

Artistry under foot

*Floorcloths painter
finds freedom in
free form*

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While living in a farmhouse in rural Maine in the 1970s, Kathy Cooper, then a textile artist, saw an article in a magazine about making floorcloths. These paintings on durable, washable canvas were among the earliest forms of floor covering, but they had fallen out of popularity, especially with the advent of wall-to-wall carpeting.

For a farmhouse kitchen, though, a floorcloth was just the right touch.

"I hadn't really liked painting," recalls Cooper, 53, who recently moved from King to Winston-Salem, where she grew up. "Painting was very particular and rigid, at least the way I learned it."

At first she made cloths using stencils, but eventually found that she could follow her own rules. In a short time she was not only making and selling floorcloths, but also had become a national expert on the medium.

"Now when my students ask, 'Do you have to do this?' I tell them, 'You don't have to do anything. You can do anything you want.' And they say, 'Really? That's fun!'"

Madison Avenue start: Cooper's work quickly spread from Maine to Manhattan after a woman at an art show saw her rugs. "She said, 'I loved what you're doing' and handed me a check for \$1,000." Still, her designs then were "very folk-artsy, with pigs and chickens and roosters. Some had words,

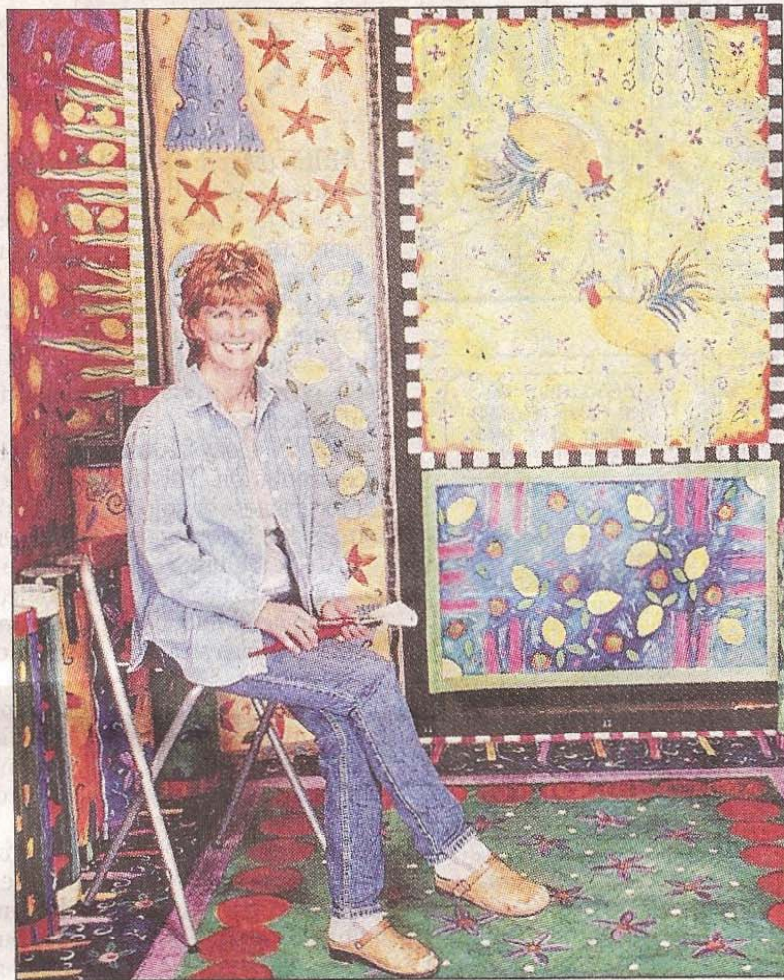
and the colors were very subdued." Having sold for years on Madison Avenue (she no longer sells through stores), Cooper can count such notable customers as Paul Newman, Michael Keaton and Carrie Fisher.

Wake-up call: In 1994, when the younger of her two daughters was 2 years old, Cooper became seriously ill. "I had a temporary paralysis. My hands and feet were numb; my face hurt. It was very scary, and I was incredibly grateful that it went away," she said. Doctors never discovered the cause.

"When you're sick you get a new perspective on everything. I decided then to make a total lifestyle change. I didn't want to sell my work wholesale. I wanted to paint and not worry about whether I spent several hours on it or a week or whatever. And I didn't want to be bound by someone else's deadlines."

Writing the book: In 1999 Cooper wrote "The Weekend Crafter: Painting Floorcloths," and in 2002, "The Complete Book of Floorcloths," both published by Lark Books. She also produced an instructional video. She sells them all from her Web site. Cooper also teaches classes, leads workshops, has been featured in several magazines and appears usually twice a season on the UNC-TV series "For Your Home."

Bigger and brighter: As Cooper's lifestyle changed, so did her artwork. Her colors became bolder and her work more painterly, with energy and motion bursting forth. She also added bigger rugs, runners and more custom work to her line. The fairly recent deaths of two of her siblings have further changed her outlook



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KATHY COOPER

FLOORCLOTH DESIGNER

on life. "My expectations of myself since having people close to me die have changed. I do whatever I manage to get done, and I'm not going to beat up on myself."

While Cooper's colors became brighter and designs more abstract, she has returned to some animal images. "I came back to some of those farm images, but they're much more like paintings now. In fact, people hang them on walls."

Floorcloths 101: Cooper teaches at Arrowmont School of Arts & Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tenn., and John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown. In July she'll teach a weeklong introductory course at Campbell. She also

teaches adults at Sawtooth Center for Visual Art in Winston-Salem, where she is president of the board of directors. "Art camp for adults is fun. I'm amazed at how many people when they come and work and paint with me, they get a different attitude. It's meditative, and the color is energizing," she said. "These women will come in with beautiful manicures, and by the end of the week they have paint under their nails and in their hair."

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