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# COUNTRY LIVING™

Very vera!: After languishing in attics and thrift shops for 20 years, colorful vera housewares are ripe for rediscovery.

Marie Proeller Hueston. **Country Living** 26.4 (Apr 2003): 62,64,66.

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If you were to travel back in time and tell the late-1800s homemaker that her yellowware mixing bowl or the wall calendar she received free at the general store would one day be worth hundreds of dollars to a collector, she'd probably think you'd lost hold of your senses. Homemakers of the 1960s and '70s might express the same sentiment, having just turned the page to find Vera housewares featured in a magazine. Forty years ago, it was the rare American kitchen that lacked at least one item—tablecloth, cereal bowl, pot holder, apron—bearing the designer's bold, first-name-only signature and ladybug logo. Most kitchens, by contrast, harbored numerous examples of the eye-catching, inexpensive wares. When objects are as commonplace as these once were, it can be difficult to envision their future desirability. After a few decades of reflection, however, subtleties in construction and design often come to light.

"Vera designs have become extremely popular with young professionals and couples moving into their first homes," reports > Alice Lindholm, co-owner of Right to the Moon Alice, a source for vintage clothing and textiles based in Cooks Falls, N.Y. "These buyers tend to reach into the recent past to find furnishings that are attractive and affordable. Vera housewares succeed on both counts."

What would one day become the vast Vera empire began humbly in the years immediately following the second World War: In the New York City apartment the designer shared with her husband and business partner, George Neumann, Vera, who had studied art and design at New York City's Cooper Union, transformed her kitchen table into a workstation where she silk-screened botanical motifs onto linen place mats. A third partner in the budding enterprise, F. Werner Hamm, hand delivered these early creations to the Fifth Avenue department store B. Altman. "I showed them to the buyer," Hamm recalled in 1972, during a presentation for "Vera: The Renaissance Woman," an exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C. "He liked the new and fresh designs. In fact, he liked them so much the order almost floored us. How could we possibly deliver?"

But deliver the entrepreneurs did, and within a decade, Vera Neumann was well on her way to becoming a household name. Americans had never seen prints like these on their tables, and they couldn't get enough of them. "There was a lot of plain white in table designs when I started," Vera Neumann told a New York Daily News reporter in 1979. "I felt we would be successful because the field was not crowded." Responding to the strong public demand, the designer's offerings quickly expanded to include tablecloths, napkins, and all manner of home accessories. Her own firm, the Vera Companies, produced linens, scarves, and sportswear, while licensing agreements allowed her to develop dinnerware for Mikasa and Island Worcester, fabric and wallpaper for Schumacher, and sheets for Burlington Industries.

To create her distinctive designs, Neumann found inspiration all around her. Flowers were a favorite theme, and her studio in the Hudson River Valley home she and her husband built in the 1950s overlooked a garden filled with blooms. Traveling was another passion. Windmills on the Spanish island of Ibiza, mosaic-tile sidewalks in Rio de Janeiro, modern sculpture in Finland, and calligraphy in China all sparked the designer's imagination.

Although the Vera Companies continued production through the early 1990s, with Neumann herself contributing designs until only months before her death (in 1993 at age 85), public appreciation began to wane in the 1980s. Vera housewares were packed away by the boxful in attics or donated to thrift shops, where they have languished for the past two decades. But today, savvy collectors are excavating these long-forgotten treasures. While thrift shops and yard sales remain the best hunting grounds for bargains, stores specializing in mid-20th-century design often offer the widest selection of patterns.

Of all the Vera designs on the market, textiles appear with the greatest frequency. Tablecloths range in price from about \$10 to \$35 depending on size and condition. Single napkins fetch a few dollars apiece, while matching sets of four, six, or eight can command \$10 to \$35. Aprons, pot holders, and dish towels sell for \$3 to \$15. China and glassware are less common—and therefore more expensive—than textiles, perhaps because of the fragile nature of the objects. Expect to pay about \$5 to \$12 apiece for single plates, cups, or bowls, while complete sets with matching serving pieces start at about \$75 to \$100 and rise steadily from there.

One of the best things about collecting vintage Vera is the seemingly limitless array of patterns there are to choose from—when asked by the Daily News reporter to estimate the total designs in her lifetime, Neumann simply gasped and rolled her eyes. But like the designer herself, collectors have revealed a soft spot for flowers. "Subdued color schemes and geometric prints have their fans," Alice Lindholm observes, "but it's the bright florals that seem to say 'dinner on the terrace' that get the most attention."