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## THE DANISH WAVE

IN RECENT YEARS, A NEW GENERATION OF DANISH DESIGNERS HAS SURGED FORWARD ON THE FASHION SCENE. THEY HAVE A GLOBAL APPROACH, YET GO IN SEARCH OF THEIR ROOTS. BY CAMILLA ALFTHAN

For years, Danish Design has been synonymous with a modernist and functional industrial design. However, for fashion designers this unique design tradition is a double-edged sword. At the Danish Design School, *Danmarks Designskole*, the approach to fashion is no different to that of all applied art: it takes time to refine and define an idea.

"But fashion is just the opposite – it's on the go – and your sketches are often the best way of conveying a clear-cut idea in its immediate form. We challenged tradition by daring to go our own way," Marianne Eriksen says, who along with Kristina Søndergaard enjoys international success with Daughters of Style, a flamboyant and very distinct style using zigzag cut, lace cutting and heart shapes of woven nappa leather – features borrowed from local seasonal trimmings and traditions.

"Right now, Danish designers are experiencing a momentum. Handmade styles rather than industrial finish are in fashion – and this is deeply embedded in local tradition," Eriksen says, who like Søndergaard lives and works in Copenhagen but mainly works for export.

If you want to make a living in this business, Denmark is too small a market. More than ever, young designers go abroad to study and work. This helps them establish an international network.

"Going abroad was of great help to me. I've always known that I wanted to work in London. It was both an inspiration and an aim," Peter Jensen says, who was the first Dane to study at Central Saint Martins in London. He's been conspicuous in the international press ever since he took part in London Fashion Week with Camilla Stærk.

Today, Danish fashion design is synonymous with a new wave of talent rather than a certain style. According to Jensen – who describes his latest collection as "graphic sportswear inspired by the UPS logo" – this development started with the British-Danish fashion show Hyperhall '98 in Copenhagen.

"The show was very visionary and generated international attention and useful contacts. We dared to be visionary, and it was a boost to our self-confidence. We were stronger in unity," Peter Jensen says, who along

with Daughters of Style and Baum und Pferdgarten founded the Copenhagen Radicals discussion group.

Apparently, there is something Danish about a joint approach – at any rate, ten designers opened the co-owned shop Könrog in Copenhagen two years ago.

"It was difficult to do it alone. Doing things jointly meant we had greater freedom when presenting our clothes rather than depending on purchasing agents who are only into predictable designs," Thilde Jensen of Könrog explains – other members are Charlotte Weiss, Berglund/Henriksen and most recently Anna Gulmann.

"There's been a definite change in local attitude. People are more willing to spend money on design. The secondhand trend is over. Now people prefer new and unique designs," Charlotte Weiss says – her style is very asymmetrical with a lot of drapery.

After completing her training at Central Saint Martins, Anna Gulmann returned to Copenhagen, which she describes as a "friendlier and more humane place to work."

"London was a great experience, but it also taught me that there really is such a thing as a distinct Scandinavian taste. Scandinavian designs draw on folklore and often include knitwear and embroidery. The colour scheme is often very simple – blue and white – and a little melancholic. We're not all that fashion-bound, and our view on women is different. We're not into the sexy, aggressive designs that Italian and French designers often make. Our style is more casual, and sometimes humorous," Gulmann says.

Another new talent is Lotte Bank Nielsen, who made her debut with the boots-and-bullyboy sportswear line with a feminine touch, See Venice and Die.

Pernille Feiberg uses different types of yarn as an expression. Since her stay at Donna Karan in New York – which was cut short on 11 September, two days before the planned fashion house show – she has concentrated on her own collection of knitted blouses, underwear and shawls. Pernille Feiberg is based in Copenhagen and is expecting her first child. She produces new collections continuously and doesn't let seasons limit her. As she says, "it takes time to create my blouses." •



TOP BY SEE VENICE AND DIE.  
LEATHER BOW TIE BY RELIK.  
BICYCLE TIGHTS BY DECATHLON.  
OPPOSITE PAGE: KNIT TOP BY  
BERGLUND/HENRIKSEN. PEARL  
BRACELET, STYLIST'S OWN.  
FISHNET STOCKINGS BY FOGAL.  
SATIN SHOES BY CHRISTIAN  
LOUBOUTIN.







## THE FINNISH LINE

STRIPES, BOLD PATTERNS AND BRIGHT COLOURS HAVE LONG BEEN SYNONYMOUS WITH FINNISH FASHION, AND NOW THEY ARE COMING BACK STRONG. WHEREAS THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE WAS ABOUT PROGRESS AND A NEW NATIONAL IDENTITY, TODAY IT'S MORE ABOUT NOSTALGIA – BUT TO SOME PEOPLE, IT'S ABOUT A BRAND NEW LOOK. BY CAMILLA ALFTHAN

When writers seek to define something as abstract as a 'Finnish national character' they usually employ adjectives such as 'strong', 'bold' and 'independent' – but in the world of Finnish fashion, these words take real form. When the Finnish Style finally broke through, it did so with full steam – nationally, and later internationally.

Before the 1950s there was no Finnish Style, and fashion designers were taking their lead from Paris. At best, women were still in crinoline and corsets – but more often in patched clothes and wartime greys. The war had taken its toll, and there was a terrible shortage of cloth. However, a change was on its way, and one company in particular took the lead.

In 1949, Viljo Ratia founded a textile printing company and asked his wife Armi to take charge of prints. Armi Ratia, who worked as a creative writer for an advertising agency, wanted to catch the public eye with something new and different, so she hired Maja Isola – a young painter who could transform her visions into real form. Initially, the idea

was to sell the fabric by the meter for home dress-making, but they were hesitant. The Ratias realized that they'd have to show the way by creating their own collection. They named the line Marimekko, and it was presented at Helsinki's most fashionable restaurant, Kalastajatorppa, in the spring of 1951.

The timing was perfect. People were tired of uniform mass-fashion and artificial silk, and Marimekko's graphic patterns and bold colours were something completely unprecedented and seemed to embrace the future with optimism.

The press showed interest, and Marimekko was on its way. With Maja Isola working with interior design – and later on with the young art student, Vuokko Eskolin-Nurmesniemi, working with fashion design – Marimekko had created a unique team with a style that immediately caught on with artists and intellectuals.

Interest also began to grow outside Finland. The 1958 devaluation of the Finnish mark played a significant role in the export of the brand – as did an exhibition >



CLASSIC PRINTED COTTON  
FOR MARIMEKKO: DESIGN  
BY VUOKKO ESKOLIN-  
NURMESNIEMI, 1957  
AND 1964; ALSO ANNIKA  
RIMALA, 1963 AND 1966.



at the Finnish design shop Artek in Stockholm. But, the real breakthrough came in 1960 when Marimekko put on a show in the States for the first time.

"Herald Tribune wrote about it, Time Magazine wrote about it. Jackie Kennedy bought twelve of my designs, and Sports Illustrated featured her on the cover wearing one. After that, things really exploded," Vuokko Nurmesniemi recalls – who at 69 is still active in business.

Jackie Kennedy's purchase was a stroke of luck. During the presidential campaign, the press had criticized her for her expensive Parisian fashion, and here she was buying unpretentious Finnish cottons at a local Marimekko shop. The story was syndicated to three hundred American newspapers.

Nevertheless, it was Armi Ratia herself who gave Marimekko the best PR. The outspoken and vivid person she was, she would shock people with such an air of elegance that she infatuated the otherwise easily-bored fashion trendsetters, and the press was fascinated. She frequented all the top editors of leading international papers and magazines, and at home she had become a personality in the world of arts.

Marimekko was more than just a fashion statement; it was a stance against conformity and convention.

"It serves the purpose of dressing modern-day women, who don't have the time to run off to the dressmaker. Above all, women who want to forget about their clothes and devote themselves to other matters," one journalist wrote.

Marimekko was about simple and basic design with a splash of extravagant prints. It was also a vision and a whole ideology. However, Armi's most ambitious project was 'The Mari Village', which was intended as an idyllic, self-sufficient

village community. A pilot project house was completed in 1967, but the same year all-consuming costs put an end to it all. Soon after, Marimekko became a way of life. People could order their own Marimekko sauna and choose from a line of interior designs, tableware, accessories and stationary – today we call it home collections; Mari called it stage-setting.

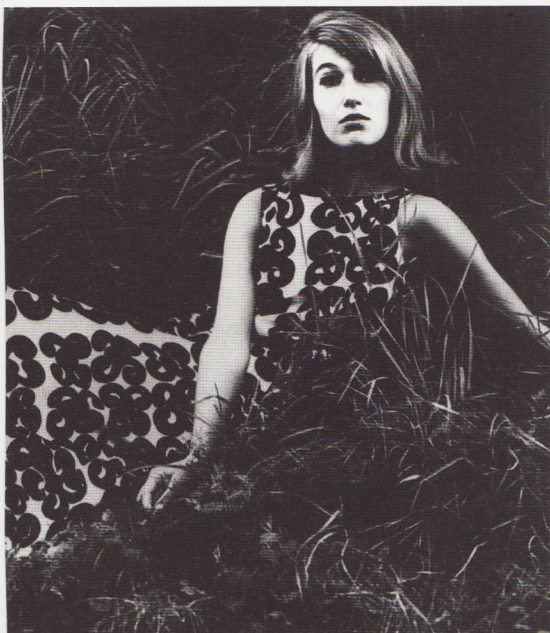
In 1961, the garment side of the business had lost Vuokko Nurmesniemi, who later created her own label, Vuokko. Being a ceramist by profession, Vuokko's work was very sculptural, and form and material always played an important role. She rejected classic pleating and shaped drapery and concentrated on the cut – also replacing padding, buttons and bone with zips, rubber bands and pressed buttons. For several years running, she received international awards and prizes, and at one point she became a celebrated name in Japan.

Marimekko allied themselves with several new designers as their image shifted from *avant-garde* in the 1950s and 1960s towards more classless and democratic values. Their next big success came when Annika Rimala created the striped *Tasaraita*-top in 1968. In Finland, all ages and sexes had a *Tasaraita*, as did personalities such as Jackie Kennedy and Princess Caroline of Monaco. Soon, striped socks, striped pyjamas and striped underwear were to follow.

The look had become so synonymous with Finland that a writer at one point called it 'The Land of a Thousand Lakes and a Thousand Stripes'.

In Finland, where nature is vast and unspoilt, environmental consciousness has become a key value. In 1968, a large oil disaster near Helsinki made Vuokko realize that nature has its limits, and this led her to replace plastic bags with paper bags,





and only to use linen, cotton, silk and wool in her products. Today's leading design talent, Paola Suhonen, who was recently assigned to the tricot manufacturer Nanso, has also distanced herself from the all-pervasive use of artificial fabrics – she only uses natural fabrics.

When Nanso was established back in the 1930s there were few competitors, but following the exemplary success of Marimekko this was to change.

"During the 1960s, textiles became an entire industry, and for twenty years it was just as large as that of France – even though Finland only has a population of five million," Jaakko Selin explains – fashion editor at Finland's largest newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*.

A string of new manufacturers emerged that hired in-house designers, just as Marimekko had done earlier. Timo and Pi Sarpaneva were assigned to Kestilä, where they developed the so-called 'Ambient Fabrics' with glowing colours that would merge and blend with each other. Teiniasu assigned Elina Kokkila and the Swedish talent, Rohdi Heintz; and Marjatta Metsovara was taken on by Finn-Flare, which also launched a collection by Maj Kuhlefelt in 1964. Other flourishing companies were Piretta, Silo and the sportswear giant, Luhta.

"The business became so big it had to come down, and with the Soviet collapse in the 1980s, it came down with a crash," Selin says.

Finnish fashion had suddenly become too expensive – and moreover, it seemed to have lost its original appeal. Armi Ratia passed away in 1979, and for a while Marimekko's classic style seemed outdated and worn-out.

With today's newfound interest in the classic modern Finnish

Style, people ask themselves what the source of the early-day creativity was.

"After the war we had nothing, and we wanted to create beautiful things around us. We wanted to find our own style and start something new. Glass was a cheap and accessible material, and emerging artists would triumph with innovative designs. We were also craving for colours, and putting lively prints on cotton was a fairly easy thing to do," Selin explains.

Marimekko has become a cult label with the young, who see it as something new, and sales have risen dramatically since last year. Maja Isola's Unikkon flowers, which were originally designed for interiors, are now re-appearing on garment fabrics – and this brings us back to Marimekko's original idea: to use fabrics in innovative ways.

And, according to Jaakko Selin, there could be more to come. Marimekko has thousands of prints in stock and tens of thousands of different colour combinations, all waiting to hit the market. The original message was about progress and a new national identity, and later about egalitarian values. Today, it's more about nostalgia – but to some people it's about a brand new look.

"If a design is good, it's good, even if it's 30 years old," Vuokko Nurmesniemi says – she recently re-introduced some of her old models.

"I always say that I'm not fashion; I am design. I try to go my own way. Today's fashion is too trendy – and that spoils creativity. You see the same thing all over the world. The business aspect has become too strong."

If sameness is the enemy today, just as it was after the war, then the Finnish Style may have started out on its second momentum. •



## LIVING PEOPLE

**Ahtila the Finn** Moving images is an expressive art form with a great following among the Finns. Eija-Liisa Ahtila's art videos invite you to peer into the darkened minds of the emotionally and psychologically distraught, from the comfort of your home! By Camilla Alfthan. Photographs from the art video *Talo*

A house, a woman and the Finnish pine woods. This is the idyllic setting in Eija-Liisa Ahtila's latest art work *Talo*, 'The House', a fourteen-minute art video, written and directed by the 43-year-old Finn. However, the story is less than idyllic. It's about a woman who starts to hear voices. They interfere with her perception of the world and gradually disrupt the sense of time and space around her.

Ahtila, which is pronounced Ahh-tila, lives and works in Helsinki. She directed her first video in 1987, but her career spun into high momentum earlier this year when she exhibited a highly acclaimed series of videos at the Tate Modern in which she explores the powerful emotions underlying human relations.

According to Ahtila, there are two major reasons why so many Finnish artists are into moving images. One reason is practical: state grants have supported it for the past fifteen years through different initiatives, notably the Avek organisation. Consequently, collectors from all over the world have taken note of Finnish videos.

"The other reason is that moving images are part of our everyday life. They deal with our environment in a different way than traditional paintings," Ahtila says – her images are always colour-conscious, and she often applies techniques from contemporary media.

"The way the videos are screened is very important. Collectors, who buy the art to show at home, either use a separate room or build a structure to screen them in. It's very evocative, and you can't just hang them on the wall like a painting."



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FLYING HIGH IN THE FINNISH WOODS – AND THE WOMAN IN EIIJA-LIISA AHTILA'S 'THE HOUSE' EVEN IMAGINES HEARING VOICES.