

Sámi Heritage and IKEA Fusion: Maria Vinka's Denationalized Design, Neocolonial Craft and Material Imaginaries Somewhere in Between

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70733/84be2wgsdbkd>

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Abstract

The designer Maria Vinka has a long and distinguished record of working for IKEA, but her identity is usually subsumed in the corporation's larger brand. Investigating IKEA artifacts as cultural predicaments, this article questions the Swedishness of IKEA's global commodities and the social intentions of Vinka's work for the company. Vinka's Sámi heritage has been a resource for her contributions to the immense multi-national home furnishing chain store. But her work also transcends the typical boundaries of cultural identities and what we recognize as Sámi, or Swedish. Documenting this individual designer's oeuvre, this article seeks to record one designer's voice and intentions and contextualize them within a larger framework of design history, especially in relation to gender and cultural agency.

I was pissed off at [Bruno] Mathsson and all those chairs made for tall people. You know the myth about him sitting in the snow and then looking at it and realizing it was the perfect contour and shape? These men always think about themselves. In Volvos, I can't reach the clutch, and all those stupid Swedish modern chairs are terrible for my back. People in general are not as tall as the Scandinavian people. Okay, I thought, now if it's okay, I'll try to think about myself. I might make a chair comfortable for the rest of the world.

Maria Vinka¹

Anti-nationalist design is usually a historian's or curator's narratological strategy to upend a canon or scholarly genealogy, but designer Maria Vinka's declaration of the literal ways in which she does not fit the physical parameters of Swedish modernism and her emotional articulation of her psychological separatism constitute a self-awareness of the larger historical context and a fissure in design discourse. Here, in this quotation, praxis appears as political and as self-aware as any studies of design consumption. Through her father's bloodline and childhood vacation visits to the north of Sweden, Vinka identifies as Sámi, a people known pejoratively as Laplanders and who have historically been mistreated and oppressed as a cultural minority. Numerous academics have recently set out to deflate myths and puncture grand narratives of a monolithic Swedish national character that is often presented as culturally homogeneous, as there are several minority groups and even the Sámi, the most famous among them, are not linguistically or culturally homogeneous. We have few designers articulating this issue of cultural diversity, so Vinka's different identities, as part Sámi, former in-house and now at-large IKEA designer, and self-deprecating Swede are a worthwhile array to add to the corpus of existing scholarship.²

Maria Vinka's work straddles craft and design and could be argued to intentionally violate existing taxonomies by seeming to self-consciously commercialize Sámi heritage and complicate the notion of Swedishness. IKEA advertises itself as the world's purveyor of Swedish identity, and yet a large percentage of Vinka's work diverges from the company's main branding strategies.³ If IKEA is commodifying Swedishness while pursuing global manufacturing, Vinka enriches that approach with artifactual predicaments. While it is easy to regard most of IKEA's cultural production within the overall dynamic of neocolonialism, Vinka might also be carving out space for alterity and individual authorship within IKEA by self-consciously working against Swedishness and "function" in her emphasis on "play," "role playing" and what Pat Kirkham has called "extra-cultural surprise."⁴ IKEA's agency as an imperial corporate Goliath is a given, even if its regional reception is often differentiated. Ascertaining how Vinka's production is both complicit in that project and yet potentially broadcasting more nuanced messages is the goal of this essay.

Because Vinka identifies Swedish modernist Bruno Mathsson (1907–1988) as the epitome of normative "Scandinavian design," it is worth noting that her sense of cultural alterity springs from her own identity on at least three fronts: her gender, her small stature, and her Sámi heritage. And yet it would be naïve to suggest that authenticity is a deliverable in her designs; Vinka makes self-conscious commodified accessories (perhaps ironically so) with "scripts" that overtly avoid functionalist ideals. If Kirkham situates the "extra-cultural surprise" as a type of "functioning ornament," this essay emphasizes a genre in Vinka's designs that is intentionally theatrical, participatory, and performative. If these designs do have "uses," these tend to the homecraft or "DIY" realms of IKEA, far from the realm of design reform. Her overall oeuvre also includes plain flatware and clean, striped upholstery, rugs and curtains much of what one experiences as globalized homogenization in a classical modernist style.

But here my concern is with how Vinka's designs comprise what the store does not promote: the sort of knickknack or accessory that is a cheap frivolity and anathema to its clean white kitchens and practical white laminate desks and bookcases. Vinka's *objets d'art* help make the store extremely profitable, but are out of sync with the austere modernist IKEA identity. If her colorful patterned fabrics and accessories assert coziness, her knickknacks are pure clutter and the sort of thing consumers pick up while unwillingly snaking through the labyrinthine pathways on their search for something specific, like a new duvet.⁵ Or they are outright games, like the Busa tunnel, a collapsible tube that I, for one, underestimated until parenthood revealed its brilliance as an endlessly entertaining object. Whereas anthropologists have tended to reductively interpret IKEA products according to Hartman the desks, bookcase, and couch announce a consumer is "plugged into the world of

modern design” or to prioritize the consumer’s own narrative about what the store is “about,” these sort of seasonal accessories are rarely contemplated as meaningful.⁶ Most recently, for instance, Vinka has realized an IKEA product that might be regarded as intentionally spanning the Freudian terms “Totem and Taboo” and perhaps intentionally flirting with political incorrectness. IKEA markets the Frekvens as “tiki-inspired cups” with four different moods as facial expressions for guests to select, “And when your guests leave, the 4 cups can become a decorative totem pole.” In these, Vinka historicizes and reenacts Polynesian and Northwest Coast Indigenous Native American touristic commodification, for better or worse.

In recent years, scholarly skepticism about the definitions of Nordic or Scandinavian art and design has noted the enigmatic existence/absence of Sámi artifactual evidence that has long been suppressed or glossed over, and yet the advocacy of prescriptive compensatory theories and strategies of inclusion often avoids the actual problem of artifactual interpretation.⁷ If Hård af Segerstad was unintentionally “patronizing” in 1971, by favoring a shift in aims from the Sámi production of “‘folk craft’ to ‘art craft,’” as Kjetil Fallan and Christina Zetterlund suggest, he was also prescient in foreseeing the academicization and globalization of Sámi within the circuit of upscale art worlds, such as art fairs and biennials.⁸ Sámi themselves, self-governing both pan-nationally and in distinct regional cultural initiatives, have assertively codified the institutional terms of their cultural production since 1993. The term *duodji* has, for instance, been differentiated from *álbmot duodji* (craft made within a Sámi social and temporal context) into variants that are to different degrees performative and dialogic in their engagement with the commodified terrain of academia and exhibitionary cultures. We now have *ehpiid duodji* (applied arts, crafts or *slöjd*); *duodji/dáidda* (applied arts/crafts displayed as “fine art”); and *dáidda/duodji* (contemporary “fine art”).⁹ This prolix taxonomical array parallels how *slöjd* (*hemslöjd* and *kunstsöjd*, as well as *kunsthantverk* and *brukskunst*) and design (as well as *kunstindustri*, *industridesign*) allude to seemingly infinite niche markets more than they clarify empirical definitions.¹⁰ The issue of which parties Sámi are authorized to sell craft to is another relevant, but complex question that goes beyond the scope here.

These overlapping typologies are useful to keep in mind though, because it is unclear how to describe and characterize Vinka’s production. IKEA sells several of Vinka’s designs as “handmade” and “unique,” because they are woven out of vegetable fiber in Southeast Asia but many Westerners would regard them as “mass-produced,” because the runs of production can be from 2,000 to 20,000. Fallan and Zetterlund rightly problematize the phrase “Swedish design” by asking if nationalist discourses that might, for example, unfairly exclude Sámi contemporary contributions persist, and therefore I wonder where Vinka might productively challenge moralistic taxonomies such as “neocolonial craft” or “denationalized design.” Is Vinka intentionally blurring the boundaries between handicraft and design when she reinserts Sámi forms as dynamic performative commodities instead of static temporal artifacts? Most design historians judge commercial appropriation in moralistic terms, equating commodification with degeneration.¹¹ For me, the real issues are whether Vinka inflects IKEA’s “Swedishness” in ways that deviate from the corporate message and whether she gives Sámi culture a platform for new growth. Instead of claiming to outline an overall cultural trajectory or identifying a heroic designer, let us ask aloud “to what ends are the Sámi quotients legible within such commercial channels, and do they constitute generative alterities?” If Ursula Lindqvist, a professor of Scandinavian Studies, can claim to access “Sweden’s repressed national archive via a historicized reading of the multinational IKEA store and the signs it gathers,” then Vinka’s Sámi identity is especially worth fleshing out.¹²

Here I examine a handful of designs in greater detail in order to document Vinka’s work, to contextualize her labor, and to analyze her articulation of “Swedish design,” while also probing issues of gender, class, and status as these are as much in need of articulation as issues of ethnic and national identity in design and craft scholarship. There is a presumption that Swedish design is socially aware to the degree that gender bias or

discrimination is minimal, even in scholarship which aims to provoke skepticism about the conformity and normativity imposed by the welfare state. But canonical Swedish design remains largely populated by men, even in contemporary exhibitions and surveys.¹³ IKEA occupies a strange position in regards notions of class identity, as there is shame in purchasing throwaway commodities and also in the corporation's avoidance of tax. Moreover, the company's archives are closed, inhibiting scholarship. Alongside the prevailing ethnographic and anthropological interpretations of the company's products, here I assert a commitment to examining an individual designer's agency especially one so self-aware of her own praxis. If Fallan and Zetterlund problematized class and consumption, Vinka proves that the agency of the designer can complicate and contradict canonical narratives as critically as studies on collective rituals of consumption.

Vinka is a diminutive figure with a mischievous look in her eyes whose twenty-year oeuvre could fill the walls of a museum exhibition or pages of a monographic publication. But, like many designers who have worked for IKEA, her individual authorship has mostly been subsumed under the larger aegis of the corporation's in-house production. Very few of the company's numerous designers gain notice within IKEA, with the company mainly spotlighting guest designers, notably the likes of Danish designer Verner Panton in the 1960s, and more recently Dutch designer Hella Jongerius. In museums and historical surveys, however, only a handful of designs have been considered noteworthy contributions in regards the social meanings of IKEA; the juggernaut is perhaps too large for individual artifacts or oeuvres to attract attention.¹⁴ In IKEA's own museum at Älmhult, Vinka is recognized and credited with individual products, but in Sweden's cultural museums only one or two IKEA products are ever exhibited or closely analyzed. Indeed, the only in-depth discussion about IKEA at the newly renovated Nationalmuseum in Stockholm focuses on Anders Jakobsen's *Chandelier* (2005), an assemblage of dozens of plastic commodities, and more a work of fine art provocation than a design product.¹⁵ In ethnographic institutional exhibitions, such as the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm and the The Apartment at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History (Norsk Folkemuseum) in Oslo, at Wessels gate 15, which offers a domestic setting, visitors find IKEA products considered historically. The enigmatic way IKEA in which is not yet integrated into comparative interpretation in design history is due in part to their past in which they produced cheaper copies of famous designs. As their PS collection "post scriptum" series has now been running for two decades, more individual designs and designers can be identified as distinct voices within the operation, which provides another rationale for my approach here.

Vinka trained at Gothenburg University's HDK (Högskolan för design och konsthantverk), which delivers a curriculum that at the time notably included significant exposure to production facilities. Indeed, although the glass and textile industries were waning in the 1990s, HDK brought students into multiple-week-long residencies, both in a glass factory in Småland and a textile factory in Borås, traditional hubs for these industrial crafts. Vinka thus had a design education that is unlike today's programs, which are decidedly inclined toward a post-manufacturing mentality. Hers was informed by material subtleties and attuned to the complexities of transferring prototypes into mass production. Weaving was mandatory for designers, Vinka avers, but that seems not to be true across genders, as several male graduates in design at HDK emerged with little weaving. She herself never enrolled in ceramics courses, but did dabble informally. Very memorable for Vinka was her four-week residence at Orrefors, during which she gained experience in cold work as well as blowing glass and learning the *graal* technique, in which layered forms can be peeled or cut back. Power loom courses at the Borås Textilhögskolan were similarly mind-expanding in terms of the lateral shift of techniques from small scale to a much larger one. Hers was one of the last generations of Swedish designers to think through materials and machines more than they touched the personal computer.

After completing her undergraduate degree at HDK in 1997, Maria Vinka was lucky enough to have IKEA pick her

up as an in-house designer after she worked on a portal to the children's department in collaboration with Pin Pin Studio, a duo of fellow HDK alumni, Christian Strömqvist and Kalle Ekeröth. Their collage of forms, which they described as a three-dimensional cover of a children's book, merged a cartoonish classical triumphal arch, city buildings, and trees into colorful forms reminiscent of both the Memphis group, Gaetano Pesce and the Emmy-award-winning stage sets of Pee Wee Herman of Gary Panter, Wayne White, and Ric Heitzman.¹⁶ This initial work foreshadows Vinka's genre of the playful social prop. One of her typologies remains this IKEA sub-specialty of stage set-like accessories for children's rooms that integrate studio art play and functionality, such as presentation or storage.¹⁷ Indeed, while Vinka worked for IKEA in-house for ten years and has a rich output that spans furniture and furnishings such as ceramics, glass, and textiles, these kinds of works are harder to categorize by media and more about play, toys, and role playing. Interactivity is a hallmark of this output, and if the first design she contributed to IKEA was a "play space," her most recent are part of the Lustigt (Funny) collection, including a wheel of fortune, in which numbers and colors can whirl at the user's discretion, with content and meaningfulness defined by each individual user. To describe these as participatory is not to grant them any political utopian feature associated. With its retro appearance, Vinka's wheel of fortune avoids classification and skirts whether it is a domestic theatrical prop, an interior whirligig, or a miniaturization of Duchamp's optical art. It is a toy.



Figure 1: IKEA Gullholmen chairs, banana leaf woven over steel frame, designed by Maria Vinka, PS Collection 2003; image courtesy IKEA, USA

In terms of scholarship and bibliography, Vinka's Gullholmen rocking chair (2002) has received the most attention of all of her designs, largely because the indoor-outdoor seat is an item of cheap global handicraft, and was marketed as sustainable because it is made in part of banana leaves, but also because it was interpreted in hindsight in relation to Vinka's Sámi roots. Only after it was produced did Vinka's father suggest to her that the Gullholmen chair bore a resemblance to the grouse, a bird significant to northern climates that changes color from white in winter to brown in summer, and to a traditional wooden burl drinking vessel, a *guksi*. In design historian Lasse Brunnström's interpretation of Vinka's work, ecological contextualization seems to elide the cultural, essentializing the design: "associations to both ptarmigan [grouse] and guksi hint at the designer's Sámi roots," he writes.¹⁸ This birdlike form is well-established as an element in Sámi visual culture, where grouse-shaped pewter saltcellars by noted Sámi *duodjar* Lars Pirak are in the collection of Sweden's Nationalmuseum.¹⁹ Several readings of the chair emphasize other aspects than how the backrest resembles a bird's tail feathers or

the handle of a ladle. Ellen Ruppel Shell has evaluated the Gullholmen as a wonder of exploitative labor and global outsourcing, calling it “not a great chair, ... a great cheap chair,” and previously I have published speculative questions concerning the chair’s role as a talisman of craft materials, as evidence of uneven modernization, and as a florescence of artisan skill.²⁰ Where I once argued that Vietnamese manual labor should be respected as craftsmanship, despite being caught in the jaws of IKEA’s shipping-crate logic, here I am wondering if Vinka’s chair should be considered almost anti-Swedish, almost subversive of modernist functionality and pseudo-Sámi. Is it indeed an outlier in IKEA’s cultural syntax?

Global outsourcing and cultural hybridization of Swedish design is not especially new: In the first half of the twentieth century, Austrian émigré Josef Frank also had rattan furniture made in Southeast Asia that was sold at Svensk Tenn and some of his furnishings remain in circulation as symbols of Swedishness through that same store. The homeless and seemingly acultural global commodity also has a long life: Gullholmen chairs outside a yoga studio in Rome or an ice cream shop in Copenhagen are floating signifiers for casual comfort more than for IKEA (see Figs. 1-3). While spending more time with Vinka, I realized that only in 2006 did she “come out” as a Sámi-influenced designer, and that the Gullholmen directly prompted her to reconsider her childhood *guksi* and more self-consciously begin to mine other possibilities for revival and reconsideration.



Figure 2: IKEA Gullholmen chair, designed by Maria Vinka, outside a yoga studio in Rome, 2019; photograph by author



Figure 3: IKEA Gullholmen chair, designed by Maria Vinka, outside an ice cream shop in Copenhagen, 2018; photograph by author

In 2001, IKEA asked Vinka if she might “do something in natural fiber” there was no specific design brief before the creation of the Gullholmen, and no mention of a chair as a product at all, only an invitation to use banana leaf. “I was very calculating in using the opportunity to design a chair for the first time,” Vinka explains.²¹ IKEA was calculating too: it had brokered deals regarding labor and materials that it sought to leverage, continuing its search for cost-cutting solutions.²² Vinka understood that chairs had become ideological icons in design history and vehicles for celebrated architects to articulate ideological or stylistic programs. She still sees her most original aspect of contribution in the Gullholmen as reviving the rocking chair. While today there are many rocking chairs on the market, IKEA did not have any modern ones at the time.

IKEA has yet to connect the Gullholmen to Sámi culture; instead the company highlights Vinka’s intent to “stimulate several different senses” via rocking and the use of banana leaf. The company underscores its ethical commitment to chairs “made of a waste material.” Vinka notes regarding Gullholmen, “I know I talked about my Sámi roots with some journalists at the press release [in] 2003 but no one was really interested in that back then so nobody wrote about it.”²³ The chair made sense as part of the limited edition PS collection that IKEA issued that year, for which the theme was “inside out, outside in.” So the chair entered the commodity stream as economical and ecological, more than especially Swedish.

To pivot from this issue of ethnic heritage back to Vinka’s contrarian outlook on what might be called heroic Scandinavian modernism such as Mathsson’s work her Gullholmen has been ridiculed for being extremely low to the ground, and yet this characteristic might be considered a riposte to the elegance of Mathsson’s and Eurocentric formal seating. Vinka’s design articulates an intentional humility, both in its materials and form, that is at odds with more affluent concepts of comfort and formality. She never saw it as a task chair and understands and values ergonomics.²⁴ The Gullholmen is designed to accommodate humans of about five feet tall, which is the vast majority of the world’s population, and in asserting its horizontality the chair could be said to re-enact its making. In its production, the weavers squat on a low box or on the ground; the finished artifact asks Gullholmen users for a similar level of flexibility and athleticism. The chair’s trapezoidal base makes it stable, or at least hard to flip over while in use as a rocker, and therefore should be read as child-centric. And yet its stackable quality ensures that IKEA can maximize profits. The chair is *not* made for people of Mathsson’s stature and is *not* for formal seating; it may not have been designed for human use so much as maximized production

and distribution. If Mathsson designed for his own body, Vinka designs as all IKEA designers do: thinking of the dimensions of the standardized shipping container and making sure that components nestle and stack as efficiently as possible. Whether Vinka was designing for maximum logistical efficiency or for the five-foot-tall masses of humanity, the chair contradicts some of IKEA marketing tenets, an issue I will return to later when discussing gender.

When Vinka designed the Gullholmen, she had already started visiting factories in India, Vietnam and Thailand, and begun to understand her own ethos in relation to IKEA's growing tactical patronage of highly specialized production in the developing world. There is a convergence between Vinka's personal interest in designing chairs for non-Western modes of seating, and IKEA's marketing initiatives of ethical global outsourcing. Beginning in 2000, when Vinka travelled to India with Anna Efverlund, a lead designer with a two-decade-long tenure at IKEA, the two produced an embroidered pillowcase collection that employed rural artisans through a partnership with UNICEF. The embroidered goods sold alongside the Gullholmen in the PS collection, a strategy several scholars regard as calculated efforts of philanthropy to counteract the negative publicity surrounding the company's exploitative employment practices. The partnership between the IKEA foundation and UNICEF has continued to grow and exists today as a multi-million-dollar annual contribution. These philanthropic initiatives are often considered as a form of corporate window dressing to distract consumers from IKEA's exploitation of labor and natural resources. Vinka is aware she has been complicit in neocolonial production, but remains pragmatic that the corporate model is her primary interface. Her self-awareness has grown since becoming a parent and leaving her in-house status at IKEA, and so has her awareness of her own role as part Sámi. There are few IKEA designers like her, who feel both non-representative of Swedish design and under-represented.



Figure 4: IKEA Fjällbjörk porcelain cup, designed by Maria Vinka, PS Collection 2006, original yellow silicon strap missing; photograph by author



Figure 5: The author holding an IKEA Fjällbjörk porcelain cup for Maria Vinka to sign in her studio, March 2019; photograph by author

For the 2006 IKEA PS collection, Vinka produced dozens of products, and several of these can be regarded as overtly drawing on her Sámi culture, as well as more explicitly engaging with gender. Again, very few of these have received attention. Vinka's Fjällbjörk is a porcelain version of the wooden carved *guksi* or *kåsa*, hollowware for dispensing drink (see Figs. 4–5). The IKEA product name means “mountain birch,” and in this instance the articulation of heritage and association with material history was intentional. In many IKEA products, gendered naming is standardized, so that metered fabric is “female” and storage like armoires or chests are christened with “male” names. Outdoor furniture is often named after an island, as in the case with Gullholmen, whereas lamps often have marine associations. Vinka's Fjällbjörk is strangely made out of porcelain, not wood, but is molded in China in such a way as to evoke the notching of chisel marks. Sending a drawing across the globe to become a 3D object is standard procedure that in its execution predictably drifts. Because it was completed over the months when Vinka was on maternity leave and overseen by other designing and manufacturing circles, she explains that the thickness of the porcelain and the texture are not pleasing to her.

“I remember that people at IKEA and some journalists thought it was interesting to highlight the Sámi inspiration,” she remembers of the 2006 PS collection debut. Of all her designs, what is most obviously “ethnic” or illustrative of a neoliberal multicultural society is Vinka's set of brightly painted nesting dolls of the Russian matryoshka type, called Jutanäs. Vinka represented Sweden with a Sámi woman, a direct challenge to homogeneity. The matryoshka doll is a modern commercialized folk-art knickknack popularized since the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, whereas IKEA's were traditional insofar as they were made in Russia. And yet Vinka transformed the women into a sort of global village, replete with a hijab, too. Her overt multicultural approach may have obviated discernment of the Sámi quotient, but deserves mention because it grounds the artifact in a personal narrative in which being a part-Sámi woman herself is political, not merely pretty or colorful. How to define this object in relation as a thing that invites physical manipulation? This is a toy that is dialogic but cannot be regarded as activist.

Vinka's 2009 Krona is a basket that literally resembles a crown. Also made in Southeast Asia, but of palm leaf, it is both lacy and cartoon-like, featuring an array of circles and stars balanced on top of two wave patterns. On her personal website, Vinka describes it as “inspired from the traditional birch root basket weave in Sápmi,” but IKEA did not publicize this aspect, and Vinka believes that “people that are not Sámi would not see that this has clear

Sámi features.” Vinka does not call it a “bridal crown,” as an ethnographic museum would characterize the historical form, and instead she suggests it might be used to hold knitting tools, or as a sewing basket, or left for users to determine themselves. For most historians of basketry, such appropriation and reconfiguration has usually been regarded as a trend toward cultural degeneration or touristic commodification. But is such self-conscious manipulation also a form of generative cultural transmission? Could we argue that Vinka is liberating a bridal accessory into a more modern form of self-coronation, independent of societal pressures and expectations? Like an upscale version of a Burger King throwaway crown, when taken seriously Vinka’s design can be considered to take on a strangely destabilizing social strategy, while remaining entrenched in commodity culture. Taken together, Vinka’s Sámi doll and crown evoke a very contemporary idea of independence; they are as declarative of feminism as anything that IKEA makes.

In 2009, *IKEA: The Book*, put a spotlight on Vinka’s role and her ethnic identity, the only moment the long reach of the company can be regarded as coopting or capitalizing on her Sámi dimensions.²⁵ Vinka is part of the first generation of Sámi designers who were young enough to be appreciated and to come of age when older widespread repression and suppression of Sámi cultural identity had become politically incorrect. Strangely, both the in-house 2009 book and Ellen Ruppel Shell’s of that same year chose to mention Vinka’s personal tattoos in print, mapping her as an exotic, and marketing her as rebellious.²⁶ To attribute Vinka’s successful command in working in a Southeast Asian factory to her tattoos circumscribes her achievement, typecasting her. *Ikea, The Book*, ascribes the rustic allusions of her designs to her Sámi heritage “roots in Lapland” essentializing her, transforming her identity into a sort of romantic fetish.²⁷ In the same breath, IKEA attributes to Vinka both “playful” designs and their own pursuit of “a more colorful and youthful form of modernism.”²⁸ Thus the greater “extra-cultural surprise” becomes the designer, not designs like the Gullholmen or Jutanäs, her matryoshka dolls.

In the last decade, curators of documenta 14 and other art biennales and spectacles have raised the profile of Sámi artists as a contemporary set of practices and an indigenous culture worthy of greater respect. Yet there remains a sense among contemporary art curators in both Norway and Sweden that public recognition in Scandinavia has not yet been achieved on the same scale that it has outside.²⁹ Is fetishization inevitable outside of Scandinavia and unlikely within due to the emphasis on consensus? Fallan and Zetterlund specifically worry aloud about the institutional forces homogenizing cultural representation within Sweden, as mentioned before. It is in this context in which Vinka’s Sámi identity has emerged all the more, especially as she has juggled two high-profile endeavors that pull her in new directions that add to the complexity of defining her role at IKEA and enrich her identity as a Sámi designer. These projects underscore the enigmatic existing taxonomy in identifying varieties of Sámi design.

On the one hand, Vinka has produced lines for IKEA that address paradigmatic historical Swedish aesthetics in a manner she had not done before. Starting with the assignment of colors for a line titled Stockholm, in yellow and green, Vinka worked from images of rapeseed fields and coltsfoot flower in the northern light. She made numerous drawings in which she abstracted nature in a painterly manner, or what she refers to as her “sloppy Bauhaus” style. Some of the final products include linens and textile prints and aprons for informal entertaining of the sort that might happen in an open kitchen. For this project, both IKEA and Vinka mined the painted images and actual home of Carl and Karin Larsson. That product line, *Sällskap*, translates as “keeping company” or “party,” and domestic imagery prevails: geraniums and dogs aplenty. IKEA even staged photoshoots reminiscent of Carl Larsson’s paintings of his children curled up in window seats and his self-portraits in which he depicted one of his many children sitting atop his shoulders. Such imagery surely plays well in the contemporary world of people aspiring to cozy commodities and domestic bliss. Bearded fathers wearing Vinka’s kitchen apron hold

their children aloft. In Sweden, the “latte papa” a father on paternity leave drinking a latte is considered representative of an egalitarian society. Whether that is a true indicator or not is beside the point, and IKEA has begun to merge such child-focused men into kitchens on an unprecedented scale where the prevalence of bearded models is worth noting in relation to the problem of emasculation and gender issues.



Figure 6: IKEA Sällskap cotton print, part of a limited collection to “celebrate the Scandinavian arts and crafts;” photograph by author in Maria Vinka’s studio, March 2019. Green splatter patterns have both 18th-century precedents in wallpaper as well as 20th-century ones like Göta Tragårdh’s textile print

Vinka was inspired to develop a kitchen apron that was loose and flaring, with crossed back straps like in Japanese design. She also wanted to expand upon Karin Larsson’s ideal of dressing children irrespective of gender. She attributes her apron to Larsson’s creation of clothing that stays loose on the body so as to not inhibit the movement of children or women. Vinka’s apron is produced in black and also with geraniums. Whether these are for gendered consumption or enlightened and free of such targeting and whether reality matters in weighing up such scripts remains worthwhile speculation; the designer’s intention is not the final word. Her other printed patterns include many silhouettes of inky black dogs against a pinstriped yellow ochre pattern, a splattered green field, and a pattern with many of the same hounds set against green droplets and flowers (see Fig. 6). The last design is both a finished textile and a suggestion for further DIY domestic beautification and cutification: dotted lines around the silhouette or each poodle, terrier and dachshund imply that these can be cut out and turned into dolls. Here, again, the participatory aspect of play is actually embedded as a visual pattern.

The role of Karin Larsson as a contemporary influencer resonates at IKEA headquarters in Älmhult, where in the company museum several tableaux connect the company to every Swedish historical high point, almost like museum period rooms. They include the Gustavian eighteenth century; the Larssons’ and Ellen Key’s circa 1900 “home beautiful” ethos; twentieth-century functionalism; and most of all and against aesthetic history to the farmer and entrepreneur of Småland. “Lista’ is a common term in Småland; it means ‘making do’, doing what you have to do with an absolute minimum of resources,” wrote IKEA’s founder Ingvar Kamprad, in his “Testament of a Furniture Dealer” (1976), seemingly rejecting the affluent atmosphere of the Larsson’s densely layered international gleanings and sumptuous use of colorful patterns. These contradictory aesthetics are left unresolved: IKEA’s “beautiful home” is a combination of austere white laminate filled with colorful knickknacks

and textiles. At one end we read Ellen Key's slogan "Everyone is entitled to a beautiful home," while steps away is a shrine to the Allen key; reconciling *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics with mid-twentieth-century economic functionalism is a challenge.

Vinka's patterns can appear both tidy and playful, but they also built on modernist precedents. Her green splatter print is reminiscent of Göta Trägårdh's 1954 pattern Planeta, and her Gullholmen perhaps not unlike Kerstin Hörlin-Holmquist's wicker chairs, Big Kraal and Little Kraal, which introduced novel informality in 1952, and chairs with a decidedly diminutive stature. Her Sällskap textiles with printed dog imagery are decidedly whimsical. However, placed in context, Vinka's designs are not shocking and her whimsy seems to have a tradition within the canon of Swedish modern design. Even the mass-production of an implied DIY aesthetic precedes IKEA, and is rooted in Nordiska Kompaniet's line of Triva-Bygg furniture invented in 1944. What might be novel is Vinka's ironic dotted line, and her blatant integration of the instruction manual into the product pattern. Is the Do-It-Yourself attitude, the larger aesthetic message, one that dates back to Kamprad in the 1960s?

To assess Vinka's creative work thoroughly, her role as curator of the exhibition "Sápmi runt hörnet" (Sapmi just around the corner) deserves mention. The exhibition of printed textiles opened at the Röhsska Museum of Design and Crafts in Gothenburg in 2017, and then traveled to Kautokeino, Röros, and Burlöv. Digitally printed patterns made by young Sámi artists and designers interpret their heritage specifically; this was the stated mission. The bolts of cotton cloth were all prototypes, and one of the participants was a recent graduate of HDK, Vinka's *alma mater*, too. Vinka's own contribution was a colorful stripe inspired by shoe bindings, but her larger achievement was to be the generative organizer in much the same manner that Joar Nango invited other Sámi to be a part of his selection at documenta 14, also in 2017. According to Love Jönsson, former curator at the Röhsska Museum who coordinated the exhibition, it was Vinka herself who approached the museum and raised funding to realize the project.³⁰ For the past few years, the museum had commemorated February 6, Sámi International Day, and the city specifically requested the museum integrate the event into its agenda. Previously, in 2015, the Röhsska Museum coordinated a display of work by Britta Marakatt Labba, whose embroidery visualizes her own participation in the 1970s uprising of the Sami Artist Group (Mázejoavku) in Masi which also featured in documenta 14 in 2017.

The meaning of "Sápmi runt hörnet" is, like many museum exhibitions, open to interpretation and highly subjective.³¹ Was it a step forward, away from debating authenticity toward accepting the benefits of commoditizing Sámi aesthetics? According to Love Jönsson, the exhibition was proposed by Vinka as a way of claiming ownership of the patterns from the tourist industry and to give individual Sámi designers a platform. She hoped to make prototypes for design products, but not constrained by notions of Sámi traditions. The museum curator acting as liaison, Jönsson saw the exhibition as a balancing act between safeguarding heritage and developing a range of design products that Sámi might profit from instead of non-Sámi, should the designs enter production.

Other designers are also advertising their Sámi heritage these days in relation to product design: Monica Förster uses her identity to market her embroidery and endow it with meaning beyond mere ornament. Her overall aesthetic is consistently gothic and tends towards monochromatic scale, and her use of materials, like pewter, might be inspired by her "Arctic circle roots," but the objects are manufactured around the globe, including partnering with Zanat, a Bosnian UNESCO world heritage site. Meanwhile, non-Sámi artists such as Aia Jüdes and Anders Jakobsen are using birch bark, and other signifiers of rustic Sweden more generally, as performative gestures and with more irony than sincerity. Jakobsen merges Sámi hunting gear with queer aesthetics, perhaps

forgoing the scale of labor exploitation, but strangely embracing cultural appropriation as liberating. The relationship between Swedishness and Sámi aesthetics remains largely uncharted taxonomically. For instance, whether drinking communally with a *guksi* is or should be considered Sámi is increasingly unclear both within and outside of Sweden.

Conclusion

Taking the long view, Maria Vinka has been recolonizing design perhaps with participatory aesthetics or, should that sound too grandiose, with an inclination towards play and toying around, for almost thirty years. However well-intentioned she is, design historians might judge her work as engaging in neocolonial exploitation, where the only question is whether there has ever been any mass production that cannot similarly be faulted by armchair scholars. Recently, Vinka has designed graphic identities for exhibitions of Sámi historic objects. As in her work for IKEA, she feels that she reveres her ancestors. I hope that Vinka's work with IKEA will, in generations to come, not be regarded as depriving Sápmi of a voice or opportunistically commodifying the topography of Sámi aesthetics, but as an individual voice within IKEA that sang in a slightly unchoreographed minor key, diversifying its commercial strategies to be genuinely more participatory. While cultural authenticity remains subjective and a highly problematic pursuit, participatory aesthetics remains a valid and increasingly necessary pursuit in our passive society. Only time will tell whether the participatory dimensions and tactile values that Vinka sows grow at a faster or slower pace than the planned obsolescence of IKEA products.

While some readers may wonder what the manufacturing or the distribution of a product from a Sámi perspective resembles, such a speculative utopian perspective is valid only insofar as we do not discount the varieties of Sámi identities that are embedded in mainstream cultural production. There is no singular Sámi culture that we can identify without being wholly reductive. If the relationship of interpreting IKEA to class and gender remains fertile for more research, especially in terms of participatory design and the DIY ethos, this record of Vinka's voice may be useful, too. Surely some IKEA designs are worthy of interpreting as having political sub-texts that are feminist, or contestations of class identity, or class aspirations as well as ethnic identity? One could argue that design historians have tended to celebrate the politics of consumer self-fashioning, as suggested by Daniel Miller, in order to provide an antidote to hagiographic portraits of "great designers."³² This case study argues that the individual designer and the cycle of production remain underexamined. Maria Vinka's Gullholmen chair or porcelain *guksi* need to be read as tri-national in terms of designer, IKEA, and country of production, which are to be *read interpretively*, rather than be considered as global product lacking in culture only because they emerge from the dynamic gears of commoditization. In the end, to read Vinka's work as "intersectional" may mean that her chair or cup appear Swedish in New York City, as "denational design" in Rome or Copenhagen and as "neocolonial craft," too, in respective countries of production and also, in the hands of engaged consumers, as material imaginaries with varying degrees of potency. As surely as the collapsible Busa tunnel is connected to nomadic architecture, Vinka's use of "Tiki culture" reconciles the practices of auto-ethnography and auto-commodification in ways that, however grotesque, illustrate the larger predicament of culture today.

The author wishes to thank Kjetil Fallan and Mònica Gaspar for their editorial comments on previous drafts of this essay, and peer reviewers at PARSE, and especially Maria Vinka herself, for her time and generosity. Several engaged audiences were especially productive interlocutors, and I thank students at Stenebyskolan, KHIO, and the Capellagården School for Design Work. The author's research took place during a Fulbright Fellowship residency and he thanks Crafts at Göteborg University HDK (Högskolan för design och konsthantverk) for being his generous host and the Fulbright Program.

Footnotes

1. Interview Maria Vinka with the author, March 7, 2019.
2. Vinka's work is interpreted in Ruppel Shell, Ellen. *Cheap: The High Cost of Discount Culture*. New York, NY: Penguin Press. 2009. p. 136; Brunnström, Lasse. *Svensk designhistoria*. Stockholm: Raster Förlag. 2010. pp. 350–351; Bengtsson, Steffan. *IKEA: The Book: Formgivare, produkter & Annat*. Stockholm: Arvinius Förlag. 2010. pp. 45–59; Shales, Ezra. *The Shape of Craft*. London: Reaktion. 2017. pp. 99–104.
3. Most academics tend to write about IKEA in terms of generalizations. See for the only design history monograph Kristoffersson, Sara. *Design by Ikea: A Cultural History*. Translated by William Jewson. London: Bloomsbury. 2014. Anthropologists and sociologies have seen the store as the exemplary experiential consumer phenomenon of our zeitgeist more acutely than design historians, but in doing so have mostly lost sight of designers and actual material artifacts. See Garvey, Pauline. *Unpacking IKEA: Swedish Design for the Purchasing Masses*. London: Routledge. 2017; Lindqvist, Ursula. "The Cultural Archive of the IKEA Store." *Space and Culture*. Vol. 12. No. 1. February 2009. pp. 43–62; Hartman, Tod. "On the Ikeaization of France." *Public Culture*. Vol. 19. No. 3. September 1, 2007. pp. 483–498.
4. Kirkham, Pat. *Charles and Ray Eames: Designers of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995. pp. 143–157.
5. Vinka's more functionalist designs include the recent Stockholm line of furnishings, and the Förnuft flatware set, the Färgrik dinnerware set, and the Elias and Måsö chairs. I thank Kjetil Fallan for emphasizing this range.
6. See Hartman, "On the Ikeaization of France," p. 487.
7. Fallan, Kjetil and Zetterlund, Christina. "Altering a Homogenized Heritage: Articulating Heterogeneous Material Cultures in Norway and Sweden." In *Designing Worlds: National Design Histories in an Age of Globalization*. Edited by Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei. New York, NY, and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016. pp. 172–187.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
9. Bydler, Charlotte. "Art, Geographies and Values: Thinking Sámi Contemporary Art Archipelagically." In *Regionality/Mondiality: Perspectives on Art, Aesthetics and Globalization*. Edited by Charlotte Bydler and Cecilia Sjöholm. Södertörn Academic Studies. pp. 159–160. Available at <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-25350> (accessed 2020-04-20); see also Lundström, Jan-Erik. "What is Contemporary Sami Art and Design?" In *Contemporary Sami Art and Design*. Stockholm: Arvinius + Orfeus Publishing. 2015. pp. 9–15.
10. Lees-Maffei, Grace and Sandino, Linda. "Dangerous Liaisons: Relationships between Design, Craft and Art." *Journal of Design History*. Vol. 17. No. 3. 2004. pp. 207–219.
11. See Fry, Tony. *Design as Politics*. Oxford: Berg. 2010; Bowe, Steven and Richmond, Peter. *Selling Shaker: The Commodification of Shaker Design in the Twentieth Century*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 2007.
12. Lindqvist, "The Cultural Archive of the IKEA Store," p. 45.
13. Fallan, Kjetil. *Scandinavian Design*. London: Berg. 2012. pp. 237–241; Wickman, Kerstin. "A Wedge in the Walls of the Masculine Bastion." In *Oomph: The Women Who Made Sweden Colorful*. Stockholm: Arts and Theory Publishing. 2016. pp. 169–181.
14. Brunnström, *Svensk designhistoria*, pp. 343–352; Hagströmer, Denise. *Swedish Design*. Stockholm:

- Swedish Institute. 2001. Of the authors, Hagströmer pays least attention to IKEA, but ascribes the greatest degree of agency to an individual designer, Robert Metell, by identifying his oval crib as innovative. In contrast, Sara Kristoffersson illustrates two 1995 PS collection pieces, a vase by Pia Wallén and a cabinet by Thomas Sandell, but limits ekphrasis to corporate advertisements.
15. Jakobsen's *Chandelier* is also illustrated in Kristoffersson's *Design by Ikea*. In addition, Ingegerd Råman's design for IKEA's glass jug and dish are on display in the Nationalmuseum. Thomas Sandell's Vågö, a molded chair that was part of the 2001 PS collection, is still on view at the Röhsska Museum, as of the reopening in February 2019.
 16. See Christian Strömqvist's description, available at <http://www.stromqvistdesign.com/portfolio/childrens-entrance-portal-2013/> (accessed 2019-05-03).
 17. For instance, Vinka's desk for IKEA comprises a clean blond wooden frame supporting a white laminate work surface that incorporates the appearance of a professional drafting table with storage that publicity photographs suggest was intentionally shaped to be able to stow crayons and other kinds of art supplies out of sight.
 18. Brunnström, *Svensk designhistoria*, p. 350.
 19. Bydler, "Art, Geographies and Values," p. 162.
 20. Shell, *Cheap*, p. 142.
 21. Interview Maria Vinka with the author, March 7, 2019.
 22. Shell, *Cheap*, pp. 144-146, provides an in-depth analysis of IKEA's trade dealings with the government.
 23. Email Maria Vinka to the author, May 3, 2019.
 24. While working at IKEA, she complained to her boss about the standard chairs they gave employees. She asked for them to purchase a Håg, an ergonomic Norwegian product with skeletal back support and the capability to tilt the sitter's pelvis. Vinka still has one in her office today, having bought one when she left IKEA. Interview Maria Vinka with the author, March 7, 2019.
 25. Bengtsson, *IKEA the Book*, p. 45.
 26. Shell, *Cheap*, p. 136.
 27. Bengtsson, *IKEA the Book*, p. 45.
 28. *Ibid.*
 29. Curators for documenta 14 included eight Sami practitioners: Máret Anne Sara, Britta Marakatt-Labba, Synnøve Persen, Keviselie (Hans Ragnar Mathisen), Mette Henriette, Iver Jåks, Niillas Somby and Joar Nango. See Falkenås, Susan. "The Norwegian Art Scene Must Be Decolonised." *Kunstkritikk*. November 13, 2017. Available at <https://kunstkruttikk.com/the-norwegian-art-scene-must-be-decolonised/> (accessed 2020-04-30).
 30. Conversation Maria Vinka with the author, May 25, 2019.
 31. Due to mismanagement and conflict within the administration and between the administration and the city governance, to which it was answerable, the entire Röhsska Museum closed after only three weeks, limiting the visibility and critical analysis of the exhibition.
 32. In their attempt to shift away from celebrating "great designers," far too many design historians have envisioned the dynamics of consumption as redemptive, whereby "consumers engage in a process of self-fashioning, thereby converting something vast and estranged into something inalienable, singular and intelligible." Garvey, *Unpacking IKEA*, p. 11; Miller, Daniel. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford: Blackwell. 1987.