

Nordic Muses

Although separated by time, and even geography, these three illustrators share a common thread — a sense of magical other-worldliness. Their striking work can appear unique, and yet somehow familiar — perhaps sourced from a collective subconscious, or from a bygone, unrevealed world that each has stumbled upon? Fortunately for us, each of them in their own inimitable way has created worlds that will be enjoyed, doubtlessly for generations to come.

Three illustrators, Tove Jansson (b1914 – d2001), Oili Tanninen (b1933) and Sanna Annukka (b1983), have mined deep sources of inspiration that have yielded exceptional artwork. Each of them is in some way forever indebted to Finland, either through its distinctive culture, landscape, folklore or socio-political underpinnings, situated as it is, tucked between Sweden, Norway and Russia, along the northern edge of Europe.

Tove Jansson, who is probably best known for her whimsical children's *Moomin* book series. Born in Helsinki (when it was still part of the Russian Empire) Tove was raised by Viktor, her father, who was a sculptor and her mother, Signe Hammarsten-Jansson, who was also an illustrator and a graphic designer. At 31, in 1945, at the end of WW2, Tove published her first book, *Småtrollen och den stora översvämningen* (“The Small Trolls and the Large Flood”)¹ or as it later became known in translation, *The Moomins and the Great Flood*.² It wasn't a commercial success however, and it would take three years and two more books before the *Moomin* books finally achieved international recognition, with the publication of her third book *Finn Family Moomintroll*. Even today, over 60 years later, this children's book has such a dreamlike quality in the writing, as well as in the illustrations of course, and yet it all seems so rooted in the physical landscape and folklore of Finland. “It's important to fill your tummy with pine needles, if you intend to sleep all the winter,” says the narrator at the beginning of the book, subtly encapsulating landscape and folklore in one single sentence.³ Tove's drawings, at times, can seem almost Rousseau-like, in their lushness, and yet her drawings of the Groke,

have an almost primordial feel to them. As if this charming character was pulled from an ancient pine forest.

Tove, never lost her love for nature and solitude, and continually drew inspiration from the Finnish landscape throughout her life. In her later years, seeking solitude from her burgeoning fame, she and her partner Tuulikki Pietilä lived in seclusion on Klovharun, a remote island off the coast of Finland. Today, of course, *Moomin* is an international success story, and one can even visit the Moominvalley museum dedicated to Tove's work, located in Tampere, Finland.

While Oili Tanninen may not be quite as internationally well known as her compatriot, Tove, Oili is nonetheless much beloved in her home country and is a remarkable illustrator, animator, and an artist who has a keen sense of design. Her work is bold, graphic, deceptively simple, and humorous. Oili is probably best known for her *Nunnu* series of children's books, (later made into an animated TV series) which were first published in 1965. Her book *Hippu*, published in 1967, is a wonder in a limited red, black and white palette (apparently due to print cost restrictions) and is reminiscent of Paul Rand's *Sparkle and Spin* or *I know a lot of things* children's books. Like Rand, Oili's illustrations are whimsical, playful and seem effortless in their execution. Once again, Oili, like Tove, also wrote and illustrated her books. Oili, makes that union of text and image seems effortless; one feeds off the other in a deceptively simple rhythm. Oili's illustration style has clearly been an influence to contemporary illustrators such as Chris Haughton, with her cut-paper approach to creating imagery and intense color palette.

Although Sanna Annukka was not born in Finland, she readily agrees that it is Finland, with its folklore and rich heritage, that is the source of inspiration for much of her work.⁴ Born in Brighton, UK, of a Finnish mother and a British father, Sanna spent her childhood summers in Finland. "Childhood memories and experiences influence my work in a big way. They were the days when I traveled on fishing expeditions to Lapland, the times where I fell in love with the lands above the Arctic Circle."⁴ Her anthropological designs are imbued with a strong sense of illustrative elements found among the indigenous Saami people of northern Finland,⁵ and their intricate, almost Inuit-like folktales such as that of the Soul Bird. Birds, in fact, feature predominately in

Sanna's work, and she seems to strive to keep alive these ancient myths and stories that are such a part of culture of the Sami people. One such story, the aforementioned Soul Bird, is the inspiration behind Sanna's beautifully made wooden birds, inlaid with her distinctive illustrations. Sanna, is also textile designer for the Finnish design firm, Marimekko. Her designs adorn many spools of cloth and a fascinating video, made by Jasper Goodall, shows her luxurious artwork being silkscreened on long banners of fabric.⁵ Her book illustration are equally evocative. Her illustrations for *The Fir Tree*, by Hans Christian Andersen, are a wonderful example of how she marries folkloric traditions with playful graphical illustrations of people, birds and nature.

Looking collectively at all three illustrators, it is clear that the source of their work, is firmly rooted in their love for Finland, its ancient culture, its mythology and just as importantly in the very land itself.

¹ "Tove Marika Jansson." In Contemporary Authors Online. Detroit: Gale, 2016.

Literature Resource Center.

http://go.galegroup.com.libproxy.temple.edu/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&sw=w&u=temple_main&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CH1000049932&asid=9a5215fd39cc3784b30bd9ca1f829490.

² Lovegrove, James. 2014. "Life, Art, Words, by Boel Westin; Sculptor's Daughter, by Tove Jansson." *FT.Com*. <https://search-proquest-com.libproxy.temple.edu/docview/1498348041?accountid=14270>.

³ Jansson, Tove. 2014. Farrar, Straus and Giroux (BYR); Reprint edition (September 2, 2014) p12.

⁴ Lazure-Guinard, Catherine. 2011. Nordic Design. <http://nordicdesign.ca/profile-sanna-annukka/>

⁵ The Last Yoik in Saami Forests? (2007). Documentary Educational Resources.

⁶ Goodall, Jasper. 2013. <https://vimeo.com/51613532>