

Do not adjust your eyes. The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design and Culture in New York City is covered in the colourful prints of Finnish clothing, fabric, and lifestyle company Marimekko.

Curated by Marianne Aav, director of the Finnish Museum of Art and Design in Helsinki, *Marimekko: Fabrics, Fashion, Architecture* features over 150 examples of fabrics, clothing, accessories and even architecture, many from the museum's extensive collection. The exhibition traces the company's development from a small textile-printing firm into an international phenomenon, thanks to the unique vision of its artistic director Armi Raita (1912–1979), who co-founded the company with her husband Viljo in 1951.

Their first collection, launched in Helsinki in the spring of 1951, featuring radical new designs hand printed on crisp cotton, created a fashion sensation by dressing the likes of Jackie Kennedy.

As Raita said, "I sell an idea, rather than dresses." A textile designer by training, she brought in young artists who had no previous fashion experience to work at Marimekko. In fact, many of the designers came from the Institute of Industrial Arts in Helsinki.

Textile artist and painter Maijla Isola

Marvelous Marimekko

The revolutionary Finnish fashion icon is enjoying a revival.

(1927–2001) was one of the first Marimekko designers. Her interior textiles featured oversized, geometric patterns and bright colours, two hallmarks of Marimekko design. Isola's signature Unikko (poppy) pattern of 1964 was re-issued by the company in 2000 and the streets of Helsinki were once again awash with 1960s colour.

In the 1950s, ceramic artist Vuokko Nurmesniemi created two of the company's best-selling products: the Piccolo brushstroke pattern and the Everyboy shirts. In the 1970s, graphic designer Annika Rimala's Even Stripe cotton jersey T-shirt was a must-have for jazz musicians and rockers. One of Marimekko's early designers, artist Fujiwo Ishimoto, is still creating original patterns for the company – his latest is a pixilated grid in soft pastels.

These designers and their colleagues injected new ideas and social themes into the product and the result was exciting, non-traditional patterns with vivid colours that captured the character of the times. The Marimekko ready-to-wear collections of clean, unisex lines spoke of an equality of the sexes, an issue that came to the forefront in the 1960s and 1970s. During that time, Marimekko opened lifestyle stores in the United States, Europe, Japan and Australia, and held shows in Boston, Paris, Stuttgart and New York, introducing a highly original vocabulary to the fields of fashion and home design, promoting the use of the same textiles for both fashion and interior décor. As confirmation of the current Marimekko renaissance, a new store opened in Manhattan last fall.

Raita's other venture was architecture. She hired architect Aarno Ruusuvuori, considered to be one of Finland's most ascetic practitioners, to collaborate on projects. They designed a utopian community scheme for a village of 3,500, including Marimekko employees, and built a prefabricated model house with a colourful interior, described as a "minimum dwelling," deep in the woods of the company estate near the town of Porvoo, southeast of Helsinki. Ruusuvuori also designed an experimental sauna overlooking the sea that, when photographed by Simo Rista, became an icon of the potential for prefabricated Finnish architecture, opposing the classical notion that a sauna must be built with vernacular materials according to vernacular traditions. Both ideas, however well received, never got past the prototype stage.

Marimekko: Fabrics, Fashion, Architecture closes at the Bard Graduate Centre Feb. 15, to go on display at the Finnish Embassy in Washington D.C. from March 12 to May 15. A fully illustrated catalogue, the first comprehensive study of the company, is published by the Bard Centre in collaboration with Yale University Press. 

