

Got It Covered

Artist Kathy Cooper helped get Sawtooth back on right track

By Janice Gaston
JOURNAL REPORTER

Artist Kathy Cooper knows how to make a splash. When she paints floorcloths, the medium in which she makes her living, she covers her canvases with bold colors and fanciful patterns. As a volunteer, she is known for holding strong opinions, speaking bluntly and getting the job done.

People call her unconventional, tenacious and persistent. She lives in an old, traditional house in the Washington Park neighborhood, where she painted the dining room dark purple and covered its original dark wood mantle with white paint. She tools around town in a pea-green Honda Element that evokes frequent comments.

Cooper is a Southern woman, a former debutante from a conservative background. She grew up in Buena Vista in an era when girls were often cautioned against displaying unladylike behavior. Her friend, Sherri Nielson, grew up in Biloxi, Miss. She often heard the warning: "Be sweet. Don't be ugly."

If Cooper heard similar warnings, she didn't pay much attention.

"I have always been incredibly defiant," Cooper said.

Cooper is kind and thoughtful and funny, Nielson said. She is creative and smart, said Jane Doub, another friend.

But Cooper is not sweet, Nielson said. She chooses not to be.

Cooper recently completed her term as president of the board of directors for the Sawtooth School for Visual Art, where Nielson is the executive director. Cooper came in at a time when people were wondering if the Sawtooth would ever get back on track, Nielson said. The school had run through a series of directors, and things needed stirring up.

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JOURNAL PHOTOS BY DAVID ROLFE

Kathy Cooper paints a floorcloth, an art form that dates to the Colonial era.

About Kathy Cooper

- **AGE:** 53.
- **HOMETOWN / BIRTHPLACE:** Winston-Salem.
- **EDUCATION:** Attended the University of Georgia, Penland School of Crafts and Haystack Mountain School of Crafts.



KATHY COOPER

Two daughters, Sunny, 17; Libba, 14.

• **PHILOSOPHY:** "Perfection, I've just determined, is not necessarily the best goal. Perfection is not really obtainable. If you are constantly going to be looking for perfection, you're going to be disappointed."



Cooper works on a detail in a floorcloth. She is a leader in her field, writing books, teaching workshops and appearing on TV.

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Cooper didn't hesitate to wield the spoon.

"We needed a strong hand and someone who said what needed to be said," Nielson said. "That's what she brought to the table." She also brought business sense, said Doub, the executive director of Piedmont Craftsmen. "It gave her the ability to work with a variety of different people — the artistic and those who only see it in black and white."

One of Cooper's achievements was recruiting several new board members, Nielson said. "She put the right people on the board that established confidence in the organization again."

Cooper has carved a career niche with floorcloths, an art form that dates to the Colonial era. When she began painting them in 1979, she was simply making floor coverings in keeping with her vintage house.

Now Cooper is a leader in her field. She co-wrote *The Complete Book of Floorcloths* and wrote *The Weekend Crafter: Painting Floorcloths*. She teaches workshops and makes TV ap-

pearances. She sells her floorcloths at trade shows and paints custom pieces.

"I usually call her the guru of floorcloths," Doub said.

Not long ago, Cooper attended a political event at which most of the people hold conventional jobs. As she made small talk, she described her work.

"They looked at me like I was a drug dealer," she said. No matter.

"I feel really lucky I can scrape along and make a living doing what I like," she said.

She worries about the changes that she sees in the crafts market. Fewer young people are going into it, she said, and the older ones are getting out. Arts schools sometimes teach students all about creating but nothing about marketing and selling their work.

"We're lucky that we have a community arts school here," she said, referring to the Sawtooth. "Not every town does." People who simply want to try their hands at crafts can take a pottery class or a jewelry-making class.

"We don't want people to lose touch with things they can do by hand," she said. The Sawtooth has tried to extend its

reach by establishing relationships with other organizations, such as the Children's Museum. Artists in the crafts world want to make sure that people remain interested in fine crafts.

"You can go to Pottery Barn or Target — some of my favorite places — and buy really nice things," Cooper said. Home magazines encourage people to buy trendy items by focusing on one look one year, then another the next. But fine crafts should be timeless.

"The thing about buying art is you're investing in somebody's life and establishing a relationship with them," Cooper said. She charges \$40 a square foot for her floorcloths, and much of her work is done on commission.

Before she designs a piece, she asks customers to send color and fabric samples, photographs of their rooms and specific requests for design elements. One woman wanted to incorporate images of her cats in her floorcloth. When Cooper depicted one cat in a pose that the woman didn't like, Cooper changed it.

"It's real personal," she said.

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