

# vera and the money tree

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Just as Ralph Lauren concentrates on the American West and Yves St. Laurent turns to history's gaudy periods for ideas, Vera Neumann—better known around the world for her brush-stroked first name on dozens of items—looks to things natural for her inspiration. In fact, her trademark is the ladybug, the insect that is loved by gardeners.

"I've actually made my fame with nature," she says. Neumann remembers particularly her childhood, when long walks to school and family outings along the Rippowom River in Connecticut sparked her lifelong interest in trees and plants. Astrology may have had an influence, too. "I'm a Leo, so the sun is very, very important to me. If I can't think of what to do—which isn't often—I can always do a sun motif. The sun is a pattern, a color, a design."

But ideas can come from anywhere. "It can be air. It can be sky. It can be some child along the way," she explains.

While it may not be her primary interest or inspiration, Neumann apparently also has learned how to grow money. She and her business associates are tight-lipped about how much money her company, Vera Companies, now owned by Manhattan Industries, makes. But they do say sales of licensed products—scarves, sportswear, table linens, sheets, pillowcases, bedspreads, curtains, wallpaper, pottery and china, needlework, eyeglass frames and facial tissue, to name a few—amounted to about \$100 million at retail last year. (Vera's scarves alone are licensed in Italy, Japan, Australia, Canada and South Africa.)

That success is reflected in the kind of reception she gets when she travels from her home in Croton,

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N.Y. On a recent visit to Los Angeles, for example, Mayor Tom Bradley proclaimed a "Salute to Vera Week" and issued a proclamation resembling a page from an illuminated manuscript. She was here under the sponsorship of May Co. California, which held a show and sale featuring her work. Travel is also part of the creative process. Many of her designs have come from visits to foreign museums and marketplaces, she says. Trips are a way to get away from it all, too. She visits the Golden Door in Southern California a couple of times a year to get away from the telephone and visitors.

Back at her home overlooking the Hudson River, Neumann and her 15 associates in the design studio leave time in their schedules for the leisure that inspires creativity. When her bad luck with cars is in abeyance, Vera arrives for work between 8 and 8:30 a.m. and quits about 4 p.m. She and the others leave early "mainly because we all have other interests besides working all day." She adds, "I try to avoid any kind of business at the office so that I can design at my board all day long." The staff is also given a monthly "museum day" to unwind. "I know they don't all go to museums but it gives them time to do something they want to do."

Despite the unhurried pace, Neumann, who will be 74 this year, turns out 600 designs every year for a business that is now global. When she began in 1945 with her late husband, George Neumann, and F. Werner Hamm, who still helps run the company, the first design—a place mat—was silk-screened on a kitchen table.

Neumann certainly has no plans for retirement. "I think I have been successful because I work at it," she says. "I don't think you can live on what you've done in the past." One thing she might limit, however: "I hate interviews. I'm very shy."