# When Stripes and Flowers Ruled, and Smocks Were All the Rage

By ROBERTA SMITH

If you missed the original Marimekko moment, which was at its international zenith in the 1960's and 70's, you probably weren't alive. In those days, it was hard to be unaware of the bright, boldly patterned fabrics, fashions and furnishings produced by the small but influential Finnish design company whose American power base was the legendary Design Research store on 57th Street in Manhattan. (It occupied a brownstone where the Four Seasons Hotel now stands.)

Now the Marimekko aesthetic is back in force, in a three-floor exhibition at the Bard Graduate Center that brims with garments and huge swaths of fabric, as well as the odd bedsheet, paper plate and felt boot. The best of these are redolent of a time when the catalog that mattered most was Whole Earth, not J. Crew; when abstraction was strong, but Pop was gaining; when those who didn't want to be hippies still wanted to be hip; and hip meant modern design. Even the Pollyanna chirp of the company's name was in step with the optimistic 60's, our most recent age of innocence; appropriately, its name is chaste: Marimekko means Mary Dress.

The show could not be better timed. The current obsession with the 60's runs high, both within the art world and without. Younger artists continue to redefine the place of craft in art; pop-psychedelic colors abound. Spurred by digitalization and new materials, contemporary design is in ferment; you don't have to look very far at Bed, Bath and Beyond to see signs of the Marimekko legacy.

Marimekko played a prominent role in Finland's postwar recovery and also helped propel Finnish design to international prominence. Its achievement was based on comfortable, roomy garments — silhouettes were not the point — that let the fabrics rule. And rule they did, often at a scale more suitable to abstract painting. Ranging from decorative peasant motifs and homey, hand-drawn stripes and dots to exuberant floral motifs and hard-edge Op Art configurations, Marimekko fabrics could be found on the backs of artists, Park Avenue socialites and hippies alike. And on the walls and furniture of fashionable drawing rooms or college dormitories.

The Bard show chronicles the rise of the Marimekko phenomenon in detail, with the help of a small guide that lists and reproduces every item in the show. The company's founder and presiding spirit was Armi Ratia (1912-1979), who took over Printex, a small producer of printed oilcloth that her husband had purchased in 1949. Applying her Bauhaus-inspired vision of total, coherent design, Ratia stepped into the public eye with a fashion show, called Marimekko-projekti, staged in a restaurant in Helsinki in 1951.

Ratia had a strong design sense, a good nose for talent and, judging by the diversity of the designs here, a healthy tolerance for those whose sensibility differed from hers. She worked with an array of artists and designers, several of them in-house, and also collaborated with architects. In the early 1970's, she built an employee-friendly factory outside Helsinki whose utopian touches included a children's playground, tennis courts and a swimming pool. Designed by Erkki Kairamo, its transparent structure is reminiscent of the Pompidou Center in Paris.

Ratia's first two designers were Maija Isola, who began her career specializing in deft, Dufyesque glosses on peasant motifs, and Vuokko Nurmesniemi, who favored the casual geometric patterns that became a Marimekko signature. Both would prove extremely versatile, as the exhibition indicates; they were joined in the 1960's by Liisa Suvanto and Annika Rimala, who guided the Marimekko look through its heyday.

Ms. Nurmesniemi was responsible for the familiar Piccolo fabric (1953) whose narrow stripes became synonymous with the unisex shirts named Jokapoika (Everyboy). While some patterns are printed with stripes of a single color on white fabric, the most interesting alternate two colors that overlap slightly to form a third.

Nearly all Marimekko fabric designs are engagingly direct and process oriented. You look at them and sense an artist's hand drawing or painting them; you can decipher the printing stages and savor the deliberate irregularities. The black-on-white circles and dots of the Bog Pond pattern, used in a 1959 sheath dress, seem little more than doodles that seem intended as a tongue-in-cheek approximation of eyelet lace.

At the height of its influence, especially from the late 1950's into the 70's, the Marimekko fabric patterns alternate between the demure and the dynamic, between designs that bow, if somewhat slyly, to tradition, and those that compete aggressively with contemporary painting. I can't say that either approach has aged very well, but the results invariably have a strong period look. Some are too silly for words, or made sillier by words, like the Iloinen Takki (Joyous Smock) of 1960, a housecoat design for mother and daughter in dark fabric punctuated with numerous small randomly placed pockets in purple and magenta.

Isola in particular was responsible for the delicately scaled traditional motifs, mostly floral, with names like Country Rose, Feast or Summertime Sweetheart. They are punched up with contemporary color combinations — say, red and marigold yellow, or pink and magenta. But in 1964-65, she also designed the company's well-known pink and red Poppy fabric, whose enormous flat blossoms are only slightly cuter than Andy Warhol's Flower paintings, which were made at the same time.

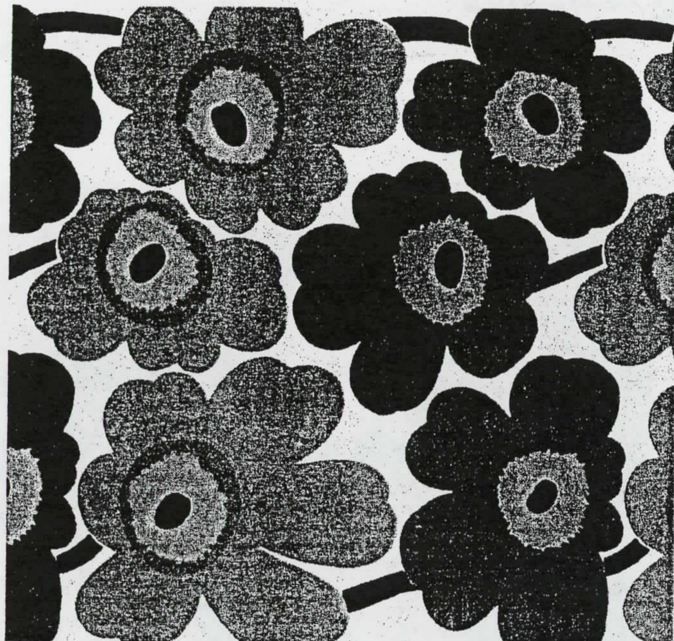
The art-conscious fabric designs, visible in clothing as well as the expanses of cloth that resemble wall hangings, often have patterns whose enormous scale is not really appropriate to the human frame. This explains some of their period look and creates all sorts of interesting intersections with contemporary painting; it also makes one wonder if some of the designers weren't frustrated painters.

A fat undulation of red and blue on white might almost be a painting by Paul Feeley. There are target designs that bring to mind Kenneth Noland, and big slurpy brush strokes that evoke the early work of Jules Olitski. Nicholas Krushenick, Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly are among the other artists whose simple, blunt compositions come to mind, along with the more supple motifs of Milton Avery, especially in a wave pattern that Ms. Rimala designed in 1965. And most of all there is the Marimekko color, saturated and hot, almost too strong to wear.

By definition, a period piece is something that you can't imagine using, that belongs to the past either because of its obsolescence or because it is so full of its own time. Since the 1980's and 90's, the Marimekko designs have veered toward Armani and Yamamoto; they're more contemporary and useful, but also more anonymous.

The Marimekkos of the 60's especially prove that every period has a particular aesthetic atmosphere, a climate determined by ideas in the air that find expression in the work of different people, working in different mediums around the world. And Marimekko recorded the temperature of its moment with indelible accuracy.

*The colors and geometric designs of Marimekko conjure up the spirit of the 60's and 70's.*



Rauno Truskelin/Bard Graduate Center

Ian Sullivan/Bard Graduate Center

Maija Isola's "Unikko" fabric pattern, left, designed for the Marimekko company of Finland in its heyday, 1965. Above, Marimekko dress designs, also from the 1960's.

*"Marimekko: Fabrics, Fashion, Architecture" is at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture, 18 West 86th Street, Manhattan, (212) 501-3000, through Feb. 15.*