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THE HOLIDAYS

Holiday Gift Guide Inside

Knot your average work



Don Hiltner of Don Thomas Designs developed his own innovative technique to create beautiful miniature rugs and wall hangings.

By Kim Carlson

A stitch in time saves nine," goes the old familiar saying. If that's the case, how many are saved with thousands of stitches per inch? Don Hiltner would be the person to ask. Don designs miniature rugs and wall hangings for dollhouses, room boxes, or to be framed as life-size wall art. His beautiful creations contain thousands of stitches.

Don has been designing and handcrafting fine collectible miniature rugs, carpets, and wall hangings professionally through Don Thomas Designs for over five years, but his passion and love for miniatures and rugs started long before that. In grade school Don created miniature models of various items, including a suspension bridge out of cardboard and string. "As I recall," Don says, "I was very impressed with my creation and yet I didn't think anyone would believe that I had made it myself."

Interestingly, his interest in rugs also goes back to his childhood. "When I was ten or eleven years old, I had hooked my first life scale rug from a kit," he recalls. "I remember finding great solace in the creative process of making this rug, which was like a special blanket that



RIGHT: Hooked rug of woman holding a 1940s vase, 4" x 5".



embodied a lot of warmth and charm."

His own technique

As an adult, Don's interest in rugs started about the same time that he rediscovered miniatures. "It was through my own desire to recreate a miniature rug of an old American Indian rug that I had found pictured in a book," says Don. "I recall adapting this design to my own liking, all the while paying very careful

attention to the most minute of details." Although his first handcrafted miniature rug turned out to be extremely crude and out of scale for what he desired, he was nevertheless proud of his creation.

Don started out doing his rugs the traditional miniature way such as using hand embroidery, "bunka," "needle punch," and then French knots. However, he was looking for a less time-consuming method of crafting his rugs,

so about five years ago he developed a new technique that allows him to put an incredible amount of detail in his rugs. "Thus," he explains, "my rugs contain thousands upon thousands of stitches per inch. In addition, I am able to scale my rugs for the absolute in true realism." These features allow Don to work in an unlimited amount of styles and designs, unlike other methods that have traditionally existed.

A wide range

He creates rug designs that are original as well as adapted from earlier styles, ranging from the primitive to the contemporary. "My work is also well suited for that special occasion such as a wedding where, for example, a traditional folk art design rug, personalized, could make a very unique and memorable gift for the happy couple," he says. In addition to his own designs, Don welcomes custom

ABOVE: Front and back views (inset) of a William Morris design knotted rug, 4 1/2" x 2 1/2".





work for portraits, birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, and other special occasions.

Don sells his pieces through his website, at some local retail businesses, and in miniature shows in California. The price of his works range widely, between seventy to three thousand dollars, depending on the amount of detail in the design as well as the size of the rug. "When I first started out, some of my earlier rugs were hard to sell because I was emotionally attached to them," he admits. "Now I'm thrilled and excited when a piece sells!"

He's not doing workshops at this point in his career, in part because the

embroidery process he developed and uses requires a lot of artistry, skill, and time. "This keeps me busy," he explains, adding that "at this time, I prefer to keep my process secret." Not content to rest on his laurels, however, Don is always looking to develop new and different techniques, as well as new and exciting styles and designs. He hopes to design and create some larger miniature tapestries.

As to the value and place of miniatures, Don is very articulate. "These unique tokens frequently elicit fond but perhaps long-forgotten memories from another era, allowing us

to keep these memories alive and close to our hearts for years to come," he says. "With them we have the ability to create our own individual view of the world, both past and present, that we can share with friends and family alike." www.donthomasdesigns.com

GET IN touch

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ABOVE: A collection of Don's unique rugs.