

# DEPARTURES

## Behind the Veil: The Artwork of Vera Neumann

June 26, 2015



Bert Stern

By Carol Kino

In 1978 the *Washington Post* joked that archaeologists of the future would likely uncover two major American artifacts: the Golden Arches of McDonald's and "millions of rainbow colored relics bearing the name Vera"—as in Vera Neumann, the iconic textile designer who, in her midcentury heyday, was known for everything from bed linens and tablecloths to ladies' sportswear and silk scarves. First Lady Bess Truman chose a fern print by Vera to decorate the White House solarium in 1952, and, 10 years later, Marilyn Monroe famously wore nothing but a sheer Vera scarf for her final photo shoot.

Now the Alexander Gray Associates gallery, in New York, is putting Neumann's littleknown original artwork on display in the show *Vera Paints a Rainbow*. Assembling watercolors, ink drawings, and tissuepaper collages from different eras, it will demonstrate Neumann's wide use of subjects and styles. She was as comfortable with bucolic designs—fruit, flowers, ferns, butterflies, rainbows—as she was with psychedelic swirls and crisp geometric abstractions.

The Vera empire was born during World War II, soon after Neumann, a Cooper Union-trained painter, married an advertising executive who suggested that she screenprint place mats with her designs. By the late 1940s, she was also making silk scarves, which became the company's top seller. Because each design started as a work of art, every product bore Neumann's signature, embellished with a doodle of a lucky ladybug. As she told the *New York Times* in 1972, "they were always paintings first that were then transferred to other things."

By the late 1970s, the company was a financial and aesthetic hit, with a Marcel Breuer-designed Manhattan showroom and over \$100 million in sales. Its designs were collected by New York's Metropolitan Museum and Museum of Modern Art and shown at the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C. But after Neumann's death, in 1993, the brand faded from view. It was acquired in 2005 by the merchandising executive Susan Seid; she resurrected it by licensing designs to the likes of Anthropologie and Bloomingdale's.

Seid has since sold off the company's intellectual property and licensing agreements and is now focusing on the one asset she maintained: Neumann's archive of original artwork. "She was an artist first and foremost," Seid says. "It was a pretty radical move to take the art off the walls."