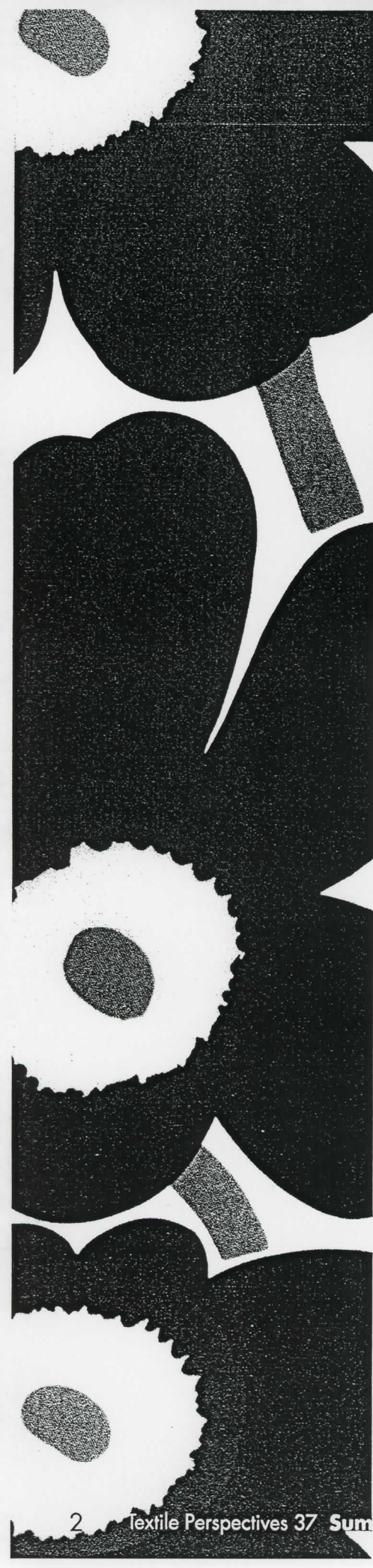


Textile Perspectives

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Marimekko fabrics for a lifestyle

Marianne Aav explores the development of the Finnish fashion and textile company

Today Marimekko is enjoying its greatest financial success to date. With its eventful, often tumultuous, history, it has established its position as a global company. The bold and vivid Unikko 'poppy' pattern, designed 40 years ago by Maija Isola, blooms as never before. The key to Marimekko's character and success lies in the enduring freshness and originality of its printed textile patterns, with their clean and bright colour palette, which have for the whole of its history defined and underpinned the company's identity.

As a company Marimekko is more or less the brainchild of one person, the charismatic Armi Ratia (1912–79). Her vision was crucial in recruiting promising young designers and fostering an atmosphere that allowed creativity to flourish. Collaboration between Ratia and the open-minded designers at Marimekko enabled the company's operations to expand from printed fabrics to a broader concept of designs for a lifestyle.

Marimekko's start was modest. The first public presentation of its fashion and textiles took place in 1951 in the wake of the first great triumph of Finnish design after the Second World War. Printex, a small printworks in Helsinki that Armi Ratia's husband Viljo had acquired in 1949, organised a successful fashion show at Helsinki's finest restaurant. The garments were designed by Riitta Immonen using Printex fabrics. Armi Ratia dubbed this marketing campaign The Marimekko Project. Soon thereafter, the company was registered. Its main objective was designing and marketing the fabrics pro-

duced by its sister company Printex. The new company's amusing name, which literally translates as 'Mary dress', meaning 'little girl's dress' has various interpretations, that reflect the complex associations and dualities that define the Marimekko aesthetic – national and international, traditional and modern, rural and urban, natural and technological.

In 1949 Armi Ratia hired Maija Isola (1927–2001), a textile designer and painter as the first full-time designer for Printex. She is best known for her interior textiles with gigantic geometric patterns and bright colours. Also among the first designers was Vuokko Eskolin-Nurmesniemi (born 1930), a ceramic artist by education. She started with interior textiles with large intensive colour surfaces, but her real classics are the brush-stroke pattern *Piccolo* created in 1953 and the *Jokapoika* (Everyboy) shirts made from it in 1956. This is still among Marimekko's best selling products. Another early designer was Annika Rimala (born 1936), originally educated as a graphic designer. Rimala's best known design, the *Even stripe* cotton jersey T-shirt from 1969, dominated the jazz and rock festivals of the 1970s. It soon became a symbol of the new unisex thinking in the fashion industry. From the mid-1970s Fujiwo Ishimoto, a Japanese-born graphic designer, has successfully combined the Japanese brushstroke technique with the Finnish nature aesthetics.

In the early and mid 1960s, Marimekko was on the covers and in the headlines of the major design magazines worldwide. The company had already been introduced to American



Cover and far left: Maija Isola Unikko pattern 1964

Left: Dress by Annika Rimala on the cover of *Elle*

Below: Maija Isola Ananas pattern 1963, Photo by Raimo Traskelin

The idea of producing an exhibition and an associated book about Marimekko came about in 2001 when the company celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The exhibition *Marimekko: Fabrics, Fashion, Architecture* explores half a century of the company's history, focusing on the work of the talented designers who defined the firm's identity. The travelling exhibition is organised by the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in Decorative Arts, Design and Culture in New York, and the Design Museum in Helsinki, and is based on the Design Museum's collection. From November 2003 until mid-February 2004, the bright colours of Marimekko filled the three floors of the Bard in Manhattan. The exhibition will travel to Washington and Los Angeles, before coming to Europe, where it will be seen in France, Italy and Scotland. ■

audiences in the late 1950s, through an exhibition of Finnish design organised by the architect Benjamin Thompson in his store Design Research. Reception was good and publicity overwhelming. As a result every architect and designer knew about Marimekko, and Design Research created a marketing base for the company. Among its prestigious clients was Jacqueline Kennedy.

Armi Ratia's concept of fashion was broad and Marimekko was among the earliest textile and fashion manufacturers to offer the consumer a whole lifestyle instead of individual products. Marimekko was also one of the first clothing companies to target production at a specific group of consumers.

Marimekko's modern, democratic ideology manifested itself in its own office and factory interiors, which were thoughtfully decorated in simple 'Finnish style.' All the workers wore Marimekko clothing. The greatest of Armi Ratia's dreams was the Mari Village. The idea was to create an idyllic village community featuring pre-fabricated houses with free-form interiors to promote a democratic spirit. Though only one

pilot house was built from Aarno Ruusuvuori's design, this has been widely illustrated.

From the beginning, the Marimekko business strategy was based on the idea of being different, or 'anti-fashion', as it was called in those days. It turned conventional fashion norms upside down and offered an alternative. Marimekko's clients, according to Armi Ratia, would be found near a university. A Marimekko woman was seen as a career woman, normally with a degree and a profession that involved travelling extensively. The truth is, however, that Marimekko's jolly, colourful designs appealed just as much to the average housewife.

As the decades passed, Marimekko became a major factor in shaping the Finnish way of life. Marimekko textiles found their way to Finnish interiors. In the 1950s, the simple geometric textile patterns complemented simple wood surfaces. At the turn of the 1960s, the romantic patterns of Maija Isola with their Byzantine extravagance lived together with crystal chandeliers and exuberant table settings, and the late 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of clear colours and bold geometric patterns.

