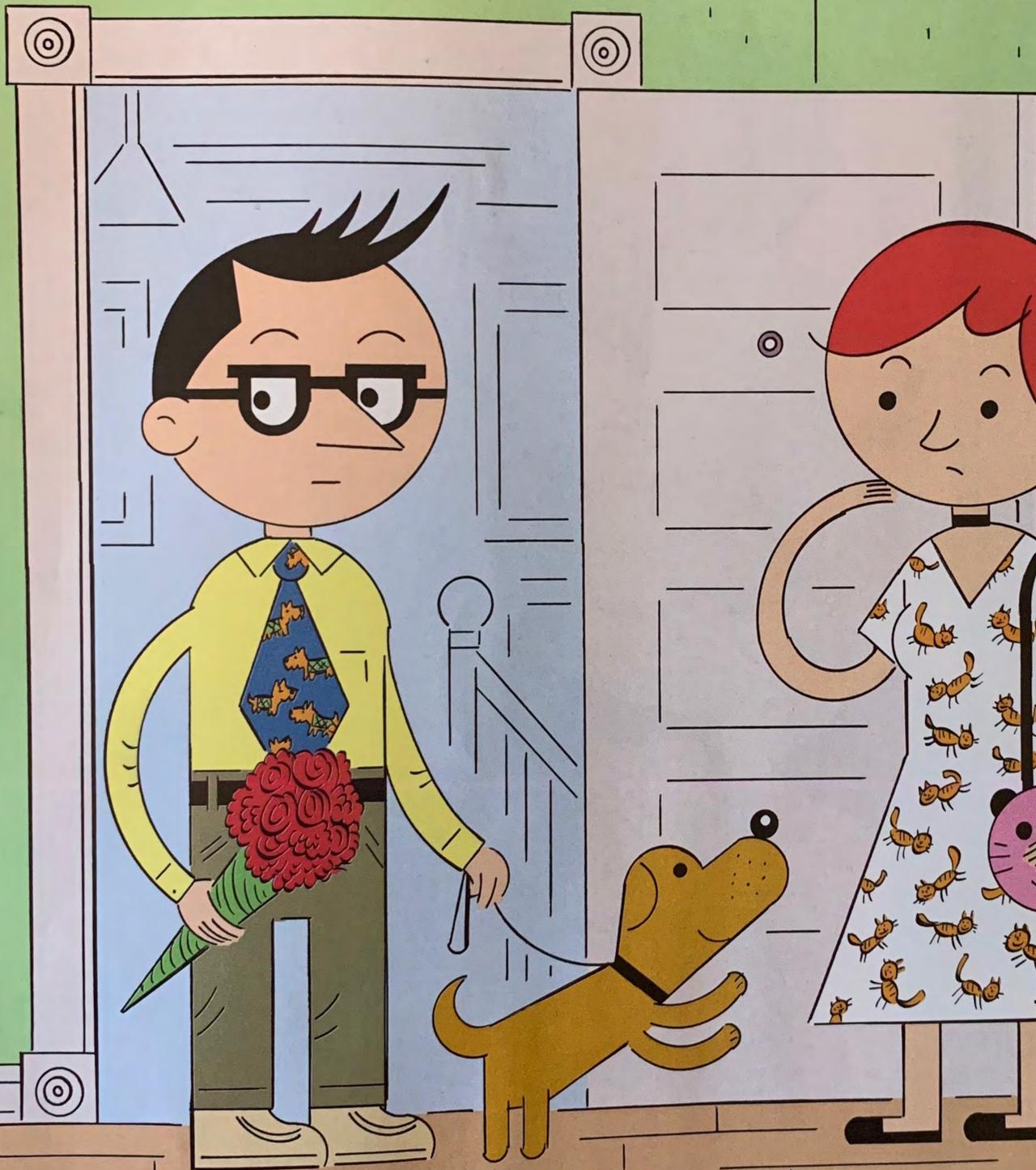
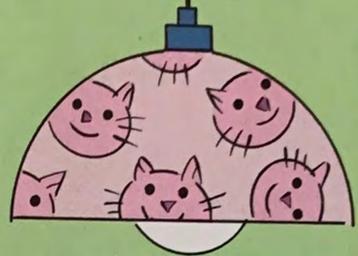
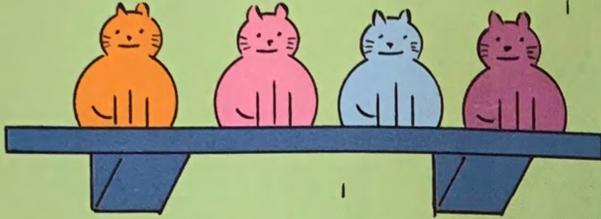


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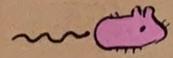
THE

SEPT. 16, 2019

# NEW YORKER



BEWARE OF CATS



ART

Alvin Baltrop  
Bronx Museum

This quietly wonderful retrospective presents the Bronx-born photographer, who died in 2004, as more than a sensitive documentarian: Baltrop was also the unseen protagonist of his stunning pictures. More than two hundred small, mostly black-and-white prints (some of them worse for wear) provide a rich record of the Christopher Street piers in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, when a collapsed section of the West Side Highway created a clandestine zone of abandoned industrial warehouses that became a site for both gay cruising and avant-garde experimentation. (The artist Gordon Matta-Clark famously removed sections of a derelict structure on Pier 52 for his 1975 piece “Day’s End.”) Baltrop captured idyllic moments of sunbathing and public sex amid the ruins, sometimes wielding his camera as he hung from a makeshift harness. He also showed the waterfront’s dangers in images of firefighters approaching a blaze and of a corpse surrounded by police at the river’s edge. As a gay African-American art-world outsider, Baltrop did not enjoy much recognition in his lifetime, but, in recent years, his photographs have earned a well-deserved place in queer history. This illuminating, important exhibition is the first to draw on his personal archive, which is housed at the museum.—*Johanna Fateman (Through Feb. 9.)*

“Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘St. Jerome’”  
Metropolitan Museum

Smartphones waft like palm fronds above the viewers who throng this shrinelike display of a painting that Leonardo started around 1483 and then abandoned, perhaps when its commission lapsed but as likely owing to ennui. The Master had fully drawn only the face, clavicle area, and right foot of the old, nearly toothless Jerome, who is about to pound himself in the chest with a rock as he contemplates a crucifix in a grotto. A glum brown undercoat occupies much of the wood panel. The saint’s sketched companion animal, a lion, appears to roar at him for some reason. The work’s torqued composition and canny human anatomy are impressive, but it registers mainly as a relic for the contemporary cult of Leonardo—the innovator’s innovator—which dates from Bill Gates’s purchase, in 1994, of one of his notebooks. How exciting is it that a Leonardo fingerprint appears in the paint? Your call.—*Peter Schjeldahl (Through Oct. 6.)*

Vera Neumann  
Museum of Arts and Design

Faced with post-Second World War shortages, Neumann found a bolt of parachute silk at a surplus store in New York City, and her line of scarves was born, now as recognizable for its “Vera” signature (and little ladybug stamp) as for its brightly colored designs. This breezy exhibition, titled “Vera Paints a Scarf,” showcases decades of the buoyantly chic foulards—delicate, vibrant squares printed with dashed-off butterflies, sunbursts, fruit-laden branches, and playful geometric patterns. The artist produced thousands of such designs for clothing, tableware, and

linens from the nineteen-forties until her death, in 1993, embracing the modernist aim of democratizing good design. A number of her exquisite works on paper—influenced by Japanese sumi-e ink painting, with which Neumann generated ideas—are also on view, but the emphasis is on mass-produced beauty. From “Jollytop” panel-printed blouses and Alexander Calder-inspired scarves (the artist was a close friend) to Mikasa-brand plates emblazoned with red poppies, Neumann’s expressive lines and entrepreneurial spirit shine throughout. An eight-part display of napkins and a hand-drawn how-to brochure titled “Vera Folds Art Napkins,” from 1975, put *Martha Stewart Living* to shame.—*J.F. (Through Jan. 26.)*

Mika Rottenberg  
New Museum

Imagine Karl Marx as a YouTube ASMR star and you’ll have some sense of Rottenberg’s absurd, mesmerizing, and socially conscious video installation. (This exhibition, astutely curated by Margot Norton, also features a roomful of Rottenberg’s surreally mechanized sculptures.) The forty-three-year-old artist—who was born in Argentina, grew up in Israel, and is now based in

upstate New York—is best known for her satirical allegories about the indignities of pink-collar labor, which show an extravagant eye for pattern and color and an ear for tingle-inducing sizzles and drips. Degrading work conditions and the indignities of human bodies are linked; in “NoNoseKnows,” made for the 2015 Venice Biennale, a woman (played by the formidable Bunny Glamazon) sitting alone in a cramped office magically produces a plate of noodles every time she sneezes. In each video, Rottenberg toggles between staged scenes and documentary footage that she shoots around the world, whose weirdness rivals her fictions. In the show’s kaleidoscopic tour de force, “Spaghetti Blockchain,” she travelled to Siberia to film female Tuvan throat singers.—*Andrea K. Scott (Through Sept. 15.)*

“What’s Love Got to Do with It”  
The Drawing Center

**DOWNTOWN** The biennial exhibition of works by artists in this nonprofit’s Open Sessions program is reliably full of fresh ideas from around the world, and the current edition is no exception. The thirty-one participants include Johanna Unzueta, whose intriguingly cosmological

AT THE GALLERIES



“Bodies, with their color and their nuance and their materiality, are so different in person than on social media,” the Mexican painter **Aliza Nisenbaum** told me last month, in her Harlem studio. She was putting the finishing touches on a group portrait of the staff at the Anton Kern gallery, where an exhibition of her taut and tender pictures, for which she spends hours painting people from life, opens on Sept. 13. This intimate process has social-justice roots: Nisenbaum met her first sitters in Queens, in 2012, while teaching English to immigrant women at a center founded by the Cuban artist-activist Tania Bruguera. Think of the kaleidoscopic “Jenna and Moises” (pictured), from 2018, as a portrait of entwined art and politics: Jenna is both a salsa dancer and an immigration attorney.—*Andrea K. Scott*

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STYLE | SELF | CULTURE | POWER 

SPACE OF THE WEEK | 11:00 A.M.

# Wild Thing A new exhibition reveals artist Vera Neumann as a brilliant entrepreneur with a keen eye for nature, travel, and marketing.

By Wendy Goodman



DESIGN HUNTING

*Design editor Wendy Goodman takes you inside the city's most exciting homes and design studios.*

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Photo: Vera Neumann/Courtesy of Susan Seid

**W**hat do Vera Neumann (1907–1993), an artist who turned her work into a textile and lifestyle empire, and Marilyn Monroe, the most iconic movie star of all time, have in common? A scarf, it turns out — specifically, a semi-sheer scarf of Neumann’s design that Monroe draped in front of her bare torso in one of Bert Stern’s legendary photographs taken just weeks before her death in 1962. Neumann, born in Stamford, Connecticut, exhibited her artistic flair from the get-go, creating collages of dried ferns collected from her backyard as a child. Later, with her husband George Neumann, whose family emigrated from Hungary in the ’30s, she decided to start a design business. The hand-built silk screen that fit on their dining-room table would ultimately lead to a \$100 million design empire including scarves, textiles, and tabletop pieces, all of which are now part of American-design iconography. With each piece, Vera signed only her first name alongside a small painted ladybug. Above, one of her exuberant floral watercolors. The Museum of Arts and Design’s exhibition “Vera Paints a Scarf: The Art and Design of Vera Neumann” opens August 8 and runs through January 26, 2020.



As Vera and George's business blossomed and word spread about her artistry, F. Schumacher's merchandising director, René Carrillo, placed an order for fabric that resulted in a debut collection in 1947. Schumacher's Vera-glazed cotton chintz "jack-in-the-pulpit" design was ordered for the solarium in the Truman White House. In 1952, Vera and George purchased 3.5 acres of a former apple orchard in Croton-on-Hudson and, being Bauhaus enthusiasts, asked architect Marcel Breuer to design their one-story modernist cinder-block-walled house, the living room of which is seen here. Photo: *American Home* magazine, by William Maris



Vera and George traveled the world, and her art reflected both the natural world and anything that caught her eye. The wonderful book *Vera: The Art and Life of an Icon*, by Susan Seid with Jen Renzi (Abrams), is still available on Amazon. Photo: Vera Neumann, watercolor on paper, courtesy of Susan Seid



The Neumanns' Breuer-designed house included glass walls to allow optimum views of the Hudson River and an indoor-outdoor feeling. The flagstone used on the terrace continued inside for the floor of the living room. The treatment of the wall couch in different-colored fabric for each seat is a delightful touch below a gallery wall filled with modern art. Alexander Calder was one of the Neumanns' best friends, and he gave them a mobile, *Constellation*, that they installed outside on the lawn. Photo: *American Home* magazine, by William Maris



After George's death from a heart attack in 1962, Vera continued to grow the company with myriad products exhibiting her art. She was always committed to her original premise that every design starts with an art piece, and as lyrical as her joyous floral paintings were, her love of modernism and Bauhaus led her to create rigorous geometric patterns as well. Photo: Courtesy of Susan Seid



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## Wonder Woman

An exhibition locates the late artist, designer, and entrepreneur Vera Neumann, who transformed the way humans interact with art, in her proper context.

By TIFFANY JOW



### ASK YOUR GRANDMOTHER OR MOTHER IF SHE EVER OWNED A VERA SCARF.

Chances are she did: my mom remembers my grandma's cherished silk accessory, featuring a wiggly red ladybug with Vera's signature scrawled alongside it. But Mom, like most people, didn't realize the late Vera Neumann—known on a first-name basis to a global audience—was one of the most successful female entrepreneurs of the 20th century. The artist and cofounder of a \$100 million company, Vera was omnipresent in midcentury America. Her confident, vibrant watercolor paintings—pared-down yet energetic depictions of flowers, food, and animals as well as abstract patterns—appeared on everything from wallpaper to comforters, placemats to tableware, sportswear to lingerie. Vera was the first designer to register her designs with the Library of Congress, the first American to manufacture her designs in China and import them for sale in the US, and the first artist at the Smithsonian's Resident Associate Program. Above all, she created one of the first lifestyle brands that transformed how middle-class Americans interacted with art: Vera took it off the

walls and surrounded people with it in their everyday lives.

Yet Vera—with her trifecta of being female, designing for a midrange market, and enjoying commercial success—is barely discussed in design history. An exhibition opening at New York's Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) on August 8 aims to change that. *Vera Paints a Scarf*, organized by MAD's Windgate Research and Collections Curator Elissa Auther, with curatorial assistant Alida Jekabson, features some 200 objects produced by Vera, who died in 1993, and her company between 1945 and 1980. It is the first show to comprehensively examine Vera's career as an artist, businesswoman, and all-around trailblazer.

Born in 1907 to Russian immigrants, Vera was one of four children and grew up in Stamford, Connecticut. Her parents—particularly her father, who paid her 50 cents each time she filled a sketchbook—encouraged her creative spirit. She studied art at New York's Cooper Union and believed strongly in the democratization of art, seeking ways to bridge the gap between her painting practice and commercial design. In 1938, she married George Neumann, whose

family business was textile printing. (They would later move into an upstate home designed by their friend Marcel Breuer.) George suggested she screen-print placemats with her designs, so they set up a screen-printing frame on the kitchen table of their Gramercy Park apartment, and, with the help of their friend Frederick Werner Hamm, made their first sales at B. Altman & Co., Lord & Taylor, and textile giant F. Schumacher & Co. The trio formed their company, Printex, in 1942, when Vera was 35 years old.

Linen was scarce during World War II, but Vera discovered an abundance of parachute silk at an army supply store and shifted her focus to scarves. They were an instant hit: by 1972, her designs were sold in 20,000 stores around the world. Prior to that, in 1948, Vera, George, and the company moved into a Georgian mansion in Ossining, New York, with a printing facility on the ground floor, and the firm swelled to include manufacturing facilities in Puerto Rico, China, Italy, and Japan. (Vera decorated her New York home with work by Josef Albers, Pablo Picasso, Isamu Noguchi, and Alexander Calder, who called Vera whenever he needed linens or bathroom



OPPOSITE: Vera Neumann in her office in the 1970s. THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: Vera Neumann, *Untitled* (napkin) (1960–65), cotton blend. Vera Neumann, *Meadow Fern* (1973), watercolor on paper.

towels.) “It was a vertically integrated company: all the screens were made there, the printing was done there, they even had their own color chemist,” Auther says. “She had complete creative control.” Marketing campaigns used the tagline “Vera Paints” (e.g., “Vera Paints a Persian Garden,” a line informed by a trip to Iran, and “Vera Paints a Happy,” a collection of pieces with a sun motif) and spoke about her product lines in the language of fine art.

Once someone asked Vera if she was a feminist. “She told them she’d been lucky that no one ever stopped her from doing what she wanted to do,” says Susan Seid, a merchandising executive who acquired Vera’s design assets, intellectual property, and artwork in 2005 (she sold all but the latter in 2013) and coauthored the 2010 book *Vera: The Art and Life of an Icon* (Abrams). I wondered if Vera—a 5-foot-tall, incessantly forgetful woman whose confidence was veiled by her kind, accepting exterior—had actually called the shots or if she was merely the face of an empire run by her business partners. Vera had strong opinions on that matter: “I would have made it without [George],” Vera told the writer Lois

Rich-McCoy in 1978 (George passed away unexpectedly in 1962). But he needed her to organize their company, she continued, as no businessperson succeeds completely alone. “Everyone needs a George,” she said.

Every design in Vera’s prolific output began with a painting. Her process adapted the Japanese technique *sumi-e*, in which the brush is held vertically to the paper, sometimes to pool paint. Vera preferred this method, which allowed her to exclude extraneous details and let her singular sense of color shine. “Vera combined orange and purple and fuchsia, which was very unusual at the time,” Seid says, the sensibility fueled and emboldened by Vera’s travels in Mexico, Peru, Paris, and India.

Vera’s vibrant, geometric patterns did not seem a match, however, for subdued postwar modern interiors. “She saw a market that wasn’t being served,” Auther says. “She was part of a circle of people, like the Eameses and Alexander Girard, who were deep modernists but also had a deep love of craft and seamlessly integrated it into sleek, modern interiors. I think of her as part of that circle, but people don’t talk about Vera

in that way in design history.” At least, not yet.

Today Vera’s work lives on, licensed in collaborations with brands such as Anthropologie and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. “What’s fascinating is the cult following she has,” Auther says. “The artist Pae White has more than 3,000 of her scarves; the New York gallerist Alexander Gray collects Vera’s napkins and tableware; fashion designer Francisco Medavog documents her scarves on YouTube. Nowadays, Vera crosses all socioeconomic classes.” ✱





## WITH A GLORIOUS NEW EXHIBITION, DESIGNER VERA NEUMANN GETS HER DUE

*This female design entrepreneur paved the way for Martha Stewart and Tory Burch.*

BY [VANESSA LAWRENCE](#) AUG 5, 2019



Steven Meckler

A good portion of average Americans are likely familiar with the names Martha Stewart and Tory Burch, even if they can't site specific details of their respective empires. But they might not recognize the name [Vera Neumann](#), a woman who was arguably their historical equivalent as one of the most successful female design entrepreneurs

of the last century. The Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York is hoping to change that with their exhibition “Vera Paints A Scarf,” which runs from August 8 through January 26, 2020. A Cooper Union-educated American artist who was born in 1907, Neumann founded the label Vera Industries in 1942 after screenprinting her paintings onto linen napkins and placemats from her kitchen with help from her textile-savvy Austrian husband. Her cheerful, exuberant designs took off and over the course of the nearly 50 years until her death in 1993, she expanded into everything from clothing to kitchenware and textiles. At the heart of her business was the firm belief that beautiful design should be accessible to all. Here, curator Elissa Auther walks us through the inspiration behind Neumann’s work and the reasons for her immense success.



A Vera Neumann design.  
Courtesy of MAD Museum

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**Why have this exhibit now? What can we learn about today's entrepreneurs from Vera's story and experience?**

From its beginning, the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) has been dedicated to collecting and exhibiting the work of women. Vera Neumann is a good example of a designer whose work hasn't been fully recognized in American design history even though she was one of the most successful female design entrepreneurs of the 20th century. I feel like it's always a good time to redress the exclusions of history due to an artist or designer's gender, race, or sexual orientation. In Neumann's case, it was her gender plus her populism and commercial success that played a role in her falling out of design history.

The control Neumann had over her product lines, which included all aspects of design, production, marketing, and distribution, afforded her the freedom to create and take risks with design that is rare today. She even had her own color laboratory and for decades she did her printing in-house. Obviously, the industry is much changed, but even in her time with the goal of reaching a broad audience she insisted on always doing something new and unexpected. She claimed she never designed down for her market.



Vera Neumann Bone China.  
Courtesy of MAD Museum

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**How would you characterize the immense appeal of Vera’s designs? What accounts for her success in so many different areas?**

Vera intervened in a market that lacked the bold dose of color and graphic whimsy that was her signature style. Her designs for home goods looked current and fresh within the ordinary suburban home and humanized more high-end modernist design that was beautifully refined, but unornamented. Her abstract patterns for scarves channeled contemporary painting trends, while her exquisite, panel printed silk blouses made the wearer feel like she had dressed herself in a work of art. Neumann believed that not "only the wealthy deserve good design," and she understood her work as a democratic practice.

**Her work was notably accessible, in pricing. Where did this ethos come from and why was it important to her?**

This ethos was coming from two places: Neumann's interest in the Bauhaus philosophy of breaking down the boundaries between art, craft, and industry, and in the U.S. at mid-century, the Good Design movement. In concert with these forces, Neumann 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. She emphasized her company's marriage of art and mechanized production as key to delivering high-quality objects at a modest price point. She frequently stated in press releases that "I don't believe only the wealthy deserve good design."

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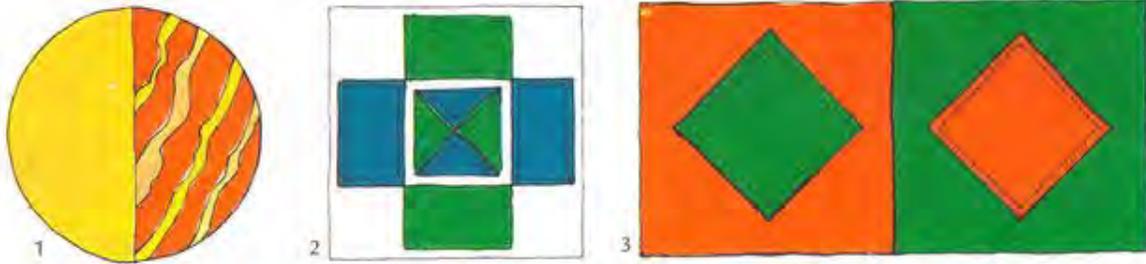


Blossom by Vera Neumann.  
The Vera Company

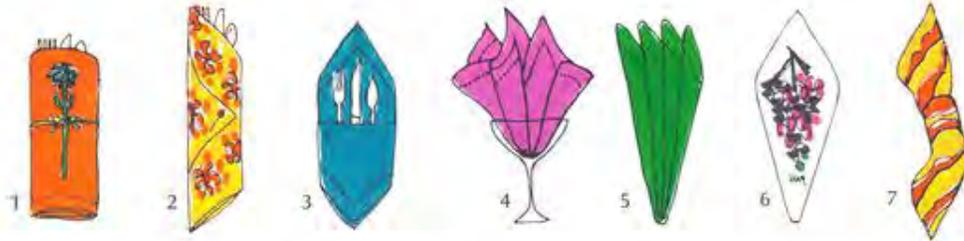
**The notes on the show mention that her preferred technique was Japanese *sumi-e*. How did she arrive at this and why was she so drawn to it?**

Neumann graduated from Cooper Union in 1928 with a fine arts degree in painting. She was introduced to the *sumi-e* technique as a student and subsequently studied it in Japan. *Sumi-e* is an East Asian ink wash technique where the artist holds the brush vertically to the paper, and the elegance and economy of line that can be achieved are prized. Neumann adapted the technique to suit her style—for instance, she didn't exclusively work in black ink. The spontaneity of the technique was attractive to Neumann. She said the technique allowed her “to leave out everything extraneous. With one brush stroke, I can be both impressionistic and graphic.”

## The Art of Table Setting with Vera



Treat a table top like a canvas, says Vera. 1. Start with two round cloths, one solid, one print, fold each in half, place side by side. 2. Place hemstitched white cloth on table, use contrast color mats to create place settings, pick up both colors in folded napkins used as centerpiece. 3. Fold two hemstitched cloths in half, place side by side for contrast color, spice with contrast napkins, centered for modern design.



Napkin-folding is an art form too. Informal ideas for buffets: 1. Fold napkin in quarters, place silver inside, roll and tie with ribbon, flourish with flower. 2. Fold napkin into quarters, place in diamond position, wrap silver by rolling all the way, secure with decorative pin. 3. Fold napkin in quarters, place in diamond position with opened points up, turn down two top layers to meet bottom point, fold points to meet in back. Tuck silver into pocket. Formal setting: 4. Pick up napkin from center, crush in other hand, fold up 3" from end and set in goblet. 5. Use gentlemen's hankie fold, starting with napkin folded in quarters, keep folding triangles 'til you have fan effect. 6. Fold in quarters, turn back two sides to create point. 7. Fold into two triangles, then roll and knot.



Be creative in compositions of napkins, cloth, mats. 1. Create a cloth with a patchwork of hemstitched napkins, starting with solid cloth underneath. Place napkins in diamond position to form pattern of colors. 2. Start with hemstitched cloth, use striking mats to create face-to-face pattern for centerpiece and place settings. 3. Two cloths in same pattern, different color combination, becomes something else when each cloth is folded in half, placed side by side. 4. Try one color napkin to fill tray; another color, in diamond position, on top. Trim with bud vase. 5. Any old tray will do when you fill it with an exciting placemat design. 6. Design your own bread tray by placing three different colored napkins (each folded in half) on table. Place tray on top. Repeat color of each napkin with half-folded napkin tucked into tray. Arrange three kinds of bread, one for each color, on tray.



*Imagination is the spice of table-setting.* 1. Placemats with vegetables seem to ask for bunches of carrots, mushrooms, turnips. 2. For Thanksgiving, color states the season, with orange cloth underneath, diamond-positioned striped cloth on top, pumpkins, cranberries for dash. 3. Find a favorite object to decorate cloth, perhaps a copper pot holding plant. Center candle in earth for added touch of color.

*Usna* Fashions for the Home, 417 Fifth Avenue, New York

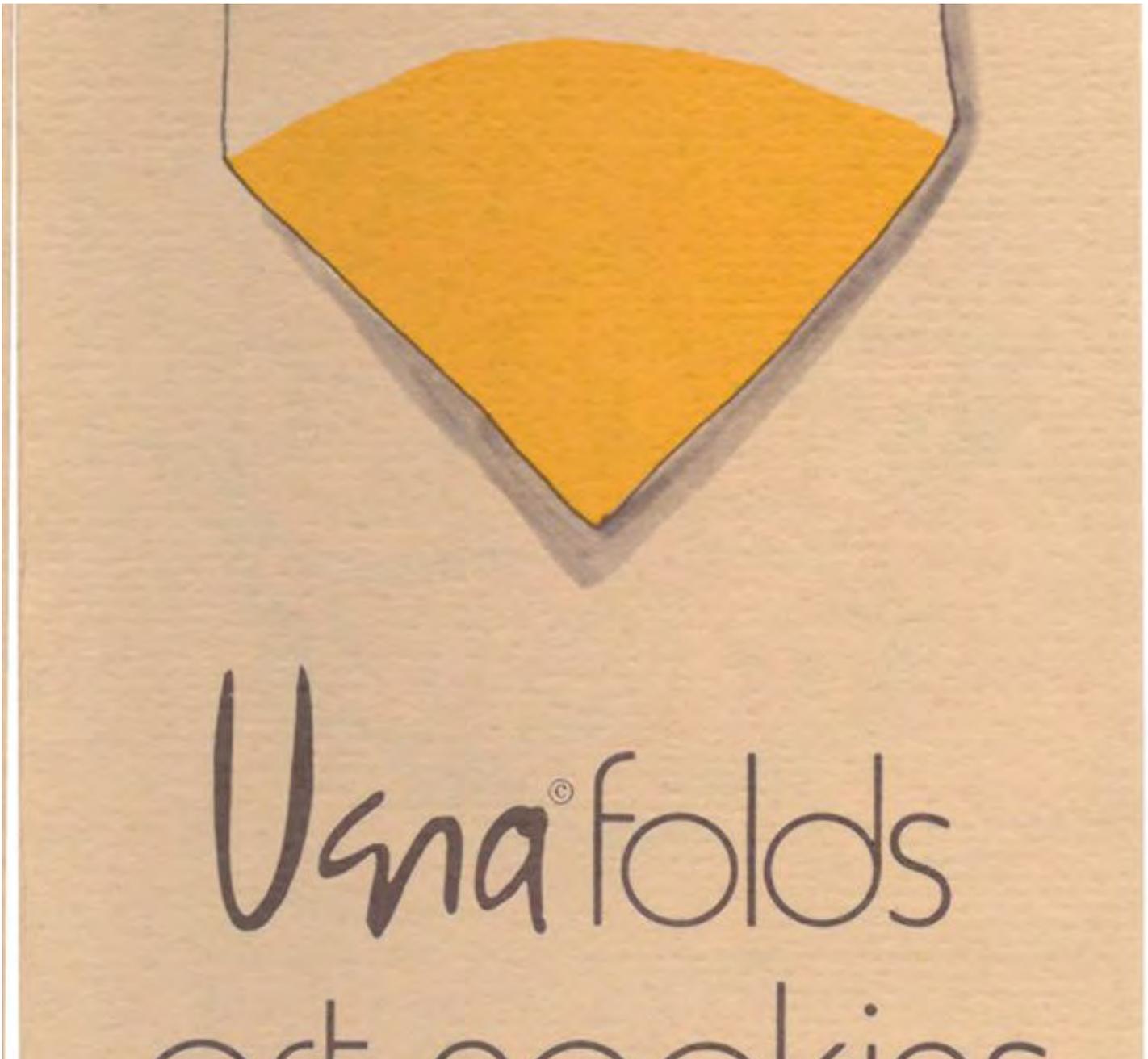
The Art of Table Setting with Vera.  
Courtesy of Susan Seid

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**Neumann was an artist first. What motivated her to turn that art into a business? Did she set out to create a lifestyle brand or was it organic?**

After her graduation from Cooper Union, Neumann enrolled in Manhattan's Traphagen School of Design, founded in the early 1920s by the designer Ethel Traphagen to help foster a fashion industry in the U.S. independent from Parisian couture. It was here that Neumann was introduced to the idea of a career in design that bridged the fine and commercial arts. Like many artists of her generation and beyond needing to make a living, Neumann pursued work in creative industries adjacent to fine art. She worked in interior design and the fashion industry very briefly before turning her own art into a business. This was an idea that she hatched with her husband, George Neumann, an Austrian who came from a textile manufacturing family. With only enough capital to build a silkscreen frame to fit their kitchen table, they went into business together screenprinting her paintings onto linen napkins and placemats.





Vera Folds Art Napkins.  
Courtesy of Susan Seid

Neumann experienced immediate success with these early pieces, and in 1943 a third partner, Frederic Werner Hamm, joined the company. He brokered several large contracts, which put Vera Industries (as the company would come to be known) on the map. There was no looking back at this point, but Neumann held onto her identity as a painter. Literally every design she produced originated in a painting, and she capitalized on her identity as an artist in her promotional material. She used the ingenious tagline, “Vera paints...” as in Vera Paints a Scarf, Vera Paints a Butterfly, or Vera Paints a Rainbow to associate her work as a designer with her identity as a fine artist, and she promoted her products as works of art whether worn or hung on a wall. For instance, she gave out pamphlets along with her scarves that showed the buyer how to stretch them like a canvas. In this way, Neumann played with assumptions about the lesser value and status of objects made for use and encouraged an appreciation of design as art integrated into life.

## Of the many pieces on display, what are some specific ones that exemplify her impact on design?

I have a number of favorites, but at the top of my list are her designs for table linens and the fabric patterns she designed for F. Schumacher & Co. The exhibition includes a special emphasis on what Neumann called "The Art of Table Setting." Her promotional material for her table linens advised the buyer to treat the table like a canvas, and some of her most playful and graphically striking designs can be found on her linen napkins. I also love her patterns for F. Schumacher & Co., some of which were best sellers; others have been reissued as recently as this year! That's a testament to the staying power of her design aesthetic.

**VANESSA LAWRENCE** Senior Editor, ELLE Decor

Vanessa Lawrence, the Senior Editor at ELLE Decor, writes about home, design, style and the arts and was previously at W Magazine and WWD.

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## A Loom of One's Own

Two exhibitions of pioneering female textile artists celebrate the Bauhaus spirit.

**ART** “If handweaving is to regain actual influence on contemporary life,” Anni Albers once wrote, “approved repetition has to be replaced with the adventure of new exploring.” This might have been the mantra of the German Modernist artist, whose work ranged from wall hangings to upholstery to drapery, all of which blended the structural considerations of textile with a painterly sense of form and color. A member of the Bauhaus school—which sought to marry the fine arts with industry—Albers was initially relegated to the institution’s weaving rooms while her male peers dominated the sculpture and architecture studios. But she came to love the loom, seeing herself as carrying on the traditions of weavers in Mexico, Peru, and Chile.

Now Albers (1899–1994) is the subject of a sprawling exhibition at David Zwirner in New York, coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the Bauhaus. (Canvases by Paul Klee, one of her teachers at the influential design school, are displayed

**MATERIAL WORLD**  
VERA NEUMANN'S PATTERNS (LEFT) AND ANNI ALBERS'S GEOMETRIC STUDIES (BELOW) WERE MIDCENTURY MAINSTAYS.

upstairs.) Comprising some 40 years' worth of work, the show in part examines Albers's response to Bauhaus ideologies. “Bauhaus honored thread, cotton, leather, wood, glass,” says Nicholas Fox Weber, executive director of The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, and similarly, Albers prized “material rather than authorship.”

Concurrently the Museum of Arts and Design on Columbus Circle in Manhattan is honoring another artist and designer with “Vera Paints a Scarf:

The Art and Design of Vera Neumann.” Known for cheerfully printed linens, wallpaper, and scarves—including the one worn by Marilyn Monroe for her final photo shoot—Neumann (1907–1993) was a midcentury household name. (In 1952, one of her patterns was applied to the White House solarium.) Although not a product of the Bauhaus herself, she embraced the school's democratizing approach, translating her colorful paintings into widely reproducible designs. Her creations could hang on a gallery wall or from a hook in the pantry, where “the sudden sight of a pot holder making a gay little spot” would brighten even the dreariest of corners.—MARLEY MARIUS



## Folk Songs

*Porgy and Bess* makes its long-awaited return to the Met.

**OPERA** “I thank God I’ve done the big Puccini and Verdi operas,” stage director James Robinson says, because “*Porgy and Bess* has huge chorus numbers.” It’s something of an irony that the folk opera that brought us “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’” is a work of amplitude: The production debuting this month at the Metropolitan Opera involves an all-black 60-person chorus, a multi-story moving set, and coproduction credits from the Dutch National Opera and English National Opera. “It’s a big-scale work, and that’s what’s really thrilling about doing it at the Met,” says Robinson. (The production—the first to appear at the Lincoln Center institution in nearly 30 years—travels from London.)

George Gershwin’s tale of a Depression-era South Carolina slum has sometimes been criticized, as critic Hilton Als memorably put it, as “a show about black people, created entirely by white people,” but the cast and crew involved in this production see it as transcending race. “It’s not just about the African American but about the American as a whole,” says soprano Angel Blue. As *Bess*, her story is ultimately one “of someone trying to rise up and become better.” In the fabled Catfish Row, adds conductor David Robertson, “Gershwin managed to find human universals that resonate with everyone.” With its brew of yearning and resignation, hope and heartbreak, *Porgy and Bess* hits universal chords. Reflects Eric Owens, the soulful bass-baritone who plays Porgy: “These characters are in every culture, all over the world.” —M.M.

**IN SYNC**  
ERIC OWENS AS PORGY AND ANGEL BLUE AS BESS, ABOVE, IN THE MET'S NEW PRODUCTION

The Magazine

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2019

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**Celebrating the happy art of Vera Neumann**

**F**or many women with a chic and sporty fashion sensibility, a Vera Neumann silk scarf—or a dozen of them—has long been a wardrobe essential. And if you wanted Neumann’s upbeat, offbeat artistry on more than what you wore, you could find it on sheets, towels, tablecloths, upholstery, and housewares of every kind. Over the course of a career that spanned five decades, from 1942 until her death in 1993, Neumann parlayed a quirky, curious eye and a talent for painting into a textile design and licensing empire—her work instantly recognizable by her cursive Vera signature and its usual companion, a ladybug.

The Museum of Arts and Design in New York pays tribute to Neumann’s achievement in a current exhibition entitled *Vera Paints a Scarf: The Art and Design of Vera Neumann*. Born Vera Salaff in 1907 in Stamford, Connecticut, daughter of Russian immigrants, she displayed artistic talent as a child and would eventually grow up to study art at the Cooper Union in New York. She followed that with studies at Manhattan’s Traphagen School of Fashion, her entrée into the couture world. But work as an illustrator in the garment industry dissatisfied her, particularly when she was asked to knock off the work of others. Her husband, George Neumann,

*Cats and Dogs* by Vera Neumann (1907–1993), 1963. Photograph by Steven Meckler, courtesy of Susan Seid.

*Meadow Fern*, c. 1973. Photograph courtesy of Susan Seid.

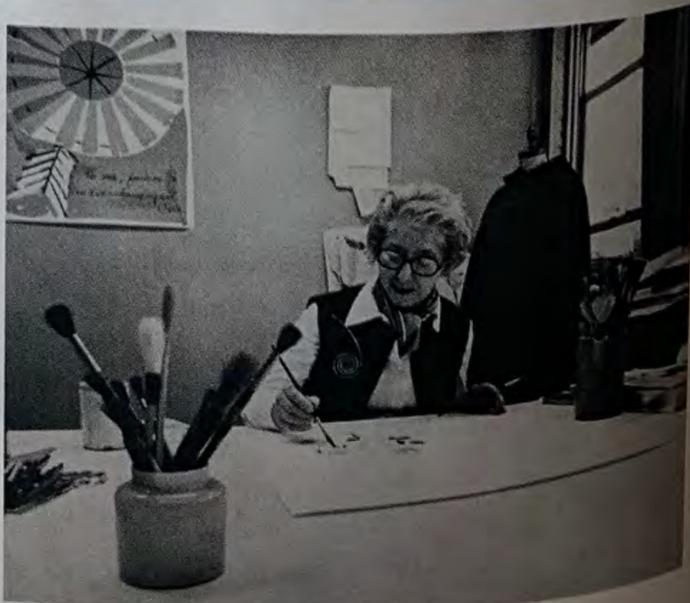
Vera painting in her office, c. 1970.

an advertising executive, suggested she use her paintings as source material for textiles. They started a small silkscreen business in their studio apartment in 1942, at first printing placemats and napkins. By 1972, her scarves were being sold in twenty thousand stores. Her artwork would be licensed for scores of products that ranged from Burlington bedlinens to Mikasa china.

A prolific painter, her motifs included abstracts and geometrics, and her subjects everything from butterflies and birdcages to fish, cityscapes, and a smiling sun. Above all there were botanicals: foliage, ferns, herbs, vegetables, and flowers of all kinds. To celebrate this body of Neumann’s work, starting in October the Tucson Botanical Garden will present an exhibition of some fifty of Vera’s original paintings, along with associated tours and lectures.

***Vera Paints a Scarf: The Art and Design of Vera Neumann* • Museum of Arts and Design, New York • to January 26, 2020 • madmuseum.org**

***Vera Paints a Garden* • Tucson Botanical Garden • October 12 to January 5, 2020 • tucsonbotanical.org**



# Vera, ever vibrant

BY MARY SHUSTACK

## It's hard not to smile when visiting "Vera Paints a Scarf: The Art and Design of Vera Neumann."

Elissa Auther, curator of the exuberant exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design in Manhattan, is doing just that when she begins to walk us through "Vera" on its opening day.

"This is the first I've seen it all finished – how pretty," she says, taking it all in just as enthusiastically as we are.

The thoughtful exhibition offers up a fittingly vibrant celebration of Neumann (1907-93), the artist-turned-textile designer, while also exploring her contributions to American design.

"Overall, the exhibition focuses on Vera Neumann as an artist, a textile designer and a design entrepreneur," says Auther, MAD's Windgate Research and Collections curator.

Neumann, in collaboration with her husband, George, would launch the company in the early 1940s, quickly taking off with Neumann's signature work turned into textile patterns.

From the start and throughout the company's history, each design would be based on her drawings, paintings and collages, which then became home goods ranging from linens to plates to wallpaper and, eventually, clothing and accessories.

"I do see her as an originator of what we see today as a lifestyle brand," Auther says. "The cross-licensing, she was very successful at."

Indeed the Vera story is told through watercolors and placemats, cocktail napkins and vintage advertisements,

videos and women's fashions, magazine covers and, of course, scarves, her most beloved creation.

"I grew up in a 'Vera home,'" Auther says, noting her connection dates from childhood. "I have always been a fan. I'm happy to call myself a fan of Vera."

And Auther certainly isn't the only one.

The Vera scarves, first launched in 1947 and collectible to this day, became her signature product, thousands of designs all emblazoned with the recognizable logo of a "Vera" signature and a ladybug.

### AN ARTISTIC LIFE

Neumann, who was born in Stamford and would go on to have longstanding personal and professional ties to Westchester County, began drawing and painting from nature at an early age, something that would be a lifetime practice.

"So much of her work is inspired by nature, her direct observations," Auther says.

Neumann would graduate from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art with a fine arts

Clockwise from top left: Vera Neumann, c. 1960s. *Courtesy Museum of Arts and Design*; Vera Neumann, "Occasional Stripes," 1978. Watercolor on paper, 24 x 24 inches. *Courtesy Susan Seid*; Vera Neumann, *Mexican Paisley*, 1971. Watercolor on paper, 24 x 24 inches. *Courtesy Susan Seid*; and Vera Neumann, "Sundown," 1970. Watercolor on paper, 36 x 36 inches. *Courtesy Susan Seid*.



degree in painting in 1928, next enrolling in Manhattan's Traphagen School of Design where she began to contemplate a design career that married the fine and commercial arts. It reflected, we learn, the Bauhaus philosophy of bringing together art, craft and industry.

Auther notes that Neumann was "very comfortable with a business model that combined fine art with commercial art. She really believed fine art should be accessible to everyone."

The Vera success story began with tabletop designs.

"She really saw the table as a canvas," Auther says.

But, she added, "She quickly outgrew the tabletop" category.

Early big orders allowed her to really move ahead, leaving New York City for a move to Ossining that allowed, Auther says, Neumann to "put the studio and printing facility under one roof."

The company at that time, Printex, she says, "was like a major operation" that would eventually grow into Vera Industries.

#### GALLERY STARS

The exhibition delves into the many facets of the Vera story.

Its centerpiece is a salon featuring Neumann's paintings, which follow the East Asian sumi-e technique and from which all her textile designs draw.

"I think she did inject not just bold color but

whimsy. You see that in something as simple as the painting with the strawberries," Auther says, pointing out a specific design.

Other sections explore her design work for the home. The 1970 Vera Neumann for Mikasa poppy plates are particularly striking, as is a section that brings the "Vera folds art napkins" campaign to life with completed examples ranging from rose petals to "fan-fare" to candlestick.

"She was kind of a genius when it came to promotion," Auther says. ("We spent a whole three days figuring out how to fold these napkins," Auther says with a laugh of the lost art).

The 1957 Jollytop, basically two scarves tied together in a vest-like design, began the Vera fashions that are represented here with a handful of dresses and blouses.

"It's hard to find," Auther says of the Vera clothing. "I think it was very well-loved in its day."

No matter the item, the themes are vibrant. There are florals and sunsets, vegetables and travel-inspired motifs such as Japanese dolls or kites.

"She enjoyed travel but for her travel was a source for her designs," Auther says.

"She loved global craft," Auther adds, pointing out the influence of handmade goods such as baskets or moccasins.

For a bit of pop culture, there's even a photograph by Bert Stern from his photo shoot with Marilyn Monroe, "The Last Sitting," in which the

icon – a noted Vera fan – is seen in a Vera scarf (and not much else).

Work traces the Vera production through the 1980s, rounded out by archival photographs and ephemera such as company marketing campaigns which used the "Vera paints" tagline to reinforce the artistic origins of the collections.

Throughout her life, Neumann associated with Modern artists of her time such as Alexander Calder. Architect Marcel Breuer not only designed her Manhattan showroom but also her longtime Croton-on-Hudson home (The restoration of the 1953 Neumann House, completed by current owners Ken Sena and Joseph Mazzaferro, was recognized earlier this year by The Preservation League of New York with an Excellence in Historic Preservation Award. The owners have also loaned materials to the MAD exhibition).

Perhaps the enduring legacy of Neumann just might be her unique vision, as exemplified by the signature Vera scarf.

As Auther says, "She really did encourage you to think of these products as things you can wear – or think of them as works of art."

After touring "Vera Paints a Scarf," it's easy to do both. **WG**

*"Vera Paints a Scarf: The Art and Design of Vera Neumann" continues through Jan. 26 at the Museum of Arts and Design, 2 Columbus Circle in Manhattan. For more, visit [madmuseum.org](http://madmuseum.org).*

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Selbst auf dem Höhepunkt ihrer Karriere wurde Vera Neumann nicht von ihren Fans erkannt. 1978 wollte die Unternehmerin und Künstlerin im „Beverly Wilshire“-Hotel in Los Angeles einchecken. Das Problem: Anstatt für zwei Nächte hatte das Hotel eine Zimmerbuchung von nur einer Nacht registriert. Neumann scherzte mit ihrem Reisebegleiter: „Wissen die nicht, wer ich bin?“ Der nebenstehende Hotelmanager realisierte, mit wem er es zu tun hatte. Er entschuldigte sich sofort und organisierte ihr ein neues Zimmer. „Meine Bettwäsche ist von Ihnen“, sagte er.

Nicht alle kannten die Frau Vera Neumann, doch die Drucke und Muster mit dem „Vera“-Logo konnte fast jeder

berdem ließen sie edleres modernistisches Design etwas zugänglicher und menschlicher aussehen, denn dieses war zwar sehr elegant, aber kaum dekoriert.“

Bei vielen Amerikanern erwecken die Muster und Produkte von Vera Neumann heute ein Gefühl von Nostalgie. Auther, die selbst mit Vera-Designs aufwuchs und sich als Fan bezeichnet, erfuhr bei ihren Recherchen, wie aktiv Liebhaber im Internet „Vintage Vera“ suchen und kaufen. „Ich treffe kaum jemanden, der mir nicht von den Vera-Schals oder Küchentüchern seiner Mutter oder Großmutter erzählt“, sagt sie. Die Schals gehörten zu Neumanns berühmtesten Produkten, ob aus Polyester, Baumwolle, oder Seidenmischgewebe, weshalb sich die Schau im MAD



Die originalen Aquarelle von Vera Neumann gehören heute der Sammlerin und Neumann-Enthusiastin Susan Seid. „Occasional Stripes“ stammt aus dem Jahr 1978

## Vera MALT wieder

Mit leuchtenden Farben und gut gelaunten Mustern belebte die Designerin Vera Neumann amerikanische Haushalte – und gründete eine der ersten Lifestyle-Marken. Erst jetzt ehrt eine umfassende Ausstellung ihr Werk

identifizieren. Zwischen den 40er- und 80er-Jahren gehörten sie zur Standardausstattung eines typischen amerikanischen Haushaltes: Servietten mit Zucchini- und Paprikaprints, Platzdeckchen mit lächelnden Fischen oder Seidentücher mit Blumenmotiven in unzähligen Variationen. Eine kleine, aber unübersehbare Signatur kennzeichnete jedes Stück. „Vera“, geschrieben in schwungvollen schwarzen Pinselstrichen und begleitet von einem zierlichen Marienkäfer. So sah das Logo einer der ersten Lifestylemarken der Welt aus und eines der erfolgreichsten Designunternehmens im Amerika des mittleren 20. Jahrhunderts, das zeitweise 100 Millionen US-Dollar Umsatz im Jahr verzeichnete. Gegründet hatte es Vera Neumann, eine Frau, die nie so berühmt wurde, wie der Erfolg ihrer Marke es vermuten lässt. Ihre Designs gehören zwar zu den Sammlungen der Smithsonian Institution oder des Metropolitan Museum. Doch mit dem Museum of Arts and Design in New York widmet ihr zum ersten Mal ein Museum eine umfassende eigene Ausstellung.

VON SILVIA IHRING

Die war lange überfällig: Viele Experten betrachten Vera Industries, die Firma von Vera Neumann, als Vorläufer von Marken wie Martha Stewart oder Ralph Lauren. Neumann, die 1993 verstarb, war eine Tochter jüdischer Einwanderer und gründete ihr Unternehmen gemeinsam mit ihrem Ehemann George Neumann in New York. 1942 startete das Paar mit Platzdeckchen und Servietten und expandierte im Laufe der Jahre mit Tüchern, Geschirr, Bettwäsche, Tischdecken und Mode. Alles war bedruckt mit bunten, gut gelaunten Motiven und Mustern, die die studierte Künstlerin und Textildesignerin meist mit Aquarellfarben malte und später per Siebdruckverfahren auf das gewünschte Objekt übertrug. „Vor Vera hatte sich niemand auf dem Markt damals an so mutige Farben und launige Prints gewagt“, sagt Elissa Auther, die Kuratorin der Schau. „In einem durchschnittlichen Vorstadthausalt wirkten ihre Entwürfe modern und frisch. Au-

„Vera Paints a Scarf“ nennt. Mehrere bunte Quadrate hat man in den Ausstellungsräumen auf große Glaswände gespannt. Ein roter Schmetterling leuchtet vor grauem Hintergrund, ein geradliniges Geschenkpaket füllt fast das gesamte Tuch, ein anderes Modell wird dominiert von der Wälscheibe eines alten Telefons.

Neumann bediente sich aus einem facettenreichen Repertoire von Motiven, doch einigen Grundsätzen blieb sie immer treu: der Liebe zu Farben und Naturbildern und der Idee, dass Kunst zugänglich und demokratisch sein sollte. Die Ästhetik der Vera Neumann versperrt sich dem Betrachter nicht, sie lädt ihn offen ein, muntert auf, anstatt herauszufordern. „Farben sind so eine wundervolle Art, Emotionen auszudrücken. Bei all den Problemen in unserer Welt brauchen wir ein wenig Farbe im Leben“, sagte Neumann 1978 der „Washington Post“. Vera Industries stand für zugängliches Design in jeglicher Hinsicht. Die Motive waren verständlich und massentauglich, die Preise erschwinglich und die Markenkommunikation freundlich und einladend. Vera-Tücher kosteten zwischen zwei und zehn US-Dollar, während Luxusdesigner wie Geoffrey Beene 25 US-Dollar verlangten. Gleichzeitig nahm das Unternehmen seine Kundin an die Hand, indem es diese mit zahlreichen Informationen und Tipps rund um den Umgang mit Vera-Designs ausstattete. Mehrere dieser Broschüren finden sich auch in der Ausstellung, darunter Anleitungen für unterschiedliche Bindetechniken für die Foulards oder Faltideen für die Servietten. Letzterem hat die Kuratorin eine kleine Installation gewidmet, in der der gefaltete „Kardinalshut“ oder die „Seerose“ ausgestellt sind.

Neumann verdiente viel Geld mit dieser Strategie sowie einem Netzwerk aus Lizenzen, das in dem Ausmaß einzigartig war zu jener Zeit. Doch in erster Linie sah sie sich als Künstlerin. Der Markenlogan „Vera paints ...“ (Vera malt), mit dem neue Kollektionen eingeführt wurden und der ebenfalls den Titel der Ausstellung inspirierte, reflektiert dieses Selbstverständnis. Und warum sollte sich ihre Kunst nicht auf All-



Vera Neumann in ihrem Studio mit einer Brosche von Alexander Calder



Zeitlose Lieblinge: Blumen und Naturmotive. „Meadow Fern“, 1973

tagsgegenstände anwenden? „Die Verbindung aus industrieller Produktion und Kunst war für Neumann entscheidend, um den Menschen qualitativ hochwertige Produkte zu einem erschwinglichen Preis anbieten zu können“, sagt Elissa Auther. Diese Geisteshaltung, die Ästhetik mit Funktion und Industrie vereinen will, teilte sie mit der Bauhaus-Bewegung, die sie inspirierte. Die Neumanns engagierten ihren Freund und Architekten Marcel Breuer für die Gestaltung ihres Hauses in der Kleinstadt Hudson sowie für die des Showrooms in New York.

Anders als Breuer oder andere Zeitgenossen der Designszene wurde Neumann zu ihrer Lebenszeit und auch danach kaum für ihren Einfluss anerkannt. Für den Mangel an Ruhm, glaubt Elissa Auther, seien mehrere Faktoren verantwortlich. „Zum einen ist Textildesign sehr feminin konnotiert und so hat ihr Geschlecht sicherlich dazu beigetragen, dass man ihr keinen Einfluss in der Designgeschichte zugestehen wollte. Doch eigentlich ist es komplizierter.“ Auch der kommerzielle Erfolg, die massenfreundlichen Designs und das demokratische Geschäftsprinzip sorgten dafür, dass Neumann als Künstlerin von vielen Kritikern nicht ernst genommen wurde. Sie selbst schien sich daran nicht zu stören. Nach dem Tod ihres Mannes und Geschäftspartners im Jahre 1962 arbeitete die Mutter zweier Kinder weiter, entgegen aller Erwartungen von Beobachtern, die mit einem Verkauf der Firma rechneten. Mit 70 Jahren malte sie jeden Tag in ihrem Studio in Hudson, fuhr eine schwarze Corvette, kaufte Kleider von Halston und pflegte ihre Reiseleidenschaft, die zahlreiche Kollektionen inspirierte. Als weibliche Unternehmerin und alleinige Besitzerin ihrer Firma hatte sie die Kontrolle über jeden Bereich ihres Unternehmens. Und trotz der großen Verantwortung, den Spaß an der Kreativität verlor sie nie. „Der kreative Teil des Geschäfts ist wie ein Brunnen“, sagte sie der „Washington Post“. „Es fließt und fließt und fließt.“

■ „Vera Paints a Scarf“ läuft bis zum 26. Januar 2020 im „Museum of Arts and Design“ in New York

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## VIEW

**Vera Paints a Scarf: The Art and Design of Vera Neumann, Museum of Arts and Design, New York, until 26 January 2020**  
[www.madmuseum.org](http://www.madmuseum.org)

*Vera Paints a Scarf* is a colourful exploration of the life of Vera Neumann, a pioneering textile designer whose remarkable career bridged design and art with commerce in the mid-twentieth century. The exhibition traces her success story, showing how she crafted the signature style which would enrapture the public for more than three decades.

Neumann (née Salaff) was born in 1907 in the United States, in Stamford, CT, to parents of Russian Jewish origins. Raised in a creative environment, she showed an artistic dispositions at a young age. In her early twenties Neumann moved to New York and enrolled in Fine Arts at The Cooper Union to study for the Advancement of Science and Art. She graduated in 1928 and pursued her studies at Traphagen School of Design.

In 1936 she married George Neumann, an Austrian immigrant coming from a family of textile manufacturers. In the early 1940s, the couple teamed up and started working out of their New York studio apartment. They produced in-house printed placemats and napkins with each design stemming from one of Neumann's artworks. These first series of samples brought the attention of the department store B. Altman in Manhattan. The

Neumanns found a partner in their friend Frederick Werner Hamm, a German immigrant with textile expertise. They founded Printex in 1943 in New York and manufactured their own textiles. In 1947, Neumann signed her first screen-printed scarf. Linen shortages in the aftermath of World War II caused her to look for alternative materials and use silk from parachute surplus. And by 1948, the company was so successful that it was relocated in Ossining, in upstate New York on the Hudson river.

In 1962, Neumann's husband unexpectedly passed away and she was left with the responsibility to raise her two children and continue running her business. As one of her publicists once said, Vera Neumann 'could not decide whether to be a wife, a mother, an artist, a business entrepreneur, or a world traveller. So she was all of these.' She eventually sold Printex to Manhattan Industries in 1967 and remained at the board with Werner Hamm, also keeping her position as creative director. Printex closed in 1988 and Neumann sold her licensing line to Salant Corporation in 1988. She continued working as head designer until her death in 1993.

To showcase Neumann's prolific nature, the exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) has relied on a wealth of objects and sources, including textiles from her lines for the home and women's fashion produced

between 1950 and 1980, original drawings and watercolours, along with magazine spreads, ad campaigns, personal photographs, and promotional film archives. The designer was a tastemaker whose products appealed to a large feminine audience. Her 'Vera scarves' quickly became best sellers in the late 1950s, worn by celebrities and immortalised on a sensual Marilyn Monroe for Vogue Magazine in 1962, the photograph of which is on view.

Neumann's success is also the story of the industrialisation of the textile and clothing industry in the United States. She believed in the democratisation of good design and expanded her lines to women's fashion and home textiles, working with Schumacher & Co to produce fabrics for upholstery and developing licensing contracts for sportswear with Perry Ellis.

By inviting her customers to experience the 'Vera' way of life, her designs adorned with her trademark ladybug doodle brought refreshing motifs and bold accents to simple kitchen tables. The brand accompanied women in their daily lives, even providing illustrated how-to guides on the many ways to tie a scarf or fold decorative napkins, which are playfully displayed in the show.

At heart, Neumann remained an artist. With her husband, they were established as modernist designers close to the Bauhaus ethos. Her friendships with architect Marcel

## VIEW

Breuer, who designed her Manhattan showroom, and sculptor Alexander Calder deeply influenced her work. She produced about 8,000 original designs throughout her career. Her favourite ink-wash technique was inspired by the Japanese method of sumi-e which allowed her to dissolve hues in water and create infinite gradations of shades.

With a formidable eye for colour, she played with a rich repertoire of botanical motifs inspired by ferns, blooming florals and foliage, but also pushed towards more abstract compositions. She challenged silk scarves' squared format with references to op-art, folkloric imagery, also paying homage to figures of art history such as Henri Matisse in the design 'Vera paints African violets'. She also loved to travel and her cosmopolitan lifestyle brought her to East Asia in 1965, Denmark in 1968, and Iran in 1969, each travel becoming a special collection of textiles.

What strikes the most while walking through the galleries of 'Vera Paints a Scarf' is the timeless quality of her work. In the present, her vibrant designs continue to draw in an enduring following seduced by her unique vision of a certain American zest for life. ••• **Magali An Berthon**

**Right; Meadow Fern, c. 1973. Watercolour on paper, 75 x 75cm.**  
**Following Page Left; Occasional Stripes, 1978. Watercolour on paper, 60 x 60cm**



## VIEW



**Tim Walker: Wonderful Things V&A Museum, London, until 8 March 2020**  
[www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)

Anyone who has picked up a copy of Vogue in the past 20 years will be familiar with the magical photographs of Tim Walker. With just a glance, one can dive into his world of fantastical make-believe dance with a giant skeleton, ride a powder-blue pony, or, simply marvel at the beauty of his composition. With the help of set designer Shona Heath and curator Susanna Brown, the world of these images has been brought to life in the V&A's immersive exhibition.

Walker compared the experience of spending months exploring the V&A's collections to the moment Howard Carter, the British Archaeologist, broke into the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1922. After a long period of silence, Lord Carnarvon asked Carter if he could see anything, and all he could muster was simply, 'Yes! Wonderful things!'. The 'wonderful things' that Walker selected range from an 18th century snuff box to a Mughal watercolour, and they are displayed alongside the images and films that he created in response. Throughout the exhibition, visitors are accompanied by his voice, elucidating the creative process and sharing his child-like and infectious awe for the objects.

Born in 1970, Walker's interest in photography began while working in the Condé Nast library, cataloguing the Cecil Beaton archive. After completing a BA in photography, he moved to New York to work as Richard Avedon's assistant.

© Tim Walker Studio © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

# Lilith

INDEPENDENT, JEWISH & FRANKLY FEMINIST

by Yona Zeldis McDonough

## "Vera Paints a Scarf"- Honoring the Life and Designs of Vera Neumann

For Proust, a tea-soaked madeleine was the portal to memory, but for me it was the show "Vera Paints a Scarf" at Manhattan's Museum of Art and Design. The show celebrates not only the scarves but also the tableware, clothing, posters, stationery, and paintings created by the eponymous designer. Back then, I didn't even think to associate the name, scrawled in loose, jaunty script, with an actual person. It seemed like the name of a product, only slightly more resonant than Kleenex or Mattel, though I did like the little ladybug (more on that later) that was part of the logo.

Instead, I was captivated by the bright colors, the breezy, slightly insouciant style, the sheer joy of the designs, which were easy mix of natural elements like trees, flowers—lots of flowers—birds, insects (that ladybug again) fruits, and vegetables, along with more abstract patterns, some sinuous and lyrical like her paisleys, others more geometric or linear. Of the ladybug she said that it "means good luck in every language." Both her palette and her aesthetic felt fresh and distinctly modern, the shifts and tunics designed for girls like me, or maybe the girl I aspired to be—think 1960s model Twiggy in one of those little dresses and a pair of go-go boots and you get the idea.

I don't know how or when I lost track of Vera, though I do recall occasionally encountering the scarves in my perpetual second-hand-shmatte hunt, when such a discovery would be accompanied by a whiff of nostalgia and even melancholy. So walking into the show at MAD was a thrill that brought it all rushing back—color, the whimsy, the echo of the girl I was when I first discovered her.



### MAD Museum

But as I reconnected with the patterns and designs I had loved so much, I also learned so much about Vera the person, not just Vera the brand. She was an artist, an entrepreneur, a tastemaker and a branding/marketing genius at a moment when the expectations of most women never veered far from marriage, children and home. Vera wasn't just ahead of her time; in a sense, she was the creator of a new time, one that ushered in such like-minded giants as Martha Stewart and Tory Burch.

Vera was born in Stamford, CT in 1907, the third of Fanny and Meyer Salaff's four children, and she was named for the author of the book her mother was reading while pregnant with her—Vera Bashkirtseff. The Salaffs were Russian Jewish immigrants, and uncommonly supportive of their children's creativity. Little Vera spent a lot of time outside, fascinated by nature, and also by rendering it. Her father gave her 50 cents for each sketchbook she could fill with her doodles. He also hired a sign painter to give her art classes and took her to the Metropolitan Museum of Art every Sunday. After graduating from high

school, she attended The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art and enrolled in classes at the Traphagen School of Design after graduation. Her first job was as a fashion illustrator and then a textile designer on Seventh Avenue in New York. Shortly afterwards, she left to design fabric and murals for children's rooms.

Vera met and married Austrian George Neumann, who was from a family whose background was in textiles. The couple moved into a small studio, where they decided to merge their professional lives by forming a company called Printex. They built a small silkscreen printing press to fit on their dining room table—which was only large enough for them to produce linen placemats, which were then cured in their kitchen oven.

The Neumanns were soon joined by their friend Frederick Werner Hamm, a recent German immigrant, and another textile maven. Hamm used his sales skills to secure their first order from the late (and sorely-missed B. Altman department store). When the company outgrew the small apartment they moved into a larger one. When they outgrew that, they decamped to Ossining, NY, where they took possession of a large—and derelict—1810 Georgian mansion near the Hudson River.



MAD Museum

During World War II, Vera found linen supplies hard to get, so she went in search of alternatives. The discovery of several bolts of parachute silk at an army surplus store led to an aha moment, and the beginning of her scarf business. She kept her signature on art transferred to the scarves, thus creating the first signature scarf in history. "Vera scarves" became popular immediately. Marilyn Monroe was a fan (and MM holds a Vera scarf over her breasts in one of the famous images from Bert Stern's series "The Last Sitting"). So were Grace Kelly and first lady Bess Truman, who selected Vera fabric from Schumacher, Inc., to decorate the third-floor solarium windows and upholstery of the White House.

Vera liked to say that much of her success was due to luck, and to having been at the right place at right time. She could have also mentioned that the men in her life were uncommonly supportive, starting with her father, who nurtured her artistic longings, and her husband, who saw her as an equal and a partner.

In 1962, George Neumann died suddenly of a heart attack. Yet Vera's business remained robust. By 1966, her scarves could be found in 10,000 stores in North America alone. Annual sales totaled \$12 million. In 1967, Vera and Werner Hamm, who had remained on board, sold the company to Manhattan Industries. Both Vera and Hamm became board members, and Vera stayed on as creative director. The company expanded into sportswear, as well as luggage.



#### MAD Museum

Artistic acclaim soon followed. Emile Walter Galleries launched an exhibition in 1970. It included around 50 original paintings and drew art collectors from around the country; the first buyer was John Lennon. The Smithsonian inducted Vera into its Resident Associate Program in October 1972 as their first artist and commissioned her to paint the Foucault Pendulum, which still hangs in their offices today. The Institute launched "A Salute to Vera: the Renaissance Woman" at the Museum of History and Technology. In 1975 the Fashion Institute of Technology's Museum launched a retrospective, "Vera: The Artist in Industry 1945-1975" and the Goldie Paley Design Center at the Philadelphia College of Textiles and Science opened a retrospective of their own in 1980 entitled "Celebrate the Seasons of the Sun With Vera."

Vera remained in Ossining for the rest of her life, and died in 1993, at the age of 84. Attention to her work continued in the form of "Vera Paints a Rainbow," a show installed at the Alexander Gray Associates in 2015.

The current show at MAD makes apparent Vera's uncanny ability to fuse art with commerce. She was a working artist, continuing to seek inspiration in new places, yet she clearly wanted her creations to have a practical application in the lives of women. And strolling through these galleries, soaking up the undimmed light of her output, it's clear just how brilliantly she succeeded.

## HYPERALLERGIC

ART

### Vera Neumann, the Artist Who Transformed Her Paintings Into Wearable Objects

“I’m an artist who prefers to paint things for people rather than for walls,” Neumann explained in 1971.

Julie Schneider January 8, 2020



Installation view of *Vera Paints a Scarf: The Art and Design of Vera Neumann* at the Museum of Arts and Design, New York (August 8, 2019–January 26, 2020) (photo by Jenna Bascom, all images courtesy of the Museum of Arts and Design)

It all started with a simple square of fabric. In 1942, Vera Neumann and her husband, George Neumann, set up a silkscreen on the kitchen table of their Manhattan studio apartment and started printing napkins and placemats based on Vera’s original artwork, complete with her signature on the bottom-right corner. What began as a small home-based operation soon flourished into a booming business — with three showrooms in Manhattan and a 24/7 production space on the shores of the Hudson River in Ossining, New York — and one of the most beloved labels of the 20th century. Vera Neumann’s lively,

color-saturated designs became ubiquitous in the homes and wardrobes of the masses across the United States and abroad.

“I’m an artist who prefers to paint things for people rather than for walls,” Neumann explained in a 1971 marketing brochure. “So I turn my paintings into things people wear or use. Scarves, blouses, sportswear, fashions for the home.” Growing up in an art-filled environment, Neumann earned a degree in fine art at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, followed by studies at Traphagen School of Design in New York City, where her eyes opened to the possibilities of combining fine and commercial arts. She believed that everyone deserves access to good art and design, not just the wealthy. Her cheerful, inventive prints and patterns elevated everyday objects into art, bursting with vivid hues and motifs inspired by nature and her extensive global travels.



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The Museum of Art and Design's exhibition *Vera Paints a Scarf* examines the breadth and impact of Neumann's career, featuring more than 200

objects, including paintings, scarves, dishes, table linens, press clippings, videos, and marketing ephemera. Though a trailblazer in many ways — as an originator of the American lifestyle brand, an innovator of cross-licensing, and a marketing whiz — one signature product has become synonymous with Neumann's legacy: scarves. And, it's a selection of these modern swathes of fabric that pulse at the heart of the show, showing off Neumann's playful palette and inventive brushwork with bright florals, abstract patterns, and novelty prints. To pay homage, I wore a vintage Vera Neumann scarf from my small collection: a cotton navy-blue number edged with bright stripes. I spotted the same scarf in a slightly different color scheme, called *Rainbow Stripe* (1977), hanging in the show. As I picked up a reprint of a 1968 pamphlet titled *14 Ways to Tie a Scarf That's a Painting That's Actually a Scarf* to take home as a souvenir, another woman wearing a mod scarf made eye contact with me. We exchanged a knowing nod; we were members of an unofficial vintage Vera Neumann fan club.



Vera painting in her office (c. 1970)

After World War II, fabric shortages led Neumann to experiment with surplus army silk parachute fabric, from which she made her early scarf collections. As wartime technological innovations spread to the textile industry, her scarves were produced in the newest materials of the day, including polyester, acetate, nylon, and rayon-silk blends. "I spent half my life painting scarves," Neumann said. Each one bore her signature and, often, her iconic vermilion ladybug. By 1972, Vera scarves sold in more than

20,000 stores worldwide. Even as the company grew, Neumann remained closely involved in the production process, creating the art and approving every final design — all while ensuring the prices stayed accessible. (At a time when other designers sold scarves for \$25, a Neumann scarf cost \$2–\$10; even today, vintage Vera Neumann can be found on sites like Poshmark and Etsy with reasonable price tags.)

Taken together in this show, Neumann's collection and vision to make functional, wearable art readily available to everyone, comes full circle. Her scarves bearing reproductions of her original artwork hang in an art museum, once again blurring cultural distinctions between art, design, and practical everyday objects. The joyful color splashed across the gallery walls is pure sunshine. In the same way that reading a good book can spark the desire to grab a pencil and start scrawling, this show had me ready to run home grasp a paintbrush in each hand, just as Neumann herself does in a photograph, and paint a more colorful world.



Vera Neumann, "Cats and Dogs" (1963), watercolor on paper, 30 x 30 inches (courtesy Susan Seid, photo by Steven Meckler)



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[Vera Paints a Scarf](#) continues at the Museum of Art and Design (2 Columbus Circle, Manhattan) through January 26.



Vera Neumann, "Sundown" (1970), watercolor on paper, 36 x 36 inches (courtesy Susan Seid)

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