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**IN LOVING MEMORY OF OUR FRIEND, TEACHER,
NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED THEOREM ARTIST
SANDRA J. COLDREN**

Sandra Jean Coldren passed on January 20, 2015 after battling cancer since September 2014. She was 59. She resided in Lititz, Pennsylvania, in the heart of Lancaster County. She is survived by her mother, Kathryn Coldren, brother Larry Coldren and sister Debra Nauman, a nephew and two nieces.

Sandy was a founding member of the Distelfink Chapter of SALI in 1991. Her SALI (now IDAL) membership number was 271, which she was proud of. Sandy was active attending SALI conventions yearly when it was deeply rooted in its stenciling beginnings. She was president of SALI at the 2003 Dearborn, Michigan convention. Sandy started the Annual Distelfink Country Christmas craft show within one year of creating the Distelfink Chapter and we just had the 23rd show. The show has been an annual success featuring unique, juried handcrafted items.

In 1972, Sandy painted her first theorem as a gift for her grandmother. She knew she was hooked! It would be another 15 years before she would start selling her pieces of art. Sandy's business was known as Theorems by SJC and founded in 1983. Her business grew as she continued to teach, demonstrate and participate in many juried craft and folk art shows. Her theorems have won many awards and were shown at many exhibitions. Her theorems can be found decorating the walls of her many collectors of fine folk art worldwide.

Sandy's passion for early American arts and crafts, theorem stenciling and Pennsylvania German arts always made us eager to learn more, laugh loudly and enjoy every class she taught and every meeting she attended. Every Distelfink meeting was more interesting because of Sandy. Some of us had never heard of Robert's Rules of Order until our chapter meetings with Sandy. She held many board positions in her 24 years as a Distelfink member, including President. Sandy brought knowledge and passion. She unselfishly shared her arts knowledge with us eagerly as she felt that historic arts were never to be forgotten; but embraced and enjoyed for many generations. Her practice of historic accuracy was apparent when she created her own oil paints with pigments and oil. She painted her lovely theorem paintings on cotton velveteen. Her frames for her works of art were beautifully grained in a "fancy" method; again, using historic techniques. Sandy taught us how to stencil using velvet wrapped around our finger rather than using a brush! One of her classes was painting "The Gilbert Rabbit". She adapted her theorem design from a watercolor drawing (ca.1795-1800) by fraktur artist John Conrad Gilbert (1734-1812). This was believed to be the earliest portrayal in American art of the mythical "Easter Rabbit."

Sandy's love of the arts did not start or end with stenciling. She enjoyed taking classes learning about old arts; including painting authentic band boxes from New England with ink; reverse glass painting, fancy graining, vinegar painting, Pennsylvania German boxes, fraktur, candle boxes, Salt/Spice box reproduction of Samuel L. Plank, Pennsylvania German (Pennsylvania Dutch) decorative painting, pith painting and many more.

Sandy had written articles on the art of theorem painting and wood graining, and has lectured and demonstrated her craft at Landis Valley Museum and the College of William and Mary in Colonial Williamsburg. In addition to having worked at High Steel for the past 41 years, Sandy made her hobby her passion. She once said, "Being a self-employed entrepreneur in the craft industry affords me the opportunity to set my hours and to pace my production while receiving great inner satisfaction from working with my hands. I am able to nurture my love of history and of traditional ways while surviving economically in today's contemporary society."

She has been honored by Early American Life magazine as one of America's Top 200 Traditional Craftspeople. In an article in Early American Life, December 2009, the article states, "While the number of artists creating theorem paintings has dwindled, the paintings themselves remain popular in homes featuring period decor. Sandy was very proud of her German heritage and it was a part of her work. She said, "I really do love the old designs - the fruit, flowers and birds - but my heritage is Pennsylvania German, so you'll find a lot of German motifs added to my designs." Sandy also said, "I was lucky enough to be able to study under several talented theorem artists and historians. Like every traditional craft, theorem painting must be learned and then passed on, so today I'm fortunate to take what I've learned and teach it to others." Sandy's theorems were aged to look very old. She said, "But then I found one of mine for sale in an antiques shop where the proprietor insisted it was produced in the 1800's. I realized that if I wanted to continue aging my work, I must start putting the date on the front of the painting instead of on the backing where it could be torn off. When I started selling my work without antiquing, it became another form of distinction between mine and the work of others."

Her professional affiliations in leadership positions with the Landis Valley Museum, the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen, Lancaster Designer Craftsmen, SALI and the Distelfink Chapter of IDAL enabled Sandy to lead through example and share a passion for the arts with others. Sandy believed, "Craftspeople working in traditional medias must value historical accuracy and processes." Her training reflected her philosophy. She studied theorem technique at the Fletcher Farm School for the Arts in Vermont, Winterthur, Colonial Williamsburg and with the New York State Historical Association. Her studies continued through teachings by several well-known "masters" in the craft field.

Sandy's passing has left a void in the historic craft and folk art community. Her smile, generosity and wealth of knowledge and sharing of that knowledge will be sorely missed by our Distelfink Chapter of the International Decorative Artisans League. We lost a very gifted artist and friend. For more photos and information, visit our website: www.DistelfinkArtisans.com.

- ABOUT THEOREM PAINTING -
AS WRITTEN BY SANDRA JEAN COLDREN

THEOREM PAINTING

SANDRA JEAN COLDREN

Theorem painting, also known as formula painting on velvet painting, was a popular art form introduced to America from England in the early 1800's. It was the trend of fashionable young ladies of the period to complete their education by attending "finishing schools" which provided instruction toward their cultural development. Many offered studies in needlework, drawing, painting, botany and philosophy. Historical records of such seminaries refer to the art of theorem painting as an elegant accomplishment for young ladies. It peaked in popularity around 1840 and was prominent in New England, where most of the schools were located. Itinerant painters are credited with spreading the art south and westward.

The term "theorem" is believed to refer to the manner in which a picture is analyzed and divided into parts from which stencils are cut. Originally, "theorems" referred only to the stencils used in the process, but later came to mean the finished painting as well. Defined in the "Illustrated Glossary of Decorated Antiques", theorem painting is "the art of painting with oils or watercolors through a stencil onto velvet, silk or paper."Therefore, theorem painting is simply a sophisticated form of stenciling with examples ranging from the very crude to those exhibiting a pleasant array of detail and shading.

In many instances, the task of students from the early schools was not to create new designs, but to copy as accurately as possible, the design provided by their teachers. This explains why several examples of the same pattern can be found today. Popular motifs depict fruit, flowers and birds.

The technique of theorem painting involves producing a line drawing or tracing of the subject matter. The elements of the drawing are then divided and numbered, and a series of stencils produced. The paint is applied through the stencils using a short stiff brush known as a "scrub", or by wrapping a piece of cloth around one's finger. Most theorems are produced with two to seven stencils which allow the artist to achieve soft shaded effects unknown in other art forms. After the stencil work is complete, details and finishing touches are applied freehand using a liner brush.

Early supplies included stencils which were cut from thin paper that had been treated with linseed oil and coated with varnish for strength. Newspaper ads offered the many chemicals and pigments necessary for mixing paints. Today's theorem artists; however, are enjoying the availability of modern materials such as waxed stencil paper or mylar and ready-mixed paints. While the technique remains the same, the artist now has the opportunity to express creativity rather than exact copying.

The short-lived interest in theorem painting (1830-1860) seems surprising until one reads this early quote on the decline of velvet painting: "Frightful specimens multiplied until it has dropped into oblivion and is scarcely mentioned except in the country, where painting has not made great progress." Because of this and since no mass production ever occurred, very few originals still exist.

Theorem painting revived in the late nineteenth century and again in the 1960's. And it continues to flourish among today's artists who have come to know and appreciate the art.

Original works can be seen at the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center in Williamsburg, Virginia, the New York State Historical Association in Cooperstown, New York; the Shelbourne Museum in Vermont; the Concord Antiquarian Society in Massachusetts; and Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts.

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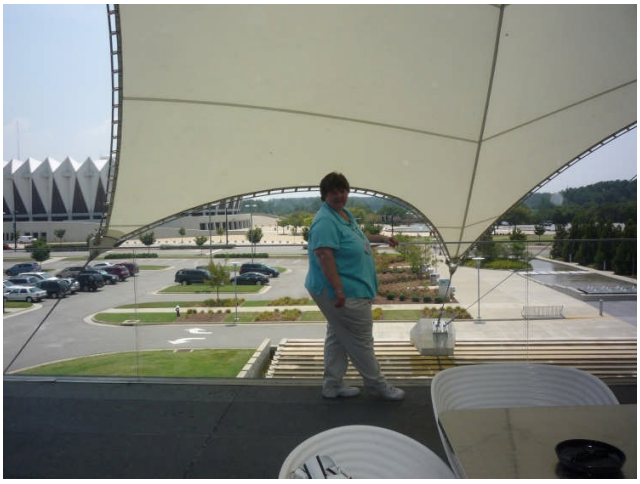
Some of Sandy's art.
She was passionate about historical theorems, but had a whimsical side too.


S. J. Coldren

Sandy in her element – teaching or demonstrating

Or learning new tricks

Convention Memories



Celebrating 20 years in 2011

Sandy generously donated the center squares for many of our raffled quilts.

Sandra Coldren mixes her own oil paints to achieve the bright colors of original theorem paintings, as on this overflowing basket of fruit. She does not age her work.

they become very familiar with the design they'll be executing. They'll also have a better understanding of how it's going to fit together. And there's a certain amount of satisfaction in doing the entire process, start to finish."

Her stencils are paper, which means you cannot see through them. "That way you have to rely on your instinct and your memory, just like the early artists did," she explained. "Now, would they have used Mylar if they'd had it back in the 19th Century? Probably."

Rosier recounts how she learned to cut her own Mylar stencils because none existed for the theorem paintings she first saw in museums. "I'm not doing just one theorem, and the stencils are very precious to me," she said. "I want them to last as long as possible. Of course if they would have had Mylar in the mid-1800s they probably would have used it as well because you can see right down through it. It's amazing to me how beautiful some of the antique theorems are when you consider they couldn't see through their paper stencils, which made positioning much more difficult."

"I truly believe the invention of laser-cut theorem patterns has helped to keep the craft alive and to grow," Coldren said, although she almost exclusively uses stencils she cuts herself. "In the past your theorem was only as good as your cut stencil, and anyone who has ever cut a theorem stencil knows it takes a lot of practice. I also teach stencil cutting as a class because it's a craft that needs to be passed on so it's not forgotten."

Lefko also creates her own stencils, using Mylar. "It's an art to cut one well," she said of deciphering and cutting stencils based on period paintings. "Some of the designs are very intricate, crazy, wild things, while others are quite simple."

PAINT CHALLENGE

Although most 19th-Century artists used watercolors, most contemporary theorem painters rely on oil paints. Even Lefko, the most fervent purist of the group, considers oil paints an acceptable deviation from strict authenticity.

"The watercolors that we know today are not the same composition of the watercolors of 1820," she explained. "My professional life has been geared toward replicating the old stuff as appropriately as possible. If you can use the exact same materials, that's one thing, but with the watercolors, there's no way you can do

True to her heritage, Sandra Coldren often employs Pennsylvania German elements from *fraktur*—such as these tulips and distlefinks—into her theorem paintings, produced on cotton velveteen.