Trip to Africa Is Inspiration For Designer

By RITA REIF

"**I**S there a Vera?" This question, which has been asked frequently in the table linen, scarf and blouse departments of department stores, was answered in the affirmative the other morning as Vera Neumann offered visitors a mid-morning cup of coffee in her 1810 studio at Ossining.

The tiny, vivacious designer behind the Vera signature and ladybug trade-mark forgot her accustomed shyness of the public long enough to report on a recent trip she and her husband, George, made to Morocco. Mr. Neumann functions not only as president of the four "Vera" corporations (one each for linens, scarves, blouses and printing) but also is his wife's official photographer on their travels.

African Crafts Inspiring

The Neumanns exhibited Arab mantels, primitive wooden locks and crude tableware bought on their African trip, explaining that by fall these would be translated into textile designs, which in turn will become table linens and scarves. Supplementing the souvenirs, Vera said, are hundreds of pictures that Mr. Neumann took of architectural details, plant life, crafts and utensils.

The post-Revolutionary War building where Vera works also is the printing factory, Mr. Neumann explained. When the Neumanns bought the site in 1948, they turned a portion of it into living quarters since it cost "200 times more than we could afford," Mr. Neumann said.

In direct contrast is the Neumanns' present-day home a few miles from the factory. The low stone and glass "box" was designed by Marcel Breuer and an adjoining smaller building will, in a few years, serve as their youngsters' "house." At present the children, aged 7 and 9, have bedrooms in the main house and use the annex as a large playroom.

Vera, who studied design with Ethel Traphagen in the Nineteen Thirties, started her career in a Seventh Avenue textile house. Shortly afterward she left the garment center for a job creating fabrics and murals for children's rooms. After she met and married George, who came to New York from Austria in the late Thirties, they decided to try their own business.

First Design Successful

In 1942 the pair found a studio on Twentieth Street and at the insistence of the landlady, who claimed that Henry Luce and other notables had started on their road to fame there, they rented it. The studio's charms continued to work for the Neumanns. Vera's first table mat design, executed on a kitchen table, was sold to a major department store.

Unfortunately the order for 1,500 mats proved to be "pie in the sky," Mr. Neumann said, "because we couldn't fill it. To meet the agreement we needed $500 in materials and we just didn't have it."

By 1943, despite the war-time shortages in textiles, Vera had sold her first drapery design to Schumacher. Then came a major move to West Fifty-seventh Street, where the Neumanns opened a large factory. After the ware they expanded further. In 1947 Vera sold her first scarf design to Lord & Taylor and her fame was assured. The scarves, printed with leaves and flowers, were monochromatic creations. At that time scarves were brightly colored affairs, Vera recalls, that any chic woman found too "arty."

Scarves, blouses and table linens followed as the business grew and grew. The concern today employs 200 persons. The Ossining factory often works around the clock and, says Vera, "we expect this year will be no exception."

The designer's expectation is based on the fact that her strawberry, jonquil, orange, grape and corn linen designs in Lord & Taylor and other stores across the country keep women asking, "Is there a Vera?"

WOMAN BEHIND THE SIGNATURE: Vera, designer of table linens, scarves and blouses, is shown in her studio. In private life she is Mrs. George Neumann.