Communists but also the Social Democrats.

The issue of an official language also illustrates tensions in Finland during the 1930s. Then the partisans of the Finnish language and of Swedish squared off.¹⁸ Linguistic antagonism had been developing in Finland since the 1860s, but in the 1930s these tensions ran particularly high within the University of Helsinki. There the question was resolved on the institutional level in 1937 by a law that made the university a Finnish-language institution while instruction in Swedish was still maintained.

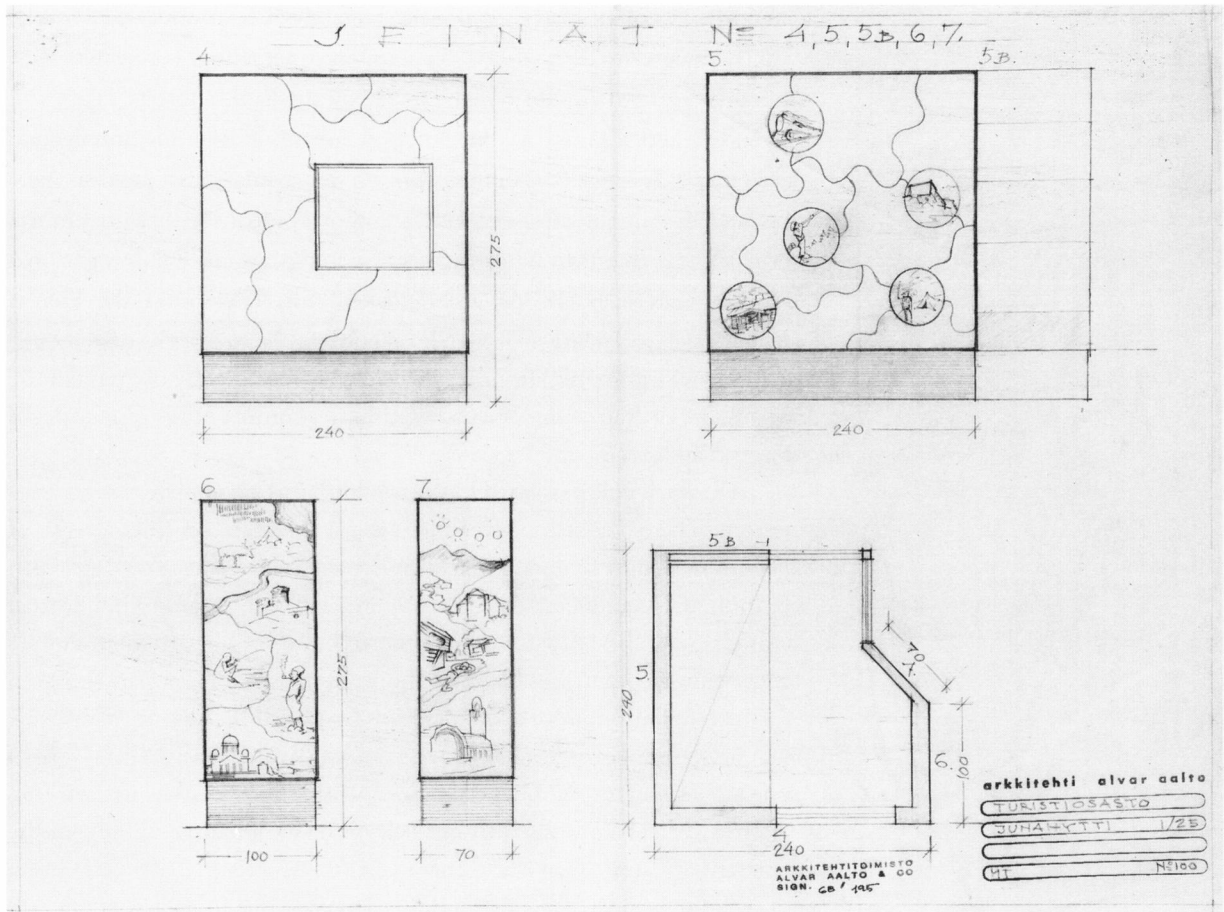
These tensions arose from the complex history of a country born in a different way from a nation-state like France. For Finland, in addition, the progress toward greater autonomy dated only from the end of the nineteenth century.

The Finnish Pavilion as a Work Reduced to Its Material

Oddly enough, it was an economic resource—wood—that held the privileged place in the process that led both to the heroization of Finland and to the simplification of its history. In part because of Aalto's choices in his presentation of Finland, the historical complexity of the country eluded Zervos, the critic who paid the most attention to the interior design of the Pavilion. In particular, the place given over to wood in the

presentation seemed to him the distinguishing feature of the country, and he seized on it immediately. He was not alone in recognizing the importance of wood as essentially economic. It was all the more important because the overall level of industrialization in Finland was rather low. Forestry and dairy production were the country's two main industrial activities at that time, and the products of both were heavily exported.¹⁹ An article on Finnish forestry, published at the time of the Paris Exposition of 1937 in the *Revue Commerciale de Finlande*, highlighted its modernity by depicting the diversity of Finnish products made out of wood: plywood, some of which was used in the construction of airplanes, as well as wood pulp, cellulose, and paper.²⁰ The profusion of lakes in Finland, which Aalto dramatized in his display, was closely linked with forestry: according to the article, the total length of the waterways for floating wood was estimated at 47,000 kilometers, in a land possessing some 60,000 lakes. Thus Finland boasted a certain economic and geographic originality, and the coherence of the concept of it was reinforced by the material chosen for the architecture of the Pavilion. Both presented a modern face that, however, evaded the complexity of history. Zervos considered the work of Aalto and Finland itself through the exclusively economic prism that the displays provided. Through this prism, the Finnish economy appeared selectively. Zervos's text implied that forestry brought with it the promise of a modern humanism to which Finland held the exclusive rights.

As Zervos explained it, the Pavilion design that Aalto proposed brought him into conflict with the authorities of the Finnish commissariat, who did not approve of his intensive use of the lake motif and also wanted a more extensive presentation of craft industries, which Aalto opposed.²¹ Only certain elements of his projects survived from his initial conception. The most important concept that he had to change was the emphasis given to Finnish lakes in the advertisement-like presentations inside the Pavilion. A display of them was still present in the Pavilion through photographs, but what changed was the use of the lakes both as a banner heading in the Pavilion and as a motif in the exhibition panels, as shown in a preliminary drawing for panels representing aspects of tourism in Finland (Fig. 2). Zervos cites the heading "a country of a thousand lakes" in referring to the project Aalto had to abandon because of the attitude of the Finnish commissariat. Other headings replaced this one, as shown in the photographs published in the French official report on the exhibition.²² For instance, "wood is on the march," the name of the Pavilion, was also shown in type inside the Pavilion. Inside the Pavilion Aalto had had to change his key advertising message: he dropped his key



lake concept, though lakes were still present through photographs, and replaced it with a concept built mainly on wood. He also had to drop the preliminary drawings for panels 6 and 7 in Figure 2 (lower left) showing aspects of tourism in Finland—a medieval castle (Olavinlinna, today called Savonlinna), illustrating the Swedish past of Finland, the Helsinki Cathedral by Carl Ludvig Engel in the Senate Square, a typical Finnish summer cottage, illustrating a “Finnish way of life,” and the railway station by Eliel Gottlieb Saarinen in Helsinki. No photographs of such panels exist in the French report, which was very well documented with photographs of the interior.²³ Nevertheless, the slogan “Finland, a country where travel is cheap” was shown in photographs published in the report of the exhibition.²⁴ Also, the social section planned by Aalto survived from his initial conception, as did his section on architecture.

In his writings, the French commissioner general of the exhibition, Edmond Labbé, also mistakenly perceived the Pavilion as representing Finland in its entirety. His report revealed no better understanding of the

FIGURE 2
Aalto, *Turistiosasto* (touristic section), preliminary drawing for unexecuted exhibition panels for the Finnish Pavilion, 1936. Photo: Archives of the Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki.

complexities of Finland than did the French criticism discussed above.²⁵ Labbé saw Aalto's use of associations and metaphors connected with wood as a way to present Finland as "a faraway land of forests, lakes, and legends," and also as "a young nation full of artistic and intellectual activity."²⁶ He placed Aalto's work in relation to this mythological Finland and simplified accordingly, and that architecture thus became the product of a tradition (since its main material, wood, was a traditional Finnish material). Having accomplished this, Labbé and the French reviews assigned a largely fictive local color to Aalto's work and removed it from any internationalism. This local color completely obliterated the originality of Aalto's use of wood, within the context of his generation of Finnish architects.

The local color assigned to Aalto's work was a complete misinterpretation. The scholarship of Raija-Liisa Heinonen on the arrival of Functionalism in Finland has shown the international context in which Finnish architecture evolved, starting in 1926 with regard to intellectual currents, and in 1928 for actual constructions.²⁷ In particular, Aalto's wide vantage point is evinced by the large number of German books on German and international architecture that filled his library.²⁸ This wide vantage point makes it impossible to reduce any period of Aalto's work to one single source of influence. Indeed, Kirmo Mikkola has written that Aalto created before the thirties some of the most daring building in the ambient "L'Esprit Nouveau" generated by Le Corbusier.²⁹ The ascription of such importance to Le Corbusier is doubtless due to Aalto's citation of one of Le Corbusier's works in his important article entitled "Du seuil au séjour," published in 1926 in the journal *Aitta*. In addition, the Turun-Sanomat building of 1928 (Fig. 3), one of his first works in a Modernist language, is extremely close to two other buildings that are presented on the same page in a book that Aalto possessed, entitled *Internationale neue Baukunst* (Stuttgart, 1928). The architects of these two buildings, which housed stores, were Jaromír Krejcar, whose building was in Prague, and Johannes Andreas Brinkman and Leendert Cornelius van der Vlugt, two architects from Rotterdam (Fig. 4 left and right). The interiors of Aalto's Turun-Sanomat building, as well as those of the Paimio Sanatorium, were also quite marked by the influence of the Bauhaus. Far from being isolated in a realm of "local color," Aalto was actually exercising his profession in an international cultural context.

The use of visible wood in the Finnish Pavilion appears as an original feature of Aalto's work when it is compared with that of his contemporaries. In the 1930s the Finnish review *Arkkitehti* published many new buildings, and in these the architects for the most part used "modern"

materials, particularly concrete.³⁰ The Festival Hall in Helsinki, by Hytönen and Luukkonen, constructed of reinforced concrete, and the Pohjanhovi Hotel in Rovaniemi by Pauli Blomstedt, built of reinforced concrete and brick, are just two examples (Fig. 5). The use of wood in Aalto's furniture design was also an exception, as Finnish furniture designers, for instance Blomstedt, more frequently used tubular steel for their creations.³¹ One building that was emblematic for the Finnish nation, the new Parliament House, built to the designs of Sigfrid Sirén in 1931, also had a cafeteria with tubular steel furnishings designed by the Finnish designer Werner West. This use of tubular steel reveals the influence of the Bauhaus on Finnish design in the 1930s. Aalto himself used tubular steel at the start of the 1930s and was aware of the work of Marcel Breuer, whose influence is demonstrable in the work of his spouse and associate, Aino Marsio-Aalto.³²

The gap separating the Finland that French critics divined in Aalto's work and the real Finland results in part from a larger demand for local color in the 1930s. In 1930 the Modernist architecture of that year's Exhibition of Industrial Art in Stockholm by Erik Gunnar Asplund was criticized in *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* as insufficiently "Swedish" work.³³ Correspondingly, in 1937 Aalto's Pavilion at the Paris Exposition won the French critics' praise because they perceived a mythical and simplified Finland in it.

This is what *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* meant by Aalto's "total creation": the Pavilion was seen as identical with Finland. Zervos too proposed an equivalence between design and, in his own words, "a clear presentation of the cultural and economic problems related to the materials,"³⁴ referring here to the materials exhibited inside the Pavilion, especially wood. In so doing, he ended by commenting not on the design but on economic geography, a discipline that Zervos was blending with culture in a very unscientific way. In fact, Aalto's Pavilion harbored complex references that remained inaccessible to spectators whose point of view was exclusively based on nationalist conceptions.

Undulating Lines and Countryside Motifs at the Pavilion

French accounts were notably silent about the theme of the countryside that is so present in the Finnish Pavilion of the Exposition Internationale in Paris. Another, closely linked motif also passed completely unnoticed: the use of undulating lines. Nor did the American articles about the Pavilion grasp the association of these motifs. The motif of undulating lines, underlined by McAndrew as bearing witness to

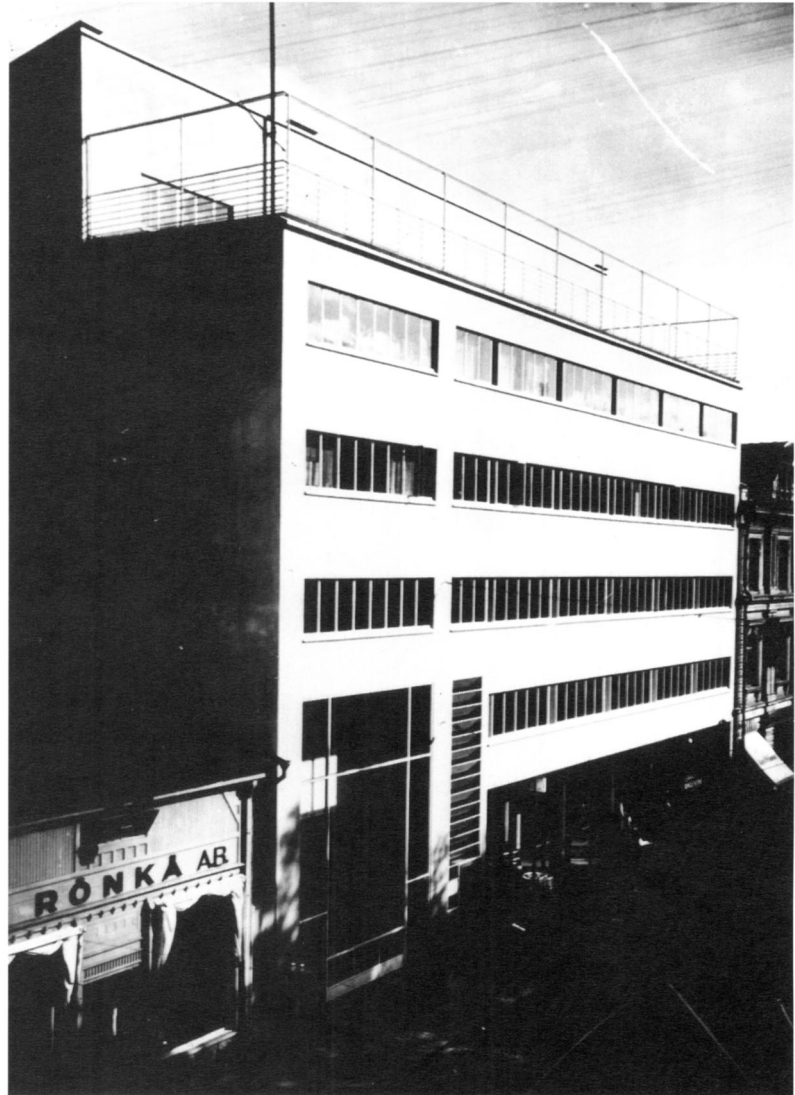
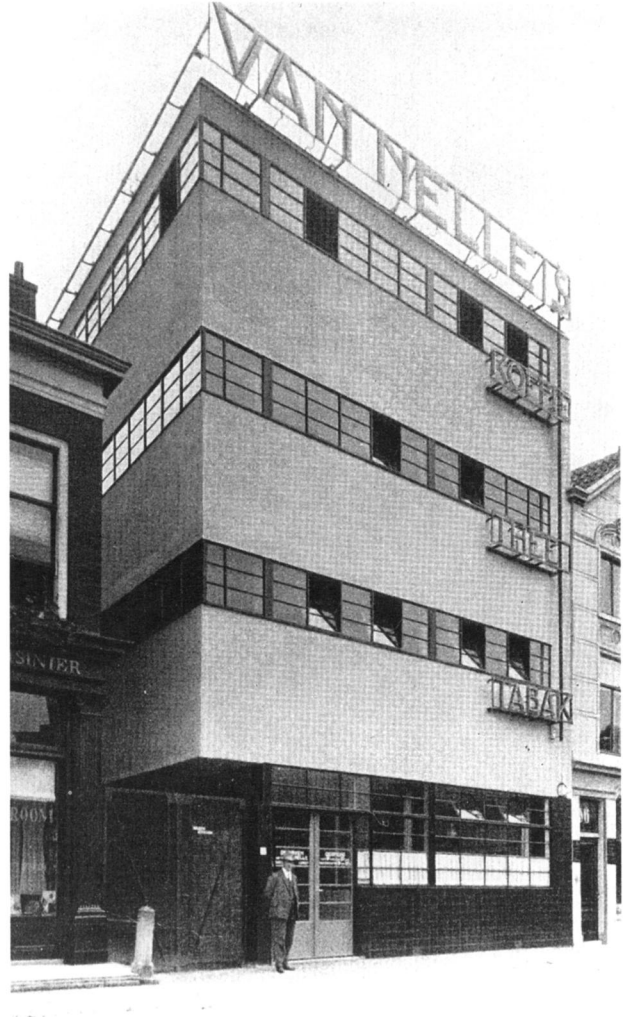
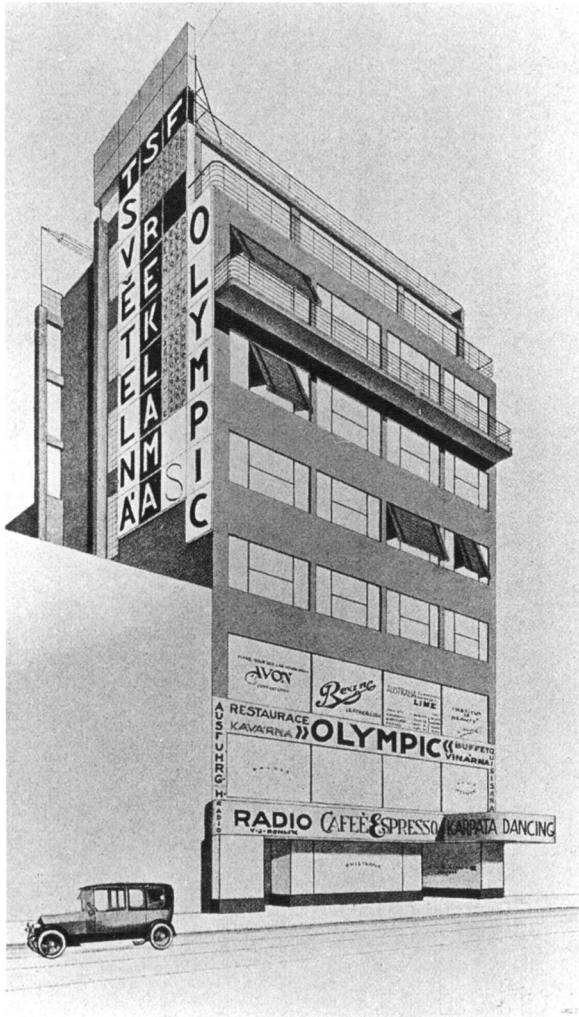


FIGURE 3
Aalto, Turun-Sanomat building, Turku,
Finland, 1928. Photo: Museum of Finnish
Architecture.

Aalto's membership in the European artistic avant-garde, was illustrated, in the exhibition catalogue published in 1938 by the Museum of Modern Art, by the curved ceiling of the auditorium of the Viipuri Library, a building completed in 1934.³⁵

Aalto's preparatory drawings for the Pavilion's interior design are based on an assemblage of curving lines (Fig. 2). The outdoor body of water he designed for it also employed this motif.³⁶ He created the Savoy vase and other glass pieces of wavy lines around the same time, echoing the architectural conception of the Pavilion. These decorative objects were part of a commission Aalto won following a competition organized by the Karhula Company in fall 1936 for glass objects to be presented in



the Pavilion (Fig. 6). Aalto designed the Savoy vase knowing that it would stand within his interior. The Finnish countryside also inspired Aalto's modes of documentation of Finland at the Pavilion, and it also entered into multiple details of various elements of the design. The preparatory designs for little outdoor lamps—*nurmikkolamppu* (lit., grass lamps) (Fig. 7)—make clear their resemblance to mushrooms. These diminutive lamps were placed in the interior courtyard of the Pavilion, as seen in a period photograph (Fig. 8). The grouping of the wooden pillars within the Pavilion evoked a grove of trees (Fig. 9). Certain works of photography that Aalto had planned to install in the Pavilion still exist (in reproductions and installation views), and photographic documentation of one of his installations, which surmounted an exterior staircase of the Pavilion, showed a landscape of lakes and pines (Fig. 10).

FIGURE 4
 Left: Jaromír Krejcar (1895-1949), shop building in Prague. Right: Johannes Andreas Brinkman (1902-1949) and Leendert Cornelius van der Flugt, shop building in Leiden. From *Internationale neue Baukunst* (Stuttgart, 1928).



FIGURE 5
Pauli Blomstedt (1900-1935), Pohjanhovi
Hotel, Rovaniemi, Finland, 1936. Photo:
Museum of Finnish Architecture.

Before his design of the Villa Mairea of 1938-1939, the Pavilion was the first structure in which Aalto combined the two motifs of undulating lines and representations of the countryside. He had already used the motif of curving lines in his classicist work: in 1922, he had built a wooden acoustic screen in the form of a shell for the Tampere fair (Fig. 11). In 1928, a preparatory drawing for the restaurant for the theater in Turku showed a piano podium in curved form. In 1929, in cooperation with Erik Bryggman, he built a little orchestra platform in wood with a

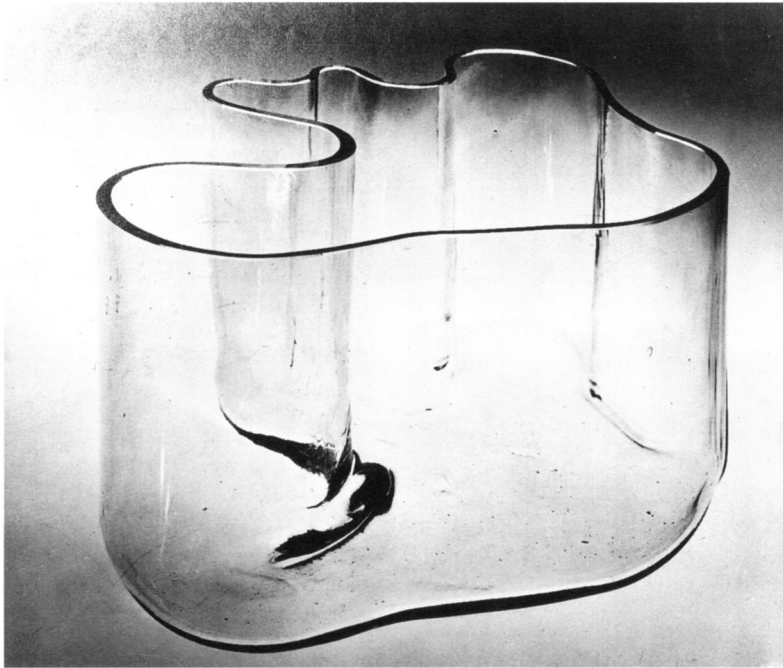


FIGURE 6
Aalto, Savoy vase, winning entry in the Karhula Company competition, fall 1936, for glass to be exhibited in Finnish Pavilion, 1937. Photo: Museum of Finnish Architecture.

floor of curved outline for the Jubilee fair in Turku. In the domain of furniture, his first explorations of how curved lines relate to the body began in 1929, and they culminated with his creation of the model armchair for the Paimio Sanatorium in 1931. According to Göran Schildt, it was in direct relation with these first furniture creations that Aalto undertook his first wood sculptures in the early 1930s.³⁷ As for interior architecture, it was in his project for the Viipuri Library, the final version of which was drawn in 1933, that the curvilinear form appears most clearly in the early 1930s (Fig. 12). Other details from the interior of the building—for example, the stairway ramps—were also curved (Fig. 13). A drawing by Aalto from early 1937 shows the free motif of the Savoy vase, as well as various floral motifs, within the geometric lines of the plan of the Tallinn Museum: they appear in the context of a competition organized for the construction of this building (Fig. 14).

The Paris Pavilion was the first work, however, in which native topography played a major role in the interior design. In 1938, the year after he conceived the Pavilion, Aalto designed two other works with metaphors linked to the Finnish landscape. In the interior arrangement of the Savoy restaurant in Helsinki,³⁸ the principal piece of interior decoration consisted of wooden panels, while the client chose the Savoy vase to decorate the tables.

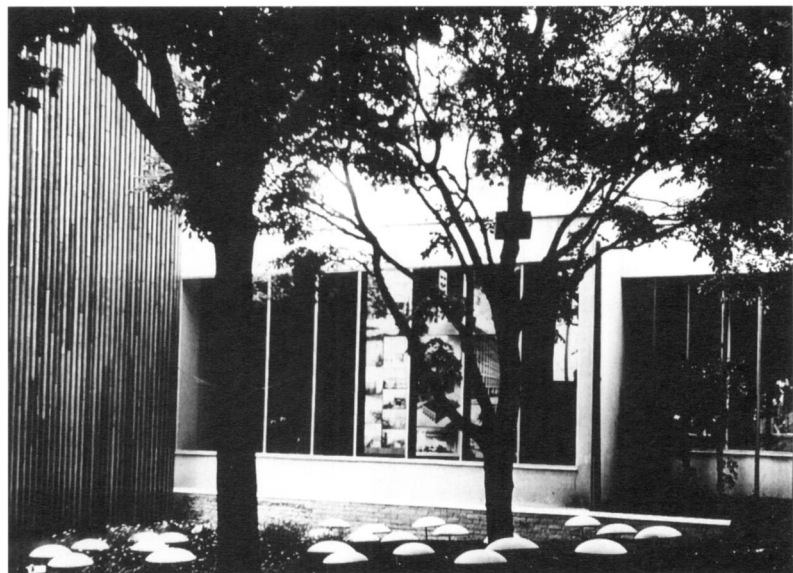
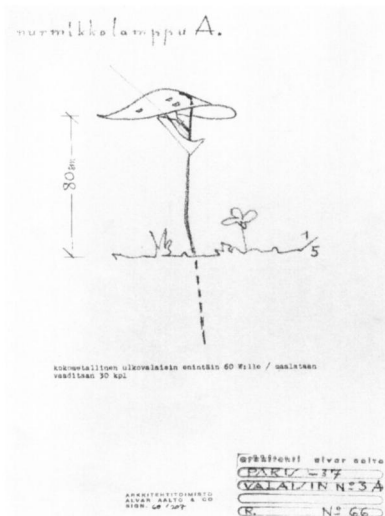
The Villa Mairea is a major building by Aalto. Juhani Pallasmaa has commented extensively on its “intuitive and associative architecture” and has pointed out that Aalto “transformed the interior into a metaphorical forest punctuated by columns and poles.³⁹ According to Marc Treib, “the principal staircase leading to the bedrooms further reinforces the reading of the house as a refined humanized forest.”⁴⁰ In this villa, numerous details, as in the Finnish Pavilion, linked the exterior and the interior, some of them associating undulating lines with the countryside: the sinuous form of the pool, and the wavelike wooden partition isolating the library from the living room.

The Originality of the Finnish Pavilion

The general question of the role of the Finnish countryside in Aalto’s work has been the topic of much commentary by a variety of authors, notably by Demetri Porphyrios, who developed the concept of “heterotopia.”⁴¹ Similarly, the general question of Aalto’s use of undulating lines has also been the object of numerous discussions, and evaluation of these too would extend beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to cite, however, the claim made by Kirmo Mikkola in the catalogue of the traveling exhibition *En contact avec Alvar Aalto*, 1992-1993: “Aalto’s works also participate in the evolution of abstract art, as is shown by their similarities to the paintings of Arp, Miró, or Léger.”⁴² The reference to similarities between Aalto and Arp does not go beyond McAndrew’s statement in 1938 cited above.⁴³ Mikkola in *En contact avec Alvar Aalto*

FIGURE 7
Aalto, drawing, 1936, for outdoor lamps for Finnish Pavilion, 1937. Photo: Archives of the Alvar Aalto Foundation.

FIGURE 8
Aalto, interior courtyard, Finnish Pavilion, 1937, mushroom-shaped lamps in foreground. Photo: Museum of Finnish Architecture.



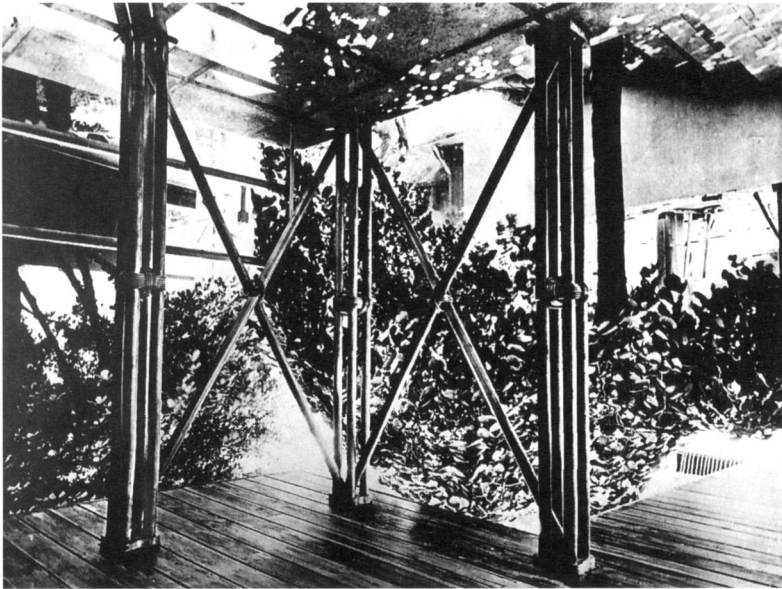


FIGURE 9
Aalto, interior showing clustered wooden columns, Finnish Pavilion, 1937. Photo: Museum of Finnish Architecture.

suggests that Aalto entertained this influence because of his critical attitudes toward rationalism.

The 1937 Finnish Pavilion was a profoundly original design, both within the framework of the exhibition and with regard to Finnish architecture as a whole at the end of the 1930s. In the context of the exhibition, references to Scandinavian landscape were certainly not limited to Aalto's work. The Norway pavilion, built by Knut Knutsen, Arne Korsmo, and Ole Lind Schistad⁴⁴—architecture espoused the straight lines of the early Modern movement—also displayed national topography through the medium of large-scale photographs. Put into perspective with this building, the originality of Aalto's design lies not in the presence of the landscape but its transformation into a composition that extends even to the gardens, with their lakelike body of water and mushroomlike lamps.

The representation of the countryside also distinguishes Aalto's Pavilion from the rest of Finnish architecture in the 1930s. An examination of the principal Finnish architectural periodical of the period, *Arkkitiehti*, reveals Aalto's originality in deploying metaphors linked to nature. The works of certain architects, such as Bryggman's villas, are constructed in harmony with a natural site, but never does the countryside intrude into the interior decor as it does at Aalto's Finnish Pavilion.⁴⁵ Decorative designs, such as the "Gilded Cat" by Birger Carlstedt, the interior of a café he designed in Helsinki in 1929, are most often marked by the influence of the Bauhaus. One work by Pauli Blomstedt does, however, present an exception to this observation, in

that the architecture and interior decoration are shot through with natural metaphor: the work in question is his reconstruction of the manor at Rantala in Karelia, 1938. Blomstedt's commentaries and preparatory drawings, published in the journal *Arkkitehti*, show that he used pine wood from the site for various aspects of the interior decor, and especially for the construction of benches.⁴⁶ This minor work, as compared to the Finnish Pavilion and the Villa Mairea, is nevertheless also an exception in both the Finnish scene and Blomstedt's own work. Furthermore, its metaphorical dimension, as expressed in the use of stone for the façade and local wood for the design of the main living room, shows no similarities with Aalto's works.

FIGURE 10
Aalto, detail of façade with photograph (at right) by Eino Mäkinen, Finnish Pavilion, 1937. Photo: Museum of Finnish Architecture.

The Pavilion as Didactic Design

At the Finnish Pavilion, Aalto intended to use undulating lines as a basis for his representation of Finland. A preliminary drawing shows



curved lines that, suggesting the outlines of Finnish lakes, border the documentary information (Fig. 2); but, as mentioned above, Aalto had to drop this part of his project. The Senate Square by Engel and the railway station by Saarinen illustrated in this drawing were his choice of urban architecture, the best in the city of Helsinki. They also showed that Finland could not be summed up with a univocal rhetoric of the countryside.

Aalto's projected choice of a figural form capable of signifying the concept of a "country of a thousand lakes" demonstrates his didactic intent. His drawing shows a functional use of the curved line motif, a direct and universally comprehensible expression of the sinuous outlines

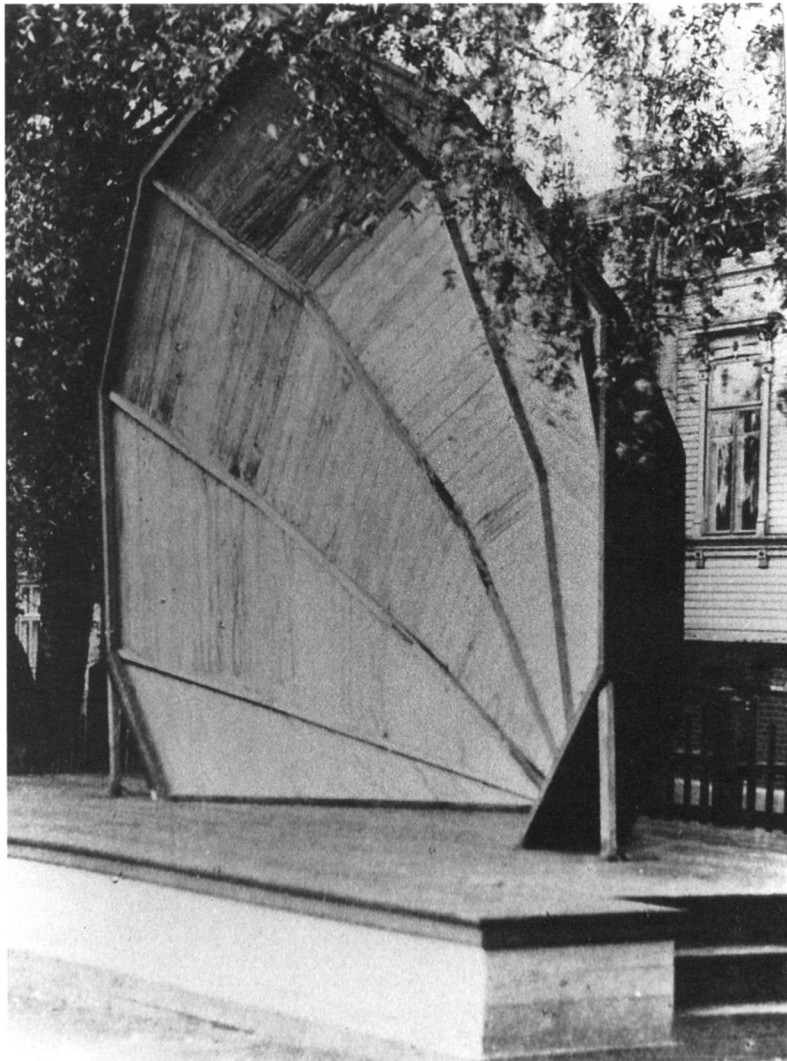


FIGURE 11
Aalto, wooden acoustic shell, temporary construction for open-air concerts, the Fairgrounds, Tampere, Finland, 1922.
Photo: Museum of Finnish Architecture.

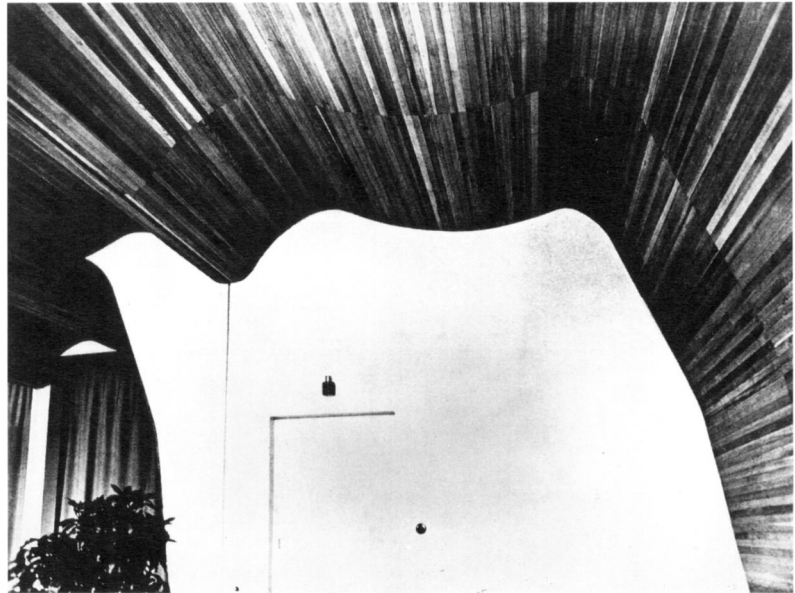


FIGURE 12
Aalto, detail of ceiling of auditorium,
Viipuri Library, Viborg, Russia, 1934. Photo:
Museum of Finnish Architecture.

of lakes. This is not the first example of Aalto's functional use of the curved line. For example, the wooden shell he constructed for the Tampere fair (Fig. 11) was acoustical.⁴⁷

Instead of using of this figural form in large panels, Aalto displayed photographs, goods, and diagrams and maps, though to a lesser extent than in the Finnish Pavilion at the New York World's Fair of 1939. Although the panels with the curved line motif were not made, other works in the Pavilion, which were realized, reiterated in a more expressive way this motif of undulating lines—the lakelike body of water, the mushroom-shaped lamps, the photographs of a lake-filled landscape, and the Savoy vase.

The documentary display that Aalto elaborated in 1937 in Paris, which was centered on communicating touristic information, prefigured the undulating partition that he would construct in the Finnish Pavilion at the New York World's Fair in 1939 (Fig. 15). In New York, three levels of photographs, representing the country, its inhabitants, and their life and work, covered this partition.⁴⁸ This mode of display was original among the Finnish exhibitions, which in general emphasized an effective display of commercial products judged to be good candidates for export.⁴⁹ Yet the documentary dimension of Aalto's work and the importance he accorded the representation of natural resources are in harmony with the work of another Nordic architect, the Swede Sven Ivar Lind. In his presentation of Swedish forests in the Swedish Pavilion at the Paris Exposition Internationale of 1937, Lind also made aesthetic use of

diagrams (Fig. 16). The diagrams presented by Aalto in 1939 in the Finnish Pavilion at the New York World's Fair, continuing with the concepts he first offered in Paris, evoke Lind's presentation directly (Fig. 17).

Avant-Garde and Local Influences on the Pavilion

Closely linked to the projected presentations of touristic regions and to the rhetoric of the countryside, the undulating lines that are such an important feature of the Finnish Pavilion have not been the subject of

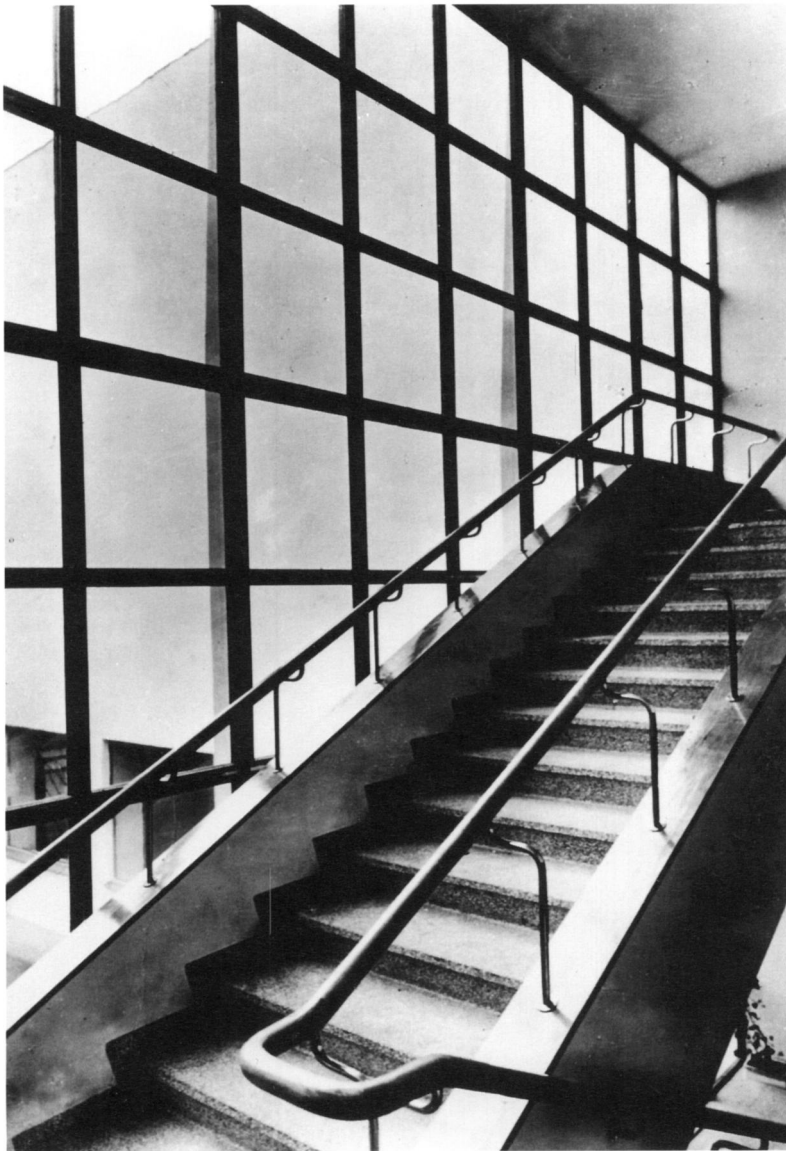
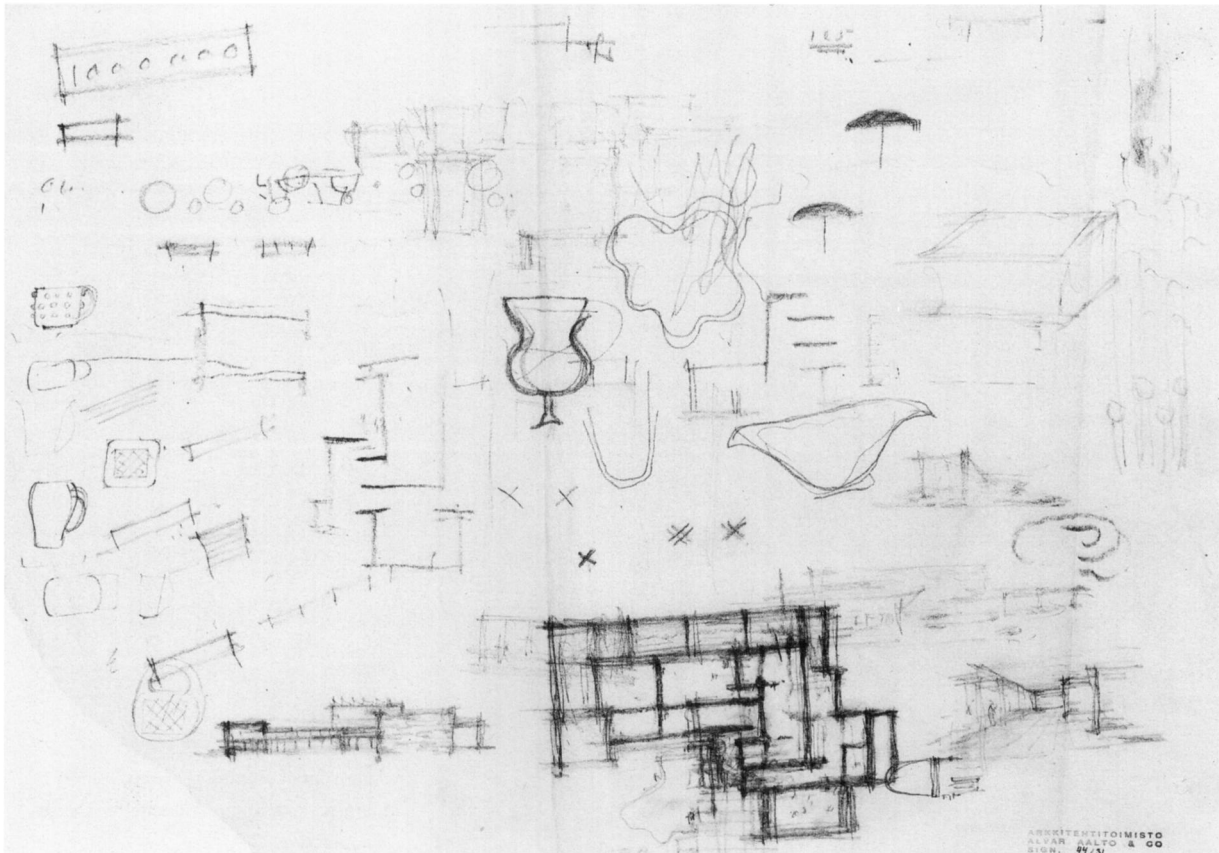


FIGURE 13
Aalto, detail of stairway ramps, Viipuri
Library, 1934. Photo: Museum of Finnish
Architecture.

many commentaries on this work. One school of thought sees them as a sign of Aalto's adherence to the European avant-garde. Authors such as Martin Eidelberg have connected Aalto's work with the artistic avant-garde and biomorphism,⁵⁰ as well as with the countryside motifs in Japanese art.⁵¹ Others, such as Juhani Uolevi Pallasmaa, have associated his forms with Synthetic Cubism and Purism, and have identified paintings by Georges Braque and Fernand Léger with the general form and even some architectural details of the Villa Mairea.⁵² In his essay in the 1998 exhibition catalogue *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism*, Pallasmaa also refers to the friendships that Aalto had with artists, notably Léger and also László Moholy-Nagy, Max Ernst, Constantin Brancusi, Hans Arp, and Alexander Calder.⁵³

To what extent did international avant-garde inspirations animate the interior design of the Pavilion in Paris? The nationalist understanding of the work that evolved from the French reviews of 1937 has often ignored this question. For example, in the catalogue of the exhibition *Métamorphoses finlandaises: Architecture et design*, organized by the Centre

FIGURE 14
Aalto, plan for Tallinn Museum and motifs
for glass objects. Photo: Archives of the
Alvar Aalto Foundation.



Pompidou in Paris in 1978,⁵⁴ Aalto's Savoy vase⁵⁵ is juxtaposed with a photograph (just above it) of an aerial view of the Finnish countryside featuring a lake (Fig. 18), and it is not mentioned at all in the sizable article consecrated to artisanal products and design, nor in any other text in the catalogue:⁵⁶ the vase is thereby denied the quality of a design object. This nationalist interpretation was not uniform, however, for the same vase was seen as a design object in the catalogue of the Aalto exhibition organized in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art.⁵⁷ There it was associated with influences from the European avant-garde. Nevertheless, the example of the 1978 exhibition in Paris shows how powerful the nationalist representation of Aalto's work still was at the end of the 1970s.

The circumstances of Aalto's affiliation with the European avant-garde at the end of the 1930s are, however, far from obscure. Göran Schildt has noted the importance of Aalto's relations with László Moholy-Nagy,⁵⁸ for instance. He first met the Hungarian in 1930,⁵⁹ and Moholy-Nagy and Ellen Franck spent a holiday in Finland with Aalto and his wife in 1931. Schildt sees Moholy-Nagy's impact and, through him, the impact of the Bauhaus on Aalto in many domains: in

FIGURE 15

Aalto, interior of Finnish Pavilion, New York World's Fair, 1939, detail of undulating partition with photographs. Photo: Museum of Finnish Architecture.



typography, and in his experimentation with wood, starting in 1929, which opened the way for both his creations in the domain of furniture and his works of sculpture. Aalto's interest in the theater was also heightened by continental Europeans: Schildt signals a stage set Aalto executed in 1929 that shows the influence of the Bauhaus. Finally, the example of Moholy-Nagy can clearly be seen, according to Schildt, in the importance accorded photography by Aalto in his exhibitions in Paris and New York. As for personal relations with members of the continental European avant-garde, during Aalto's stay in Paris during the Exposition



FIGURE 16
Cover of *Byggmästaren* 32 (1937), showing presentation of forestry in Swedish Pavilion by its architect Sven Ivar Lund, Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, Paris, 1937.



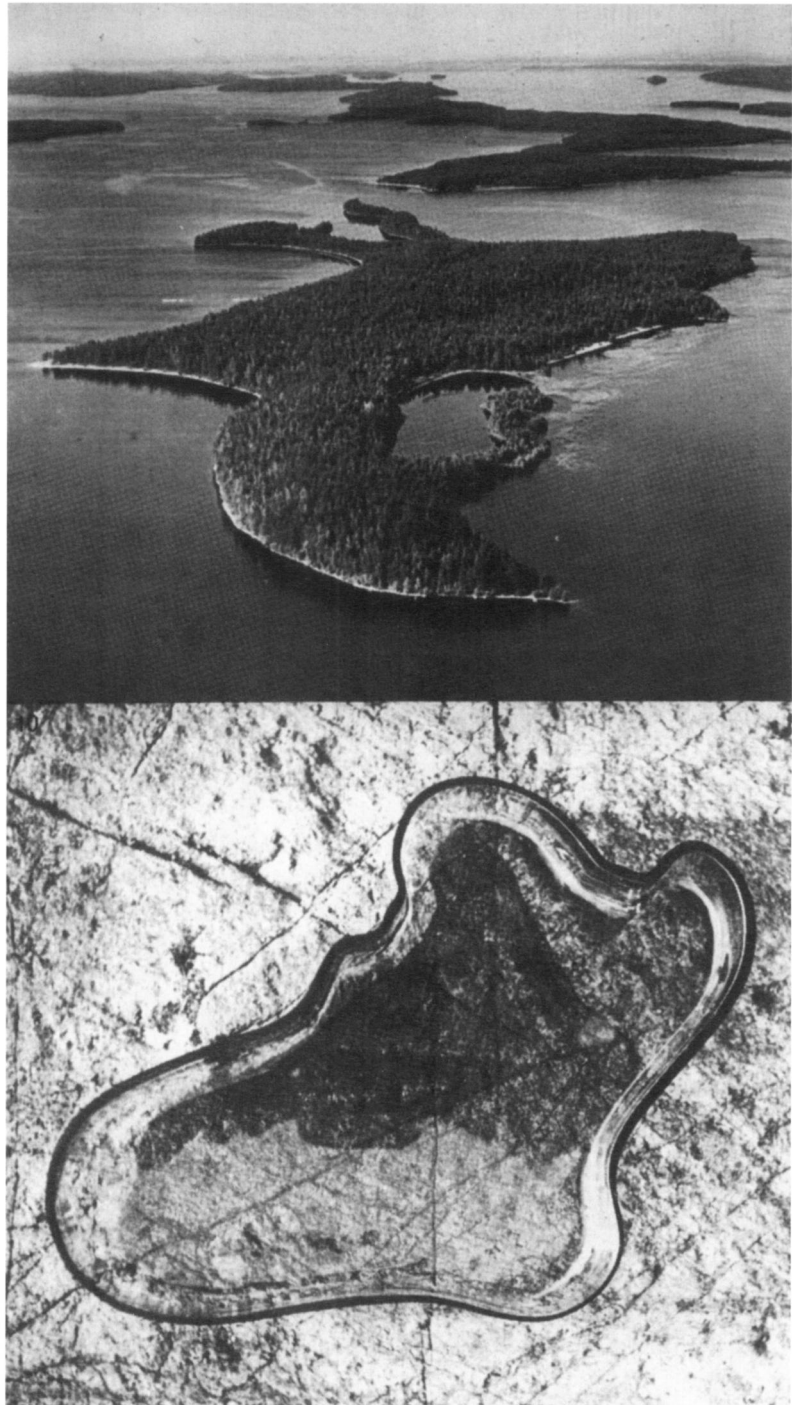
FIGURE 17
Aalto, detail of forestry presentation in Finnish Pavilion, New York World's Fair, 1939. Photo: Museum of Finnish Architecture.

Internationale of 1937 he renewed the friendship he had formed with Léger in 1933 in Athens during the meeting of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM). In Paris in 1937 Aalto also met Alexander Calder and Constantin Brancusi,⁶⁰ two acquaintances he made after he designed the Savoy vase and the Finnish Pavilion.

Aalto's knowledge of avant-garde art via the Bauhaus and Moholy-Nagy is incontestable, and is witnessed by various works published in the 1920s that were in the library of Aalto's workshop.⁶¹ One of these works, Moholy-Nagy's *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, was a compendium of Modernist photography. Another Bauhaus publication, *Die Bühne im Bauhaus*, also illustrated Moholy-Nagy's photo-collages, which seem to have inspired Aalto's choice of the photographs in the Finnish Pavilion at the Paris Exposition of 1937. A print of women exercising in the social section directly evokes Moholy-Nagy's *Menschmechanik* (Fig. 19), for example, as much by the nature of its subject as by the repetition of the same image, and in particular by the suppression of the horizon line, a typical feature of Moholy-Nagy's work⁶² (Fig. 20). Obviously, Aalto could use continental European avant-garde sources for representations that were a priori

FIGURE 18

Above: aerial photograph of Lake Päijänne, Finland. Below: cross-section drawing of Aalto's Savoy vase, 1936-1937. From Jacques Mullender, Matti Klinge, et al., *Métamorphoses finlandaises: Architecture et design*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1978), 8. Photo: Museum of Finnish Architecture.



nationalist. His stretching women illustrate the wide interest in exercise and fitness in Finland. The example shows, contrary to what McAndrew suggested, that Aalto's adaptation of avant-garde influences was not entirely limited to the motif of undulating lines.

It is quite understandable that the similarities observed between the work of Aalto, as an architect, and the work of European artists have been confined, following McAndrew, to the "heroes" of abstract art. Still, Aalto did not meet Brancusi, Arp, or Calder before the 1937 Paris Exhibition. Further, the main role among artists that Pallasmaa attributes in his essay in the 1998 exhibition catalogue *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism* to Léger in Aalto's evolution should be discussed. There is only one piece of correspondence between Aalto and Léger.⁶³ In light of the volume of letters, the main role among Aalto's artist friends is played by Moholy-Nagy.⁶⁴ This does not imply that Aalto was untouched by Léger. For example, the Savoy vase has an affinity of formal language with a mural painted by Léger in Antibes in 1932 containing undulating forms inspired by a book of astronomy.⁶⁵

Another major artist who may have influenced Aalto with regard to curved lines in the late 1930s was Max Ernst, who with Aalto was commissioned to contribute to the Corso restaurant in Zurich.⁶⁶ Aalto's furniture was to be placed in the ballroom facing a large mural by Ernst (Fig. 21), which included sinuous lines.

Nevertheless, the influences on Aalto in the thirties were certainly not restricted to those who have become the icons of modern art. The influence of the Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer illustrates this point, for example, because, as mentioned above, Aalto owned a copy of *Die Bühne im Bauhaus*, in which several of Schlemmer's theatrical drawings were published. Intimately linked with the theater, Schlemmer's oeuvre included a series of drawings for his "Triadic Ballet," representing schematic theatrical spaces in which puppets moved about, as shown in a drawing reproduced in *Die Bühne im Bauhaus* (Fig. 22).⁶⁷ Indeed, the forms in this drawing are more similar to the curving line of the auditorium of the Viipuri Library than are any artworks, such as Arp's, with biomorphic shapes but no architectural form to sustain them. In addition, Aalto might have been drawn to Schlemmer's work through his own interest in stage sets, as Schildt has pointed out.⁶⁸

That Aalto was aware of and possibly influenced by lesser-known artists is also demonstrated by his contact with the so-called Brno movement of designers in Czechoslovakia.⁶⁹ Aalto's integration of

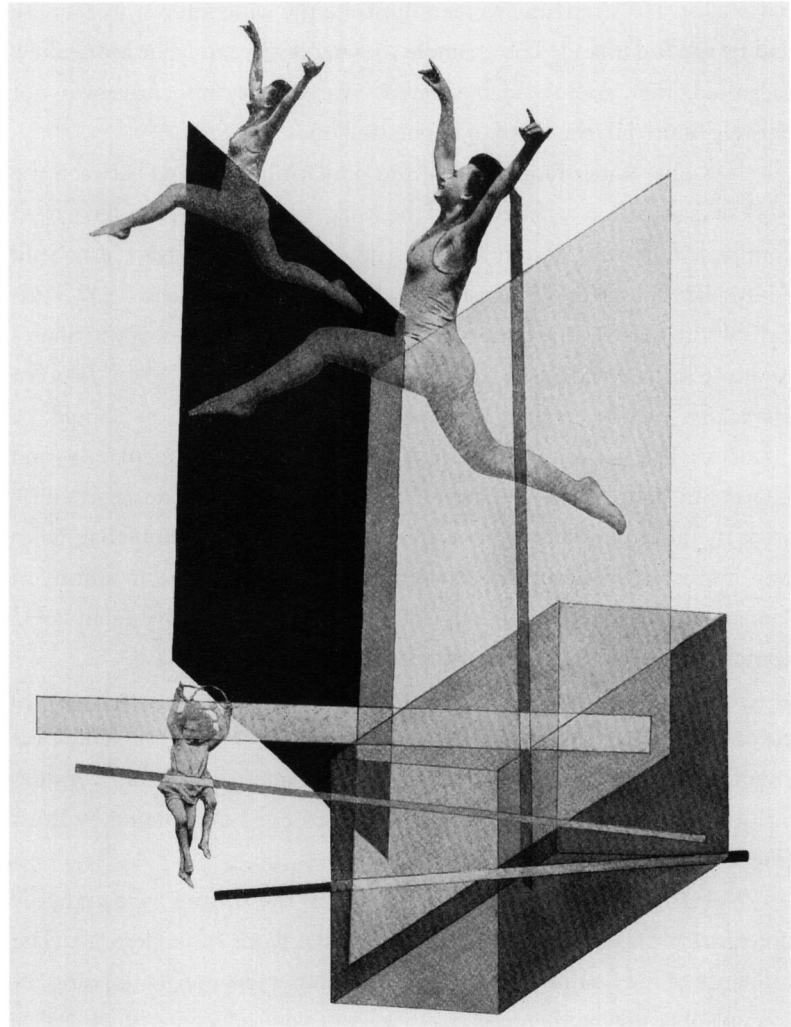


FIGURE 19
László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946),
Menschmechanik, photo-collage. From László
Moholy-Nagy, Oskar Schlemmer, and
Farkas Molnár, *Die Bühne im Bauhaus*,
Bauhausbücher no. 4 (Munich, 1924), 65.

undulating lines in the thirties is a development parallel not only to that of Le Corbusier, as Marc Treib points out,⁷⁰ but also to that of Bohuslav Fuchs, an architect in Brno, as shown in his decoration of a café in the Brno City Museum in 1934 (Fig. 23) using art objects with curved lines by the Czech painter František Kalab.⁷¹ That Aalto and Fuchs knew each other is highly probable.⁷² Nevertheless, Aalto's use of an undulating line in the thirties always reflects his own conception.

Aalto's involvement with the continental European artistic avant-garde was very extensive, as seen in his friendships, his participation in the meetings of the CIAM, his contacts through the commercialization and exhibition of his furniture designs, and his exposure to European cultural activities through the foreign magazines he received. In contrast,

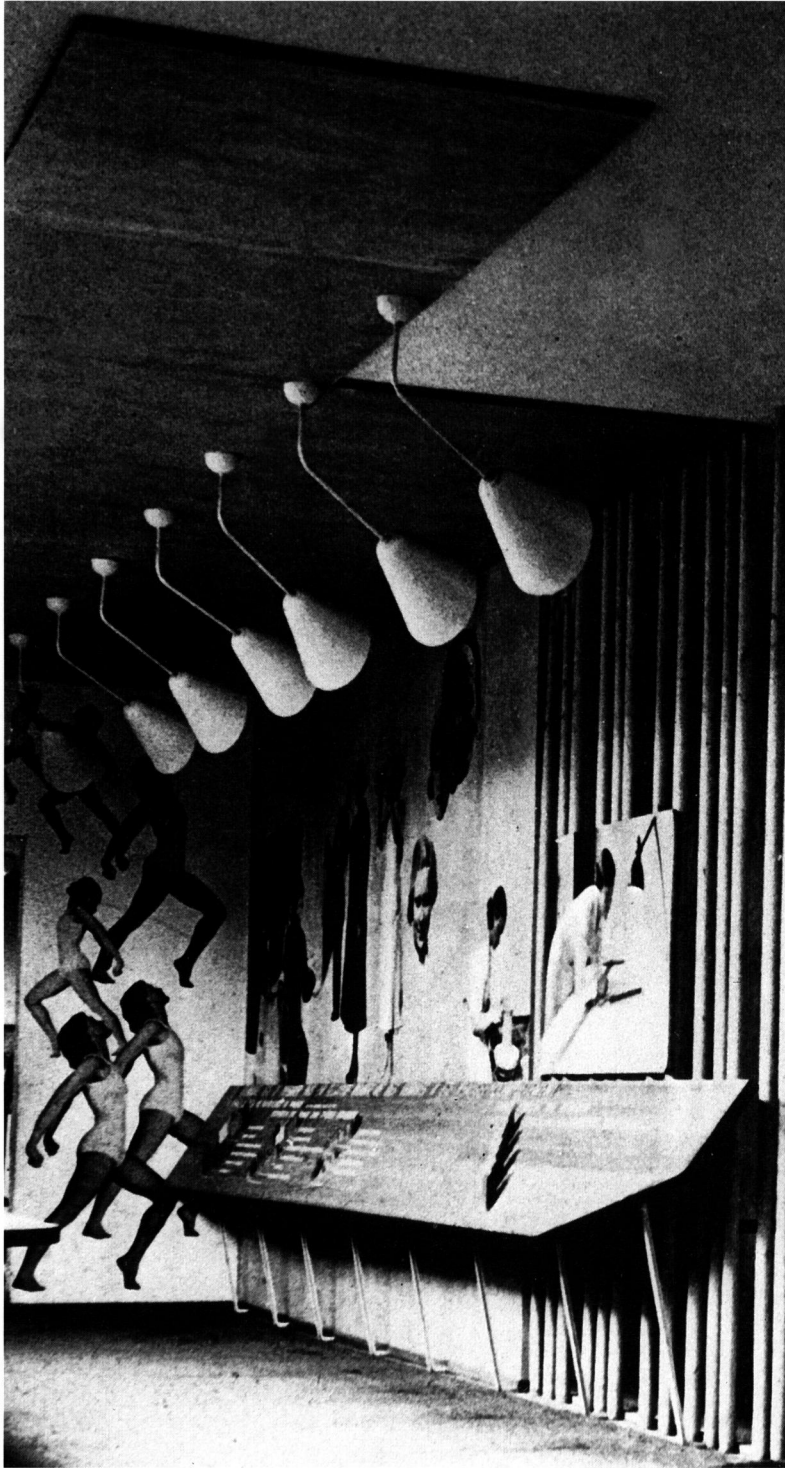


FIGURE 20

Aalto, detail of graphic presentation on society at the Finnish Pavilion, 1937.

Photo: Museum of Finnish Architecture.

the general awareness in Finland of continental developments in the thirties was limited. One measure of Aalto's originality is suggested by a survey of the artistic and cultural journals published in Finland during that decade:⁷³ it shows that Finnish artistic milieux were notably slow to accept new continental European tendencies. Abstract art is not mentioned in these publications, and coverage of French art is limited to Impressionism and its immediate aftermath.⁷⁴ Not surprisingly, the exhibition entitled "Art Français," which opened in Helsinki in 1937 after the Paris Exposition and presented works by Matisse, Picasso, and Braque, was negatively received.

In sum, it seems too simple to analyze the undulating line in Aalto's work as a borrowing from continental European avant-garde art, and to consider such borrowing simple and direct, as McAndrew did in 1938. The possible sources for the motif lie across the spectrum of the European vanguard, as well as in nature itself. The general theme of the countryside also illustrates the complex character of Aalto's sources of inspiration for

FIGURE 21
Ballroom of the Corso restaurant, Zurich,
with furnishings by Aalto and mural by Max
Ernst (1891-1976), 1934. From *Werk*
(November 24, 1936), n.p.



the undulating line motif, sources that were not limited to a simple reprise of aspects of the Finnish countryside. At the Finnish Pavilion, Aalto's concept of touristic publicity and his projected design of panels showing touristic regions played a considerable role in the use of this motif. It also seems too simple to identify only the curvilinearity in Aalto's work with the avant-garde, for the photographic aspects of the Pavilion, which employ no undulating motifs at all, also show major avant-garde influence.

Other sources for Aalto's designs of the 1930s include Japanese culture, and the Aaltos' friendship with the Japanese ambassador to Finland and his wife between 1933 and 1937 is pertinent to the Pavilion.⁷⁵ Schildt notes that the ambassador presented Aalto with various books on Japanese civilization, probably including two small texts on Japanese gardens and landscape art.⁷⁶ These publications of 1934, illustrated by small, good-quality photographs, could have played a role in the conception of Aalto's works between 1936 and 1939, in particular his designs for the Finnish Pavilion.

Treib has pointed out that early sketches for the Villa Mairea reveal an affinity with Japan, as exemplified by the poles of the principal staircase leading to the bedrooms, poles that resemble bamboo. In time, Aalto replaced this allusion to Japan with a modulated composition of wooden poles.⁷⁷ Earlier, Aalto's series of poles for the Paris Pavilion also reveal an affinity with the Japanese landscape, as shown in Figure 9. It is revealing that these poles, with their metaphor of nature and Japanese associations, are placed in a transitional space between inside and outside, between the interior of the Pavilion and its courtyard. They also call to mind a trait that

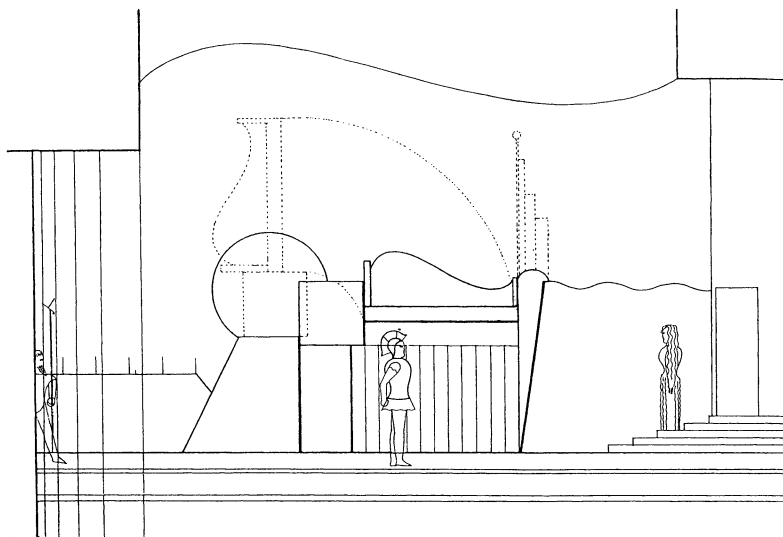


FIGURE 22
Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943), drawing of an unidentified stage. From Moholy-Nagy et al., *Die Bühne im Bauhaus*, 43.

Aalto associated with Finland. In a text titled “Architecture and the Landscape of Central Finland” published in 1925,⁷⁸ Aalto had pointed out the Finns’ longing for nature and explained that, because of this longing, they liked having “beauty at the door of [their] house.” In the design of the Pavilion, the poles form a passage between the interior and the courtyard.⁷⁹

The Savoy vase, designed in 1936, a work of undulating lines created in the context of the Pavilion as a “total work of art,” typifies the complexity of Aalto’s stylistic inspirations. An affinity with Léger’s forms has already been cited. Timo Keinänen has pointed out the similarities between the curvilinear forms of Aalto’s vase and those of an unidentified designer at the Swedish glass manufactory Orrefors,⁸⁰ which were published in 1935 in the journal *Form*⁸¹ (Fig. 24). The resemblance is indeed striking, and it is well established that Aalto knew this journal. The editorial committee of *Form* was composed at this time of Gotthard

FIGURE 23
Bohuslav Fuchs (1895-1972), interior
decoration of café in the Brno City
Museum, 1934. Photograph: Museum of the
City of Brno.



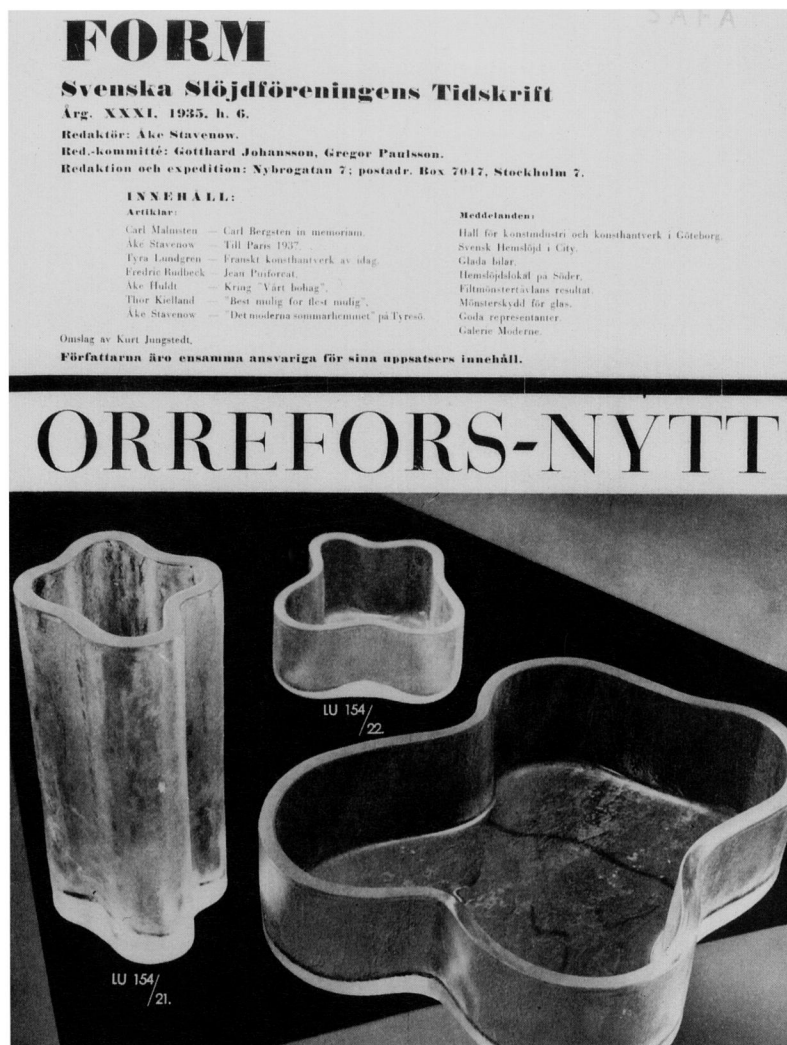


FIGURE 24
Cover of *Form*, Svenska Slöjdföreningens
Tidskrift (Stockholm) 31, no. 6 (1935),
showing Orrefors glass.

Johansson and Gregor Paulsson, two members of the Swedish Modernist avant-garde. Aalto received *Form* and maintained a solid connection with the journal, which regularly carried advertisements for his furniture. *Form* defended Aalto's work, as is shown by the publication in 1934 of an article by Paulsson on his curved wood furniture.⁸² Issue number seven of 1935—the issue following the one in which the Orrefors creations were published—presented an article on Aalto.⁸³ The Savoy vase may also have been influenced by the work of the glass designer Marsio-Aalto, Aalto's wife.⁸⁴ Of intriguing similarity is a flower vase in the ABCD series she created in 1932 that has undulations in the bottom for receiving flowers of various sizes (Fig. 25). Within the field of design, the Savoy vase also evokes the lines of an unusual glass vase created in 1859 by the

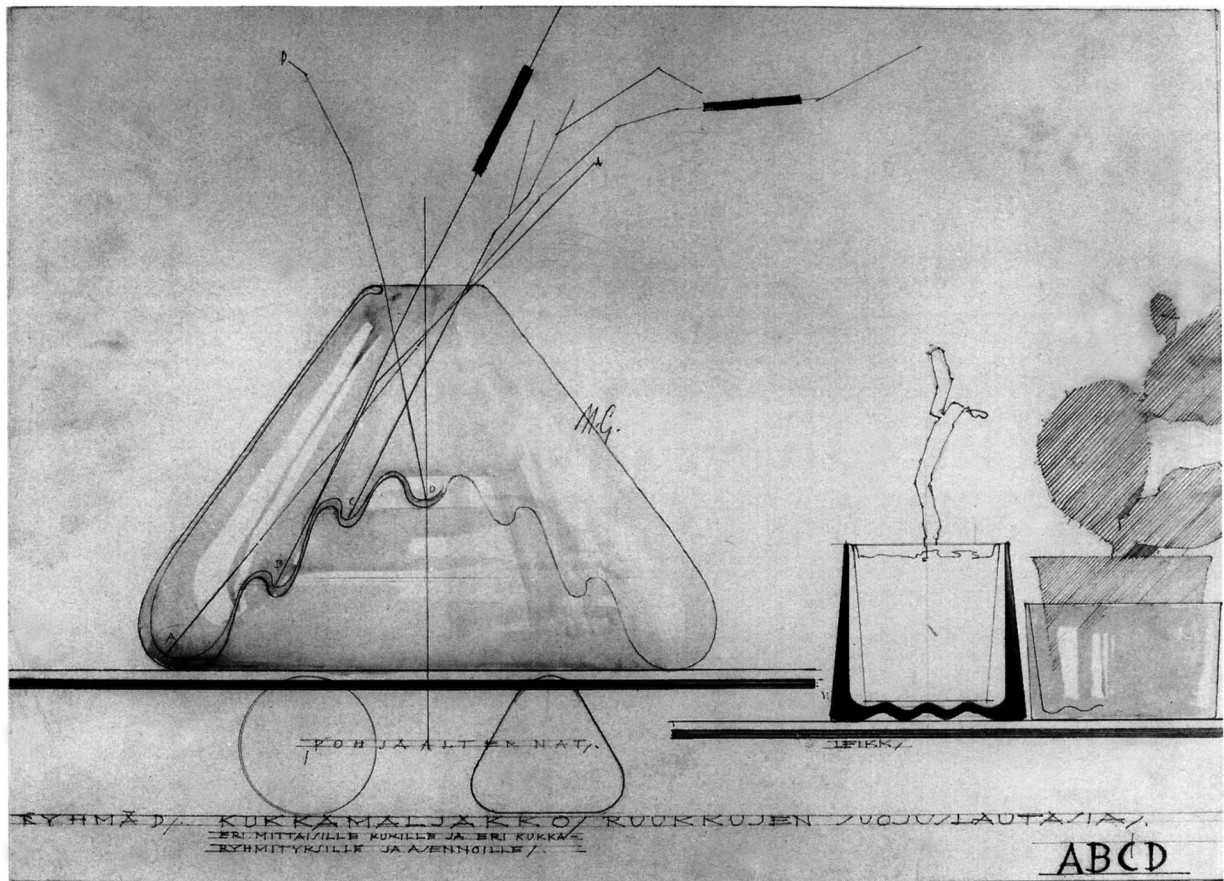


FIGURE 25
Aino Marsio-Aalto (1894-1949), ABCD series (vase), design submitted to Karhula Company competition, 1932, for table ornaments and vases. Photo: Archives of the Finnish Glass Museum, Riihimäki.

British designer Philip Webb.⁸⁵ Aalto particularly admired the Arts and Crafts movement, as is shown by his letter to Charles Francis Annesley Voysey after his stay in 1933 in London, where the two men met.⁸⁶ Aalto's knowledge of the aforementioned vase by Webb has not been established, but its affinities with his work show, if further proof were needed, that curved forms did not constitute a rupture with the art of the previous century.

Conclusion

On the occasion of the Paris Exposition Internationale of 1937, French critical discourse created a particular myth of Finland and bound the work of Aalto to it. Other examples after 1937 show that Aalto's work, and even Aalto himself, were often associated with an image of his country. The chapter entitled "Alvar Aalto: Elemental and Contemporary" in Sigfried Giedion's famous book *Space, Time, and Architecture* (1941) clearly bears the mark of such an association: as Giedion wrote,

"Finland is with Aalto wherever he goes."⁸⁷ This chapter contains long digressions on Finland, insisting on its primitive character, a character that is presented as a positive aspect of its civilization. Another example is the official speech on Aalto's reception of the Royal Gold Medal for Architecture in London in 1957.

Finland, as I think it has been made all too clear already, is unhappily unknown to most of us first hand. Alvar Aalto is, however, a very lively visible export.

He is Finland, a man of forests, lakes, and rocky islands, the embodiment of a vigorous, independent, and a lion-hearted nation.

His architecture is Aalto, and as I have already said, is Finland.⁸⁸

The French narratives contained a latent contradiction: was Aalto's work of Finnish or European character?⁸⁹ The Finnish Pavilion illustrates both the national and the continental European foundations of Aalto's work and their complex manifestations. The work also reveals that while it might have been animated by national inspirations, it was of course not an exact reflection of the country, but rather an original *representation* based on inspirations of Finnish origin. In the process of representation, the program of the Exposition Internationale, involving the construction of national pavilions, could not but play a contributing role. Among Aalto's roots, the Pavilion, its interior design, and the Savoy vase also reveal the importance of Swedish parallels and influence (such as the work of Sven Ivar Lind and the Orrefors vases, both mentioned above) as well as the very great variety of Western and Central European influences that Aalto absorbed.

Benedict Anderson's analysis of the concept of "nation" in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* is extremely pertinent to the French reception of the Finnish Pavilion. Anderson defines the nation as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign,"⁹⁰ and he describes the various cultural processes through which nations have forged a so-called "identity." In Europe these processes became very important from the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the same book, he depicts a young Greek explaining nationalistic conceptions to a sympathetic French audience in 1803.⁹¹ This event illustrates for Anderson how France's development of an "outward gaze" aided in its processes of constructing nationalism: the attention paid by major countries to young nations seeking independence, liberation, or identity contributed to such processes. The reception of art also played a role, as shown in the French

interpretation of Aalto's work in 1937. In that case, France's outward gaze took its point of departure from the Finnish Pavilion. One result of this outward gaze, however, was a very simplified interpretation of the building, which has had long-lasting consequences for the interpretation of Aalto's entire oeuvre.

—Translated by Richard Wittman

NOTES

This article was based on a research project entitled "Passages, trois recherches sur Alvar Aalto," which was undertaken in 1993-1995 with the assistance of a Bourse Lavoisier from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For their help, I would like to thank Timo Keinänen, head of archives at the Museum of Finnish Architecture, Elina Standertskjöld, the curator of the archives, and Anna-Liisa Alho, librarian at this museum, as well as Minna Elsilä, Mia Hipeli, Ulla Enckell, and Merja Penttinen. I also wish to thank the Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki, and Eeva Viljanen, curator of the Museum of Design and Applied Arts, Helsinki.

1. "Finlande," *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 10 (October 1937): 66-84.
2. "Plus nettement encore qu'aux pays scandinaves, l'architecture en Finlande a passé presque sans transition de la traditionnelle maison en bois des campagnes aux réalisations les plus expressives des temps nouveaux, l'indépendance de ce pays ayant coïncidé avec celui des techniques modernes. Là, l'architecte n'eut pas à lutter contre l'inertie d'un public accoutumé depuis des générations à des traditions devenues sans objet, ni contre ses propres préjugés. . . . Mais, utilisant l'expérience durement acquise par les peuples évolués plus tôt, la Finlande n'eut qu'à construire, rien à détruire. C'est pourquoi son architecture nous apparaît si homogène, si 'moderne' sans effort, sans discussion: elle ne peut être autrement dans un pays qui sait rester jeune et libre"; "Finlande," 66.
3. *Ibid.*, 77.
4. "Pavillons étrangers (suite et fin)," *Art et Décoration* 66, no. 1 (1937): 297-99.
5. Christian Zervos, "Le Pavillon de la Finlande," *Cahiers d'Art* 8-10 (1937), special issue: *Souvenirs de l'Exposition 1937*: 269-70.

6. "Le plan initial conçu par l'architecte était basé sur l'industrie du bois, la plus importante du pays. Celle-ci devait donc former le fonds général de la participation finlandaise à l'Exposition de 1937. Pour cette raison, le Pavillon devait avoir toutes ses surfaces visibles couvertes de bois"; *ibid.*, 269.
7. Edmond Labbé, "Finlande," in *Rapport général de l'exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne*, vol. 9, *Les sections étrangères* (Paris, 1937), 195-96.
8. Patrick Cabanel, *La question nationale au XIXème siècle* (Paris, 1996), 19.
9. Gustave Soulier, "Le Pavillon de Finlande à l'Exposition Universelle," *Art et Décoration* 8 (July-December 1900): 1-9.
10. "Une culture est d'abord nationale, c'est-à-dire distincte, unique"; Cabanel, *La question nationale*, 19-20.
11. Aalto also participated in subsequent CIAM conferences, in Brussels a year later and in Athens in 1933.
12. "Exhibition of Finnish Furniture," *Architects' Journal* 78 (November 1933): 627-30; and "Standard Wooden Furniture at the Finnish Exhibition, Alvar Aalto Designer," *Architectural Review* 445 (December 1933): 220-21.
13. John McAndrew, preface, in *Architecture and Furniture: Aalto*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 3-4.
14. *Ibid.*, 3.
15. Simon Breines, "Architecture," in *Architecture and Furniture: Aalto*, 11.
16. *Ibid.*, 5.
17. For the history of these events, I have principally used Eino Jutikkala, *Histoire de la Finlande* (Neuchâtel, 1978), 289-313.

18. Swedish had been the official language of Finland during the period of Swedish domination, that is, from the end of the twelfth century until 1809.
19. Henri Smotkine, *La Finlande* (Paris, 1986), 71-87.
20. Colonel V. A. M. Karikoski, "L'industrie du bois en Finlande," *Revue Commerciale de Finlande* 1 (October 1936): 7-12.
21. These points were made by Kerstin Smeds in a work published in collaboration with Peter McKeith, *The Finland Pavilions, Finland at the Universal Expositions, 1900-1992* (Tampere, 1992), 48 and 62-66.
22. Labbé, "Finlande," illustrations passim.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, illustration between pp. 196 and 197.
25. *Ibid.*, 191-98.
26. *Ibid.*, 194.
27. Raija-Liisa Heinonen, "Some Aspects of 1920s Classicism and the Emergence of Functionalism in Finland," *Architectural Monographs* 4, *Alvar Aalto* (London, 1978), 20-27.
28. In particular, *Innenräume, Räume und Inneneinrichtungsgegenstände*, Werkbundbücher (Stuttgart, 1928); Max Taut, *Bauten und Pläne*, with essay by Adolf Behne (Berlin, 1927); Ludwig Hilberseimer, *Internationale neue Baukunst* (Stuttgart, 1928); *idem*, *Grossstadt Architektur* (Stuttgart, 1928). Aalto's library may be consulted at the Archives of the Alvar Aalto Foundation, Alvar Aalto Säätiö, Alvar Aalto Stifelsen, Alvar Salto Foundation, Tiilimäki 20, 00330 Helsinki, Finland.
29. Kirmo Mikkola, "Architecture et destin national," in Jacques Mullender, Matti Klinge, et al., *Métamorphoses finlandaises: Architecture et design*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1978), 92.
30. *Arkkitehti* (1930-1937).
31. Elina Standertskjöld, "Blomstedt," *Dictionnaire international des arts appliqués et du design*, ed. Arlette Barré-Despond (Paris, 1996), 81.
32. Renja Suominen-Kokkonen, "Designing a Room of One's Own—The Architect Aino Marsio-Aalto and Artek," *Scandinavian Journal of Design History* 7 (1997): 31-32, 35-36.
33. "L'exposition de Stockholm," *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 2 (February 1930).
34. Zervos, "Le Pavillon de la Finlande," 269.
35. The following chronology of Aalto's buildings is that established by Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: A Life's Work, Architecture, Design, Art* (Helsinki, 1994), 307-9. The curved ceiling of the Viipuri Library was illustrated in *Architecture and Furniture: Aalto*, pl. 16.
36. Labbé, "Finlande," 192-93.
37. Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: A Life's Work*, 260.
38. Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Decisive Years* (Helsinki, 1986), 274, fig. 301.
39. Juhani Pallasmaa, "Alvar Aalto: Toward a Synthetic Functionalism," in Peter Reed, ed., *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 33; 206, fig. 166; and 207, fig. 169.
40. Marc Treib, "Aalto's Nature," in Reed, ed., *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism*, 55.
41. Demetri Porphyrios, *Sources of Modern Eclecticism* (London, 1982), 110-12. In this book Porphyrios defines "heterotopia" as a syntactic technique aimed at a critique of Cartesian reason. He writes that this critique was undertaken not so much because Cartesian reason was found untrustworthy as because it had been idolized as an exemplar of the positivist spirit. Heterotopia alluded to both the tyranny of the machine and the freedom inherent in organic nature. Porphyrios sees Aalto's work as representing heterotopia (see *ibid.*, 111).
42. "Les oeuvres d'Aalto s'inscrivent également dans l'évolution de l'art abstrait, ainsi que le démontre leur rapprochement, par exemple, avec des tableaux de Arp, Miró, ou Léger"; Kirmo Mikkola, "La tradition du rationalisme," in *En contact avec Alvar Aalto*, exh. cat. (Jyväskylä, Finland, 1992), 29. (This exhibition was not seen in Finland but in three places in France: the Musée d'Art Moderne, St. Étienne; Arc en Rêve, Centre d'Architecture, Bordeaux; and the École Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Industries, Strasbourg.)
43. McAndrew, preface, in *Architecture and Furniture: Aalto*, 3.
44. "Architecture aux pays du Nord," *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* 10 (October 1937): 65.
45. On the work of Erik Bryggman, see the essay by Riitta Nikula, "Erik Bryggman and His Architecture," *Erik Bryggman 1891-1955, architecte* (Helsinki, 1991), 70-78.
46. "Rantalan tilan päärakennus," *Arkkitehti* 8 (1938): 116-19.
47. Malcolm Quantrill, in his analysis of the ceiling of the Viipuri Library, has stressed Aalto's attempt to find logical means of optimizing acoustics; Malcolm Quantrill, *Alvar Aalto: A Critical Study* (London, 1983), 64-66.
48. Smeds and McKeith, *Finland Pavilions*, 58.
49. On the originality of the Finnish exhibition in New York, see Harry Rönholm, *Maailman markkinointi* (In the World) (Helsinki, 1944), 39, 260-65.
50. Martin Eidelberg, ed., *Design 1935-1965: What Modern Was: Selections from the Liliane and David M. Stewart Collection*, exh. cat. (Montreal: Musée des Arts Décoratifs de Montreal, 1991; New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 25, 90-92.
51. *Ibid.*, 96-98.
52. Juhani Uolevi Pallasmaa, "Du tectonique au pictural en architecture," in *En contact avec Alvar Aalto*, 49-50.
53. Pallasmaa, "Alvar Aalto: Toward a Synthetic Functionalism," 27.
54. *Métamorphoses finlandaises: Architecture et design*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1978), 8-9.
55. The cross-section drawing of the Savoy vase at the lower right in this photograph is incorrectly labeled "Vase en verre. Dessiné pour le restaurant Savoy, 1937." The vase was actually not commissioned for the Savoy restaurant. It won the first prize at the competition organized in 1936 by the Karhula Company for the purpose of displaying new glass objects in the Finnish Pavilion at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in Paris in 1937.
56. Leena Maunula, "De l'artisanat au design: Quatre individualités importantes pour les arts décoratifs finlandais," in *Métamorphoses finlandaises: Architecture et design*, 58-72.
57. J. Stewart Johnson, preface in *Alvar Aalto: Furniture and Glass*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 18-21.
58. Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Decisive Years*, 70-78.
59. Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: A Life's Work*, 260.
60. Göran Schildt, "Fernand Léger och Finland," in *Léger och Norden*, exh. cat. (Helsinki: Museet för finländsk konst Ateneum, Helsinki; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Henie-Onstad Kunstsenter, Hovikodden; Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, 1933), 138-39.

61. László Moholy-Nagy, Oskar Schlemmer, and Farkas Molnár, *Die Bühne im Bauhaus*, Bauhausbücher no. 4 (Munich, 1924). László Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, Bauhausbücher no. 8 (Munich, 1927; rev. ed. of *Malerei, Fotografie, Film*, Bauhausbücher no. 8 [Munich, 1925]).
62. As Eleanor M. Hight points out in *Picturing Modernism, Moholy-Nagy and Photography in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1995), 200.
63. Postcard from Fernand Léger, dated September 17, 1934. Archives of the Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki. In this very brief postcard Léger asked Aalto whether someday he might not have among his projects a little bistro that needed decorating.
64. The Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki, possesses a letter dated October 7, 1931, from Moholy-Nagy to Alvar and Aino Aalto; a letter dated April 17, 1933, from Moholy-Nagy to the Aalto family; a letter dated July 3, 1933, from Moholy-Nagy to Alvar and Aino Aalto; a letter from Moholy-Nagy to Alvar and Aino Aalto dated September 17, 1933; a letter from Moholy-Nagy to the Aalto family dated October 5, 1933; and two undated postcards from Moholy-Nagy.
65. The mural was painted in Antibes in 1932 for Gerald Murphy and illustrated in *Cahiers d'Art* 6-7 (1932): 265: "Peinture murale exécuté pour M. Murphy, Antibes, la première oeuvre en date (hiver 1931) qui anticipe la nouvelle évolution de Léger. Ce sont les illustrations tirées d'un ouvrage astronomique qui ont servi de modèles à l'artiste pour les éléments de sa décoration." Aalto owned this issue of *Cahiers d'Art*. The first issues of this journal that he received date from 1927, and he continued to receive it in the 1930s. Zervos's article "Fernand Léger et le développement de sa conception des objets dans l'espace," *Cahiers d'Art* (1929): 149-52 (with unpaginated illustrations), also illustrates works by Léger that present affinities with Aalto's undulating lines in the thirties.
66. "Der Umbau des Corso-Theater in Zürich," *Schweizerische Bauzeitung* 8, no. 104 (Zurich) (August 25, 1934): 79-86. "Corso-Theater, Zürich," *Werk* (Winterthur, Switzerland) (November 24, 1936): 340-49, unpaginated photographs. The commission of a mural painting from Ernst is documented by the unpaginated photograph of the artist at work published in *Werk* with the caption: "Der Maler Max Ernst, Paris, malt das Wandgemälde in der Nische des Dancing" (The painter Max Ernst, Paris, paints the mural in the alcove of the ballroom), and also reproduced in *Schweizerische Bauzeitung*, 83, with the caption: "Wandbild von Max Ernst, Paris" (mural by Max Ernst, Paris).
67. Drawing reproduced in Moholy-Nagy et al., *Die Bühne im Bauhaus*, 43. As mentioned above, Aalto owned this book.
68. Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Decisive Years*, 71.
69. This contact is attested by the second issue (1938) of the Czech review AKA. In this issue, it emerges that František Kalivoda, the architect and editor of the journal, had organized an exhibition of Aalto's furniture in Brno between February 13 and 28, 1938, in conjunction with an exhibition of textiles by the Czech artist Drahomira Fuchsova. Advertisements in the magazine also indicate that Aalto's furniture sold in AKA shops in Brno and Prague, and that Kalivoda was the exclusive representative for this furniture in Czechoslovakia. See *Magazin AKA, Zeitschrift für industrielle Kunst, Revue d'Art Industriel, Industrial Art Magazine* (Brno) 2 (1938), cover and 11-12.
70. Treib, "Aalto's Nature," 66, n. 43. Treib points out that the sinuous line was a common motif in the buildings and urban schemes of Le Corbusier. But, in fact, in the 1930s Le Corbusier was not yet using curved lines in his architecture. Curved lines appeared, however, in the *paintings* he chose to display in 1925 in his Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau in the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris.
71. B. 1908 in Brno, d. 1950 in Brno. This information was kindly provided by Marcela Macharackova, curator, Brno City Museum, through Eva Böhnelova, cultural attaché in the Embassy of the Czech Republic in Helsinki.
72. This contact may have occurred through Moholy-Nagy, since he was in touch with the Czech avant-garde as early as the 1920s, as established by Kristina Passuth, *Les avant-gardes de l'Europe centrale, 1907-1927* (Paris, 1988), 168. Hight has also established these contacts in *Picturing Modernism*, 212 and 234, n. 8. Also, Fuchs and Kalivoda played important roles in reorganizing the Czech group at the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM). In addition, Aalto owned a book written by Fuchs and other authors. The book was published in 1948, but given the highly specialized nature of the publication, and the fact that it was published in Czechoslovakia, as well as the commercial contacts that existed in the 1930s between Aalto and the Czech review AKA (see n. 69), it is difficult to see how Aalto would have obtained it other than through a personal contact, possibly dating back to the thirties. The authors and title of the book are: Josef Mrkos, Bohuslav Fuchs, et al., *Hospodá ská dynamica zem Moravskoslezské v zrcadle. Jejicho popula niho vývoje a fluktuace obyvatelstva. let 1790-1930* (The economic dynamism of Moravo-Silesian lands from the point of view of demographic development and population fluctuations, 1790-1930) (Brno, 1948), 3-5.
73. The following is based on these periodicals: *Finsk Tidskrift, Taide, Valvoja-Aika*, and *Nya Argus*, all published in Helsinki.
74. E.g., the journal *Taide* published an article on Paul Signac in 1932.
75. Schildt, *Decisive Years*, 107-14.
76. Books by Matsunosuke Tatsui, *Japanese Gardens* (Tokyo, 1934), and Yone Noguchi, *Hiroshige and Japanese Landscapes* (Tokyo, 1934) are in the Archives of the Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki.
77. Treib, "Aalto's Nature," 55. See also an illustration of the principal staircase in the Villa Mairea in the same exhibition catalogue, *Alvar Aalto: Between Humanism and Materialism*, 207, pl. 169. The early sketches commented on by Treib are not illustrated in the exhibition catalogue.
78. Alvar Aalto, "Architecture and the Landscape of Central Finland," *Sisä-Suomi* (June 28, 1925). This text is published in French in *Alvar Aalto, de l'oeuvre aux écrits*, texts by Aalto selected by Göran Schildt, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985), 115-16.
79. About the play between exterior and interior space, see also Alvar Aalto, "Porraskiveltä arkihuoneeseen" (From Doorstep to Living Room), *Aitta*, Special Christmas Issue (1926), 63-69. That article is published in French as "Du seuil au séjour" in *En contact avec Alvar Aalto*, 9-12. See also Fabienne Chevallier, "Le vase Savoy, extrait d'un décor," *Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne* 59 (Spring 1997): 116-17.
80. Timo Keinänen, "Eskimonaisen nahkahousut ravintola Savoyon pöydällä" (The leather trousers of an Eskimo woman on the table of the restaurant Savoy), *Arkkitehti* (Helsinki) 8 (1980): 48-54.
81. *Form, Svenska Slöjdföreningens Tidskrift* (Stockholm) 31, no. 6 (1935): cover.
82. Gregor Paulsson, "Plywoodmöbler," *Form, Svenska Slöjdföreningens Tidskrift* (Stockholm) 30, no. 2 (1934): unpaginated article following p. 31.

83. Aalto, "Rationalismen och Människan," *Form, Svenska Slöjdföreningens Tidskrift* (Stockholm) 31, no. 7 (1935): 156-60.
84. On the work of the designer Aino Marsio-Aalto, see Suominen-Kokkonen, "Marsio-Aalto," *Dictionnaire international des arts appliqués et du design*, ed. Arlette Barré-Despond (Paris, 1996), 387.
85. This vase is illustrated in Gillian Naylor, *The Arts and Crafts Movement: A Study of Its Sources, Ideals and Influence in Design Theory* (London, 1971; repr. 1990), 39, no. 14.
86. Letter of December 29, 1933, Alvar Aalto to Charles Francis Annesley Voysey, in the Archives of the Alvar Aalto Foundation, Helsinki.
87. Sigfried Giedion, *Space, Time and Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1941; 5th ed., rev., Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 620.
88. This speech by Gontran Goulden is quoted by Laura Iloniemi in "The Reception and Criticism of Alvar Aalto in Britain" (master's thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1993), 28, and taken from J. L. Martin, "Presentation of the Royal Gold Medal for 1957 to Professor Aalto," *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects* (May 1957): 256.
89. It should be noted that Markku Lahti raised this issue in the foreword to the exhibition catalogue *En contact avec Alvar Aalto*, 5.
90. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York, 1983; rev. ed., London and New York, 1991), 6.
91. *Ibid.*, 195.