
Scarves as artwork return; Designs By Vera; Archives opened to revive every woman's favourite accessory

Burshtein, Karen. **National Post** [Don Mills, Ont] 08 Mar 2008: WP.8.

Even as fashion editors shovel the last heaps of dirt atop the It Bag, they look for the new hot accessory. All signs point to the scarf, worn often of late by the usually accessories-lite Paris Vogue editor, Carine Roitfeld.

Scarf lovers are greeting the revival of the Vera line with glee. It began with New Yorker Vera Neumann in 1947 and became a mid-century success story. The scarves were beloved for their whimsical designs and bold graphics. Neumann was foremost an artist, and her scarves display her deft, if disciplined, sense of colour. She was ahead of her time in gutsy colour mixes, putting lime greens, chocolates and purples together, for instance. The painterly scarves became a highly collectible accessory, and almost as many people framed them and hung them on their walls as tied them around their necks.

Neumann's singular career was launched when her husband, George Neumann -- he became her business partner along with F. Werner Hamm -- encouraged her to paint on linen squares. They sold the printed fabrics as placemats to the B. Altman department store. Because surplus U.S. army parachute silk could be bought inexpensively, printed scarves became the company's next step and its DNA.

In their heyday, Vera scarves were sold at 12,000 stores around the world, though they were mostly an American phenomenon. Marilyn Monroe, a fan of the line, was photographed naked but for some sheer Vera scarves.

The company changed hands several times over the decades. After several management miscues, and Vera's death in 1993, her archives of thousands of designs ended up in a storage facility outside of Atlanta. Vera scarves disappeared from view, though they continued to be sought out by young thrift-shop know-it-alls.

Which is why Vera Era fans got giddy when they spotted the colourful scarves at a stand at the Coterie accessories trade show in New York in 2006, the year after Susan Seid, an Atlanta-based fashion and marketing veteran and avid Vera collector, bought the Vera archives.

Maureen Sirois of the Accessories by Eva shop in Toronto, who was at Coterie and is carrying the revamped line, remembers her grandmother buying scarves directly from Neumann. "They're so joyful," she says. "It's good design that lasts. There's the idea of stepping backwards and looking at what was beautiful then, and how timeless the design really is."

The archives had been the property of the Atlanta-based Tog Shop catalogue when they were discovered by Seid, who was working for the company. She describes stepping into the warehouse with the archives of colourful scarves and prints "like the Wizard of Oz, when it turns from black and white to colour."

Now the owner of 7,000 Vera designs, all of which Neumann prudently copyrighted with the Library of Congress, she plans to rebuild the line, now called the Vera Co., through licensing. "You have with Vera the basis of a lifestyle brand," she says. (The newly revamped Vera Co. got a boost of publicity, 21st-century style, when designer Vera Wang sued over use of the name. The suit has been settled.)

Seid wants to see Vera prints on cards in museum gift shops and on bed and household linens, and doesn't rule out a collaboration with **Target**, a partnership of which we can assume Vera would have approved.

Vera Neumann changed the concept of how brands were extended. She was ahead of the pack in copyrighting, trademarking and licensing. She put her designs on sheets, plates, fabric, tablecloths, wallpaper and clothes. The height of sophisticated suburban hostess chic in the '60s was wearing a Vera shirt in the same print as your Vera placemats.

In 1972, the Smithsonian Institution recognized her as an artist with a forward-looking corporate sense, in a retrospective called "Vera: The Renaissance Woman."

"She definitely knew how to work her art," says Deborah Seguin, a partner in the Edward Carriere lifestyle store in Winnipeg that carries the revived line.

Neumann's design inspirations were wide-ranging. Everything from pine needles to bold florals, from the Bauhaus to folk art, and her world travels found their way into motifs. Ladybugs were a favourite, and would eventually become her trademark logo along with the flourish that was her signature.

Seid said she will tweak the reissued Vera scarves, by shifting colorations slightly, say, or possibly incorporating two or three designs in one scarf. She is also marketing the scarves in theme groups, such as Painterly or Bohemian. They will have the same luxury-for-the-masses price points as the originals: The hand-rolled silk scarves start at about \$100, the silk and cashmere versions at about \$200.

"They are not uptown like Hermes scarves," Sirois says, "but a scarf equivalent to very good costume jewellery." - In Canada, Vera Scarves Spring line is available at Accessories by Eva in Toronto (402 Eglinton Ave. W., 416-481-0892); at Billie in Montreal (141 av. Laurier O., 514-270-5415) and at Edward Carriere in Winnipeg (162 Spence St., 204-987-6441).

Credit: National Post

Illustration

Black & White Photo: Courtesy Of Vera Company / Her sources of inspiration were wide-ranging, and Vera Neumann put her designs on sheets, fabric, tablecloths, wallpaper and clothes. ;; Caption: