

Vera Paints a Scarf: The Art and Design of Vera Neumann

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Vera Paints a Scarf: The Art and Design of Vera Neumann

***Vera Paints a Scarf* celebrates the work of artist-turned-textile designer Vera Neumann (1907–1993) and her contributions to the field of American design. Neumann was one of the most successful female design entrepreneurs of the twentieth century, and an originator of the American lifestyle brand. This exhibition—the first to comprehensively examine her career—highlights the keys to her success, including her joyful and inventive aesthetic, democratic design ethos, fusion of craft and mass production, and clever marketing.**

Today, those who recognize the name know Neumann as the designer of women’s scarves signed with a cursive “Vera” and

stamped with a ladybug. Yet over the course of her career, which spanned her label's debut in 1942 to her death in 1993, Neumann produced thousands of textile patterns based on her drawings, paintings, and collages. She translated her designs into a prolific output that beautified homes and wardrobes across the United States in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, including fabric and linens for the dining room, kitchen, and bedroom, as well as wallpaper, women's sportswear and lingerie, and her iconic line of scarves.

Created in a fresh, modern style that combined simple yet expressive lines with a vivid color palette, Neumann's inventive designs struck a chord with women consumers at mid-century and beyond. She firmly believed that fine art should be

accessible to all, and that this objective could be realized by incorporating good design into everyday life at an affordable price. This ethos, which she shared with her business partners—her husband, George Neumann, and textile expert Frederic Werner Hamm—was inspired by the philosophy of the progressive German art school the Bauhaus, which encouraged the union of art, craft, and industry. These ideals guided her creative practice and informed her company’s advancement of an aspirational identity for women rooted in an appreciation for art and design, on and off the wall.

Who Was Vera?

In 1978 the *Washington Post* joked that archaeologists of the future would one day uncover “millions of rainbow-colored relics bearing the name Vera.” The woman behind the ubiquitous brand was the artist and textile designer Vera Neumann.

The third of four children, Vera was born in 1907 in Stamford, Connecticut, to Russian Jewish immigrants Fanny and Meyer Salaff, who encouraged all their children’s creative interests. At an early age Vera began drawing and painting from nature, a practice that remained foundational to her creative process as an artist and designer. She graduated from the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art with a Fine Arts degree in Painting in 1928 and

subsequently enrolled in Manhattan's Traphagen School of Design. It was there that Neumann encountered the idea of a design career that bridged the fine and commercial arts.

In 1938 Vera married George Neumann, an Austrian immigrant well versed in the textile industry, and together they founded Printex, a printing company that initially operated out of their studio apartment near Gramercy Park. The Neumanns set up a small silk screen frame on their kitchen table to reproduce Vera's paintings—including her iconic signature at the bottom right of her compositions—as designs on napkins and placemats. These early pieces caught the eye of retail buyers and art directors, and in 1944 Neumann received her first large order, from the department store B. Altman & Co.

In 1947, she sold her first screen-printed scarf, to the department store Lord & Taylor. In the late 1950s and 1960s she further expanded into women's fashion, and by the mid-1970s her textile empire, now known as Vera Industries, had grown exponentially through cross-licensing arrangements with Burlington Industries, among other manufacturing giants.

The untimely death of her husband in 1962 left Neumann to raise their two children, John and Evelyn, on her own while continuing to preside over her company. Her publicist once said, "Vera couldn't decide whether to be a wife, a mother, an artist, a business entrepreneur, or a world traveler. So she was all of these." She remained the creative director of the company throughout its existence, and she continued to provide

designs until shortly before her death, in 1993, at the age of eighty-five.

In 1947 Neumann created her first screen-printed scarves. Faced with post-World War II fabric shortages, she initially turned to army surplus parachute silk. The earliest designs—like the botanical pattern shown here—were made with actual plant material, which Neumann collected and photographically transferred directly onto the silkscreen. This example also includes a drop shadow, a visual effect that Neumann used in many subsequent designs, which gives the illusion of a shadow over which the pattern floats.

The small hand towels exhibited here highlight Neumann's preservation of the artisanal quality of her original works of art (in this case, drawings from nature) in her commercial design, an objective she achieved through screen-printing. Initially, she undertook the printing by hand, which allowed her to sensitively translate the expressive lines and whimsical spirit of her drawings and paintings. Once the printing process was mechanized, as in these examples, Neumann continued to oversee every step in the translation of her artwork into a screen print, ensuring the high quality of design that was a hallmark of her company's success.

These photographs were taken at Printex, the printing concern for the Vera Companies

(later Vera Industries). The Neumanns established Printex in partnership with Frederic Werner Hamm in 1943. By 1948, the company had outgrown its facilities in New York City, and it relocated all operations to a rambling Georgian mansion in Ossining, along the Hudson River, where it remained until it closed in 1988.

The scrolling images on this iPad reproduce pages from a 1979 F. Schumacher & Co. sample book of Vera-brand fabrics and wall coverings. The images highlight the range of Neumann's work for the company as well as the trend of decoratively dense, pattern-on-pattern interior treatments that emerged in the later 1960s and 1970s and were well-suited to her designs.

In the late 1940s Neumann began creating designs for the textile design firm F. Schumacher & Co., in New York City, a collaboration that would last decades. *Happy Leaves* and *Papaya*, exhibited here, are two of her earliest hand- screened textile patterns produced for the company in 1947. Jack-in-the-Pulpit, which to this day remains one of Schumacher's best- selling fabrics, was hung in the White House's third-floor solarium in 1952, during the Truman administration, in the colorway called **Mouse.**

Neumann's scarves enjoyed widespread appeal, gracing the covers of fashion magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar*, in 1950, and worn by the likes of Marilyn Monroe, photographed by Bert Stern with her Vera scarf in 1962.

The Neumanns were part of a circle of Modern artists and designers that included the sculptor Alexander Calder and the architect Marcel Breuer. In 1952 Breuer designed the Neumanns' residence in Croton-on-Hudson (shown here in the magazine spread) and Neumann's first showroom, called The Vera Galleries, at 417 Fifth Avenue in New York City (highlighted later in the exhibition).

An article published in American Home Magazine presents the couple as avid collectors of Modern art and world craft. They owned several works by Calder, one of whose mobiles resided in the couple's backyard and inspired the scarf to the right.

New York Times Crossword Puzzle (scarf transparency and promotional clipping), 1982, Paper and acetate

This two-layered transparency illustrates part of the process of converting an image, such as Neumann's drawing of a crossword puzzle, into a set of colors that can be printed. Each layer of the transparency represents a separate color element of the design, to be photographically transferred to individual silkscreens in preparation for printing.

A step-by-step view of the process of screen-printing in the pre-digital era can be seen in the film *In the Company of Vera*, on view in this gallery.

In the early 1950s Neumann added the ladybug motif to her brushy, branded signature, promoting it as a cross-cultural sign of good luck. The ladybug provided a pop of color and helped to distinguish her work from copies, which had become rampant. Shortly after its appearance, the ladybug was incorporated as an all-over design element in Vera apparel, as well as in promotional items, like the stickpin Neumann gave away with a copy of the newspaper crossword puzzle in which she appears as a clue.

In the early 1970s Neumann had been in business for over twenty-five years, and her merchandise was retailing in twenty thousand stores in North America and abroad. This explosive growth was due in

part to her cross-licensing agreements with companies such as Mikasa and Burlington Industries, for which Neumann designed dinnerware and bedding, respectively.

***In the Company of Vera*, a promotional film directed by Neumann’s nephew Fred Salaff in 1976, captures the company at its height and takes the viewer through the “process of bringing original artwork to the consumer ... from paintbrush to retailer.” The film highlights Vera Industries as a full-fledged lifestyle brand built upon the marriage of art, craftsmanship, and technology, which allowed for the faithful translation of Neumann’s paintings into repeatable compositions on repeatable objects to create coordinating product lines across categories—from women’s apparel to**

drapery, bedding, table linens, and dinnerware.

This selection of department store advertisements for Neumann’s tableware appeared in regional newspapers. The coupling of product photos and illustrations with pricing underscores the ubiquity and accessibility of Vera home goods in households across the United States. Her designs were attractive not only for their winsome patterns and bold color combinations, which were singular in their time, but also for their accessible price point, which was well below that of competitors. For instance, an eight-piece Vera napkin-and- placemat set sold for five dollars in 1961— equivalent to approximately forty dollars today.

In the 1950s the company began licensing designs to china manufacturers, and over the following decades Neumann designed several patterns for Mikasa in Japan, on view in this section of the exhibition.

Available in cups, saucers, and plates, *Poppy*, seen here, became one of the company's most popular dishware designs to come out of the collaboration.

The Art of Table Setting

Napkins and placemats were among the few products small enough to be screen-printed on the Neumanns' kitchen table during the early days of company. As Vera Industries grew more successful, operations relocated to Ossining, New York, and the business expanded to include a range of coordinated prints for the home, including tablecloths and other kitchen linens. Neumann's The Birches pattern, on view here as a dining set, was also produced as wall coverings by F. Schumacher & Co. The multiple color options and products available in a single pattern expanded creative possibilities for consumers in their own homes.

As seen in the adjacent promotional poster, Neumann approached the tabletop as a

canvas, encouraging imagination and creativity in routine activities like setting the table. The designer's attentiveness to the choreography of the table setting demonstrates her commitment to elevating the everyday through design.

Brand ambassadors for Vera Industries visited department stores like Lord & Taylor, Bloomingdale's, and B. Altman to perform in-store demonstrations of tableware and scarves. These occasions included the giveaway of brochures, like the example seen here. *Vera Folds Art Napkins* details nine ways to fold Vera napkins, eight of which are re-created in this installation.

Wearing Vera

[Vera was] ... an American Sonia Delaunay, especially in her color sense.

—Perry Ellis, Vice President of Merchandising for Vera Industries, 1985

Neumann expanded into sportswear design with her “Jollytop,” first sold in 1957. The designer credited this simple top as the origin for her “panel printed” blouses, which entered the market in 1959. She launched her sportswear line (later headed by young designer Perry Ellis) in 1960 as a division of Vera Industries. The brand incorporated Neumann’s designs into a variety of sportswear product categories: pullover tops, shirts, shifts, tunics, and dresses.

Neumann's sportswear designs were distinctive on account of the company's early practice of panel or engineered printing. As opposed to cutting patterns from a bolt of printed fabric, Neumann produced individual designs for specific parts of a garment pattern, including front and back panels, cuffs, collars, hems, and plackets, often painting directly on paper fitted to a mannequin. The finished result made the wearer appear as if she had dressed herself in a painting.

The poster here, produced by Vera Industries, outlines the process of designing and manufacturing a panel print garment. The vibrant dresses and blouses on view date from across the history of the business and serve as examples of this technique.

The *Jollytop* was Neumann's earliest sportswear design. Constructed out of two printed cotton scarves with a seam at the shoulders, the affordably priced square top was marketed as a wearable work of art. Neumann frequently employed the butterfly as a motif, as seen in many of the objects on display.

The Fine Art of Design

Every product sold under the Vera brand began with a unique artwork. Despite her success as a designer, Neumann consistently stressed her identity as an artist, which she viewed as essential to her brand. She once said, “I put into my work a painter’s idea about what a scarf should look like,” a statement that can be extended to all her textile designs, from table linens and bedding to apparel. This installation of watercolor and ink paintings provides a glimpse into Neumann’s immense catalogue of work that informed her design aesthetic. In her most active years, Neumann produced between three hundred and five hundred paintings annually.

Neumann studied the East Asian ink-wash technique *sumi-e*, and she incorporated it into her work throughout her career. In *sumi-e*, the artist holds the brush vertically, and the elegance and economy of line that can be achieved are prized. According to Neumann, the technique allowed her “to leave out everything extraneous. With one brush stroke, I can be both impressionistic and graphic.”

The film to your left, *Vera Paints Ibiza in the Sun*, documents Neumann’s working process during a trip to the Spanish island of Ibiza, where she kept a pied-à-terre. The opening segment highlights traditional culture and craft as a design inspiration for Neumann, and shows her painting out-of-doors. The film was marketed as educational and sold to textile design schools throughout the world.

Vera Paints...

Neumann used the ingenious tagline “Vera paints ...,” as in *Vera Paints a Scarf*, *Vera Paints a Butterfly*, or *Vera Paints an O’Rainbow*, to associate her work as a designer with her identity as a fine artist. In addition, she consciously promoted her seasonal lines as paintings and limited-edition “printings,” downplaying the status of her home goods and apparel as mass-manufactured objects. Through humorous advertising and in-store demonstrations on, for instance, how to stretch a scarf to create a painting for the home, Neumann played with assumptions about the lesser value and status of objects made for use, encouraging an appreciation of design as art integrated into life.

While she often looked to nature, many of her designs can also be sourced to her trips abroad. At the peak of her travels, Neumann was taking two trips a year to paint, draw, and collect objects, especially distinctive crafts. As the screen prints and other ephemera exhibited here show, she visited countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and South America. Neumann favored the local scene, as opposed to museums and tourist attractions, and her first stop upon arrival was often the marketplace. Her watercolors, sketches, and photographs of imagery encountered on these trips informed the following season's designs and marketing campaigns.

Like many other American textile designers working in the modern era, Neumann engaged with and appropriated imagery from cultures outside her own. This brochure details Neumann's travel campaign through the Americas in 1971. In the text, she credits indigenous visual and material culture as a design source while simultaneously treating culturally specific imagery as decorative motifs in her work. Her cross-cultural referencing, seen here and in other materials on view, reflected a Modernist design ideal that valued clarity of form, skilled making, and an appreciation for ordinary and traditional objects alike. At the time this appeared as a liberal and humanistic approach to world culture, although today we are aware of the cultural imperialism it so clearly reflects.

On her travels to prerevolutionary Iran in 1969, the designer looked to every aspect of the landscape she encountered. The resulting line, entitled “Vera Paints a Persian Garden,” featured designs based on mosque architecture, carpet and tile motifs, and Persian landscape design. The central image of the campaign was a teardrop-shaped tree, likely inspired by the four-thousand-year-old Sarv-e Abarqu cypress, against an abstracted landscape.

The design that resulted from Neumann’s trip to Denmark in 1968, where she spent time at the Tivoli amusement park in Copenhagen, was marketed in advertisements as “Vera colors gone delightfully Danish.” The multicolored pinwheel daisy soon appeared on shifts, skirts, scarves, and home goods. This motif

was also incorporated into promotional giveaways.

The Japanese character for “rain” served as the central image in Neumann’s Fall 1973 line, “Vera Paints Symbols of the East.” The character adorned posters, postcards, and other materials, indicating the orchestrated promotion of Neumann’s designs. The flyer on view was provided to department stores to encourage creative displays in alignment with the seasonal theme.

Neumann returned to Asia every two years after her first visit to the region in 1965. She traveled to China, Japan, and Taiwan, and based many of her seasonal lines around her experiences and work produced in these countries. The “Fan-T- Asia” line

incorporated Japanese fish kites and steamer baskets, while later campaigns featured Neumann's watercolors of cherry blossoms and fans.

Her work in Asia extended to the realm of manufacturing. Due to rising labor costs in the United States, Neumann's scarves in the mid-1970s and 1980s were made in China and Japan. Her collaboration with Chinese manufacturers began in 1975, marking the first time American designs were produced in the People's Republic of China and sold in the U.S. The scarves bore the "Vera" signature, in English, below the Chinese company seal, or chop, the characters of which translate to "truth" and "honesty," as seen in the accompanying promotional postcard.

The Vera Scarf

I spent half my life designing scarves.
—Vera Neumann, 1987

Neumann's signature accessory, the scarf, was a beloved product throughout the history of the company. She screen-printed her earliest scarves on surplus parachute silk and eventually expanded to other fabrics, such as polyester, cotton, and rayon-silk blends. Vera scarves came in a variety of sizes and shapes, from squares, rectangles, and wedges to the specialty three-cornered and five-cornered designs known as "wingtips" and "winglets."

Neumann possessed a democratic design ethos, declaring, "I don't believe only the wealthy deserve good design." While scarves by fashion designers Geoffrey

Beene and Pauline Trigère sold for twenty-five dollars each in 1966, Neumann's, by contrast, ranged from two to ten dollars, reflecting her commitment to accessibility.

The placement of the “Vera” signature on Neumann's scarves originated from one of her paintings, equating the scarf to a canvas and reinforcing her identity as an artist. In her lifetime Neumann created designs for thousands of scarves. The selection on view provides a small sampling.

The Vera Industries marketing team produced promotional videos such as *Vera Scarves*, in which a model demonstrates how to tie various styles of scarves for day and evening occasions. Dating from the later history of the company, the video

underscores the breadth and longevity of Neumann's work and the many possibilities for wearing her products.

Promotional pamphlets illustrating different scarf-tying styles were produced by Neumann's marketing team in the 1960s as a supplement for in-store demonstrations. In *14 Ways to Tie a Scarf That's a Painting That's a Scarf*, the graphic treatment recalls the cover design of *Art News*, a popular magazine of the time. These materials reinforced Vera Industries' approach to garments, especially scarves, as works of art in their own right.

The Vera Companies printed its products in multiple color combinations, offering each design in a variety of hues. Although Neumann became known for intense colors and unusual chromatic combinations, her designs were remarkably spare compared with those of her contemporaries. Fewer colors led to greater creative flexibility and a lower price point, both central objectives for Neumann and company.

The Bauhaus-trained Modernist Marcel Breuer designed Neumann's showrooms in New York and Los Angeles. The first, for scarves and linens, was completed in 1952 and located at 417 Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. The retail spaces were named "The Vera Galleries," emphasizing the

company's products as equivalents to artwork shown in gallery settings.

The Vera Galleries showroom space was markedly spare, reflecting mid-century Modernist design trends. Scarves and other products were hidden in wall partitions and revealed during presentations. A mural of patterns from Neumann's first line of scarves adorned the walls, and space was dedicated to displaying the designer's collection of indigenous art and craft. Mirrored walls and sculptural furnishings by Herman Miller and Breuer reinforced the chic, modern atmosphere.