Helsinki Journal, Entry 23, January 7, 2007

Finland has been an independent country for only 100 years, and during the early years of independence, national identity and pride were a big thing. And they still are it seems; in my experience, Finns are every bit as patriotic and proud as Americans. This is best illustrated by the intense pride the country takes in the great Finns of art and sport. One of the first such Finns was architect Eliel Saarinen, who is well known for his Art Nouveau buildings in and around Helsinki. His most famous landmark is the hugely impressive (in my opinion) Central Train Station, pictured below behind Jen.

But a more classical example of the Art Nouveau style is the Saarinen designed Pohjola Insurance building – just a short walk from the train station and pictured next.
I love the Art Nouveau style. It’s mathematical and clean, but is also playful.

As is often the case with artists, Eliel Saarinen lived an unconventional life. On a recent visit to his home, known as Hvitträsk (see the picture below), outside of Helsinki, we learned that his partner at the time, who also lived at Hvitträsk, stole Saarinen’s first wife, while Saarinen, in a double ceremony, married this fellow’s sister. Ah, the joys of cohabitation. Fortunately, it seems that it was all for the best.

The visit to Hvitträsk was sad in the sense that the place still felt like the beloved retreat of the Saarinen family that it was. It now makes sense to me why museums are so often made to have an impersonal, and even institutional, feel. To walk through a family’s home and retreat, to look at old family pictures, to see Eliel Saarinen’s studio, one can’t help but to feel that the place ought to still to be a family dwelling. On the other hand, in this day and age, taking care of such a monstrous array of buildings would be expensive indeed.

Eliel Saarinen immigrated to the U.S. where he finished his distinguished career, but the family always returned to Hvitträsk in the summers. His son Eero Saarinen also became a famous architect. The Gateway Arch of St. Louis is a design of his that I immediately recognized. The student of architecture might recognize many more of his designs. Wikipedia has articles on both Eliel and Eero Saarinen if you’re interested in learning more.