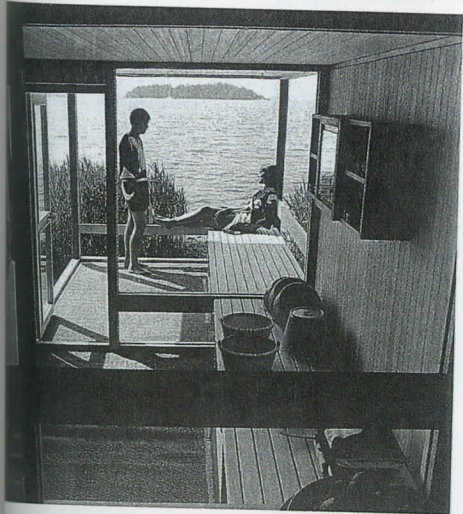


Armi Ratia, founder of the Marimekko company



Below: The Marisauna, an icon of Finnish design, 1966



All photos: Marimekko Oy



ETN participants visiting the Marimekko factory in 1999



Above: Clothing design "Pallo" by Annika Rimala

To the right: Jacket "Pikomi" with trousers "Peli" and "Lorina" design by Pentti Rinta

MARIMEKKO: FABRICS, FASHION AND ARCHITECTURE

Beatrijs Sterk

The New York Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture will show fabrics by the Finnish company Marimekko from 21st November 2003 until 15th February 2004.

The Center has the objective of establishing a new field of research "that sees in the material remains of the past and present – from works of great virtuosity to the most commonplace artifacts – a significant form of social, cultural, and art historical inquiry."

This intention informed the exhibition and the publication described below, i.e. a carefully compiled display and documentation. The exhibition curator is Marianne Aav, the director of the Finnish Design Museum which owns the largest Marimekko collection of clothing and furnishing textiles. Numbering 2,500 objects, it was donated to the museum on the company's 35th anniversary in 1986. Divided into three sections, the exhibition shows some 150 pieces – fabrics, clothing and accessories. The first section presents the establishment of the brand name Marimekko and its revolutionary design philosophy. The second introduces the most important designers who worked for Marimekko, especially the woman designers who built the company's history of success. The company founder, Armi Ratia, herself a textile designer, set out to find talented young designers who were not trained in fashion and did not have a fashion bias. They included Maija Isola, a textile artist and painter; Vuokko Nurmesniemi who graduated in ceramics; and Annika Rimala, a graphic designer. The third section of the exhibition is devoted to Marimekko's development from a fabric and clothing business for women to a company that offers products for all

aspects of home living. Above all, the latter section presents the company's successful advertising campaigns. Promoted by the corporate identity visions of the current director, Kirsi Paakanen, a renewed interest in Marimekko has arisen in our present time.

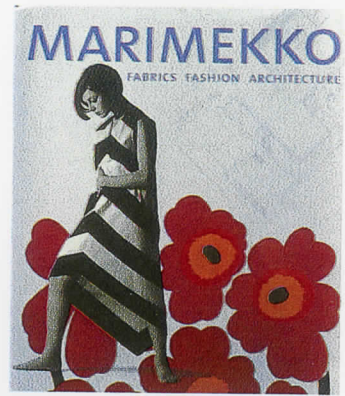
What constitutes the success of this "dress for Marie (mari mekko)"?

As everywhere else, Finnish design was dominated by men, and women were almost automatically relegated to the field of textiles where men were less well represented. At the time, the Finnish Institute of Industrial Art, now UIAH (University of Art and Design) of Helsinki, was the most important educational institution and, between 1930 and 1950, Arttu Brummer its most dominant teacher. Brummer's aspiration was to build students' confidence and promote a universal and virtuoso creativity that would countermand the polarity of art and industry. Armi Ratia embodies this idea to perfection. However, she did not set out to become a textile designer but turned to textile design when she was not accepted for the course of study she had originally chosen – art education.

In the post-war years a basic minimalist movement developed in Finnish design, a design concept that approached the Japanese aesthetic but had a strong drive for innovation which promoted creative productivity. It gave the Finnish people a strong sense of their own national identity and was particularly well expressed in Marimekko products. Limitations turned into a powerful diversity. Plain cotton fabrics and simple clothing cuts advanced to an international lifestyle. Marimekko clothes were seen at all the 1960s and 1970s festivals. Even Jacqueline Kennedy bought six items for herself.



Photo: Rauno Träskelin



MARIMEKKO – Fabrics, Fashion, Architecture, ed. Marianne Aav; New York 2003, 286 pages, 85 colour and 300 b/w ills., English text; € 55.00

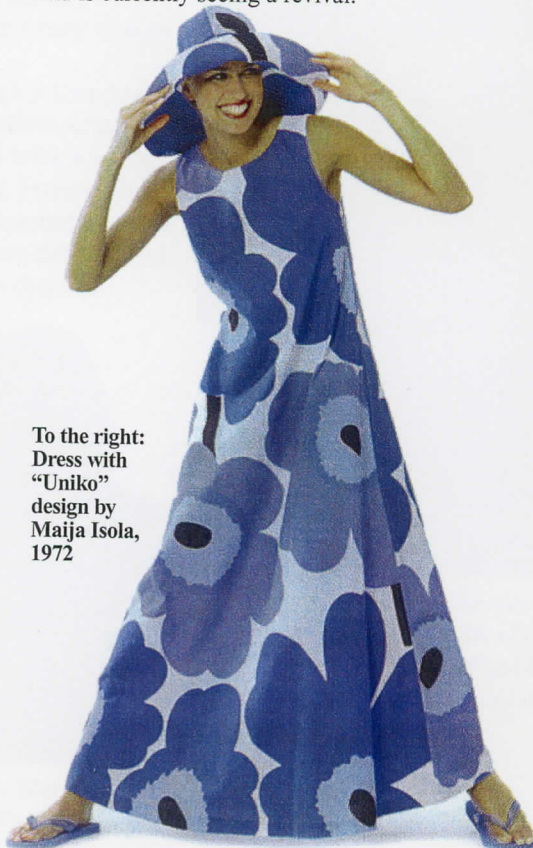
This book is far more than an exhibition catalogue. Generous support from the Marimekko company, the Design Museum of Finland, the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other donations made it possible to conduct extensive research into the subject and document it in the present publication. In addition to the exhibition curator, Marianne Aav, a number of other renowned authors were won for the publication. Design historian Lesley Jackson writes about the Marimekko print designs, once so revolutionary, in their international context. Riita Nikula, a historian of architecture, analyses the aesthetics of Marimekko products that are relevant to architecture. Riita Anikoski examines Marimekko from the perspective of its designers who approach their work in different ways. Journalists Rebecka Tarschys and Hedvig Hedqvist reflect on the international reception of the Marimekko style. The economist Annti Ainamo throws light on the reasons behind the success of the company philosophy. Unlike the equally well-known Finnish companies Arabia (ceramics) and Itala (glassware), Marimekko was, and still is, privately owned. It is said that the many stimuli and revolutionary ideas generated by Armi Ratia were sometimes apt to drive the company to the brink of bankruptcy.

Finally, Maria Härkäpää outlines ten selected designer biographies. A mere twelve pages are devoted to listing the exhibits of the New York show to fulfil the publication's claim of being a catalogue. They are followed by a company chronology and an anthology of all the designers who have dealt with Marimekko products. A bibliography and index conclude this carefully edited book which should not be omitted from any textile and fashion design library. ■

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Dress "Paali" by Marja Suna, 1994, and a jacket from the 1990s Photo: Rauno Träskelin

The participants in the 1999 ETN Conference in Rovaniemi began their visit to Finland in Helsinki where they had the opportunity of visiting Marimekko. Its building was specially designed for the company, and parts of its fabric collections are still being printed there today. Its current designer-in-chief, the Japanese Fujiwo Ishimoto, allowed us an insight into the studio and impressed us with his introvert personality that exuded great integrity. Next to Nokia, Marimekko maintains its position as a symbol of Finnish design, and is currently seeing a revival.



To the right: Dress with "Uniko" design by Maija Isola, 1972

The company originally grew out of "Print", a printing business purchased by Armi Ratia's husband after the war for which she was supposed to create designs. She seized her opportunity and founded her own company in 1951 – Marimekko. Her first public show was staged in the same year at the 9th Milan Triennial where Finnish design attained cult status. The basic idea of putting design into the context of everyday life was seen in Marimekko design at the time, but in Marimekko it came into its own. It provided a kind of anti-fashion that aimed to bring out the wearer's self-assurance. Starting from her timeless classic clothing designs, Armi Ratia went on to design entire home environments. She even planned pre-fabricated houses with the intention of using them to build an entire Marimekko village for her staff. The prototypes of the Mari house and Mari sauna have been depicted in countless illustrations. However, although the press declared them icons of Finnish architecture, they never went into production. Armi Ratia's idea of home living was very Finnish: the home was perceived to be the nucleus of a successful and happy society. The company country-house is reminiscent of the romantic pictures by the Swedish painter Carl Larsson which show a beneficial connection between rural tradition and modern life. This is the key for appreciating the vitality of the Marimekko phenomenon. I can confirm from my own experience how much Marimekko clothing and home furnishings have influenced my lifestyle. I recognised at least fifteen of the Marimekko clothing designs depicted in the exhibition catalogue, and the same ones for innumerable design examples that I encountered much later, and under different names, although they undoubtedly go back to Marimekko originals.