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Vera's Her Name and Color's Her Fame; 'Colors Sing To Me'

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WHEN THEY dig up the remains of this land known as America, archeologists of the future will undoubtedly come across two cultural curiosities of the 20th century that might be mistaken for objects of religious worship: McDonald's golden arches and millions of rainbow-colored relics bearing the name *Vera*.

Her bold signature is everywhere. On pink and orange scarves, blue and green blouses, purple placemats, multicolored napkins, tablecloths, towels, sheets, wallpaper, draperies and china.

Her name is Vera Neumann. Her company (Veraindustries) is grossing \$50 million a year and - at the age of 70 - she is entering her 32nd year as the artist, designer and business woman most responsible for putting color into the American home.

"Color sings to me," Vera says, adjusting her blue fashion frames. "Color is such a marvelous way of expressing emotion. We have so many problems in this world, color brings just a little bit of joy into our lives."

Vera is a colorful woman; a sprightly 5-feet small, with short-'n'-sassy silvery hair and a weakness for peacock-blue Haltson ultrasuede dresses. (She likes the big, loose "slouch" look in fashion but complains they make her look "like a little squirt.") She is wearing simple gold earrings, several rings, an Alexander Calder sculpture-pin and a mauve scarf knotted at the neck. A Vera scarf.

Vera drives a shiny black Corvette ("I have a Jaguar too"), lives in Crotonon-Hudson in New York with three dogs and works in her studio every day from 9 to 5. "I'll never stop working," she says. "They'll have to carry me out. I'll die in my chair at the studio."

Though the name is famous, the face is obscure. "Oh, this is a funny story," she says. "Last week I was in Los Angeles checking into the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. My secretary had arranged my reservation, but for some reason they only had me down for one night instead of two. So I turned away from the desk and jokingly said to my companion. 'Do they know *who I am?* Do they know I'm *the Vera?*'" The manager overheard me and apologized profusely. He said, 'I have your sheets, I have your towels.' You should have seen how fast I got that room. They even gave me the suite!" she said with a chuckle. "Of course, I had to *pay* for it."

Vera recently sold her condominium on the island of Ibiza and travels two or three times a year, collecting folk art and ideas for her designs. "I've been to China twice, the Orient. And I'm planning a trip to Budapest." Why Budapest? "Because I've never been."

Vera was in Washington recently to receive the Hecht Co.'s "Home Furnishing Award," and the Tysons Corner store exhibited 28 of her original paintings and prints as part of the tribute.

"Yes, I think it's art," she says of her designs, which have become as recognizable as Campbell's soup cans. "You can always tell a Picasso. Not to say I would put myself in the same class as Picasso, but you develop a style. After all, I've been doing it for over 30 years. The creative part of the business is like a fountain. It keeps going, going, going. I don't repeat myself."

She started in 1946 with a silkscreen, a kitchen table and her husband George. Their first design was a placemat - it was the only thing small enough to fit on the screen. And the signature? "Well, we transferred the design from one of my original paintings, which had my signature on the bottom. That's how the whole thing started."

Years went by and Vera expanded her graphic talents into a line of products. "I skipped that whole period of women fighting discrimination in business," she says. "I never had to fight my way up."

She raised two children while her husband (who died in 1963) and partner F. Werner Hamm handled the business end of the company. Ten years ago, she began to copyright her designs (after two lawsuits) and only one scarf design has ever been released without her families signature. ("It was an accident," she said.)

Now there are 25 designers working for the company, most of them bright young hopefuls in the fashion world. "We have a study program at FIT in New York where we pay the tuition. It's a way of developing young people. But you know," she says defensively, "some people have a thing about working for a woman boss. I think they feel women in business are tough and dominating." She pauses, wrinkling her forehead. "I'm not really tough or dominating."

Vera likes to think of her designs as small paintings and carries a scratch pad for instant sketching. "I even keep one by the bed in case I get an idea in the middle of the night." Her favorite color, in case you hadn't noticed, is orange. "I'm a Leo, a sun person. I've had a sun in every collection."

Vera predicts the big color for 1978 will be rust. "Greens are coming back," she adds, though she is mindful of advice her architect gave her when she ordered her living room wall painted that color. "Why compete with nature?"

She sits back and smiles. "But I get inspiration from my garden. I can't understand it when people say you can't mix and match certain colors when, after all, nature itself puts them together in such beautiful ways."

GRAPHIC: Illustration, no caption, by Gerald Martineau - The Washington Post