

# the Boxed Pillow

# Thinking Outside of

by Alice Vantrease

It started as a joke but it's turned into one of the biggest revenue producers we have in our shop: an 8' x 10' rug that Customer A keeps folded in our display area so she'll have something to work on when she stops by. It is a beautiful pre-worked pastel floral rug. She is working a background of two-inch squares pastel seafoam green and pale blue. The rug stays folded on top of an antique trunk where her yarn awaits her inside. The trunk also contains projects of other customers who love to stop by and stitch. These customers have turned into great salespeople for our shop. They gladly answer questions and are happy to suggest projects. One would think we'd get more credit for offering assistance since we work in the shop daily, but on many occasions, a customer will look to another customer as the preferred source of information. A frequent query is: "It's so big; I'd never get it finished." Customer A's favorite response is, "Yes you will. Who cares how long it takes you if you really love it. After all, what can you do with another boxed pillow?" She then goes on to explain how many other projects she has going on at the same time.

Customer A had never done any needlework when she walked into our shop on a Friday morning seven years ago. She had recently survived a brain aneurism and was looking for something to keep her busy until her doctor said she could drive again. Her patient husband stood by as we gave her a short class and she left our shop with a small golf ornament project.

She was back on Monday morning with the project completed. After asking (jokingly) if she was on amphetamines, we showed her several other small projects—but she spied a rug canvas displayed on our shop stand, pointed to it and said, "I want to do a rug." We didn't tell her it was too large of a project. Nor did we tell her it would take quite a while to finish. She left the shop with a magnolia rug and more yarn than she would need since she couldn't make up her mind which color would be best. "I'm sure I'll use it in some other future project," she said. Customer A was back

in a few days to get a smaller project to carry around with her while she worked on the rug at home.

Since that time, she has completed runners for her stairs, a 2' x 3' oriental design rug, Christmas stockings, several pillows, dog collars, door stops, pocketbooks, Lee wallets for all of her daughters and friends, a clothes ham-

and advice on the benefits of working on multiple projects to anyone willing to listen.

Another customer, we'll call her Customer C, is working on two identical 3' x 5' rugs for her children. She is approaching 90 and has been a needlepointer all of her life. She is in and out of our shop on a daily basis since she lives close by, and always brings one of her projects with her be it a large or small one. She too has become a great salesperson for our shop since her friendly attitude draws people to her for answers and encouragement. Customer C doesn't claim to be a canvas finisher but says she is a canvas collector. This isn't quite true. Her home in the Savannah Historic District is full of needlepoint pillows, wall hangings, tote bags, rugs, and her Christmas stockings are to die for. "They



per and more. Now that she is able to drive herself, she is in and out of the shop several times a week when she is in town. She always has one large project going as well as several smaller ones and she's quick to give encouragement

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belong to the house," she says. Within the past couple of years, Customer C has also finished three 2' x 3' oriental design rugs for her son's sailboat. She is never too busy to run over to the shop and bring one of her projects when we request it of her. When she is in the shop, we always ask her how many projects she has under her bed. "About seventy-five," was her last response. It always makes the one or two projects a customer is contemplating seem to be a bargain when they consider the investment in seventy-five projects. We were hesitant at first to ask her to bring a project over for another customer to see, but that has gone by the way-side. Her visits accomplish two things: the obvious—showing the shop customer a finished project—and the ongoing pat-on-the-back for a job well done to Customer C. All stitchers love and deserve praise for their work.

Customer D is another stitcher who loves large projects. "After all," she says, "how many pillows can you lay around your house?" So far this year, Customer D has stitched two kneelers, numerous ornaments which she gives away, and needlepoint upholstery for two chairs in her living room. She is currently working on a 25' x 37' needlepoint rug for her guest bathroom. She is one of our most enthusiastic stitchers. Customer D buys small canvases and stores them away for future use. Her largest project to date is a runner for her 15-step stairs

in her home. She finished it in slightly less than a-year-and-a-half. (Customer A settled on her runner project after seeing one of Customer D's canvases awaiting delivery in the shop.)

Both Customer A and Customer D are used to having people stop by their house asking to see the runners. A common remark is: "I'd never allow anyone to walk on something like that." Both women laugh out loud and remind the viewer that the runners will live on for many years after they are gone.

Customer E is working on two pieces—the Emperor and Empress of China—and keeps the Emperor on a stand in our shop. She works on it when she visits us. When stitchers fall in love with the Emperor but are afraid of its size, we show them smaller versions which most go on to purchase. Customer E has also just purchased a 3 x 5 rug to work on at home. She loves to say "Can't never could." She's right. If a customer can't see the possibilities of something great to stitch—they never could... unless we show them the wonderful range of projects the needlepoint craft offers.

Thinking outside of the boxed pillow has been wonderful for our shop and has created tremendous word-of-mouth marketing for the availability of large project needlepoint. This past month we have seen 12 rugs go out of our shop—some to regular customers and others to tourists. All were looking for "something to do" when they stopped in. All left with a lot to do. Most are working on small projects as well. If, by chance, a purchase is not made, we have postcards available of some of the more elaborate needlepoint projects, so that tourists can mail them to a stitcher friend back home. Of course we have the name of our shop as well on the other side of the card.

Please bear in mind that we know many customers will probably never work on a large project. Moreover, we are aware that never is an absolute killer to a sale if we don't explore the alternatives with a customer. We have also discovered one more thing: when we have fabulous large projects in our shop, customers tend to tell their friends about them and it draws people to the store. Therefore, our new goal is

to turn each visitor into a docent for our shop by letting them know how many wonderful projects are available to needlepointers today. That's why we keep a large project photo gallery on display in our shop too.



After many years in the business, we have to agree with Customer D: how many pillows can you put on a sofa? Therefore, thanks to our clever customers we have learned to think outside of the boxed pillow and show the wonderful world of larger projects to our stitchers. The possibilities continue to be endless and we can't wait for a customer to walk in with a new idea for a large project because we know it is contagious. (By the way: You'll notice that we will not mention a Customer B in this article since this is a label we give our more difficult customers. We've all had a customer B naysayer, haven't we. We hope to sell Miss B a rug real soon.)

*Alice Vantrease is the owner of Twiggs Needlepoint of Savannah. She is the author of the novel Charlie's Secret and a grandparent/child gardening book: The Rabbit in the Moon—a Garden Tale for the Young and the Young at Heart. Charlie's Secret is available through Amazon. The Rabbit in the Moon is out-of-print but in the process of being reprinted.*



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