

Couple puts lost art of canvas rugs at your feet

By Sarah E. Smith

It all began with a courting gift, a seemingly quaint concept when applied to the dating habits of the hip and high-tech of San Francisco in 2001.

Then again, that's the genius of Ken Forcier's strategy.

Ken, a twinkly-eyed, goateed mechanical engineer, had fallen in love with Gwen, an elegant former Sprint executive. If you're a millennial guy, what do you give the woman of your dreams — who happens to have worked at four Internet startups?

His answer: a handmade gift right out of the 18th century. A stenciled canvas rug.

It was a gift that sprang from three generations of his family's art DNA. In creating the small floor cloth, Ken used one of 170 stencil designs his mother had spent 40 years hand-copying from the walls and floors of historic New England homes.

When his normally understated



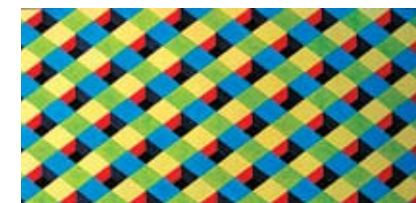
PHOTOS BY MARV BONDAROWICZ

“You have a beautiful tapestry on the floor, like an area rug, but you don't have any of the allergy issues. They don't attract dander and dust mites. They're sturdy, clean and durable.”

Andrew Galli, a customer and TV producer in Fremont, Calif.



'Margo's Raincoat,' 3 by 4 feet, \$480



'Deep Diamonds,' just over 3 by 6 feet, custom price



'Batik #3,' just over 3 by 6 feet, \$770



'Pompeii,' just under 8 by 10 feet, custom price



'Golden Gate,' just over 2 feet by nearly 3 feet, \$240



'Creamsicle,' nearly 2 feet by 3 feet, \$240



'Poppies,' 7 by 9 feet, custom price



'Batik #4,' just over 3 by 7 feet, \$960



Gwenith Jones and Ken Forcier, who are on their way to building the country's largest library of floor cloth designs, demonstrate the durability and beauty of the rugs by using them in their home. The two recently were commissioned to create a floor cloth for the entrance of the Eugene Field House in St. Louis, Mo., as part of a historically accurate restoration of the museum's interior to the 1850s.

girlfriend saw the one-of-a-kind gift, 12 prescient words came out of her mouth: “This is so great — you should be doing this for a living.”

Thus, Ken Forcier turned his professional attention to perfecting a lost craft he had learned from his mother, who learned it from her mother.

And Gwenith Jones' fifth startup was born, marketing an 18th-century product on a 21st-century Web site.

Gracewood Design, a business title woven of their middle names, began in 2004, was transplanted to a bungalow and studio in Northeast Portland in 2007, began selling four styles through Rejuvenation about a year ago and now creates floor cloths for such diverse clients as the St. Louis, Mo., toy museum and an exclusive resort in Georgia.

Together Ken and Gwen have hand painted and signed hundreds of floor cloths on the way to building the

country's largest library of such designs, documenting their color and pattern options on the Web.

The original inspiration abides in the collection of linoleum and other ornamental patterns that Ken's mother, artist Polly Forcier of Quechee, Vt., began assembling in the 1960s and uses in her business, MB Historic Decor. Ken learned the craft about two decades ago, when his mother asked him to help on a project. →

“He was better than me,” Polly Forcier says of her son. “First of all, he’s a mechanical engineer, and I’m just an artist. He’s into measuring and precision. And his touch with the brush is just perfection.”

Perfection sums up the aspirations Ken and Gwen have for their two-person enterprise. His engineering bent and her business acumen have merged to elevate the lowly floor cloth of yore — and not just artistically.

Mention durability and the two of them get a gleam in their eyes rarely seen outside Olympic trials.

They have experimented endlessly to build a better floor cloth — one that is softer because of bonded underlayers of carpet padding and vinyl, and tougher because its painted decoration is protected under layers of clear polyurethane.

Gracewood’s designs range from Early American to Victorian to Arts and Crafts. There are florals, vines and interlocking circles. A compass rose. A snowflake inside a wreath. One group is wildly geometric (such as an evocatively titled “Argyle Denial”); another is based on Indonesian batik patterns.

That’s a long way from the genealogy of the old American floor cloth. The canvas rugs — painted, printed or stenciled to resemble

WHAT

Gracewood Design, makers of hand-stenciled floor cloths

OWNERS

Ken Forcier and Gwenith Jones

DETAILS

More than 150 patterns in custom colors and designs, priced \$35–\$40 a square foot, with the smallest floor cloths going for about \$240.

CONTACT

503-922-0386,
www.gracewooddesign.com

WHERE TO SEE THEM

Four styles of their canvas rugs in various colors are available at Rejuvenation, 1100 S.E. Grand Ave., 503-238-1900.

Turkish carpets or marble, tile or wood — were used in Colonial homes to decorate and protect wood floors.

Floor cloths show up in written records of Mount Vernon, according to a history provided by Gracewood, and in the White House during the presidencies of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Often made of sailcloth retired from clipper ships, they were just the thing to pull together classic great-hall decor.

Floor cloths became a lost art in the late 1800s, killed by the

invention of linoleum. So there’s a certain borrow-your-enemy’s-strength irony to the revival of floor cloths that draw their appeal from linoleum patterns. Really, the one untamed obstacle to a wider adoption of floor cloths is the apparent oxymoron of a canvas rug — that and the lack of familiarity with a product that hasn’t been common for, oh, a century and a half.

“You say rug, and people think: fuzzy,” Ken says.

Yet many of Gracewood’s customers are drawn to floor cloths for that very reason: No fuzzy.

“You have a beautiful tapestry on the floor, like an area rug, but you don’t have any of the allergy issues,” says Andrew Galli, a customer and TV producer in Fremont, Calif. “I have allergies, and that’s one thing that sold me: They don’t attract dander and dust mites. They’re sturdy, clean and durable.

“And the best thing is there’s no one else in the world with one just like yours.”

Which goes to the whole point of how the story began: Ken just wanted to make something utterly unique for Gwen. Little did he know he would be stenciling a pattern for their life to follow. 🍷