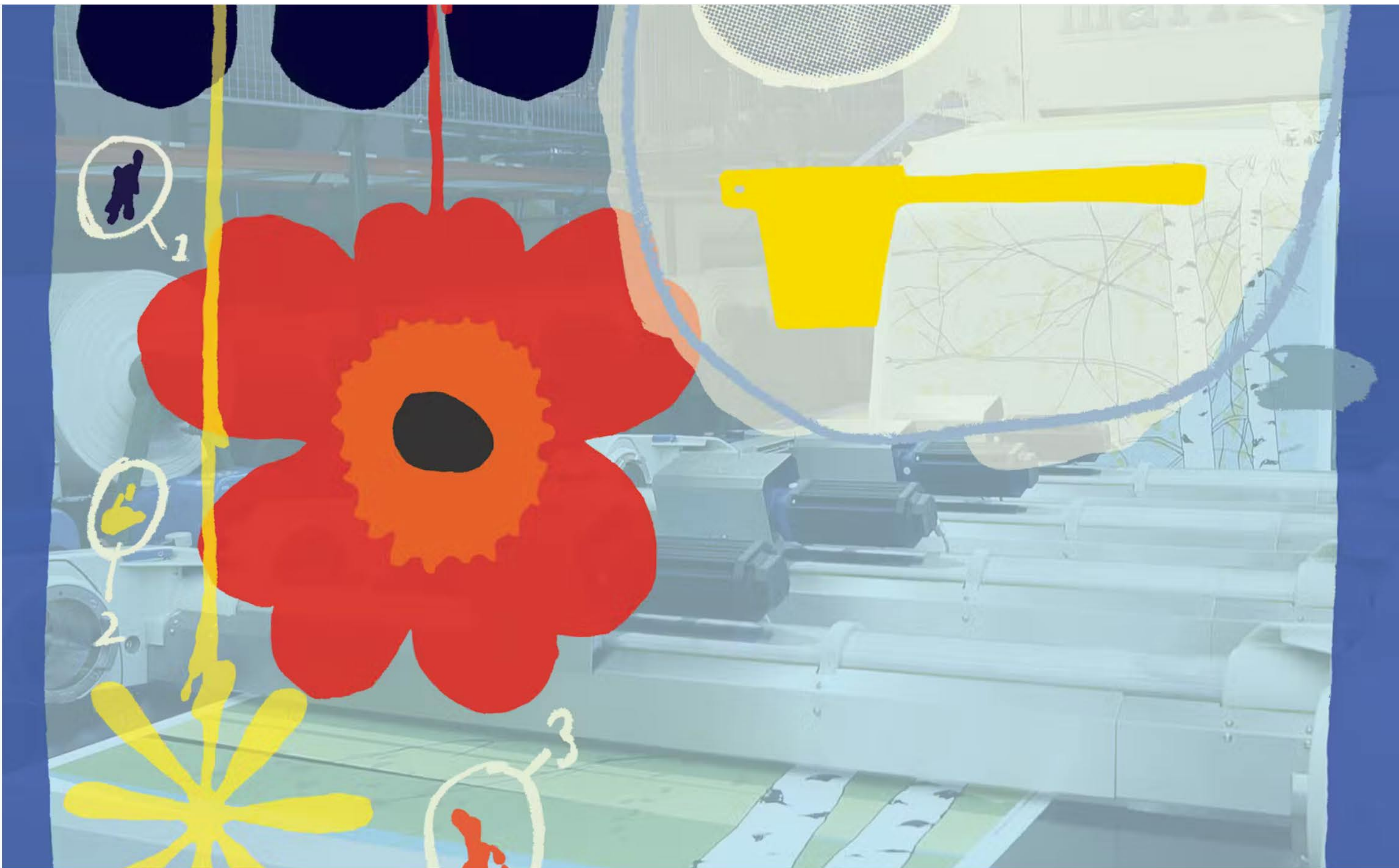


Marimekko Tour

Beyond a shining white foyer and a canteen infused with fragrant lunchtime aromas, Marimekko's Helsinki headquarters hides a textile factory in its belly.

Text by

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Comfortable corridors lead to a cement factory floor partitioned with hulking steel machinery, painted yellow lines that define circulation, and vast shelves stacked with blue-framed screens. Two printing machines, one 30 years old, the other new this year, fill a narrow wing of the cavernous space. Several other machines generate great slow cascades of freshly inked cotton and linen that end in a froth of neatly folded material in industrial canvas carts as big as grange boxes. Accessed by a steel catwalk overhead, a test studio webbed with laundry lines hums under the tireless rotations of two LG Electronics and Whirlpool washing machines.

That Marimekko (which means "Mari's dress" in Finnish) is a business driven by its designers' *carte blanche* approach to design is visible in the distinctive cotton and linen fabrics manufactured here for ready-to-wear designer collections, bags, and to be sold by the yard for interior decoration: exuberant florals by Maija Isola and Teresa Moorhouse, huge brush-stroked leaves by Fujiwo Ishimoto, and hand-sketched city scenes and comic book-colored Finnish landscapes by 24-year-old Maija Louekari.

The factory prints around 1.6 million yards of fabric each year, a process that begins with ink paste made from thickener and dyes. Bellying up to a flatbed printer, a worker wearing heavy earphones and two carpal-tunnel wrist braces pours this ink into a narrow trough along the bottom of the printing screen, on which a pattern has been lain in varying densities of wax. She scoops color from a household saucepan using a plastic yellow scoop typically found in the sauna. This trough passes across the taut fabric once, then the fabric is passed through to the next unprinted spot to lay down the next repeat. The worker searches for flaws, handling some 5 to 20 yards of material per minute. Next, the dye is fixed to the fabric by steam before excess thickener and dye are washed away. To ensure a good feel and brightness, prevent wrinkling, and preshrink the fabric, it is passed through a tenter frame, where a Teflon coat is added and the material is stretched back to its full size (having been shrunk by wet inks). All fabrics are inspected inch by inch by a human eye, flaws marked in pencil at the edges. If only four flaws are found in 40 yards of fabric, the batch is seconded. Approved fabrics are wound to cardboard bolts for sale in shops or to small rolls to be sewn into totes, frocks, or even a Fatboy beanbag.