

Attention Swappers!

by Maddy Cranley

There was a front-page headline in the daily newspaper recently that definitely caught my attention. It read, "Needlepoint pirates pillage on Net". To see the subject of needlepoint displayed among world news and political commentary was quite unusual in a big city newspaper. Although, the timing was certainly appropriate. It was in that same week that the Napsters web site was being sued in court for alleged illegal distribution of pop music on the Internet. The newspaper wire service had decided to investigate other flagrant examples of "swapping" commodities and discovered that needlework, particularly cross-stitch had become a target of widespread "sharing" of original and copyrighted designs. This "sharing" for the most part was without benefit to or accompanied by permission of the author. According to this article, one woman is alleged to have 3,000 cross-stitch patterns scanned into her database, is willing to share these patterns with her personal list of several hundred people and is said to operate only one of a number of sites boasting possession of an equally large cache of patterns.

The International Needlework Retailers Guild wants to inform consumers that "sharing" may on the surface appear as a kind or friendly gesture but when it reaches these proportions of volume, it becomes a very ungenerous act to the designer who will receive no compensation from the majority of people who may download their original design. The Guild has recently formed a new committee to deal with copyright issues and as well has started a legal fund in case it becomes necessary to pursue an action through the courts to curb this systemized bootlegging. Jennifer Aikman-Smith, who designs cross-stitch patterns and markets them through her company Dragon Dreams Inc. and is a member of this newly created committee, wants "to educate the public so that they don't think that this is what is normal or this is what they're entitled to, because there won't be a cross-stitch industry."

Now, we have all likely passed on a recipe or perhaps lent out a knitting pattern book but the issue in the cyber world is that the original physical leaflets are not being shared. Aikman-Smith says, "If you buy a paperback book, you can sell it at a yard sale, you can give it to a friend, you can give it to your church for their rummage sale, but you can't scan it into the Internet and start distributing it for free." This would be an obvious infringement of the copyright. In the case of cross-stitch, these people who have thousands of patterns scanned from original pattern leaflets into their databases, defend their actions by stating their accumulated scans are merely used as a backup source and that they would have to purchase the original pattern as the scanned and printed quality on the home computer is so poor. This reasoning is disputed by Jim Hedgepath, president of Pegasus Originals, Inc., a cross-stitch designing company in Lexington, South Carolina, who says the quality of the new scanners is good enough to print out instructions that can look exactly like the store-bought originals. As well he says of the swappers, "They spend a lot of time teaching each other better scanning techniques." In reply to the excuse that swappers complain of the lack of retail outlets that stock a sufficient variety of patterns, Hedgepath says, "Well, they're killing off the (designers) that are left." With business in his 22-year old company down 40 per cent over the last three years, he will admit that not all of the downturn is due to the Internet swapping. Since needlework projects are hard work and time consuming, people with less available leisure time are looking for more quick and easy projects but he does conclude that the cyber swapping is a big factor in his decreasing sales.

On the one hand, it is wonderful to see such enthusiastic interest in the needlework crafts. On the other hand, if this kind of "swapping" becomes too widespread, creative designers will find other things to do if they are unable to be compensated for their talent. If that happens, all needleworkers will lose as we will miss out on the creativity generated by these designers.

Authors of designs and patterns may sometimes offer a free pattern as a promotion to introduce crafters to their pattern line or may allow retailers to do the same but always with the goal to earning an income from their work. As individual customers we can do our part by

verifying the sources of the pattern to ensure that copyright is protected and to deal with reputable retailers. At the end of the day, it will benefit us all.

Maddy Cranley is a professional knitwear designer, who has created exclusive designs for knitting and craft magazines, authored and published three books on the subject of creating felt garments and projects from handknitting, and produces an ever-growing line of maddy laine handknitting patterns. For additional information, see <http://www.maddycraft.com>

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