
STAR OF THE SILK SCREEN: From Marilyn Monroe to Bess Truman, everyone but everyone used Vera Neumann's prints to adorn themselves or their homes. Kate Finnigan looks back at the work of the Laura Ashley of America

Finnigan, Kate. **The Sunday Telegraph** [London (UK)] 29 Aug 2010: 24.

From the 1950s to the 1970s the housewives of America were on first name terms with Vera Neumann. They might well have woken up under Vera bedlinen, set the table for breakfast with Vera placemats, tied Vera silk scarves around their necks or dressed themselves from head to toe in Vera fashion. An artist, designer and businesswoman, Vera Neumann was the Laura Ashley of America long before Laura Ashley even thought about getting down to work.

It's surprising that the name is not recognisable in Britain. In America, during the 1960s and 1970s, Vera's designs, which still have the power to amuse, comfort and even surprise today, were everywhere - from department stores to the White House to Marilyn Monroe's closet. Wallpaper, upholstery fabrics, linens, as well as the more quotidian tea towels, aprons and tissue boxes all leant themselves to the Vera treatment. Declaring that art should be democratic and not relegated to frames and walls, she said, 'I don't believe only the wealthy deserve good design.'

A painter from the off, Neumann based those treatments on her own artwork. She was known for her florals (both loud and childlike or delicate and elegant), verdant foliage, waxy suns and bold geometrics, but anything from bunches of carrots and spectacles to smiling fish was also likely to crop up. She was inspired by extensive voyages, from Asia to Africa, Ireland to Ibiza, the designs appearing on her return like delayed picture postcards from each destination. And all signed off with her first name in its cursive brushstrokes, later joined by a jolly red ladybird, or ladybug.

Born in Stamford, Connecticut, in 1907 to Russian immigrants, Vera had a love of art from an early age. Her father, a coffee and tea importer, took her to the Museum of Art in New York every Sunday and paid her 50 cents for every sketchbook she filled with doodles. Later he hired a sign painter in his company to give her art classes.

After attending art college in New York she worked as a fashion illustrator and then a textile designer on Seventh Avenue - until her boss offended her artistic sensibilities by asking her to 'knock off' another company's pattern.

It was after she married George Neumann, an advertising executive from a prominent Hungarian textile family, that her career took off. Together they built a silk screen that fitted on their dining-room table and in 1942 launched a small printing company, Printex, with the aim of transferring Vera's expressionistic-style paintings on to small domestic textiles - placemats and napkins - each printed by hand and cured in their oven.

The big break came in the form of a licensing deal from F Schumacher & Co, the distinguished textiles supplier. Vera's debut line for the firm, the Gold Coast collection, appeared in 1947. Two years later she created a glazed cotton chintz, Jack in the Pulpit, featuring her signature fern print. It proved one of her most popular designs and was chosen in 1952 by Bess Truman for the White House's solarium (in the brown Mouse colourway). It remained in production until 1986 and was re-released in an adapted form as recently as 2000.

But it was scarves that made Vera's name - and that only came about because the Second World War had taken its toll on fabric supply and she chanced upon some excess parachute silk. Her first design, Fern 1, a silhouette of pressed leaves, was snapped up by the retailing giant Lord & Taylor.

Vera scarves, floral, abstract and geometric designs in bright, often clashing colours, became highly fashionable. One appeared on the cover of the June 1950 issue of Harper's Bazaar. The ballerina Dame Alicia Markova favoured the triangular style. In her final photo-shoot, the Last Sitting series by Bert Stern, Marilyn Monroe wore a sheer yellow and orange Vera scarf and nothing else.

By 1960 the company was employing 200 staff and producing 130 patterns per season. That year Neumann tied together the corners of two scarves, fashioning them into a makeshift blouse she called the 'Jolly top'. And so a fashion line, Vera Sportswear, was born.

Neumann continued to paint. She may have employed 25 artists to help her realise her creations but all their work came from original Vera art. Canny marketing emphasised this, making the brand synonymous with Vera and her paintbrush. Her collections were billed as 'paintings, printings and limited editions'. Adverts depicted Vera leaning intently over her watercolours. One ongoing campaign featured the tagline vera paints..., introducing a new theme each season. A trip to Ireland, for example, inspired, vera paints an o'rainbow, a 1967 collection of 'heraldic and floral prints in colours such as Galway blue and leprechaun orange'.

Her work was the subject of numerous exhibitions and retrospectives. To celebrate her 25th year in business in 1970 the Emile Walter Galleries in New York featured 50 of her original artworks. Her first customer was John Lennon, who purchased a painting of a cube. Joan Crawford bought a fruit painting.

By 1972 Vera scarves were on sale in 20,000 stores around the world. In 1977 the business charted \$100 million in annual sales. But by the mid 1980s, fashions had changed, Laura Ashley and her nostalgic prints were in vogue, contemporary design was out. The company was taken over and its factory closed down, although when Neumann died in 1993, aged 85, her scarves and linens were still being produced.

In 1996 the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute acquired a Vera scarf for its permanent collection. More recently her scarves have been worn in the film Confessions of a Shopaholic and the fashion-savvy television show Gossip Girl. Last year Anthropologie, the lifestyle store, launched a We Love Vera clothes and home range. Almost 60 years after she first signed it Vera's name lives on.

ff YfU. 'The Art and Life of an Icon' (Abrams, Pounds 25), by Susan Seid, is available from Telegraph Books (telegraph.books.co.uk; 0844 871 1516) at Pounds 23 plus Pounds 1.25 p&p

Art, she thought, should not be relegated to walls. 'I don't believe only the wealthy deserve good design'

In her final photoshoot, Marilyn Monroe wore a sheer yellow and orange Vera scarf and nothing else

Credit: Kate Finnigan

Illustration

Caption: CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW VERA NEUMANN WAS INSPIRED BY HER TRAVELS, AND HER DESIGNS WERE LIKE POSTCARDS FROM EACH DESTINATION; THE LEAFY JACK-IN-THE-PULPIT COTTON CHINTZ; A SCARF PRODUCED AFTER A TRIP TO JAPAN; POSING WITH GEISHA; MORE 'WEARABLE ART' IN THE FORM OF SCARVES AND A TROUSER SUIT; LEFT VERA AND HER HUSBAND, GEORGE, AT THEIR DRAFTING DESK ABOVE AND BELOW TWO OF HER DESIGNS SCREEN-PRINTED ON SILK; Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. The Gottscho-Schleisner Collection. Steven Meckler. Previous pages: The Vera Company. Steven Meckler; CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT A TRIP TO INDIA INSPIRED THESE SEPARATES; AN IRISH VOYAGE RESULTED IN THIS 'O'RAINBOW' SILK SCARF FROM 1967; THE JAPANESE INFLUENCE AT WORK; AN EARLY PAINTING SHOWING ONE OF HER FAVOURITE MOTIFS, PRESSED LEAVES; Steven Meckler