

HOLDING PATTERN

*The classic Scandi aesthetic is muted and minimalist, so why is Nordic pattern design so exuberant?
Katie Treggiden explores.*

Think of Scandinavian furniture design and you will almost certainly picture pale wood, restrained colours and understated, curvilinear forms. Yet call to mind Nordic pattern design and suddenly Marimekko's bold, colourful poppies burst into view, or perhaps the confident botanical motifs Josef Frank designed for iconic Swedish interior design store Svenskt Tenn. So how did Finland, a nation of introverts, give rise to one of the loudest fashion brands in the world? And how did Austrian-born Frank convince generations of minimalist Swedes to embrace colour and pattern?

Already a renowned architect and interior designer, Frank left his home country of Austria for Sweden in 1933, fleeing antisemitism, and rejecting the cold, rational 'machine for living in' approach to modernism proposed by the likes of Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier. When Estrid Ericson, founder of Svenskt Tenn, offered him a safe haven in which to live and work in 1934, he was finally able to flourish. 'Frank had a more middle-European approach to colours and design – and Ericson accepted everything he did in his bold and colourful way,' says Svenskt Tenn's creative director, Thommy Binfeld.

'His style was questioned at the time, but he gave Sweden a new way of looking at design.'

It was new, but not unprecedented - the 19th century Swedish artist Carl Larsson painted domestic scenes depicting the Arts and Crafts style popularised by William Morris in the UK and co-opted by the Nordic nations. 'Larsson's paintings, with their motifs of everyday life, played a huge part in capturing and "selling" the essence of Nordic style - the pale wood, simple shapes and abundance of natural light,' explains Swedish textile designer and co-founder of ▶



Thiel Gallery, Stockholm, Sweden , Bridgeman Art Library





Previous Page Left: Carl Larsson, 1853-1919, Azalea, 1906, watercolour on paper

Previous Page Right: Hawaii, Josef Frank, Svenskt Tenn

Left: Primavera, Maija Isola, Marimekko

Right: Kid's Clay, Plesner Patterns

Butler/Lindgård, Karin Olu Lindgård. 'But they also featured the bold textiles designed by his wife Carin. Ever since, those bold textiles have been a natural part of the Nordic style.' In fact, confident Nordic pattern can trace its roots even further back to rosemåling ('rose-painting'), popular in Norway and rural Sweden in the 18th century. This decorative folk art featuring floral motifs in primary and secondary colours had fallen out of favour by the 20th century. 'The minimalism and functionalism that came from Europe with the Bauhaus movement said that everything should have a reason, or function, and that gave no argument for colourful patterns,' says Kiki Plesner-Löfroth, founder of Norwegian surface pattern design studio Plesner Patterns, explaining its decline.

Fast forward to the 1930s, and Frank and Ericson transformed sober European functionalism into something warmer, more colourful and more embracing - finding a way for colour and pattern to sit alongside understated interiors. 'The simplicity of the room - the richness of details,' was Ericson's mantra. By the time Marimekko was founded in 1951 and Maija Isola conceived the iconic Unikko (poppy) print pattern in 1964 - to this day Marimekko's most iconic design - the stage had been set for colourful, self-assured, nature-inspired pattern, even among a conservative Nordic population.

Both Marimekko and Svenskt Tenn continue to excite a new generation of contemporary Nordic pattern designers. 'The works of Maija Isola and Joseph Frank have been a huge inspiration for us, artistically as well as technically,' says Lindgård. 'You could argue that we're working in the tradition of those bold

Nordic surface pattern designers - and we wouldn't disagree.' Plesner-Löfroth echoes this sentiment, saying, 'Theirs is the classic boldness I aspire to.'

Yet contemporary Nordic pattern designers are doing more than simply replicating the work of their heroes - even within Marimekko itself. Giving its designers the flexibility to work from their personal studios and within the natural environment surrounding Helsinki, together with a unique in-house colour system, ensures its latest patterns are as fresh and vibrant today as those poppies were in the 1960s. Aino-Maija Metsola's *Sääpäiväkirja* ('weather diary') collection was inspired by the changes to Finnish weather patterns after the heat of the summer. 'Kuuskajaskari sighs with autumn winds and takes its colour palette from the same season,' says Metsola. A collaboration with Spinnova, whose innovative fabrics are made from post-consumer, biodegradable wood-pulp and use 99% less water than cotton, is paving the way for a textile industry that sits more comfortably within its environment too.

Plesner-Löfroth works directly with the natural environment in her native Norway. 'I design my patterns with analogue methods initially, using ink, moss, wax, eggshell etc,' she says. 'I like "art by accident"- the small distortions that emerge outside of my control make more lively and genuine patterns.' Working with everything from wet paper and ink to potato prints for a recent collaboration with running brand Loplabbet, her work is uniquely Norwegian and yet has global resonance. Supporting local weavers, using recycled and GOTS-certified fabrics, and digitally printing to minimise waste,

Plesner-Löfroth also respects the natural environment that gives her so many ideas.

Lindgård and her Butler/Lindgård co-founder Hanna Butler cite both the Northern hemisphere's light and the effect it has on colour perception in Sweden and what they describe as the 'fearless' creative community within which they work as key influences on their design practice. But their current inspiration comes directly from the human form. 'Lately we've been experimenting with direct body representation in surface design,' says Lindgård. 'Since we're women in textile design, feminist issues are really important to us. We are interested in the connection between choreography and the repeated movements that lead to repeated imprints on a surface.' They sketch on a shared sheet of paper, often finishing each other's ideas, cover their own bodies in paint to create imprinted patterns, and screen print together passing the squeegee in one seamless motion from one pair of hands to the other - a choreographed creative process in itself.

Although it's difficult to imagine Frank or Isola covered in paint, what they bestowed upon those who follow in their footsteps is a sense of freedom. The freedom to stand on the shoulders of giants and yet create something new; to be inspired by, and yet not restricted to, their local surroundings and national heritage; to explore the full spectrum of colour from natural dyes to pops of neon; and, most importantly, to find a path that is entirely their own. Scandi style might be quiet and understated, Nordic pattern is anything but. ••• **Katie Treggiden**





selvedge THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE

THE FABRIC OF YOUR LIFE: NORDIC

