

Home & Garden

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KATHLEEN NELSON

Graphic designer Kathleen Nelson's custom floor mats were such a hit with friends, she decided to make it a business.

Walk-on Art

FLOOR MAT CLASSES

What: K Studios Custom Floor Mats

Information: 575-8459 or nsdkath@sonic.net

Upcoming classes:

Cover the entire floor mat process and include stencil, faux finish, stamp and design transfer techniques.

April 3 and July 30 — 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at Riley Street, 103 Maxell Court, Santa Rosa. \$65. 526-2416.

April 9 — 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Santa Rosa Junior College Community Education, 1501 Mendocino Ave., Santa Rosa. \$75. 527-4372. Register online at www.santarosa.edu/communityed.

May 28 — 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Napa Valley College Community Education, 1088 College Ave., St. Helena. \$60. 967-2901 or 253-3070. Register online at www.napavalley.edu.

Graphic designer turns pieces of vinyl flooring into unique floor mats

By MEG MCCONAHEY
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

For Michelangelo it was a chapel ceiling. Diego Rivera poured his passions onto walls. Other artists have been inspired to apply brush and paint to everything from furniture to lampshades.

But Kathleen Nelson found the perfect canvas right under her feet.

It was the unappealing sight of her own worn kitchen floor that prompted the Santa Rosa graphic designer — partly out of desperation — to create a whimsical “rug” out of a remnant of vinyl flooring.

Her little do-it-yourself home improvement project proved such a hit with friends and family that she started making similar rugs as gifts. Eventually, she was persuaded to go professional.

Now Nelson creates custom-made vinyl floor mats that are livening up kitchens and dining rooms throughout Wine Country. She also teaches how-to workshops through Santa Rosa Junior College and Riley Street



Nelson paints a design on a sheet of vinyl flooring.

CRISTA JEREMIASON / The Press Democrat

art supply stores for people who want to try their hand at making their own vinyl rugs.

The process, she said, doesn't necessarily demand artistic talent. If you aren't inclined to draw your

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ART: Vinyl floor remnants turned into colorful designs

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own designs right on the vinyl, you can use premade stencils or photocopy, enlarge and turn into transfers any design you like, like an element in your furniture or window coverings. One client incorporated checks from a tile backsplash and a favorite bowl into the format. Echoing design elements in a room is a common trick in interior design.

"Floor mats are functional art," said Nelson, whose own postwar bungalow near downtown Santa Rosa features several of the easy-care mats that stand out like high-quality rugs. "I love the idea of color from the ground up, working within the boundaries of a space, pulling the decor into the floor. It's an exciting way to lighten up or transform a room."

Using the same basic techniques of old-fashioned graphic design, which she has done professionally for more than 20 years, she creates images on paper and then transfers them to the backside of common vinyl flooring that she custom cuts for the space. Then she hand paints in the graphic — not unlike a coloring book, but with much more care — and gives it several coats of polyurethane to withstand water and all manner of spills.

Nelson is certainly not the first artist to paint on a rug. Her mats are basically a variation on traditional floor cloths, which have been around since the early 13th century, when the French started experimenting with them as a spinoff of table runners, painted wall hangings and tapestries.

By the 1700s the British had co-opted the practice of creating painted carpets, often using geometric patterns. They brought the idea with them to the colonies. Because of their popularity under dining room tables — even President Jefferson had a green one placed under a formal table in the White House — they came to be called "crumb cloths."

The old-style floor cloths were made of canvas, sailcloth or denim that was saturated with linseed oil to stiffen the cloth as it dried. The oilcloth canvases were then hand-painted free form or with stencils and sealed with varnish or

shellac.

"Settlers with limited resources created cheap floor coverings by painting images on heavy canvas, usually from worn ship sails," Nelson said. "These covered their planked floors to help keep out the cold and decorate their minimally furnished homes."

Specialty item

Nelson uses for her new generation of mats a synthetic variation of the very material whose invention was responsible for making the old floor cloths fall out of public favor. Easy-clean and care linoleum, which could be manufactured with decorative designs, had all but supplanted painted floor cloths by the early 1920s.

A few artists keep the art of floor cloths alive even today as a specialty. And Nelson said a return to natural surfaces in the kitchen is prompting homeowners to again look for ways to protect their floors.

"With so many people putting hardwood into their kitchens, they're now looking for a creative water and food barrier," she said. "So many have islands with sinks and no backsplash so the water goes right on the floor."

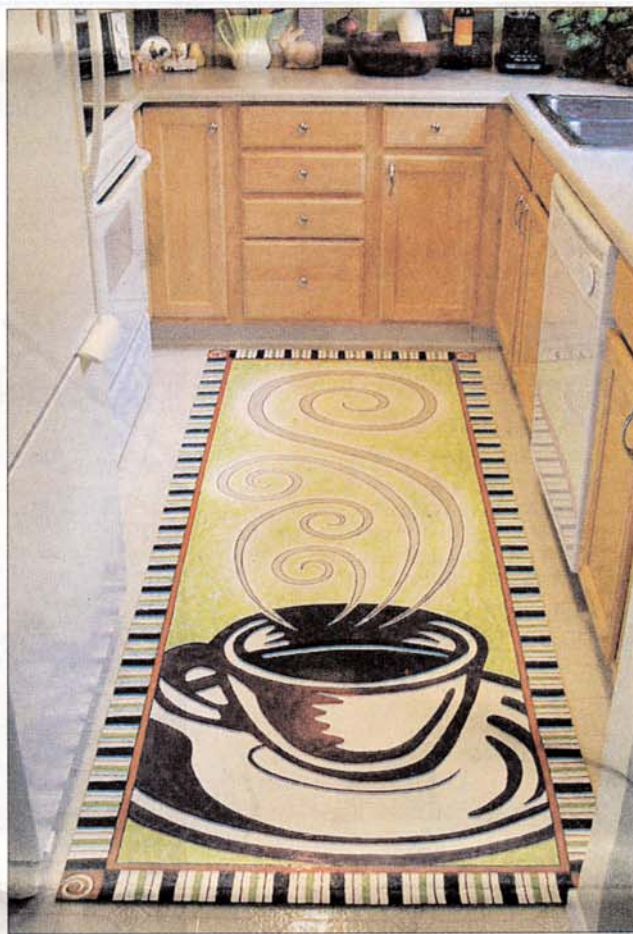
Not only is it messy, but water over time can seriously damage hardwood, she said. Vinyl is far more practical than treated cloth because it doesn't slide around and can be easily wiped up.

The mats work well on a variety of surfaces from tile to concrete. It can even be used on top of vinyl to jazz up older flooring without completely replacing it.

Nelson and the small number of other mat artists who are using vinyl have found it is not only a functional, impermeable material for a rug, but at \$17 to \$45 a square foot, it can give a custom look to a room at a relatively low cost.

One couple who commissioned a mat from Nelson's K Studios as part of a planned kitchen remodel scrapped the remodel altogether, she said, after seeing how a simple vinyl mat with graphic shapes, cut to following the outline of their kitchen cabinets, transformed the entire room.

"They are incredible. I had



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A hand-painted vinyl floor mat by Kathleen Nelson of Santa Rosa lives up a kitchen. The mats are sealed with polyurethane.

"Floor mats are functional art."

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never seen anything like this before," said Alicia Alexander, a designer with Florentine Interiors of Santa Rosa. "She can take just a wallpaper border and put it on the rug itself."

Florentine, which designs the interiors for model homes, is incorporating some of Nelson's mats into some of their projects. For a boy's room Nelson has created a bowling alley lane. When laid on the floor, the mat will end at the wall, where a muralist will paint exploding pins appearing to be at the moment of impact with a bowling ball.

Because the mats are much smaller than a regular kitchen floor surface, you can easily use vinyl remnants found at home supply stores. It doesn't matter how unattractive the color or design; you're just interested in the bare backside.

Acrylic paints

Nelson first draws out her designs, enlarges them and traces them onto the vinyl with graphite paper. She uses commonly found acrylic paints to

fill in the design.

The cool thing about vinyl mats versus commercial rugs is that they can be custom designed to your own space and tastes. Designs can be simple and understated or wild and whimsical.

For a galley kitchen she designed a giant steaming coffee cup inside a graphic piano-key style border of black, green and red. For the work area of another kitchen she designed a wraparound rug in mustard gold with an olive motif. Beneath her own dining room table she has a rug of rosebuds in pale Popsicle colors that pick up the blue and chartreuse in her chair pads.

Nelson said one of the best parts of the process is working out with clients what kind of rug will most suit their needs, whether it's under a table, catching water from a sink or fitting an oddly shaped nook.

"The beauty is they can be created in any size or shape or painted to pick up colors or elements in a room like tile or fabric," she said. "The possibilities are endless."

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