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Graphic artist Kathleen Nelson creates stylish yet practical painted mats that transform dreary floors. Designs are painted onto sheet vinyl flooring, which can be cut into any shape to personalize a space. *Submitted photos*

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MAT MAGIC

HAND-PAINTED COVERINGS CAN TRANSFORM A FLOOR



Nelson said she often finds inspiration for her floor mat designs from objects in the room where the mat will be used.

By **REBECCA YERGER**
Register Correspondent

Looking for an interesting way to transform a dull, worn-out floor? A search for a solution for her own kitchen floor led graphic artist Kathleen Nelson into a new business, KStudios in Santa Rosa, designing floor mats, created from sheet vinyl, which she transforms into stylish yet practical floor coverings.

These floor mats are a contemporary interpretation of earlier floor clothes. Humbly known as "crumble clothes," these decorative accessories can trace their heritage to 13th century France, 18th century England and colonial America. According to Nelson these 21st century adaptations can transform even the dreariest of rooms. By unifying, highlighting and accentuating a room's character, these floor mats anchor a room with color and design. To add to their benefits, the floor mats are easy-care protection for any hard surface such as wood and tile.

Nelson began painting mats about



Nelson started a second business creating floor mats after she made one for her own kitchen.

seven years ago and launched her business three years later. At the time she and her business partner Paige Sobel had a thriving graphic design business, Nelson Sobel. Nelson's second business began when Sobel commissioned an artist to design a floor mat for her home. "I was looking for a way to cover up the worn linoleum in my kitchen," Nelson said. "I

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thought the floor mat would be the perfect solution. After Paige got the finished floor mat I thought, 'I could do this.' I then began researching and experimenting with different materials and techniques," said Nelson.

Nelson honed her skills, giving her mats away to friends and family as gifts. From there KStudios was born.

"I've learned a ton," she said. "For example, at my first home show a friend was keeping me company at the booth. I had mentioned how hours of work could be totally lost during the final step of cutting the floor mat out. He simply said, 'Well, then cut it out first.' It was so obvious. But I was accustomed to the graphic design practice of trimming was the last thing you did. I now use a framer's matte cutter to cut a 45-degree angle along the edge by hand." This mitered edge reduces the likelihood of the paint chipping along the edges of the mat.

Sheet vinyl flooring is the primary material for the floor mats. "Vinyl remnants are really, really cheap. Since most of the floor mats I design are smaller than the standard 12-foot width of sheet flooring, remnants are a great option," she said. "I've also discovered commercial grade vinyl is the best for making floor mats.

"When looking for a piece of vinyl remember two points. First, the pattern and color of the remnant are of no importance since you'll be using the back as the top surface of your floor mat. However, with that said, it is also important to look for a generic embossing pattern on the vinyl. Strong patterns such as grids can eventually show through onto your hand painted floor mat."

One of the last steps of preparing the vinyl is to help it lose its memory. Vinyl is generally stored in rolls. In order for the finished hand-painted floor mat to lay flat the vinyl remnant is rolled up in the opposite direction. This back rolling creates a reverse memory. By changing its memory the mat will curl towards the floor allowing the mat to lay flat.

With those steps done, the fun is close at hand. Following an application of gesso, a sizing medium for painters' canvas, the vinyl is ready for its transformation. The design process is Nelson's favorite part. It allows her to return to her passion, the creation of art. "The inspiration for a design is generally something found in the room where the mat is to eventually be placed. I'm usually the one who finds that inspiration. The possibilities are endless."

As an example, she said, "The floor mat for Peri Payne's Napa kitchen came from the tiles. They are of sentimental value to her. ... Their pattern and colors resulted in a beautiful mat that is a perfect finish for Peri's kitchen."

Following the initial consultation, photos and measurements, Nelson creates a detailed computer generated pattern. Drawn to scale, that design is enlarged at Kinko's. Nelson then transfers the design to the prepared vinyl using graphic arts tracing paper.

The design begins to come to life as Nelson hand paints the vinyl with acrylic paints. "The floor mat painting is a physical art that uses the old traditional graphic design methods. There is much more freedom in this method. Also, it's nice to get away from the 'designing in a box' style of today's computer generated graphic arts," said Nelson. To add depth and dimension, Nelson uses faux painting and shading tech-

niques. The floor mat is then sealed with eight coats of polyurethane.

Nelson also teaches mat design classes. She is conducting a class today at Napa Valley College's Upper Valley campus.

"Teaching has helped me further refine my skills and expand my knowledge. Teaching may make you feel like a rock star because you are viewed as an expert. However, in reality, it is my continuing education."

As part of her workshops, Nelson demonstrates these steps, methods and more. She added, "You don't have to be an artist to create your own mat. One alternative to free hand painting is to use stencils. Plus, I give the workshop participants hundreds of pointers including faux painting techniques and the 'Five Foot' rule." Essentially, this rule encourages the mat painter to let go of obsessing over small details.

Nelson added, "That line that looks wavy up close will appear straight at five feet." In addition to having fun and gaining knowledge and hands-on experience, each participant creates a 16-inch by 24-inch floor mat creation at the workshops.

In addition to creating personalized designs, Nelson also provides a custom fit. "I specialize in unique shapes. I can make the floor mat fit any room configuration," she added. Generally priced at \$17 to \$45 per square foot, Nelson also supplies her clients with a separated underlayment which provides additional grip and protection as well as a touch up kit. She can be contacted at 575-8459 or www.kstudios-mats.com.