

***Fujiwo Ishimoto Exhibition:
From Marimekko Flowers to Ceramic
Fruits in Dialogue with the Rinpa***

Hosomi Museum, Kyoto, Japan

Carolyn Wargula

Exhibition Review

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About the Author

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Fujiwo Ishimoto Exhibition: From Marimekko Flowers to Ceramic Fruits in Dialogue with the Rinpa

March 9- April 21, 2019 Hosomi Museum,
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Fujiwo Ishimoto (1941–) may have created four hundred works as a prolific designer for the legendary Finnish firm Marimekko, but his fabrics and ceramics are not Finnish. They reflect his own Japanese heritage and interest in the vividly colorful Rinpa (or Rimpa) style¹—at least that is the conclusion that the Hosomi Museum hopes its audience will reach in the show *Fujiwo Ishimoto Exhibition: From Marimekko Flowers to Ceramic Fruits in Dialogue with the Rinpa*, held from March 9 to April 21, 2019, in Kyoto.² The Hosomi Museum thoughtfully curated over eighty of Ishimoto’s fabrics and ceramicwares alongside twenty-one Rinpa-style hanging scrolls, folding screens, and textiles already in the museum’s collection to explore concurrences of the old and the new, the

local and the global. The comparison makes clear that Ishimoto’s objects continue—rather than break—tradition. *In Dialogue with the Rinpa* highlights this traditional Japanese visual language embodied in Ishimoto’s art and reveals how the Rinpa style was adapted for a global audience and a transnational design house.

The uncanny resemblance between Ishimoto’s work and the historical Rinpa pieces is unsurprising. Ishimoto’s textiles are bursting with vibrant colors that mirror works by the originators of the Rinpa style—Tawaraya Sōtatsu and Ogata Kōrin—which have influenced Ishimoto since he enrolled as a student of design and graphics at the National University of Art in Tokyo in 1960.³ The highly decorative Rinpa style emerged in Kyoto during the early seventeenth century. It combines abstraction with naturalism to create dazzling ornamental paintings on a variety of formats. Both Rinpa artists and Ishimoto posit that art is meant to seep into everyday life. Rinpa artists painted on possessions used in daily activities, while Ishimoto transformed mundane objects like socks and hand towels into gorgeous pieces with a fresh pop of color as a designer of interior fabrics at Marimekko from 1974 to 2006. His textiles, however, were not always widely accepted. Armi Ratia, founder of the company, initially rejected Ishimoto’s brushstroke mark-making designs, insisting that these patterns “weren’t Marimekko.”⁴ As Ishimoto’s fabrics gained traction, he began to push against this conventional style and rigid Nordic cultural identity of the brand. By 1977, he departed from bold abstraction into a more minimalist and Japanese calligraphic style of textiles. This exhibition foregrounds Ishimoto’s commitment to making art that expresses his own cultural identity and places his works in dialogue with Rinpa art to show their similarities in form, subject matter, and craftsmanship.

It is evident in the first room of the museum that seasonal change runs as a consistent thread through the works of both Rinpa artists and Ishimoto. Eight vibrant fabrics of Ishimoto’s

¹ Rinpa style is a modern term deriving from the name of Ogata Kōrin. It literally means “School of Kōrin,” but there was never a Rinpa school in the traditional sense of a master passing down his designs to the next generation. Rinpa refers to a group of painters with a similar stylistic preference that worked in a variety of Kyoto workshops during the Edo period.

² This show was part of a traveling exhibition of Fujiwo Ishimoto’s textiles and ceramicware. The retrospective opened at the Museum of Art in Ishimoto’s native Ehime Prefecture on October 27, 2018 and concluded at the Spiral Garden in Tokyo on June 30, 2019.

³ Yoshinao Yamada, “An Interview with Fujiwo Ishimoto,” in *Fujiwo Ishimoto: From Marimekko Flowers to Ceramic Fruits*, ed. Yoshinao Yamada, trans. William Andrews (Tokyo: Wacoal Art Center, 2018), 19.

⁴ Marianne Aav, ed., *Marimekko: Fabrics, Fashion, Architecture* (New York: The Bard Graduate Center, 2003), 70–72.

design hang from the ceiling like floating pillars. These textiles are massive, and their idiosyncratic vegetal shapes, repetitive patterns, and gestural marks evoke a sense of power in space, as if each fabric occupies a separate world. Twelve additional wall-sized fabrics by Ishimoto, rolled into cylinders like Japanese hanging scrolls, line the gallery walls between Rinpa-style floral sketches. The robin's egg blue *Suvisunnuntai* (*A Sunday in Summer*, 1998) blends seamlessly with the adjacent painting of blue morning glories (nineteenth century) made by Rinpa artist Nakamura Hōchū using soft watery brushstrokes. Sōtatsu's *Moonlight Under Plum Blossoms* fan painting (seventeenth century) is paired with Ishimoto's winter-themed *Uomo* (*Midwinter*, 1987)—an appropriate match, given the identical palette of black and gold and the similar marble-like wave pattern called *suminagashi*. Ishimoto also breathes new life into the theme with *Maisema* (*Landscape*, 1983), a blue-green patchwork design textile, by moving his focus away from Japan to the changing light and color in Finland's different seasons.

The next two rooms of the exhibition focus extensively on Ishimoto's ceramicwares to explore how he, like the Rinpa artists, embellishes functional everyday items with bold, exaggerated motifs. These rooms display Ishimoto's pottery for the Finnish brand, Arabia, which he began making in 1989. Some ceramic plates are painted with a single bulbous tangerine, a popular local produce from his hometown Tobe in Ehime Prefecture while others are incised with thin lines representing the slender branches of a Japanese dappled willow tree. These objects are juxtaposed with Rinpa-style decorative folding screens and fan paintings that invite viewers to look closely and delight in their formal similarities. Yet, several of his artistic decisions, such as the ceramicwares' foreign titles and European formats, signal his

engagement with audiences outside Japan. *In Dialogue with the Rinpa* compels viewers to interpret Ishimoto's works not as replications of the Rinpa style, but as formal interactions in a relationship "neither too close nor too distant from one another."⁵

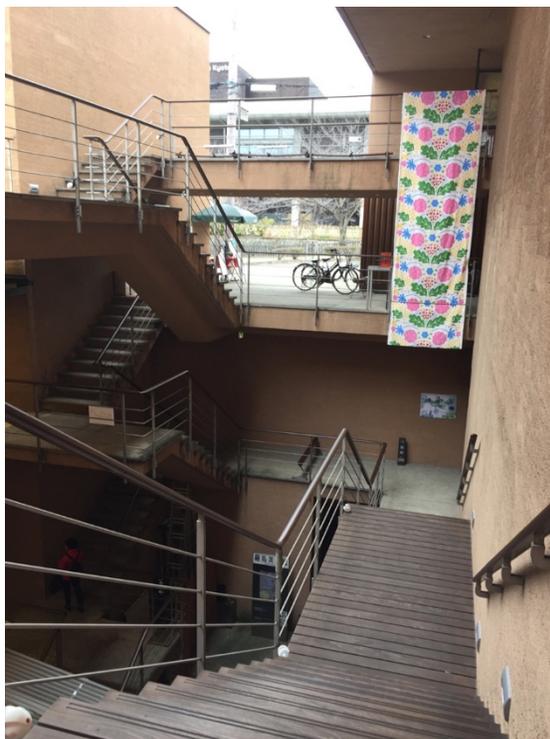


Figure 1

Fujiwo Ishimoto, *Onni* (Happiness), 1975. Installation view. Hosomi Museum, Kyoto, Japan. (photo: author)

This synergistic interplay between the local and the global is encapsulated in *Onni* (*Happiness*, 1975), a giant cheerful textile fluttering from the third-floor balcony near the museum entrance (Figure 1). At first glance, this peasant-motif fabric inspired by Finnish folk art appears foreign and distant from traditional Japanese design. Still, *Onni*, like the exhibition overall, invites viewers to probe deeper, asking them to unravel what appears to be a foreign pattern by a native artist to consider how it remains rooted in traditional Japanese imagery through its focus on nature and use of Rinpa-style abstract botanical shapes. Its prominent position reinforces Ishimoto's mastery of both Finnish and Japanese design and insists on the compatibility and even interconnectivity of these two styles.

⁵ Yamada, "An Interview with Fujiwo Ishimoto," 19.

The exhibition culminates in an installation on the third-floor Kokoan tea room to consider what transnational design has to offer for traditional Japanese art practices like the tea ceremony. The assemblage of Ishimoto's objects explores the theme *When the Spring Sun Shines* and reflects on the month of March in Kyoto as winter transitions to spring. Ishimoto's dotted-grid-pattern fabric replaces the decorative hanging scroll that usually fills the room's *tokonoma* alcove. Guests lucky enough to participate in the performance are served a seasonal sweet in the shape of Ishimoto's *Winter Melon* along with matcha green tea in a traditional tea bowl designed by the artist himself. The serene and contemplative tea room repurposes Ishimoto's objects, showing how they can be used to refresh traditional Japanese spaces and distill the dissonance of our present contemporary life.

In Dialogue with the Rinpa is a small but ambitious show that deftly tracks Ishimoto's encounter with Rinpa aesthetics and techniques. However, a few factors of the exhibition make it challenge the non-specialist viewer. None of Ishimoto's works are labelled, perhaps to let the textiles and ceramics speak for themselves. The exhibition also assumes the audience has prior knowledge of the Rinpa style. The opening wall text, for example, is only written in Japanese and omits contextual information on the aesthetic. Nevertheless, this show successfully shifts the narrative surrounding Japanese designers like Ishimoto working for transnational brands. The show makes a strong case that they do not simply emulate foreign designs but bring a distinctly Japanese pictorial style to a global audience.

The exhibition ends with this implicit question: what exactly can prolific Japanese designers working abroad like Ishimoto, Rei Kawakubo, and Kenzō Takada do for the nation? Their designs have the potential to populate our daily lives like the works by Rinpa artists before them, but on a much grander scale. Marimekko products, for example, are mass-produced and easily available across the globe. Couch cushions, king-sized duvet covers, and even bathrobes printed in Ishimoto's bold designs can be purchased at just the click of a button. Obscured behind these Rinpa-style motifs is also this grim reality: foreign brands are profiting off of traditional Japanese design. From this perspective, it is difficult not to imagine Ishimoto's fabrics and ceramicware as conspicuous product placements for foreign Finnish brands. But the exhibition also radiates positivity, championing the ingenuity and formal innovation inherent to traditional Japanese imagery and expressed centuries later through Ishimoto's mesmerizing objects. One can hear a collective sigh of relief reverberate through the museum. The global demand for Japanese design is still alive and well—a hopeful and refreshing thought for a nation that has been economically stagnant for almost three decades.



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