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DESIGN

From Armi and Viljo: Marimekko, With Love

by [Semmi W.](#) | Posted March 26, 2013

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Armi Ratia and the prints of Marimekko



Marimekko S/S 2013.
Source: stylebistro.com.

Finland is one of the only places in the world where the sun shines at midnight. During the summer months, the country's northernmost region experiences approximately 60 days of around the clock sunshine. This period does not last long, so the locals savour the sunlight after their long Nordic winters, when the sun barely rises above the horizon. In spite (or maybe because) of such unusual seasons, [Marimekko](#), the legendary textile design company, has exported the cheery spirit of Finnish summer days to the rest of the world.

Through bold colour schemes and outrageous print pairings, Marimekko expanded the very definition of graphic design. Marimekko, With Love, an exhibition at the [Textile Museum of Canada](#) pays tribute to the company's designers and the patterns that helped revolutionise contemporary fashion.

In an interview with [Maclean's](#) magazine, the museum's executive director, Shauna McCabe, sums up Marimekko's impact on fashion, design and culture: "The aesthetic we associate with Marimekko, [is] very large areas of colours, imprecise lines - a very handmade aesthetic that was all new. There was nothing like it. And so, you imagine, in 60

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years quite a transformation has taken place. And Marimekko was a big part of the changes in design over the 20th century."

With Pallo polka dots and Tasaraita stripes, founders Armi and Viljo Ratia transformed the textile industry of the post-WWII era. Their unorthodox approach was based on the belief that intelligent design is rooted in magnifying details. Audacious patterns of wavy zebra lines or checkered spirals were juxtaposed against each other, pushing the limits of traditional composition.

During Marimekko's first ever show at New York Fashion Week, presenting the **S/S 2013 collection**, head of fashion design Noora Niinikoski **reflected** on the company's timeless aesthetic: "In a way, I feel that Marimekko has invented its own colour theory, over these years... [W]e were inspired by the abstraction of nature and how we can see colour-blocking ideas in the landscapes and how that creates interesting stripes and rhythms... It was really very much about the iconic approach of being bold and brave and colourful and positive and happy and full of energy."

Armi established Marimekko in 1951 in Helsinki after her husband's oilcloth printing company failed to turn a profit. Viljo asked Armi to stage a mini showcase using materials from the warehouse, but her designs were so well-received that Armi decided to expand on the idea and form a sub-company. In leveraging her contacts, Armi was able to quickly develop a solid international following. But it wasn't until First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy bought seven dresses from Cambridge's Design Research store that Marimekko became a household name. Kennedy was often criticised for her Parisian couture choices, and so the decision to wear Marimekko dresses throughout her husband's presidential campaign helped to earn public favour.

When Jackie, alongside John, appeared on the **December 1960 cover of *Sports Illustrated*** wearing a sleeveless pink Marimekko dress (designed by Vuokko Eskolin-Nurmesniemi), it signaled a new era in womenswear fashion. Marimekko's dresses were unstructured and kitschy. Armi wanted women to move freely, appealing to the same feminist doctrine as Coco Chanel. She once told *LIFE* magazine: "One can get bored with true simplicity. Then is the right moment to take out those diamonds and black lace lingerie. Decadence is needed, I think, and the luxury of having useless possessions can be marvelous - but it isn't our food."

Armi's clear vision helped Marimekko steer clear of catwalk trends. Young in-house designers were given autonomy and were encouraged to experiment, inventing bold graphics and whimsical patterns for everything from smock dresses to beanbag chairs. In fact, star designer Maija Isola, created the iconic Unikko print in spite of Armi's famed aversion to floral motifs. The over-sized poppies not only became the label's signature pattern, it - like the Beatles - helped to define an entire generation.

A splashy protest against modern conventions, Unikko was '60s radicalism in full bloom. "I think Unikko stood out immediately, and it somehow hit the world," notes Isola's daughter Kristina, who is also a Marimekko designer, to *TIME* magazine's Marion Hume. "The blue-and-white version has come to stand even for Finland."

In Toronto, Karelia was one of the first North American outlets to introduce Marimekko. Founded by architect Janis Kravis, Karelia was both a studio and a store that showcased the best in Finnish design, and before its doors closed in the late 1970s, Kravis became friends with Marimekko's founders. The exhibition's collection is largely drawn from Karelia's remaining objects and materials. For Kravis however, Marimekko was not just a pioneering brand, but the beginning of an entire movement. He **recalls**: "On a Saturday morning in the '60s, Karelia was crammed. The in-store coffee shop - that was a first - it was so full people spilled out onto the stairs. I could look up and see Toronto's major architects all sitting there talking."



Beach umbrella in the iconic Unikko pattern, designed by Maija Isola, 1964.
Source: textilemuseum.ca.

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Marimekko was a resource for both retail shoppers and the designers. Armi was one of the first creative directors of her generation to think of her company as a lifestyle brand. "I really don't sell clothes, I sell a way of living," she once said. "My approach is something like an architect's... I make a dress for women to live in. The Marimekko woman is easily recognized. Her style in wearing dresses is to forget them."

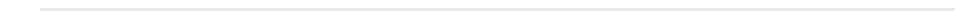
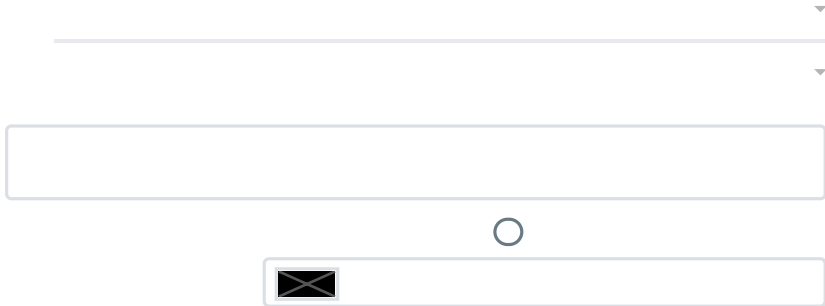
Despite her assertive spirit, Armi's leadership was ill-suited for the world of business. Marimekko's finances began to crumble in the late 1960s, despite critical acclaim and a strong following. By the late

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1970s, Marimekko's pop art rationale did not fit in with fashion trends. But through a series of corporate shakeups, the Finnish company has been able to avoid total collapse. Thanks in large part to Kirsti

Paakkanen, a retired ad executive, who took control of the company in 1991.

Through savvy licensing deals, Marimekko has been able to maintain its global reach. Textiles and products are still designed in Helsinki, and through partnerships with brands like Crate and Barrel, Converse and H&M, Marimekko has been able to fulfill Armi's prophecy for giving consumers a blueprint, a way to build a life: "One has to dream. And one has to stand out from the rest."



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