

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-art-behind-vera-neumanns-products-1436231437>

U.S. | NEW YORK | NY CULTURE

## The Art Behind Vera Neumann's Products

'Vera Paints a Rainbow' at the Alexander Gray Associates gallery shows the artist's watercolors and works on paper



Vera Neumann blurred the line between art and business before Andy Warhol did. *PHOTO: ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

July 6, 2015 9:18 p.m. ET

In her 1960s and '70s prime, Vera Neumann made millions as a creator of bold floral

patterns and portraits of an unlikely subject: the ladybug. The winsome insect served as her logo on a wide line of textiles, scarves, wallpapers and assorted housewares—all brightly colored and signed with a simple, resounding signature: “Vera.”

Her looks appealed to many—from Marilyn Monroe, who writhed behind a Vera-branded scarf at her last photo shoot in 1962, to Sally Draper, who slept on Vera bed sheets in the fictional realm of “Mad Men.”

Now, Ms. Neumann’s artful designs move to the Alexander Gray Associates gallery for “Vera Paints a Rainbow,” a colorful summer show of watercolors and works on paper that inspired the products that bore their prints.

“She was an artist and wanted art to be accessible—not just in an ivory tower,” said Mr. Gray, who started collecting vintage Vera napkins on eBay before gaining access to her archive and mounting his first show of her work at his gallery last year. The second show, opening Thursday and on view through Aug. 7, aims to further familiarize the art crowd with a fashion-design icon.



A watercolor from the 'Florals' series. PHOTO: ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

In their time, Ms. Neumann’s utilitarian products—with patterns that could be both abstract or drawn from nature—were sold with instructions for how to stretch and hang them on a wall, Mr. Gray noted, and displays in department stores such as Bloomingdale’s and Gimbels were identified as “Vera Galleries.”

“Her mission was the democratization of fine art, and the way she felt she could best do that was to take art off the wall and apply it to things that people use in their everyday life,” said Susan Seid, author of the 2010 book “Vera: The Art and Life of an Icon” and owner of the Vera Neumann Art Archive.

The method proved effective, with Vera-branded wares available in 20,000 stores at

their commercial peak, according to Ms. Seid, and popularity among fashion mavens, design aficionados and art enthusiasts alike.

“Her business model and global reach were incredible,” said Eric Shiner, director of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh and an appreciator of Ms. Neumann’s work. “We blame Andy for blurring the line between art and business, but Vera blurred it before he did.”

Ms. Neumann manufactured her fashionable scarves and sportswear on her own, but in a move that was innovative at the time, she also licensed designs for home products to other entities. These prescient business practices, along with her striking designs, helped place her among the first self-made female American millionaires, Ms. Seid said. And she did it all by making herself the star of the show.



A piece from the 'Florals' series. PHOTO: ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

“She was the first lifestyle brand,” said Ms. Seid. “People have said without Vera, there would be no Martha Stewart or Ralph Lauren.”

Ms. Neumann’s applied designs became a cultural touchstone—22 scarves and a necktie of hers are in the collection of the Metropolitan

Museum’s Costume Institute and two textile pieces now belong to MoMA. But for all her success as an entrepreneur, Ms. Neumann made her mark as an artist too. In the early ’70s, she took part in a Smithsonian Institution residency program that also hosted, among others, Willem de Kooning, Georgia O’Keeffe and Alexander Calder, a close friend of Ms. Neumann’s in New York.

Among her early collectors was John Lennon, who bought a work at her first gallery show on the Upper East Side.

Decades later, after her death in 1993 at the age of 84, her fine, painterly hand and eye for vibrant hues still resonate.



From the 'Abstracts' series, tissue paper collaged on paper. PHOTO: ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK

"What I learned while collecting was how relentless she was with color," said Pae White, a Los Angeles-based artist who has amassed around 3,500 items, from textiles and scarves to ceramics and dinnerware, bearing the familiar Vera signature and ladybug-logo stamp. "There would be a design in blue but also red, gold, green—ad infinitum."

To commemorate her use of color, the walls of Alexander Gray Associates have been painted with stripes in rainbow hues, with 60 original Neumann artworks hung in correspondence with their primary shades.

"Everything was about reinforcing an engagement with art," Mr. Gray said of Ms. Neumann's historical legacy. Her work, omnipresent in its time, is now ripe for re-examination, he added, alongside color-minded creations by contemporaneous designers including Emilio Pucci and painters like Frank Stella. "It looks so classic—and fresh too."

Copyright 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).