Finnish design is integrated into everyday items, from coffee mugs to furniture to bed linens to candlesticks. Finnish ethos regards art and design as something that should be accessible to everyone. Nowhere is this truer than in the traditional Finnish art form of weaving. Central to the importance of weaving, is a basic understanding of the country’s history and geography.

Until 1918, Finland was not an independent state. Finland was first colonized by the Swedes during the Northern Crusades in the 13th century, and, later, Finns lived under Russian rule. During this long period of colonization, many aspects of Finnish culture (language, art, and practices) were rejected, either by law or degradation, with aspects of Finnish culture being perceived as a lower quality. Additionally, many Finns lived in poverty; as such, they had little access to the finer things in life, so weaving of everyday items such as blankets and curtains brought color into their lives. Having every-day color was also important, as being so close to the Arctic Circle, Finns spend much of the winter in darkness.

The history of Finnish weaving has a long and rich history. Weaving and spinning are documented in the Kalevala, a Finnish epic poem that was kept alive through oral traditions, for over 2,000 years, finally published in 1835. Some suggest the sharing of the Kalevala is a primary reason that Finnish language and cultural traditions survived centuries of colonization.

Three distinct types of traditional weaving found throughout the centuries of Finnish history are:

Ryijy (ROY-yuh): dating back as early as the 9th century. Ryijy are ‘long-tufted’ tapestry, similar to woolen Persian carpets. Because of the warmth they provide, they were originally used as bedding and were weaved in natural colors. Over time, color became introduced through the use of vegetable or other plant-based dyes. The use of color and pattern is especially unique to the Finnish ryijy. Dating back to the 18th century, a ryijy was often used as a prayer rug during wedding ceremonies; the tapestry was then hung for display in the couple’s home. Designs were often geometric shapes and florals, or figures of humans, animals, or birds. A very typical motif was the Tree of Life, signifying family heritages.

Raanu (RAH-new): A Raanu rug is a flat weave, weft-faced handwoven piece that serves as a wall hanging or used as a bed covering. The warp is made of cotton rug yarn or sometimes linen yarn, and the weft is woven of single-ply multicolored fine wool yarns. The weave structure is a repp weave and the weft is beaten down firmly so that the warp yarns are fully covered. The earliest Raanu date back to the 1600’s. The Saami (indigenous people from Lapland) wove Raanu and used them as wall coverings in their tents and sod huts.

Käspaikka (GAHS-bike-kuh): Käspaikka are wide, long, white, plain-weave towels, with designs on both ends, and generally bordered with lace. They were used as hand towels, napkins, and for ritual functions such as weddings and funerals. For example, the bridesmaids tied them around their waists during a wedding. They were often draped on religious icon paintings. Käspaikka were made by girls before they were married. They had to produce enough Käspaikka towels before their weddings, because married women did not make them. The designs, usually in red, were either woven in or embroidered afterwards. Designs often included ancient
symbols or animals, birds, peacocks, plants, tree of life, horsemen or humans. The embroidery, front-stitch embroidery, looks the same on both sides.

Ryijy sample:

Raanu Sample:
Käspaikka Sample:

Sources


https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ryijy

https://finland.fi/arts-culture/kalevala-the-finnish-national-epic/

