

In Bold Print

Finnish textile design house **Marimekko** built their brand on strong, bright prints and the dynamic use of color.

BY Allison Malafronte

Even if you're not a design aficionado, chances are you'd recognize a Marimekko pattern from a mile away. The Finnish company's iconic prints—such as *Tasaraita* (Even Stripes) and the *Unikko* poppy (see *Pop Go the Pillows*, opposite)—helped define the fashion and culture of the 1960s and '70s. Marimekko's cheerful, colorful designs have been worn by everyone from Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis to Sarah Jessica Parker.

THE MAKING OF A BRAND

The company began in the late 1940s as a small printed-textile factory called Printex, owned by Viljo Ratia. In the early 1950s, his wife, Armi Ratia, commissioned a group of young artists to create striking fabric designs for her husband's company. In 1951, she held a fashion show featuring clothes made with these printed fabrics. Five days later she launched a separate company named Marimekko—Finnish for “Mary’s dress.” Soon after, Marimekko expanded into home goods—tableware, kitchen textiles, pillow covers, bed linens and more—making Marimekko one of the world's first lifestyle brands.



▲ PALATABLE PATTERNS

Statement table settings, with items that lend themselves to mixing-and-matching, are a signature of the Marimekko lifestyle brand. Here the *Rosarium*-print tablecloth and plates find a complementary setting with the noncompeting patterns and neutral-toned surfaces of *Puolikas* ceramic plates and a *Kubb* plywood serving tray.

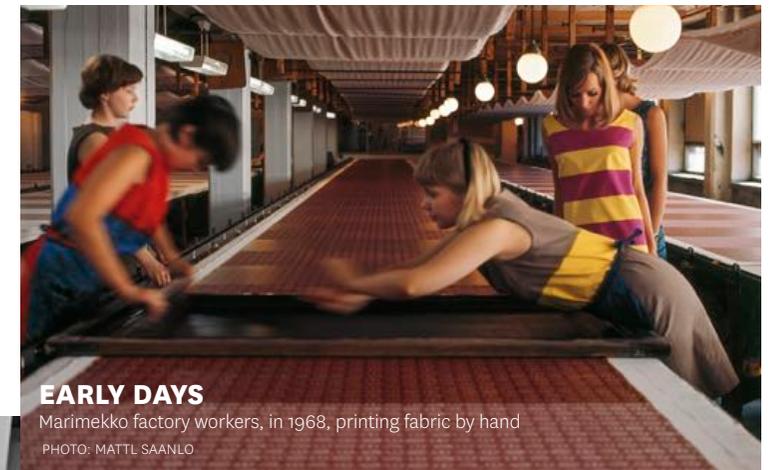


▲ POP GO THE PILLOWS

The stack of pillows features iconic Marimekko patterns and more recent designs. The *Unikko* print (top) proves a timeless way to add a pop of color.

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—MINNA KEMELL-KUTVONEN



EARLY DAYS

Marimekko factory workers, in 1968, printing fabric by hand

PHOTO: MATTI SAANLO



▲ PRIME MOVER

Founder Armi Ratia adds her signature to one of her designs.

From the beginning, Marimekko's team of artists has been at the helm of building the brand into an international design house. Maija Isola, for instance, not only inspired the launch of the company with her 1949 *Amfora* pattern but, in 1964, was also the creator of the *Unikko* poppy, Marimekko's most popular print to date. Vuokko Eskolin-Nurmesniemi helped revolutionize 1950s fashion by loosening the restrictive stays of women's dresses for a more relaxed fit. Annika Rimala's 1968 *Tasaraita* design became synonymous with the equality movements of the time. Two Japanese textile designers, Katsuji Wakisaka and Fujiwo Ishimoto, were instrumental in creating international demand for Marimekko in the 1970s and beyond. Artists such as Heikki Orvola—designer of the classic *Kivi* candleholder—and Sami Ruotsalainen—who designed the acclaimed *Oiva* tableware collection with patterns by Maija Louekari—proved that Marimekko's designs are as enduring in home décor as they are in fashion.

MARIMEKKO NOW

Today, Marimekko has a fresh breed of award-winning artists finding increasingly creative ways to make bold, colorful patterns a part of everyday life. According to Minna Kemell-Kutvonen, Marimekko's design and product development director of home products and prints, what makes Marimekko designers distinct is their eclectic mix of artistic expertise. “Our print designers are freelancers, and many of them do not actually come from the field of textile design,” she says. “Some are illustrators and ceramic

PROLIFIC DESIGNER

Maija Isola (1927–2001), who created more than 500 prints for Marimekko during her 30-plus-year career, including Amfora (1949; below) and Unikko (1964; see Pop Go the Pillows, page XX), drew inspiration from traditional folk art, modern visual art, nature and countless worldwide trips.

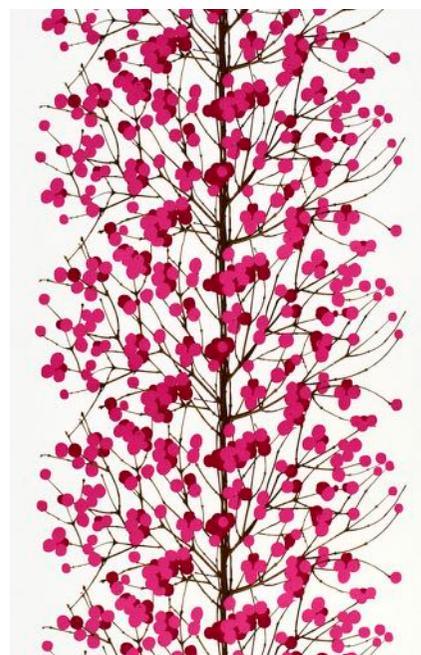


designers, and several also design for other companies and artistic projects. Because creative people from other fields do not necessarily know the limitations of silk-screen printing, they can be more free and expressive in their designs. We see this as a strength, as it challenges us to continually expand our printing techniques to develop the sketch into a format that enables screen printing.”

At Marimekko, the printing process starts when the designer’s sketch is transferred into a digital format and screens are produced according to the digital file. Having design and production under one roof has always been a distinguishing characteristic of Marimekko. Because the company’s own textile-printing factory—which turns out more than one million meters of printed fabric per year—is located in-house at their Helsinki headquarters, print designers can work seamlessly with production on conceptualization, creation and problem-solving.

As pioneers in textile printing, Marimekko also innovated the color-overlapping process, which continues to be a standout of their textile-printing. “This approach began in the 1950s, when Marimekko fabrics were printed by hand and there was a shortage of color,” Kemell-Kutvonen says. “Overlapping created new, interesting colors. Paucity became a signature effect for the brand.”

As one might imagine, Marimekko’s design process requires, in the words of Kemell-Kutvonen, “strong artistic thinking, a unique and high level of artistic expression,



FROM BARE TO BERRIES

Lumimarja (2004) by Erja Hirvi was inspired by a bush’s bare winter branch; Hirvi added berries.

original thinking about color and the ability to work well on a team.” These are qualities one detects in the work of those who have designed such recently successful prints as Rosarium (at right; by Aino-Maija Metsola), Lumimarja (opposite; by Erja Hirvi), Siirtolapuutarha (by Maija Louekari), Juhannustaika (by Aino-Maija Metsola) and Bottna (by Anna Danielsson). There are multiple ways that these and other designs have been developed, but each artist on the team has his or her singular approach to creativity.

“The design process starts when we set the theme, colors and feel for each collection,” says Kemell-Kutvonen. “When we brief our print designers, we are looking for their own interpretation of a collection’s theme. Each of our artists has a very personal way of sketching—some paint, some draw, others cut paper—and a uniquely individual handprint. We want to honor that handprint and preserve the human touch from conceptualization all the way through to the finished product.”

Allison Malafronte is an arts and design writer, editor and curator based in the greater New York City area.



EVERYTHING’S COMING UP ROSARIUM

Marimekko prints often find multiple ways to make themselves at home. Rosarium, designed by Aino-Maija Metsola, calls to mind a rose garden in full bloom. Of the various rose varieties shown, rosa rugosa—one of Metsola’s favorites—dominates the design.



HOME PRODUCED

Marimekko has its own printing factory located in-house at their headquarters in Helsinki, Finland. The factory produces more than one million meters of printed fabric per year.



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON MARIMEKKO AND ITS DESIGNERS, VISIT MARIMEKKO.COM/US_EN.