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## Forgotten designer returns to stores

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Susan Seid's destiny is wrapped in scarves.

Thousands and thousands of colorful scarves, more than 20,000 in all, that jolted her from black and white into Wizard of Oz technicolor when she stumbled upon them at a warehouse in southwest Georgia five years ago.

It was a long way from New York's Fifth Avenue, where the scarves, loved by icons such as Marilyn Monroe, once sold. But if time had dulled their popularity, Seid saw only a history rich with opportunity.

In 2005, when she purchased the trademarks and assets of the 62-year-old lifestyle brand designed by artist Vera Neumann, she had one goal: to return the Vera Co. to prominence.

This month, Lord & Taylor, the first retailer to carry Vera scarves in 1947, will again sell the brand in 19 of its top stores. And later this spring, chic retailer Scoop NYC will help introduce Vera to a new generation of fashion lovers with a special collection.

Still, the road to revitalization hasn't been all yellow brick. Seid recently had to face down a lawsuit from designer Vera Wang over use of the name Vera. The two companies settled the lawsuit in November and Seid said the challenges have only strengthened her resolve.

"The purpose of the company is to license the art and trademarks of Vera," said Seid, "and to get the artwork back out on product for everyone to enjoy."

Scarves printed in the floral, abstract, tribal and polka dot patterns from Neumann's artwork now hang in neatly archived rows that take up most of the space in the Atlanta-area headquarters. Prototypes of tote bags, umbrellas and wellies in bright colors are stashed away in closets awaiting a thumbs up from Seid to go to full production.

It's a flashback to the time when Vera's script signature and colorful designs adorned everything from Mikasa tablewear to Burlington home linens. The business got a boost when Lord & Taylor purchased Vera's first scarf, and a celebrity clientele soon followed. A sheer Vera scarf skimmed over the nude chest of a sleepy-eyed Marilyn Monroe when she was photographed by Bert Stern, the last photographer to sit with the actress before her death.

Though Neumann (born Vera Salaff) sold the company in 1967, she retained creative control. She served as a mentor to other designers, including Perry Ellis, and was twice named one of the top 10 women executives in the country by Forbes magazine. As a testament to the many roles she played, Neumann was recognized in 1972 in a Smithsonian retrospective, "A Salute to Vera, the Renaissance Woman."

### Decline and rebirth

By the mid-1970s, the brand that Neumann started at her kitchen table was selling in more than 20,000 stores worldwide with domestic and international licensing deals. But in 1988 the company was sold again and sales were in decline.

Five years later, Neumann died of a heart attack.

With no one to steer the ship, the brand faltered until Tog Shop, a catalog business in Americus, which held the license for Vera apparel, purchased the company out of bankruptcy.

Seid was considering a position with Tog Shop when she walked into the roomful of scarves. To anyone else, it was just scarves. To Seid, it was the opportunity of a lifetime.

"I saw duvets, rugs, sofa cushions and clothing," said Seid. "I saw volume. There are 40 years of artwork that came out of one brush."

Seid took the job as vice president of merchandising, but made it clear that Neumann's designs had her heart.

"She was this incredibly bright spirit, and that's what her art epitomizes," said Seid, who met the artist briefly in the early '90s. When the Tog Shop owner put the business up for sale, Seid asked him to carve out the Vera Co. for her to purchase.

Though the initial response was negative, Seid persisted. When the deal was finalized, and the brand was hers, Seid immediately set about rebuilding.

She reached out to licensees and amassed samples. And in October, she auctioned three Vera Neumann originals alongside work by artists including Miro, Calder and Lichtenstein. "I did it in order to get her back out and established in the fine art world," Seid said.

Vera vs. Vera

But not everyone had forgotten about Vera.

Last winter, lawyers representing Vera Wang called the Vera Co. They eventually filed a lawsuit to protect certain trademarks of the Vera Wang-designed "Simply Vera" collection of clothing, accessories and home decor, which debuted recently in Kohl's stores. The Vera Co. countersued.

The case settled in November. Officials at Vera Wang had no comment. Seid, who cannot talk about the details of the settlement, would only say she is satisfied with the outcome.

"I'd rather put my energies into growing my business than eviscerating the competition," Seid said, "but it strengthened this company by going through it."

On Seid's desk, a 12-page look book introduces magazine editors and buyers to Vera merchandise. A kimono-style shirt, a scarf twisted into a halter, and a graphic print black and white minidress are part of the spring and summer offerings.

Vera scarves currently sell in stores such as **Neiman Marcus**, **Henri Bendel** and Fred Segal in Los Angeles, as well as smaller boutiques nationwide. Seid hopes even more retailers will pick up the line this year.

She is even prepping a new publicity campaign based on that iconic image of Marilyn Monroe wearing only a Vera scarf. She envisions a series of photos featuring celebrities such as Christina Aguilera or Scarlett Johansson, each pictured with the same tagline, "Vera clings to a star."

And maybe, if all goes as planned, Seid does too.

#### A TIMELINE

Here's a quick look at the history of the Vera Co., a Marilyn Monroe favorite now in the hands of Atlanta's Susan Seid.

1910 --- Vera Salaff born July 24, in Stamford, Conn.

1928 --- Vera receives a B.A. in Fine Arts at Cooper Union Art School in New York.

1946 --- Vera prints her designs on excess parachute silk from World War II to create a line of scarves.

1947 --- Lord & Taylor purchases Vera's first scarf design.

1950 --- Vera adds a ladybug next to her signature to denote good luck.

1962 --- Marilyn Monroe photographed wearing only a Vera scarf. Photo was taken six weeks before her death.

1967 --- Manhattan Industries purchases the Vera Co.

1972 --- The Smithsonian does a retrospective named "A Salute to Vera, the Renaissance Woman."

1988 --- Salant purchases the Vera Co. and keeps Vera as head designer.

1993 --- Vera dies at 84 in New York.

1999 --- The Tog Shop in Americus purchases Vera's assets and trademarks.

2005 --- Susan Seid, former vice president of merchandising for the Tog Shop, purchases the Vera Co. to reintroduce the brand to the market.

2007 --- The Vera Co. and Vera Wang settle a lawsuit in November concerning use of the "Simply Vera" trademark.

CAPTION: LOUIE FAVORITE / Staff Seid hopes to put the Vera label on everything from apparel to linens. The ladybug, added in 1950, denotes good luck.

CAPTION: LOUIE FAVORITE / Staff Thanks to Susan Seid, Vera Neumann designs are again gracing scarves as well as other licensed merchandise.

CAPTION: LOUIE FAVORITE / Staff Thousands of scarves bearing Vera Neumann designs await shipping from Susan Seid's Chamblee headquarters to stores such as Lord & Taylor, which bought the first Vera scarf in 1947.

CAPTION: LOUIE FAVORITE / Staff Marilyn Monroe once draped a Vera scarf like so for a photo.

Credit: STAFF