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TRI-CITIES HISTORICAL

MUSEUM

EST. 1959

GRAND RIVER PACKET

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SUMMER 2021

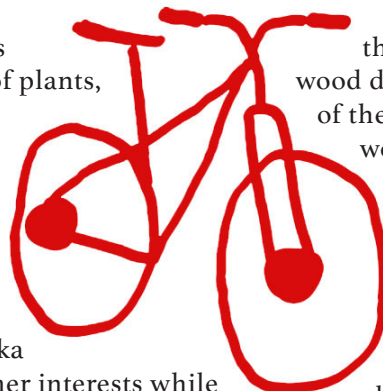
FROM CONCEPT TO CLASSIC TEE:
50 YEARS OF SCREEN PRINTED ART AT MARÜSHKA

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Bold, iconic prints. Stretched canvases using a limited color palette. Images of plants, animals, nautical scenes, and more. Apparel featuring cheeky seagulls or watermelons printed on cotton, marrying comfort and style. When you think of Marüşka and Michigan Rag, these are the things you think of. A Tri-Cities institution celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, Marüşka innovated and evolved to meet customer interests while continuing the traditions and designs from its start to the present.

If you walk into the Marüşka storefront on Washington Avenue in Grand Haven, Michigan, you are immediately greeted by a cheerful spectrum of hooded sweatshirts, tea towels, onesies, and other apparel. Printed with designs ranging from faithful recreations of plant silhouettes to very stylized dogs and cats, place-based souvenir slogans such as “unsalted” and “Grand Haven, Michigan,” and even photographs translated into screen printed designs. You may notice the many large screens hanging from the ceiling. They’re brightly colored from years of use, giving the atmosphere a more personal feel



MARÜSHKA

than an antiseptic retail store. White painted wood decorates the shop while also forming the basis of the racks for hanging shirts and hoodies. The wood has the appearance of reclaimed beach posts and planks, painted a crisp white and neatly acknowledges the store’s lakeside location without descending into a full-blown nautical tourist-trap aesthetic.

There’s a window into the actual print shop, where shoppers can peek inside at artists dragging ink across screens, feeding the clothing into an industrial dryer, rotating to the next color screen for the design, and repeating until the t-shirt or tea towel is complete. Artwork and humorous signs are plastered on the workshop walls, with neatly stacked rows of plain garments waiting their turn to run through the printing process.

Upstairs, the store has a massive table that stretches nearly the full length of the building from front to back. This is where workers once screen printed huge bolts of fabric for use in clothing and decoration. Today, the table is covered with concept sketches, stretched canvases, Michigan Rag designs, newspapers and photo albums. It is the unofficial archive of Marüşka history. Every clothing rack, shelf, and space on the wall holds a piece of the business’s 50-year history. In the basement, Marüşka artists can create rubylith prints for screens, find past screens from the earliest days of the store, and even more clothing ready to be printed.

You could walk through this space on your own and be absolutely astounded, but the real experience requires a tour led by Randy Smith, current owner and Marüşka team member since 1976. He knows the concept of every design, the photographs they’re based on and the stories behind the artists who made them. He has a wry sense of humor and an encyclopedic memory when it comes to all things Marüşka and Michigan Rag.





Screenprinting in progress

SCREEN PRINTING - STEP BY STEP

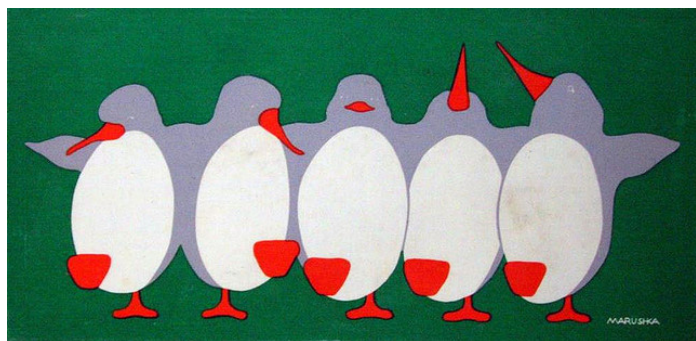
The earliest forms of screen printing date back to China during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE). The process marked a revolution in the production of textiles and textile art, as it allowed artists to quickly and consistently produce copies of the same design. Historically, the process began by creating a screen made of silk or another fine weave material. Artists would then use additional fabric or grease paint to put a design on the screen and form a stencil. Ink would then be deposited on the screen and pulled back and forth across the screen to create the printed design on the textile. Artists could choose to use a positive or negative stencil technique

depending on the design they had in mind for their screen. When most Americans think of stencils, they think of negative stencils, where a design is cut out of a material and ink/paint applied to the stencil to color in the shape on the underlying paper or textile. Positive stencils are the exact opposite of negative stencils, as they prevent ink from filling in the design itself and instead allow it to pass through the space surrounding the design.

In today's screen printing, the materials have changed but the overarching technique has not. One of the most important technological developments for contemporary screen printing has been the creation of rubylith, which is a red-tinted light-blocking film with a clear backing. To create a design in rubylith, an artist must cut the film to the correct shape, then use a scalpel or other sharp crafting knife to carefully carve the design into the film. The artist then removes the sections of rubylith that are not part of the design, so the film can be used in the next step of the process. Contemporary screen printing artists often use photo emulsion solutions instead of grease paint to create more crisp

copies of intended designs. These emulsions are spread on the thin fabric of the screen, a rubylith is placed on top, and the screen is exposed to light. Photo emulsions work by hardening and binding to the fabric when exposed to light. Parts of the screen covered by a template or design, such as a rubylith, are not exposed to light and remain soft. Once the exposed emulsion finishes hardening, screen printers can rinse the soft emulsion off of the screen to reveal the stencil underneath. If a design has more than one color, a separate screen must be prepared for each hue. These screens eventually wear out, but they can make hundreds of copies of the pattern before they do.

Today, screen printers at shops like Marüşhka can use large rotating printers to work on more than one screen at once. Marüşhka has a four color, four station rotating printer, which allows their artists to load up to four different screens at the same time. After each new color is added, the artists run the fabrics through the industrial dryer to speed the



drying process and make sure the ink sets properly. Once all the printed fabrics have gone through the dryer, they can have the next color screen printed on top. All the artist needs to do is rotate the printer to the next station. By repeating this process, Marüşhka's artists can complete elaborate designs for customers to enjoy on t-shirts, tea towels, and anything else the shop has to offer.

MARÜSHKA HISTORY

In 1971, Marüşhka started as the passion project of a local high school art teacher, Dick Sweet. This was a big year for Sweet, as he quit his teaching job, married his wife Mary, and his daughter Angela was born. As the story goes, Sweet was conversing with a Polish butcher when he learned that Marüşhka was a Polish endearment for the name Mary (his wife's name). Sweet worked with his wife Mary and another couple, Victor and Mary Krawczyk, who were also teachers, to make Marüşhka a reality. They started the business in Grand Rapids, Michigan with Dick and Mary Krawczyk creating the majority of the large-scale designs for corporate customers. This partnership did not last, however, and the Krawczyks left Marüşhka in 1972. After that,

Sweet moved the business to Spring Lake, Michigan.

MARÜSHKA



Randy Smith, owner of Marüshka

The first Spring Lake location for Marüshka was near the present-day location of the Front Porch, at 620 E. Savidge Street. While Sweet was the primary designer for Marüshka at this time, he almost always had other artists working with him. This allowed him not only to create a more diverse set of designs, but to print at a much higher volume than he could have managed by himself.

Many of the earliest designs were abstract, with two or three colors; they were bold and bright, but the limited color palette made them appropriate for business spaces. Simple and clean geometric patterns of semicircles, triangles, lines, and other shapes made designs scalable. These fabrics were intended to function in office spaces as public art and decor. Locally-based national businesses such as Haworth and Steelcase used these prints in their designs, leading to broader exposure of the brand at conferences and expos. National exposure soon followed, with successful appearances at trade shows in Chicago and Dallas. Soon, the company began sending out binders with patterns and sample fabrics to prospective clients.

Expanding beyond corporate customers, Sweet saw an opportunity to reach a much broader audience by tweaking his formula. By printing smaller pieces of canvas stretched on frames, he could sell pieces to visitors looking for a souvenir to bring home from a trip to the Tri-Cities. This pivot led to a change in the style of the designs, as there was a much more diverse set of tastes within the general public. Sweet started this aspect of Marüshka in 1973, selling the first of these smaller prints to the public in 1974, near the current location of the Snug Harbor restaurant at 311 S. Harbor Drive. One of the earliest popular printed canvas collections in this vein was

the Field Prints series, started by Marüshka employee John Wilkinson. These silhouettes of local flora were incredibly popular, which gave an encouraging boost to Marüshka's non-corporate art creation.

In 1976, Randy Smith joined the Marüshka crew. Smith was originally one of Sweet's students in his high school art classes. He started as a salesman, traveling to Florida and back to sell smaller canvas prints to various gift shops along the coast. This significantly expanded the national exposure of Marüshka in the tourism industry, beyond the office decor reputation they had already established. The popularity of Marüshka prints continued to grow during this period, particularly because of Sweet's insistence that art should be affordable, pricing his prints to be within reach of most tourists visiting gift shops.

An interesting anecdote illustrates the ways in which global politics influenced the development of Marüshka. In 1980, the Solidarity movement of Poland had an unexpected ripple effect halfway around the world: Polish linen became incredibly difficult to source, leading Marüshka to diversify into stretched cotton canvases. These cotton canvases are notable for their finer weave and brighter colors than the prints on stretched linen; the linen/cotton blend canvases were a natural oatmeal color, while the cotton canvases were a brighter white. The supply issue lasted at least two years, which was not an insignificant amount of time for a small business such as Marüshka.



In the 1980s, Marüshka made another key pivot that changed the history of the company: the development of Michigan Rag brand apparel. Michigan Rag was born from a pair of shorts. Specifically, teddy bear shorts. An employee named Chris Sine gathered four remnants from a run of teddy bear prints and stitched them together to create a one of a kind garment. Marüshka started printing fabrics to be sewn into shirts, pants, jackets, dresses, house coats, and many other articles of clothing. The designs were cheeky and playful, featuring stylized sharks, flamingos, watermelons, seashells, adirondack chairs, semaphore flags, and many more subjects. Many of these garments were printed in bright, vibrant colors like fuchsia, tangerine, aqua, electric blue, and lemon yellow, a significant departure from the early aesthetic of the Field Prints



of plants, cartoonish dogs, goats, and bears, and excerpts of actual photographs taken by staff members and cut into a design. The many artists who contributed their designs to Marüşka over the years have created a rich tapestry where anyone, regardless of their personal preferences, can find a design they enjoy.

The subjects of Marüşka prints and Michigan Rag apparel are clearly inspired by the relationship between the artists designing the screens and the Tri-Cities atmosphere. Nature is incredibly popular as a subject, from close-ups of individual plants and animals to scenes depicting the beach or woods, highlighting the connection between Tri-Cities residents and the scenic outdoor spaces such as the Grand Haven State Park, Hofma Preserve, Kitchel-Lindquist-Hartger Dunes Preserve, and Spring Lake. The importance of place is clearly evident also in the emphasis on nautical designs, such as those featuring lighthouses, sail boats, marinas, seashells, water fowl, and other sights commonly appreciated on the lakeshore. Marüşka did not stray far from its geometric roots; though the designs are generally not purely abstract, subjects such as sailboats and beach scenes are abstracted in simple triangles, rectangles, and circles to great effect. Marüşka also designed prints for commemorating local events, such as the 100th anniversary of the creation of Highland Park, and a historic hockey game between the Muskegon Lumberjacks and a CSSR team on

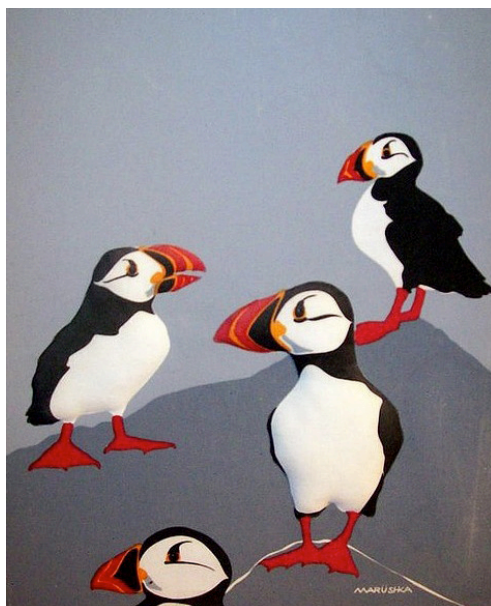
series. Not all of the Michigan Rag clothing was quite so over-the-top loud, however. One of the most popular prints made into jackets, dresses, pantsuits, and more was a stripe consisting of a seagull on a strip of beach, printed in navy, tan, gray, and white. Just as with the printed canvases, there was a Michigan Rag garment for every style and taste.

In the late 1980s, Marüşka pivoted again to respond to the changing demands of the art market. In this case, the change was from stretched canvas to paper as a medium. The popularity of framed art posters and copies of famous works at museums overtook that of stretched canvas prints. Thus, the serigraph was added to Marüşka's arsenal of products. While the printing technique is very similar between canvas and paper, the overall effect on the viewer is noticeably different. Paper lacks the tactile quality of linen or cotton canvases, but this also allows for sharper lines and smaller details. The Marüşka serigraphs were not as popular as the stretched canvases, but Smith argues that the serigraph series contained some of the highest quality art pieces Marüşka produced.

Marüşka printed its last stretched canvas in 1989, as the popularity of the art form continued to decline. Instead, they focused on the apparel side of Michigan Rag, refining and diversifying their clothing to meet the tastes of their audience.

DESIGNS AND AESTHETICS

If you look at multiple Marüşka prints, one fact will become immediately apparent: many different artists have worked with the shop over the years, contributing to a broad spectrum of styles and aesthetics. There are completely abstract geometric shapes, lifelike silhouettes



New Year's Eve of 1985. Works like these demonstrate the importance of local connections in art and design and help the community celebrate achievements and important anniversaries.

One of the most important early collections for Marüşka's development was the Field Print series. This was a departure from the abstract, geometric designs of prints intended for corporate office dividers. The Field Print series was defined by a very specific aesthetic: the subjects were local flora including ferns, Queen Anne's lace, bittersweet, and beach grass, among others. In fact, Wilkinson

based the prints on grasses and weeds located behind the Spring Lake shop. Early iterations were printed on a natural, unbleached linen and cotton blend, with one or two colors drawn from nature. Among the most commonly used ink colors were tan, a rich chocolate brown, burnt orange, forest and kelly green, deep navy blue, and clean, crisp white and black. Simply changing the color palette could spice up or otherwise change



the tenor of the piece; dyeing the canvas and using a white ink became a popular alternate version for prints originally on natural linen. This also allowed collectors to create their own series of prints using the same screen but different inks, mixing and matching as new versions were produced.

Some of the Field Print series, along with many of the nautical designs and other less place-based designs are marketable outside the Tri-Cities. The process started with Smith's trips to Florida in the late 1970s, when he sold pieces out of his car up and down the eastern seaboard.

Marüşka does a brisk business with retail partners as far south as Florida and as far west as Alaska.

Many of the pieces also display a clear and playful sense of humor. Designs featuring dancing penguins, whales with oddly human smiles, and dogs playing fetch showcase the whimsy inherent in many of the designs sold at Marüşka and Michigan Rag. Some of the playfulness was clearly geared towards children, as unicorns, clowns, rocking horses, teddy bears, balloons, and other childhood favorites made an appearance starting in the 1980s. The prints were in bright and cheerful colors, from vibrant pinks and blues to rich greens and reds. Whether aimed for children or adults, Marüşka's whimsical prints have given it a delightful reputation for creating art with a sense of humor.

MARÜSHKA TODAY

Today, Marüşka has as many types of fans as it does distinct print designs. In the Tri-Cities, there is a large contingent of Marüşka collectors who have been acquiring pieces for almost as long as the business has been open. They, in turn, have shared their enthusiasm for Marüşka with friends and family, bringing multiple generations into the fold. There



are also collectors from outside the Tri-Cities, who discovered Marüşka in the wild. They saw their first print in a Florida gift shop, or a doctor's office, or in the house of a friend who vacationed in the Tri-Cities. Michigan Rag also enjoys lasting popularity, especially vintage garments from the 1980s and 1990s. These have seen a recent surge in popularity across the country and the world. A vintage Marüşka jacket made an appearance at LA Fashion Week on the red carpet. On the other side of the world, vintage Michigan Rag apparel has a growing fan base among Japanese

shoppers. These garments are found in vintage shops specializing in American vintage clothing and accessories, selling Michigan Rag pieces for hundreds of (US) dollars. Marüşka and Michigan Rag truly appeal to everyone.

The Tri-Cities Historical Museum exhibit, **From Concept to Classic Tee: 50 Years of Screen Printed Art at Marüşka**, is on display from June 22 to December 18, 2021. It features artifacts ranging from early print designs and sketchbooks to trapunto pieces, early Michigan Rag garments, printing screens, and even clothing from Marüşka today. Come celebrate 50 years of Marüşka with the Museum!



From Concept to
Classic Tee: 50 Years of
Screen Printed Art at
MARÜSHKA

On Display June 22 - December 18, 2021

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Tri-Cities Historical Museum
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