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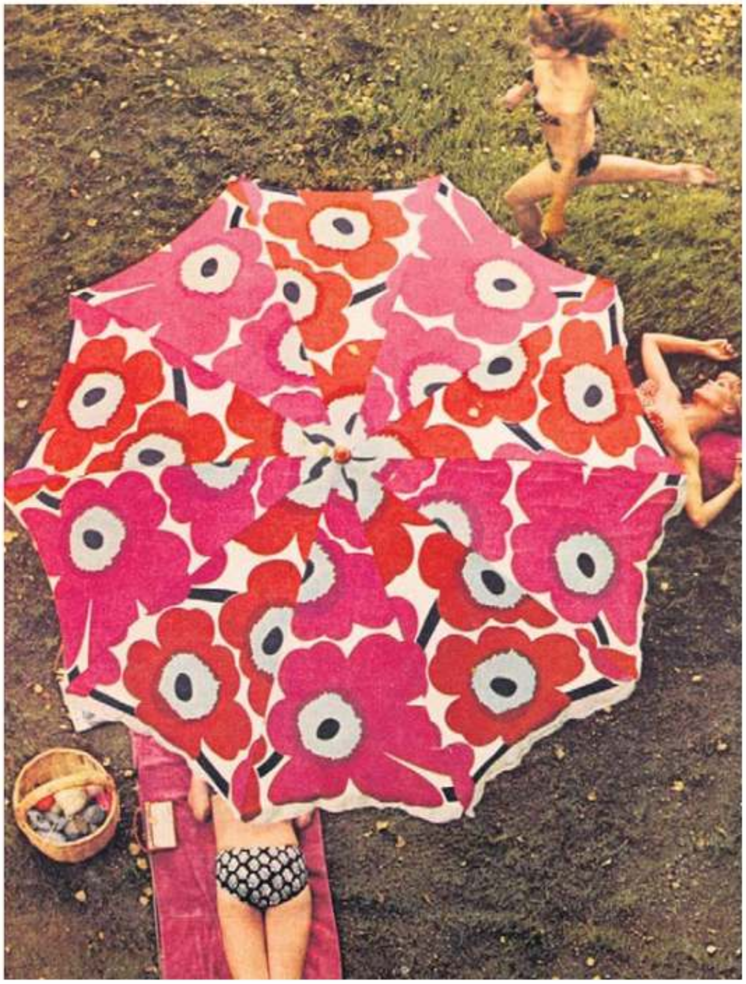
MARIMEKKO, FOR EVERYTHING'S POPPIES STILL COMING UP

As a new exhibition at the Textile Museum of Canada reveals, Armi Ratia, who founded the iconic textile house in 1951, rewrote the rules of postwar dressing. More than 60 years later, her pragmatic, anti-fashion take continues to define the iconoclastic f

Jacqueline Kennedy sported them. So, more recently, do Finnair planes, Converse sneakers and a new generation of shoppers all over the world. The objects in question are, of course, the designs of Marimekko, the Finnish company that began producing its bright, extroverted colours in the dark days of the postwar period and – more or less by accident – became a fashion institution. The brand's story is part of the exhibition Marimekko, With Love, which is on view at Toronto's Textile Museum of Canada until April 21 and concentrates on the first three decades of the company, which founder Armi Ratia presided over until she died in 1979.



Known for its oversize poppy prints (above), Finland's Marimekko has in fact produced a wide range of prints, as a detail (top) from an installation in Marimek Marimekko, With Love, an exhibition at the Textile Museum of Canada, shows.

When Marimekko was launched in 1951, there was little in Finland and indeed much of Europe that resembled a fashion industry. At the suggestion of Riitta Immonen, a fashion designer, Ratia, who owned a textile factory with her husband, Viljo, decided to promote their fabrics with a fashion show. She subsequently rented a Helsinki restaurant and Immonen designed 27 modified New Look outfits with big skirts and tight waists, marking one of the rare occasions that waists would figure prominently in a Marimekko line. Although the aim had been to showcase the fabrics, the public, unexpectedly, wanted to buy the dresses. Immonen, who wasn't interested in serial production, begged off, returning to her elite clientele. Ratia, however, decided that she did want to mass-produce clothes along with textiles; Marimekko was born in the process.

Trained in industrial art, Ratia was provocative, utopian, somewhat conflicted about fashion and profoundly original. Many of her ideas, as Shauna McCabe, the curator of the Toronto exhibit, points out, made Marimekko an industry "gamechanger." Suddenly, textile designers were given the same credit as clothing designers and, under Ratia's management, unusual autonomy, too. One of the most famous examples of this new freedom involves Maija Isola, who designed Unikko, the brand's iconic 1964 poppy print. Ratia was known for her dismissal of flower patterns – she found them too conventional – but Isola successfully challenged her bias by abstracting them and blowing them up to pop-art size.

Over time, the company also introduced the practice of repeating popular prints in succeeding collections and introduced bright colours and oversize designs when sombre hues and small patterns reigned. At a time when new synthetics were saturating the market, the firm repopularized natural fabrics. And through its loose, easy fits, it provided an alternative to the tight, figure-emphasizing styles that were typical of the fifties and early sixties. When the first screenprinting machines produced imperfect lines and edges, Ratia also made a virtue out of necessity, embracing a "homemade" aesthetic.

Especially in the early years, Marimekko built a philosophy around what were deemed artless dresses and textiles made from cotton sheeting. The firm's approach drew heavily from social reformers such as John Ruskin and William Morris, Victorians who believed that everyday objects should be both beautiful and functional and whose ideas fuelled the modernist movement in the Nordic countries, where the notion of social democracy and affordable, contemporary designs for all resonated.

Ratia likewise saw textiles and clothing as "solutions to people's problems" and therefore kept a certain distance from fashion. "I really don't sell clothes – I sell a way of living," she wrote. "I sell a new woman," one who wanted, ultimately, "to forget her dress."

She compared Marimekko's designs to the work of the architect: "He makes a house for people to live in. I make a dress for women to live in." International architects returned the compliment, embracing the firm's geometric lines and bold colours. In fact, the men who first imported Marimekko to North America were both architects. Benjamin Thompson launched the Design Research shop in Cambridge, Mass., where Jacqueline Kennedy shopped for her Marimekko, in 1953. In 1959, the architect-designer Janis Kravis and his wife, Helga, opened a boutique named Karelia in Toronto. Their venture, which extended to shops in Vancouver and Edmonton, introduced Canadians to Nordic design and forged strong links with Ratia.

Karelia and Design Research closed in the late 1970s, when it seemed that Marimekko's day was over. But since the turn of the millennium, the company has been experiencing a strong and varied revival. In 2011, Converse began making shoes from Marimekko designs. Flagship shops are opening across the United States, including new ones in Silicon Valley, Beverly Hills, Manhattan and Boston. (Canada's sole flagship is in Vancouver's Yaletown.) This spring, Finnair planes will feature textiles and tableware by Marimekko; on the outside, two planes sport gigantic versions of Isola's poppies near the tail and on the underbelly. And this past fall, Marimekko showed a collection during New York Fashion Week for the first time.

The New York models, many wearing Converse shoes and some wearing textiles designed half a century ago, came in several sizes and many ages. (The star of the show was the beautiful Carmen Dell'Orefice, 81.) And, breaking with runway tradition but reflecting Marimekko's iconoclasm, the models smiled.

Some of Marimekko's recent projects include (from left) sneakers for Converse, airplane livery for Finnair and drinkware at EQ3.