

BY HAND

HUNG BY THE CHIMNEY

Even without the goodies, these one-of-a-kind hand-stitched stockings are sweetly special. TEXT NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

Stuffing these needlepoint stockings with goodies only adds to their sweetness and heightens the magic of Christmas memories. Visions of sugar plums are sure to dance through the head of any child lucky enough to receive such a heartfelt hand-stitched treasure.

Stitchers who create the beautiful heirloom-quality projects are special people, says Judith Carter, owner of Needleworks in Homewood, Alabama. "What they stitch, why they stitch, and for whom they're stitching—my customers are the true legacy." Judith's store and similar specialty shops offer canvases hand-painted by designers, a wide selection of yarn colors and types, and experienced staff members to provide guidance.

By contrast, general-merchandise stores offer needlepoint packages with screen-printed canvases. "With mass-produced screen-printed canvases, the design can't be registered accurately because of slippage due to a high-speed press," Judith explains. "It's not the same thing as someone visually checking every stitch on the chart." This is the case with a hand-painted canvas.

Also, such needlepoint packages often include all the components for a project. "All the decisions have been made," Judith says. Serious stitchers enjoy choosing just the right shade and texture of yarn. They delight in discovering which material most closely resembles St. Nick's beard, or which see-through fiber allows tree branches to peek through the glow of a stitched candle perched on a bough.

Beginners are encouraged to take an hour-long class from the Needleworks staff to experiment with different-size canvases and yarn types before deciding on a project. "You want to feel confident in what you're doing, because you're investing a lot of time and money," Judith explains. Hand-painted, designer-created canvases can range from \$150 to \$400. Another \$400 or so may be spent on materials. In addition, there are finishing costs when the completed canvas is assembled into a final product, including backing, monograms, and other embellishments.

"We try to help people leave with a clear idea of what's going to happen," she says. That includes knowing that stitched projects take time. Judith cites Christmas stockings that one of her customers made for grandchildren Landon and Garrett. "Their grandmother started on these before they were born," she says. "It takes about a year to stitch a stocking."

Needlepoint projects are about more than just the end product, however. The actual process of the art form can be relaxing and therapeutic. "It wouldn't be the same to go out and buy a piece already stitched and give it as a gift," says Judith. That would be similar to the difference between baking a cake from scratch and picking up one from the day-old bakery. "It's about people putting their personal taste into the pieces that are truly stitched with love."



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"Every stitcher has a unique purpose for stitching a Christmas stocking. Each stocking becomes a work of art with a story to tell." —JUDITH CARTER



STOCKING HOW-TO

1. Choose a hand-painted stocking canvas that reflects the interests of the intended recipient. **2.** Personalize the stocking by selecting yarns and threads in colors and textures that are pleasing to you. Using appropriate stitches, complete the design first. Basket weave, a tent-stitch variation, is often used for completing the background. **3.** Store the stocking after the holidays by lightly stuffing the body and layering between acid-free tissue in a cool, dry location.

