

Vera Neumann: A silk scarf success story
by Diana Collings



One of my early memories of Dad was when he paid me 50 cents to stomp through grapes in a barrel. Not entirely thrilled, I spent much of a hot Sunday morning, pants rolled up stomping ankle deep in purple mush. Sadly he didn't share the sentiment of Vera Neumann's dad, who encouraged more artistic pursuits: he paid her 50 cents for each and every sketchbook that she filled with drawings. It's no small wonder she ended up at art school, after which she landed a job as fashion illustrator then textile designer on Seventh Avenue in New York!

You might not recognise the name Vera Neumann, but if you grew up in a time when Pigs in a Blanket and Shrimp Cocktails were dished out at dinner parties, chances are you wore a Vera Neumann scarf too.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, many homes across the US, UK and Australia, had some sort of Vera designed product, whether it be bed sheets, dishes, a dress or a tablecloth, her patterns bloomed in bright and bold shades of blue, green, mustard, pink, yellow and ever so much orange.

"Color is such a marvelous way of expressing emotion. We have so many problems in this world, color brings just a little bit of joy into our lives," she once said. And colour she did, mostly in floral, geometric or sun inspired patterns, her colourful prints and her signature lady beetle logo became instantly recognisable.

It all started in 1946, with a silkscreen, a kitchen table and the support of her husband George. She would paint mostly watercolour paintings, then transfer the image via silkscreen print onto linen place mats. She'd then set the ink by baking the place mats in her kitchen oven. During World War II linen became scarce, but leftover parachute silk could be bought in army supply stores cheaply and in abundance. So Vera transitioned from home wares to scarves out of necessity. Fortunately her cheerful, inexpensive prints were such a hit that by the 1970's her kitchen table business bloomed to a 100,000 million dollar worldwide business.

It didn't hurt that Marilyn Monroe and Grace Kelly wore Vera scarves or that the First Lady Bess Truman upholstered the windows of The White House windows with Vera Neumann fabrics!

A clothing line was added in the 1960s, where blouses and dresses matched place mats and tablecloths. The starting place for each piece of clothing was always a 36 inch silk scarf. Vera was the first designer to sign a scarf and possibly the beginning of life style brands... the first Martha Stewart.

Vera chose the lady beetle as her logo as they represent good luck and what good fortune she did have, as in her role as designer, she would travel from Kashmir to Kowloon for inspiration, and transfer those ideas from paint to fabric.

During the 1980's, her designs became as outmoded as Danish furniture, but with the recent resurgence in mid-century design, her prints feature once again at major retail chains. Vera passed away in 1993, leaving behind her a legacy of happy painted flowers, geometric shapes and sunshine scarves for one generation to remember, and a whole new generation to discover and enjoy.

Do you remember wearing a Vera scarf or having her homeware prints?