Signed by Vera: Goldstein exhibit showcases scarves

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After digging through over 500 scarves, Natasha Thoreson finally picked about 100 for display at the Goldstein Museum of Design.

The summer exhibit, called "Signed by Vera," is a collection of printed scarves from post-war designer Vera Neumann, who is known for her colorful patterns.

"For our summer shows we usually want to do something fun," said Thoreson, a Goldstein collection assistant who curated the exhibit. "We got a large donation of Vera Neumann scarves in 2010, and they haven't been seen yet, so I thought this would be a great opportunity to put them on display."

The show is organized into themes including travel, illustrations, painterly and geometric designs. The back wall of the exhibit will present scarves inspired by nature in a "salon-style" display, in which the 32 scarves will be hung on the wall from floor to ceiling.

There will also be a section detailing Neumann's influence on fashion that will show photos from magazines and a section titled "Legacy" that will showcase reproductions from her archives, mostly consisting of scarves with butterfly prints -- one of her signatures.

Vera Neumann began her business in 1946 in her Manhattan studio apartment's kitchen. Because of World War II shortages, she couldn't get cottons or linens, so her first scarves were handmade from silk parachutes.

"Legend has it she produced over 20,000 scarf designs over her career," Thoreson said. "All of her scarves began as paintings. She would create watercolor on canvas, and then, through a silk screen process, transfer the designs to the scarf."

Because competitors quickly copied Neumann's designs, she decided to trademark her signature and copyright her paintings. The designs would then be mass-produced on silk scarves, often in different colors.

At the time, silk scarves were being printed with up to 25 colors, but Neumann wanted women to be able to wear scarves with many outfits, so she decided to keep her scarves simple, usually using just three colors.

"It's all about the colors. When you're digging through a bin of scarves at Ragstock, her scarves jump out at you," said Mark Schultz, a Goldstein volunteer who donated about a dozen Vera Neumann scarves and napkins to the museum. "Although her designs have a very clear mid-century look, they have a timeless appeal."

Vera Neumann scarves were sold in department stores for \$2 to \$15 and quickly became popular with middle-class Americans and celebrities alike. Even Marilyn Monroe had a collection of Vera Neumann scarves. In 1972, the company's sales reached \$100 million.

Mid-century art collectors quickly developed interest in Neumann's designs because of their versatility.

"She was such a chameleon. She did op art, pop art and even psychedelic stuff," Thoreson said. "She participated in all of the trends, but she also had her own aesthetic. I think that's why so many people like her stuff and why so many collectors want her work."

What: Signed by Vera: Scarves by an iconic designer When: May 17-June 29 Where: Goldstein Museum of Design, Gallery 241, 1985 Buford Ave., St. Paul Cost: Free