

BRIGHT AND BOLD

THE INNOVATIVE DESIGNS OF

VERA NEUMANN

BY JEANETTE MICHALETS

VERA. THE NAME IS SYNONYMOUS with color, fashion and style. In the 1960s and '70s, Vera Neumann's designs blossomed like spring flowers. Her trademark signature appeared on scarves, dresses, blouses, and sleepwear, as well as on textiles such as table linens, bed sheets, and tea towels. Best known for her bold geometrics and abstract florals, Vera was the ordinary woman's *Pucci*.

Born Vera Salaff in Stamford, Connecticut in 1909, the artist and designer was known simply as "Vera," and the name that graced most of her designs. A graduate of Cooper Union Art School in New York, she was a petite blond dynamo who loved to paint watercolors and then transfer her designs onto fabric. She and her husband, George, started a small business silk-screening place mats in the kitchen of their New York

Rectangular tablecloth with bold yellow, red, and blue flowers, \$40-\$50.





apartment in the mid-1940s and went on to build a fashion empire.

When one mentions Vera, people generally think first of her scarf designs. It is true that the Vera companies produced thousands of scarf designs, most of which bear her famous signature. In the early designs, which date as far back as the late 1940s, the signature is small. In later creations dating from the 1960s and '70s, the script is much larger. Vera's signature is found in one corner of the scarf and is generally followed by a copyright symbol, and often, by a cute little ladybug in a color that coordinates with the design. It is commonly believed that the ladybug symbol appeared on Vera's work from the mid-1950s into the 1960s, but some sources

state that the ladybug was in existence until the 1980s. Vera chose the ladybug as her trademark because it meant "happiness" in all languages. As captivating as the ladybugs are, not all of her scarves have them. In fact, more scarves appear without them than with them, although the ladybug also shows up on other textiles such as napkins and tea towels.

COLOR AND DESIGN

Vera loved color and this love is reflected in her textiles. She was quoted as saying, "Color sings to me. Color is such a marvelous way of expressing emotion. We have so many problems in this world, color just brings a little bit of joy into our lives."

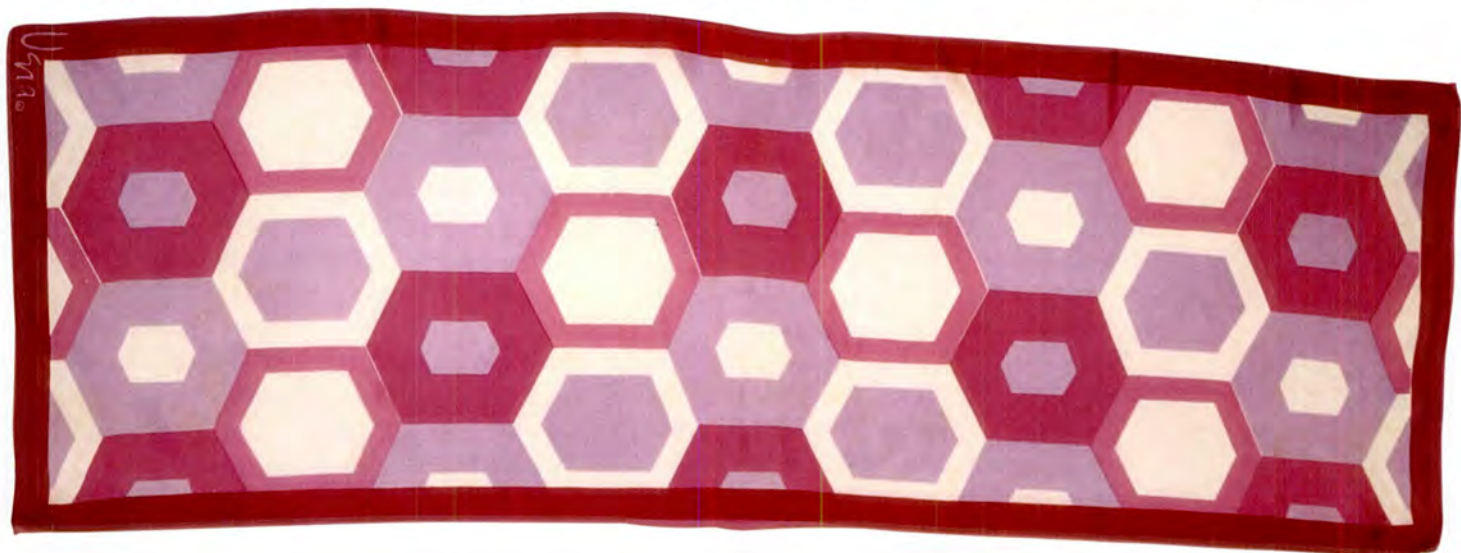
She was particularly fond of yellow and



ABOVE, left: Large yellow roses on blue ground. 100% acetate. Made in Japan, \$26-\$30.

ABOVE, right: This cheery napkin shows Vera's love of daffodils and other flowers. Cotton, \$5-\$7.

BELOW: Scarf with pink, lavender and white hexagons, \$20-\$24.





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orange and many of her scarves and table linens, bed sheets and blouses, reflected her cheery nature. When asked about her sunny hues, she responded:

“I’m a Leo, a sun person. I’ve had a sun in every collection.” Indeed, the sun, or geometric elements that suggest the sun, figure quite prominently in Vera’s designs. In addition to her use of bright, cheery colors, Vera is hailed for her bold geometric patterns, and for her splashy florals. She utilized bold stripes, wavy lines, sunbursts and circles. When it came to flowers, she favored poppies, daisies, daffodils, tulips and sunflowers. She often painted roses, too, in such offbeat colors as blue or black. Vera also loved nature in all forms. She painted trees, leaves, ferns, fruits, nuts and berries and then transferred them to her textiles. She also incorporated birds, butterflies and insects into her work.

FABRICS

The first textiles Vera designed for sale in the mid-1940s were silk-screened linen place mats. She created these early textiles

on a tabletop and *B. Altman & Co.* sold the place mats in New York. This initial sale generated an order for 1,500 more place mats, but Vera and her husband were unable to fill it. As young entrepreneurs, the couple did not have the \$500 in materials needed to fill the order. This did not stop them from expanding their business shortly thereafter.

After World War II, they purchased surplus U. S. military parachute silk and Vera set about screening her designs onto it, creating lovely headscarves. Her first design, a monochromatic print of leaves and flowers, was purchased by *Lord & Taylor* department store in 1947.

While some of the loveliest and most desirable scarves are those printed on silk, the companies also manufactured scarves made from acetate, polyester, cotton, and vinal, as well as rayon-silk blends. Her garments were manufactured in cotton, silk, polyester and rayon. Most kitchen and bedroom textiles were made from cotton or cotton linen.

Early on, her scarves were manufactured



ABOVE, left: Scarf with geometric design of circles and stripes. Rayon and silk. Made in Japan, \$23-\$27.

ABOVE, right: Three little “people” peep out from among similar shapes. Rayon and silk, \$33-\$37.



in the United States, and it wasn't long before they were produced in Japan and China as well. A few of her scarves have tags that state they were made in Italy.

INTERNATIONAL FLAIR

Not only were Vera's scarves and garments manufactured in other parts of the world, many of the designs themselves have an international flavor. Vera loved to travel, and she would return home from her trips with inspiration for new lines. Her travels to Africa, China, Japan and Europe are all reflected in her work. In the 1960s, she returned from Ireland with a line of clothing featuring shamrocks and cobblestones. Other designs reflected American Indian or African motifs. Some of her work had a decidedly Asian feel. For example, a scarf with a blue and white cloud motif also features a "chop," or Chinese characters that spell out the name, "Vera," translated as, "truth and honesty" in the Chinese language.

A WIDE RANGE OF TEXTILES

In addition to designing headscarves in a variety of sizes and materials, Vera is also known for her kitchen textiles, her line of bed and bath linens for *Burlington Co.*, and for her stunning table linens. Many of her tablecloths, which were made in round, oval, and rectangular shapes, came

with coordinating cotton or linen napkins, in sets of eight or twelve. A complete set, consisting of a tablecloth and napkins, is highly prized among collectors, with the bright, bold designs being generally more desirable than others. Collectors seem to seek out items with her abstract floral and geometric patterns more so than her earlier more realistic designs. A set of place mats and coordinating napkins in their original box is a real find, starting at about \$50. Expect to pay anywhere from \$20 (if you're very lucky) to \$75 for a Vera tablecloth. Prices tend to be lower in antique shops than at online specialty boutiques. Many Vera textiles may be purchased from online auctions, such as *eBay*. Expect bidding to be competitive on many of the items. Individual napkins are bargains, selling for as little as \$5 apiece in antique shops.

Vera created many delightful tea towel designs that are very reflective of the pop culture and motifs popular in the 1950s and '60s. These tea towels are also popular with collectors. They may be decorated with flowers, herbs, spices or objects found in the kitchen. Expect to pay \$15-25 for a tea towel on *eBay*. Christmas designs are particularly sought after, as are Vera's calendar towels. The collector will also find cotton hand towels, colorful sheet sets, and aprons designed by Vera Neumann. Some of the aprons are particularly fun and funky, featuring every-



ABOVE, left: Napkin with large brown butterfly, brown "sun," and white flowers on orange background. With ladybug, \$7-\$9. ABOVE, right: A napkin with abstract floral design showcases Vera's sunny colors, \$5-\$7.



scarves and handkerchiefs. Scarves can range in price from \$10 to \$35. You may even stumble across a blouse or apron, if you're lucky. Expect to pay at least \$35 for a blouse and \$15 and up for an apron. Online boutiques are the best sources for dresses and sleepwear sets. Bidding is very competitive, however, with dresses and Vera-designed nightgowns with matching robes manufactured by *Formfit Rogers*, selling for about \$50.

Many of the dresses you will see online were very trendy, 1960s-type styles. Vera wasn't afraid to incorporate a watermelon front-and-center on a dress or to splash a giant sunflower across the front of a silk blouse. These garments are not for the faint of heart.

Be certain that you are purchasing a genuine Vera garment before you buy. Unlike her scarves, not all Vera clothing will contain a label. Oftentimes, the original owners removed the labels. Some Vera garments contain her signature incorporated right in the design. Other items, such as skirts and early cotton shirts, may have just a tiny label sewn in on the reverse side of the garment along the seam. Be sure to ask the seller questions before making a purchase to ascertain that you are buying a genuine Vera garment. Study up on the "Vera look." After a while, you will be able to spot her scarves and blouses at 100 paces!

A WORD ABOUT SIZING AND CONDITION

When it comes to scarves, I have learned that it does not pay to buy a piece that is damaged, unless the price is very reasonable or the design is rare. Often, the same scarf will show up later on *eBay* or in an antique store (or even in a thrift shop), if you just wait. The same may be said for tea towels and handkerchiefs. Clothing, on the other hand, is harder to find, so you may wish to purchase it online or in a vintage clothing boutique, if it is something you really desire. You may or may not find the same garment, in the same size, later on. Which leads us to sizes. Remember: vintage clothing generally runs smaller than modern day garments. A vintage size 10 is about equivalent to a modern day size 6 or 4.

Always keep this in mind when bidding

thing from poppies to fondue pots and cooking implements, a la 1970s.

WHERE TO SHOP

The fun of collecting "Vera" is that her scarves and textiles still turn up for sale at thrift shops and yard sales. Her garments and linens were manufactured in large quantities and this means many have survived for the savvy collector to find. Estate sales are particularly good sources. Look for sales that feature items from the 1960s and '70s. You may unearth a scarf if you are lucky, or perhaps a Vera blouse still hanging in a closet. Treasures may be found at yard sales and thrift stores for as little as \$1.

Boutiques that specialize in vintage clothing are another good source for



A tea towel featuring jars of herbs and spices, \$16-\$20.



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online. Often, the seller will provide bust, waist and sleeve measurements. If they are not listed, e-mail the seller and ask for those measurements before buying. This will save you a lot of heartache and misspent dollars.

A FINAL NOTE

Vera designed her textiles and garments to be enjoyed by the "average" woman. Even though Vera Neumann died in 1993, her designs are very much back in style with the resurgence of interest in mid-20th century fashion and design. In fact, the rights to her name and designs have recently been purchased and "new" Vera fashions may be manufactured once again.

So, don't be afraid to wear your pretty Vera scarves. Tie one around your neck. (Vera published booklets on how to tie and wear her scarves. You can find them on the Internet.) Drape a scarf over a jacket. Tie a small one on a purse handle a la 1960s fashion. Brighten up your kitchen with a colorful

tea towel. Set a table with Vera linens and brightly-colored dishes...or tableware designed by Vera herself...that echo the colors in the textiles. Arrange a collection of Vera handkerchiefs under a glass-topped coffee table or on a dressing table. Vera would be delighted to know that her designs are used and loved in the 21st century, just as she designed them to be used in the 20th. As she herself stated, "Vera...will be Vera forever." ■

Jeannette and Katherine Michalets are co-authors of "Vera Textiles," recently released by Schiffer Publishing Ltd. It is reviewed in this month's Bookshelf on page 16.

All Photos courtesy of the author.



TOP, left: Ethnic-style top in blues and greens. All cotton with small signature and ladybug near hem, \$40-\$45. TOP, right: Synthetic blouse with pink sunflowers and tan leaves. Vera's signature is incorporated into the design, \$40-\$45. RIGHT: Turtleneck shirt with Vera signature incorporated into the design, \$40-\$45.