

From left: Marimekko's reissued styles *Monrepos* (1967), *Kentauri* (1973), *Liidokki* (1974), and *Linjaviitta* (1966)

## THE COLOR CURE

In chilly Finland, **Olivia Stren** discovers the secret to fashion survival: ebullient, color-saturated prints

"Your mother looks like a gypsy," a so-called friend once said to me, referring to the clothes my mom would wear to pick me up from school—no doubt making an entrance. It was the mid-'80s. I was about 10 years old. Among all the other mothers, sensibly dressed in their sweatshirts and jeans or Angela Bower-style power suits, my mother was forever outfitted in voluminous skirts and *robes paysannes*.

Born in a taxicab in Casablanca in 1941—the first of her dramatic entrances—my mother had been forced to leave sunny Morocco with her family for political and religious reasons at 16 years old. After a decade in Paris, she arrived in Toronto on April 27, 1969, at the age of 27. The next day—she loves to tell me, as if still recuperating from the shock—

Toronto greeted her with a snowstorm. The climate was a match, she felt, to the bloodless temperament of the stereotypical Anglo-Saxon Torontonion. Ill-equipped for this place (sartorially, culturally, psychically), she felt lonely and marginalized, and resolved to dress the part: Her exotic clothes became a kind of commitment to not belonging. So my classmate's "gypsy" comment did not wound me; to my eyes, her mother looked conventional. And in our house, *conventional*, along with its plain sister, *appropriate*, were pejoratives. My mother's dresses, meanwhile, are laced up in my memory with all that is feminine and warm, but also rebellious.

Perhaps it's a reaction to fashion's recent, ardent love affair with minimalism, or an

embrace of the inclusivity marking the protests in the streets, but peasant-style dresses feel utterly of-the-moment once again. It's true—there's something about that look that is never completely out of style (my mom wore her dresses right through the beige, Calvin '90s). But the effortless, breezy vibe and artisanal, slow-fashion quality—not to mention the specifics: blouson sleeves, rich colors, bohemian prints—could be spotted floating down the spring runways of Alexander McQueen, Jacquemus, Ulla Johnson, and Peter Pilotto. Meanwhile, Colombian designer Johanna Ortiz's billowing volumes and the richly embroidered, tasseled, Ukrainian-style *vyshyvanka* dresses of Vita Kin are hot sellers on Matchesfashion.com.

My mother would probably be most moved, however, by the spring offerings of Finland's iconic fashion house, Marimekko. The company has rereleased five archival pieces hailing from the '60s and '70s, which bear only the most minor changes from the

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originals. What's striking is not how old these designs are, but how new they look.

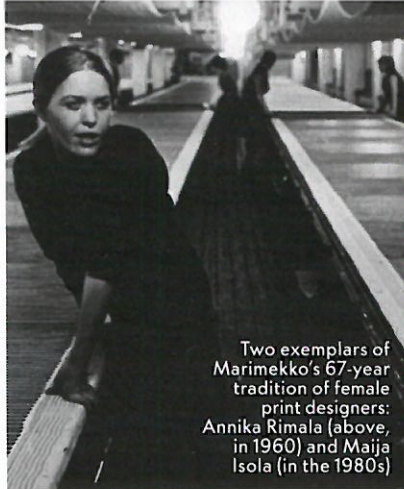
Marimekko's origin story is the stuff of national lore in Finland, as much a part of the local identity as saunas and *sisu* (which means strength of will and determination—and, I'm told, is a defining local trait). The CliffsNotes version: Armi Ratia, a former textile designer and copywriter, founded Marimekko (Finnish for "Mari's dress") in 1951, when she galvanized a group of female artists to create avant-garde prints to enliven the oilcloth produced by her husband's company.

"Armi was a visionary," says Tiina Alahuhta-Kasko, the brand's current president. "She didn't like the delicate, romantic florals of that time. She felt the world was longing for positivity, that gray, postwar Finland was longing for an injection of energy. For her, the prints and the colors were an answer to that void." If those life-validating prints served as an anodyne to the grim political climate, they also were a survival tactic amid the epic, light-starved Finnish winters.

In 1959, Ratia officially took the brand international when she packed an airplane full of Finnish models and flew to the U.S. The following year, Jackie Kennedy snapped up seven dresses during her husband's presidential campaign, appearing in a berry-colored Marimekko sundress on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. Those early dresses, designed by Vuokko Eskolin-Nurmesniemi, considered one of the foremothers of Finnish design, were architectural in silhouette and fashioned with as few seams as possible to facilitate movement and dispense with restrictions both physical and ideological. The heavy cotton fabrics—never anything flimsy or fragile—were hardy, utilitarian. "The woman is sexy, not the dress," the designer famously said. These were clothes intended less to entice others than to empower their wearers.

### BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

Blouson sleeves and mega prints in the spring collections.



Two exemplars of Marimekko's 67-year tradition of female print designers: Annika Rimala (above, in 1960) and Maija Isola (in the 1980s)



And they were rife with contrasts—between the practical silhouettes and the playful prints, the humble fabrics and the theatrical colors, the Scandinavian minimalism and the Russian ornamentalism. Such juxtapositions, I'm told by every woman I meet at Marimekko, lie at the heart of the company. (And the company is 94 percent female, by the way; men there are as exotic as palm trees.)

This algorithm of opposites was clearly successful. Marimekko prints, headlined by the iconic poppy, made their way onto everything from sundresses to oven mitts—even, my mother tells me, onto the curtains (strawberry print) that cheered my parents' tiny gecko-and-salamander-touristed bungalow in Tanzania in the early '70s, when my father was completing his PhD in African politics. The idea to animate a dress and a dinner napkin with the same pattern cannily qualified Marimekko as one of the world's first lifestyle companies. Today, the company's Helsinki headquarters prints 1.2 million square yards of fabric a year in riotous Marimekko designs (some 3,500 of them) and debuts 20 new prints annually.

In December, I visited Marimekko HQ and capped off my trip with a visit to the fortress island of Suomenlinna, a 15-minute ferry ride off the wind-frilled coast of Helsinki. It's the sort of place that might inspire a Tolkien epic—which is not as far-fetched as it might sound: Tolkien actually fashioned Elvish after Finnish. Icicles dangle from stone buildings like vitrified tassels, and

giant rocks are accoutred in ocher-colored lichen in patterns that could have inspired Marimekko prints, and probably did. With its mystical, round-roofed earthen bunkers, the island looks like a sort of Hampdens for hobbits.

On my ferry ride over, even the clock tower perched above the jetty barracks—washed a blush pink—looks ruddy-cheeked from the wind, and by 3 P.M., the sun is already setting. Chilled to the bone, I try to summon a little *sisu*. "Sisu is a will to make it. It's what you need during a Finnish winter, when you're fighting a hard wind," says Marimekko PR manager Sanna-Kaisa Niikko, though I can barely hear her over the gusts.

My mind wanders to a warmer place; I fantasize about spring and trading my parka for, say, a rereleased, circa-1967 circular-hemmed Monrepos dress in a print called Keidas ("oasis")—its charged shades of orange and cactus green evoking all the rawness and jubilation of a Matisse paper cutout. Or the Liidokki dress (1974), which conjures Latin American caftans. You could see Frida Kahlo wearing it in her Casa Azul. Or, for that matter, my mom wearing it to run errands. For as long as I can remember, she's worn an airy white embroidered summer dress. It's a Mexican wedding dress, but she'd wear it to pick me up from playdates or to go to the grocery store, always with red lipstick and her favorite Guerlain Vol de Nuit perfume. This rejection of occasion dressing is another shared Marimekko principle: "Marimekko is meant for everyday," Alahuhta-Kasko tells me, "because every day is the heart of your whole life." Last summer, at 74, my mom wore that Mexican wedding dress to accompany me and my two-year-old son, Leo, to the sandbox.

Unlike my mom, I'm more vulnerable to trends, and lately I find myself falling hard for a full-sleeve peasant dress. I long for a closet full of them. It's a longing, perhaps, to recapture my mother's youth—and maybe hang on to some of my own.