

# Vera: Designer of Simple Purity

By SHARON CHESWICK

**T**HIRTY miles from the bustle of the Seventh Avenue marketplace, high in the hills overlooking the Hudson, Vera lives and works, shuttling daily in 10-minute trips between her home, Finney Farms in Croton-on-Hudson, and her factory, Printex, in Ossining.

Glamour takes a back seat in the fashions designed by Vera, whose collections reflect the wild things that breathe, eat,

grow and create—flowers, leaves, ferns, grass, and always the sun.

"I am a Leo," says the designer and artist, who uses her first name professionally, "and that makes me a sun person." In private, she is Vera Neumann, a widow.

Her home, her factory, and all her showrooms were designed by Marcel Breuer, an architect schooled in the Bauhaus discipline. This means focusing not only on the beauty of esthetic design (painting, sculpture and architec-

ture) but also on function—the application of science and technology.

Vera's house, flanked by soft green woodlands, is terraced with rock that frames its view of the river and is garnished with granite and metallic sculptures around the gardens.

Vera's designs reflect the Bauhaus blend of painting, sculpting and science, whether they are scarves, tableclothes or coasters. They all offer a mixture of earthy beauty, sprays of pink and violet petals and lacy ferns, or bold geometric patterns—bursts of precise cubes. These are arranged unstructured in fireworks-like splashes or in squares of vibrant colors.

Vera attributes her success against peers in New York, Paris and Rome to her unyielding preference for purity and simplicity of design.

"My husband [George Neumann, who died in 1960] was a real stickler and I tried, even after he died, to continue that way," Vera said. "I try very, very hard to do designs that are a little bit more than the things that are around at the time.

"From the beginning, we wanted our designs to be as pure as possible. We used to go into the woods and select  
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leaves and then simply photograph them flat onto the screen."

Then the leaf would be painted, often in water colors. After the painting, Vera said, the design of the leaf would be ready for the silk-screen process, carefully sponged in with a squeegee, "for extra absorption."

Vera said that her penchant for purity in designs might mean the use of only one color in a scarf, while her competitors might use as many as 18.

"What we are trying to do is to take what we consider to be pure art," she said, "and translate it into a garment that will go with almost anything."

"If you had too many colors, you could very easily get tied down to just one color scheme that can't be changed."

Vera Industries, which, merged with Manhattan Industries in 1966, reports total annual retail sales of more than \$100 million, including licensed products.

How can Vera win wide support at home when the creations of such designers as Halston, Pucci and Pauline Trigère are on racks around New York City, ready to wear?

"Most of those big names are out of the grasp of ordinary people," Vera said. "More of the ordinary people can buy my things than a \$500 dress or a \$200 scarf. It's not because it's cheaper, but I feel I have given people more joy with the designs I create for them."

All Vera designs start out as paintings, ultimately becoming imprinted on an array of fashions for wearing and home decorating: potholders, platters, pottery, placemats, coasters, napkins, bed and table linens, draperies, sportswear (scarves, shawls, caftans and blouses).

Can one compare a potholder with an evening wrap?

"There are lots of women," Vera said, "who know the name of Vera because some of their most unpleasant chores around the kitchen are made cheerier by the sudden sight of a potholder making a gay little spot in the kitchen."

Printex has come a long way since Vera married Mr. Neumann, whom she met at a party ("He was handsome, so-

phisticated, Viennese, and besides knowing about fabric and color and advertising, he had superb taste in everything"), and they set up house and shop.

Vera was designing children's furniture and murals when they met, but as soon as they were married they established their Printex plant in the tiny studio apartment on 17th Street in Manhattan. They took it because the landlady told them it was lucky: Its last tenant had been Henry R. Luce.

Vera and George had two children, Evelyn and John, both of whom are now married. Evelyn's husband, Peter, is a painter. John's wife, Martha, is a programmer.

Placemats were the first product designed and produced by Printex. They were the only items small enough to make certain that the screen for printing them could fit on the little table in the 17th Street kitchen.

The first three placemats sold by Printex were carried to B. Altman in the hands of Werner Hamm, their partner. After 35 years, he is still Vera's partner in Vera Industries.

After World War II, there was a shortage of the fabric for placemats, and the Neumanns switched to parachute silk, and made scarves.

Soon Printex outgrew the studio-apartment factory, and the Neumanns moved into a loft on 57th Street. Two years later, further growth made them look upstate for room.

A silk-screening plant was for sale in Ossining, in a building that had once been "a beautiful old Georgian mansion along the Hudson."

"So we moved in and lived over our store, right up there in that beautiful old building," Vera said. Four rooms were turned into living quarters and the rest of the old mansion was used for studios and textile printing.

In 1952, Printex expanded into a 24-hour operation. The Neumanns began looking elsewhere once more. They found a home at Finney Farms, then an apple orchard. Mr. Neumann found Marcel Breuer. The Neumann Bauhaus went up in short order.

The Printex plant in Ossining has a staff of 25 artists.

"We translated 300 designs a year for our different divisions," Vera said, add-



The New York Times/Mary Ann Hardiman

## Vera at home with two of her dogs in Croton-on-Hudson

ing that many of the designs started with an idea or sketch brought back from a trip abroad with her husband.

"My husband would take photographs and I would grab up my little sketch pad," Vera said. From the rich blues of the skies of Morocco, contrasted with the North African country's white buildings, came the Vera Industry's Portofino blue. From Mexico, Vera brought back combinations of color (hot pink) and texture.

Her travels in Hong Kong inspired a special pattern of grass, which she sketched while traversing Chinese wheat fields in a train.

As for the 25 artists, and whether they create their own designs, Vera said that the apprentices had to earn their freedom to create through experience.

"Even something as simple as a daisy can give the artist a little chance to inject his own feeling," she said, "but it has to be seen by me, because the flower has to be seen within a certain square, and it must fit properly into the repeat."

In practice:

"I put into my work a painter's idea about what a drapery [Vera designs for the Schumacher Company] or scarf should look like," Vera said. "We frame a piece of the drapery being designed and put it up on a wall."

When Vera is satisfied with the designed drapery, she gives the go-ahead. All Vera designs start out as a paintings

ultimately becoming imprinted on the array of fashions for wearing and home decorating.

Vera was born in Stamford and grew up there. Nature, artistic structure, discipline, esthetic beauty and harmony are the elements of Vera's art, and they reflect the home atmosphere that Vera's parents, Fanny and Meyer Saloff, created. Mr. Saloff, Vera said, was a musician who encouraged the children to seek out for themselves the things that would satisfy them, regardless of financial rewards.

Inside the Vera household luscious flowers, fruitful and brilliant in yellow (daisies and sunflowers are Vera's favorites) fill bowls and vases, on tables that seem as congruent as isosceles triangles with the white plump sofas in the room.

No wall in the home does not have a painting. They are the works of Vera, her daughter, her son-in-law, or Alexander Calder, who was a close friend.

Vera's respect for the ancient art, culture and religions of the East is apparent in her mastery of the technique of Sumi art— "Sumi means simply brush stroke"—a calligraphy.

Vera, who is 68 years old, was asked about retirement. "Nonsense. As you get older, you are losing all the fluff along the way." ■