

Vera: Signature of Success

By Rhonda Seegal

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NEW YORK, Sept. 17—When a designer on New York's Seventh Avenue asked Vera Neumann to "copy" another painter's sketch, the prolific artist knew she had to go into her own business.

"At first, I didn't know what he meant. I thought he wanted me to draw something like it—but he wanted me to steal it," recalls the 68-year-old designer, whose name is seen around the world on scarves, sheets, sportswear and placemats. "I was astonished. We never did anything like that in my family. We were always taught to be honest."

So with the help of "the right husband," George, the Neumanns set up a silk screen on their kitchen table and The Vera Companies got started.

Her husband, who died 14 years ago, and her partner, F. Werner Hamm, now chairman of the board, handled the business end of the company while Vera produced the colorful graphics that have made her popular.

Today, the company, now a subsidiary of Manhattan Industries, Inc., manufactures her signature items and licenses her designs for sheets, china and even tissue boxes. Sales are running at \$50 million wholesale, \$100 million retail. And there are 25 designers creating patterns under the guidance of Vera and her alter-ego, Walter Erhard.

"That's a long way from the kitchen table," the spry designer says. "George had such a wonderful, far-reaching goal. He saw so many things I never visualized."

The merger with Manhattan paved the way for expansion. Money for new machinery and goods could be bought in greater quantities.

Despite her success, Vera remains a little unsure of herself.

"I'm very shy. I've always had more or less of an inferiority complex, but I've surrounded myself with good people," she said.

She always knew she was going to be a designer—even in grade school when she had a reputation for drawing on blackboards.

She has had memories of teachers who drew bold black lines through her work. "I'd ask, 'Should I go on? Should I be an artist?'" she says.

But she kept working, doing posters, greeting cards and even lampshades, a job she's hesitant to mention.

"I used to feel upset about telling anyone about the lamps," she says. But she's comforted by knowing that Renoir painted glasses.

After the Seventh Avenue fiasco, she worked designing children's furniture and rooms, earning money while her company got off the ground.

Pointing at a placemat with her name on it, she says it normally doesn't bother her to see her signature on such things. There was one exception—when she was confined aboard a cruise ship.

"There was a woman as big as—I don't know know what—who always wore my blouses. And she always wore the wrong one, like with a rose on her behind!" Vera said with a grimace. "No one knew I was the one, but I was so embarrassed, I couldn't go out. I'd start blushing."

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Designer Vera Neumann, 68, at work on a signature item.