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The Bold Type

Creative director Rebekka Bay is ready to put her imprint on 70-year-old lifestyle brand Marimekko

By Sahar Khan

At first glance, Rebekka Bay doesn't seem to fit the aesthetic of Marimekko, the Finnish brand revered for its vibrant prints. Her daily uniform, she admits, consists of a black or white shirt with denim, and her résumé is peppered with labels that focus on minimalist and monochromatic looks, such as H&M Group's Cos, which she helped launch, and American retailer Everlane.

So what makes Bay, 52, who took the reins as creative director in September 2020, a fit to lead Marimekko? First, she has experience leading mainstream international brands, such as Uniqlo, where she collaborated on capsule collections with Marimekko, and Gap, where she was hired to bring direction to a flagging icon. Second,

and perhaps more important, she grew up in Silkeborg, Denmark, and thus brings to the table a complementary Nordic sense of distilled design, inspired by "the meeting between architecture and nature, between organic shape and hard material, between the outdoors and the indoors."

Marimekko has been a mainstay in Finland since

Marimekko
creative director
Rebekka Bay

Clockwise from top left: a Marimekko store in Helsinki; an image from a 1964 fashion shoot; a look from the pre-spring 2022 collection; the textile printing factory in Helsinki; another pre-spring 2022 look



1949, when founder Armi Ratia commissioned artists to design eye-catching prints for her husband's textile company. Two years later, the enterprise presented its first fashion show; it was a hit, and a fashion brand was born. It took less than a decade for the name to go global, thanks in part to Jackie Kennedy, who wore seven bright, loosely structured Marimekko dresses on the 1960 presidential campaign trail. (The future FLOTUS was pregnant at the time.)

Bay knew of Marimekko while growing up in the '70s, but she personally preferred monochromatic and menswear-inspired clothes. She was exposed to the creative fields by her father, a photographer, and she wanted to be an architect, but after realizing she lacked the patience for it she enrolled in design school. While her student years coincided with the era of the Antwerp Six and the ethos of design purity, Bay was more interested in the influence of culture on fashion. Upon graduating, she moved to London, where she worked as a trend forecaster (clients included Volvo and Dunhill) before H&M tapped her to lead Cos.

It wasn't until years later, when a maxi dress caught her eye at a vintage fair, that she fell in love with Marimekko.



In addition to the colors and the prints, she recognized the brand's distinctive "hand"—the texture of the company's screen-printed fabrics, as opposed to that of digital-foil-printed ones. "There's something in the dryness of the pigment—it's almost like you can feel the color on the fabric," she says. "It really informed how

I thought about designing—designing not only for the eye but also for the hand."

Much of Bay's first year on the job has been spent commemorating the label's 70th anniversary. The company marked the occasion by releasing a coffee-table book, *Marimekko: The Art of Printmaking*, and collaborating with international fashion stars, including Japanese designer Wataru Tominaga, on capsule collections that drew on the company's 3,500-print archive.

"We wanted to allow someone to mess up the brand, to mess up the prints, to have a more playful approach, [to] turn it upside down," Bay says.

To wit, this spring Marimekko partnered with Adidas on the Finnish label's first sports performance line.

Another big move has been to align the company's emissions targets with the Paris Agreement.

Through a combination of the continuous reduction of emissions and the employment of carbon offsets, last year Marimekko was able to make its operations 100 percent carbon neutral. And the textile printing factory in Helsinki, which produces around a million meters of fabric annually, operates on 100 percent renewable electricity.

As much as there have been big changes, Bay is aware that she isn't here to change the company's DNA—just to tweak it for today's global consumer. It might make things easier, she notes, that she's not Finnish. "Because, as much as I respect Marimekko's heritage, I may be a little less scared," she says, laughing. "I like this idea of playing with the heritage, challenging what it can do or what it can be and ensuring that it's relevant."



To that end, the pre-spring 2022 collection, the first one Bay has overseen, is inspired by folk traditions from around the world—“the idea of the unskilled hand or the naive approach to creating.” She isn’t referring to a specific region but to an amalgam of traits that she says folk cultures share, such as creating shapes

through fabric wrapping or belting, something she achieves with touches of gathered fabric.

The pieces in the collection largely use Marimekko’s preferred A-line form, but straighter edges bring about a more streamlined look. And while Marimekko’s dress patterns have historically been liberated, almost amorphous cuts that allow women freedom in motion, Bay seeks to add polish through more structured forms.

“Most people think Unikko when they think Marimekko,” she says, referring to the poppy print from artist Maija Isola, which has been a part of every collection since its 1964 introduction. “But I want to expand that. As much as we are known for our iconic prints, my hope is we would also be known for our iconic shapes.”

