

HISTORY

Exhibit celebrates designer for the masses

Tracy Conrad

Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

It seems like Vera Neumann would have come to Palm Springs during the midcentury. Her sunny and ebullient designs can easily be imagined to have originated in the desert. During her lifetime though, Neumann did not visit the desert, but her influence is in evidence everywhere here.

Neumann practically invented the idea of the lifestyle brand. A watercolor painter, Neumann copyrighted some 8,000 designs during her lifetime and used them for all sorts of household items like tablecloths, napkins, dishware, bed linens and wallpaper. She would also design sportswear and created the concept of the signature scarf.

Neumann's cursive signature punctuated with a red ladybug for the period at the end of her name, would become iconic. She painted seemingly prosaic subjects: flowers, leaves, ferns, grass, vegetables and ladybugs. A "ladybug means good luck in every language," she said. And it was certainly lucky for Neumann. Her depictions of simple motifs became ubiquitous in midcentury America.

Julie Schneider, writing in 2020, noted: "It all started with a simple square of fabric. In 1942, Vera Neumann and her husband, George Neumann, set up a silkscreen on the kitchen table of their Manhattan studio apartment and started printing napkins and placemats based on Vera's original artwork, complete with her signature on the bottom-right corner. What began as a small home-based operation soon flourished into a booming business — with three showrooms in Manhattan and a 24/7 production space on the shores of the Hudson River in Ossining, New York — and one of the most beloved labels of the 20th century. Vera Neumann's lively, color-saturated designs became ubiquitous in the homes and wardrobes of the masses across the United States and abroad."

Shortages after World War II led Neumann to experiment with surplus army silk parachute fabric, from which she made her early scarf collections. New York's Museum of Arts and Design mounted an exhibit in 2021 paying tribute to Neumann by exhibiting hundreds



Vera Neumann paints in her office, circa 1970. Her company made sure one didn't have to be wealthy to enjoy design. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE SUSAN SEID COLLECTION

of her colorful, exuberant designs.

Schneider continues that Neumann explained in a 1971 marketing brochure: "I'm an artist who prefers to paint things for people rather than for walls, so I turn my paintings into things people wear or use. Scarves, blouses, sportswear, fashions for the home." Growing up in an art-filled environment, Neumann earned a degree in fine art at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, followed by studies at Traphagen School of Design in New York City, where her eyes opened to the possibilities of combining fine and commercial arts. She believed that everyone deserves access to good art and design, not just the wealthy. Her cheerful, inventive prints and patterns elevated everyday objects into art, bursting with vivid hues and motifs inspired by nature and her extensive global travels."

Neumann would remark: "I spent half my life painting scarves."

By 1972, Neumann scarves sold in thousands of stores worldwide, and the company boasted sales of \$100 million. Her vision to make functional, wearable art available to everyone was a spectacular commercial success. Her philosophy that art should be affordable and in-

corporated into everyday life was inspired by the progressive German art school, the Bauhaus, which encouraged the union of art, craft and industry. Fine art could exist on and off the wall.

Her company made sure one didn't have to be wealthy to enjoy good design, and her designs were joyful and accessible. First Lady Bess Truman installed a fabric of printed greens in a mélange of organic leaf motifs called Jack-in-the-Pulpit, for the third-floor solarium windows and upholstery at the White House. Grace Kelly wore Neumann scarves. The last time Marilyn Monroe was photographed, the fabled "Last Sitting" by Bert Stern, shot only weeks before her death, Monroe was captured nude behind the diaphanous pink, yellow and orange stripes of a Neumann scarf. The color combination makes the photograph arresting.

Neumann professed that "Color is the language I speak best." That playful exuberance was emblematic of the midcentury, and Neumann holds a rightful place in the pantheon of midcentury design masters. Neumann was an integral part of the modernist movement. Not just influenced by the Bauhaus ideals, she fully realized them in the real world



Neumann's designs are on household items like tablecloths, napkins, dishware, bed linens and wallpaper.

of international business. She and her husband and partner, George, were friends with Alexander Calder and Marcel Breuer. In 1952, Breuer designed their house in Croton-on-Hudson as well as their company showroom at 417 Fifth Avenue. The Neumanns literally lived the Bauhaus philosophy while bringing it to the masses.

Incredibly prolific as an artist, she produced hundreds of paintings a year for decades and translated her fine art into mass produced objects of daily living that were beautiful and useful. A masterful businesswoman, she licensed her designs across multiple mediums and marketed herself and her company astutely.

February brings wildflowers and Modernism Week to the desert, this year it also brings an appreciation of Neumann and snippets from the Museum of Arts and Design exhibition on her work. On Thursday, Feb. 24, to the Annenberg Theater at the Palm Springs Art Museum, author and owner of The Vera Company, Susan Seid, will be joined by the rightful inheritor of the Neumann mantle, Trina Turk, who opened her first boutique in Palm Springs in 2003, carrying on the tradition of joyful, colorful prints. Together, Seid and Turk will present a celebration of Neumann. Tickets are available at modernismweek.com.

Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.