

# Stenciling is a viable choice for decorating

By BRUCE STAPLEY

Gretchen Johnson is an artist whose specialty involves a decorative artform dated before the time of Christ.

The Boyer Street, Stouffville resident has capitalized on her interest in art and decorating, combining the two in her own cottage industry business, 'Stencils by Gretchen.'

According to Gretchen, stenciling is a decorating form that was used by the Chinese several thousand years ago, as well as the ancient Romans.

In more recent history, stenciling was an extremely popular method of wall treatment in colonial times in North America. Both the White House, and the house of Mark Twain, were stenciled for decorative purposes in the late 1800s.

"Stenciling", says Gretchen, "is the application of color through precisely cut out designs. The material used today is usually mylar, although in the past waxed paper, tin, ciled paper, and even oiled hides were used."

Since 1983, Gretchen has been attempting to revive this 'Old World' craft, with considerable success. Her customers have taken advantage of an opportunity to have a custom designed decorating effect in their homes or businesses.

"It really gives a person the chance to create a beautifully coordinated look in a house", says Gretchen, whose collection of stencils include her own originals, plus some antique stencils found

in the attic of a Markham house built in 1875.

"And if someone wants to match a pattern on their upholstery, I can make up a stencil and use it on the walls."

While stenciling is usually associated with country decor, Gretchen maintains it is most adaptable.

"It can go with all different styles and trends of furniture, from Victorian through art deco. It's not just country, it can be anything."

Gretchen offers a complete service to her customers, from helping select an appropriate stencil, through climbing up a ladder or scaffolding and actually painting the pattern. This can be a tedious task, as each color must be done separately.

But the final effect is nothing less than stunning, a pleasing alternative to commercially and synthetically produced effects.

And she claims the cost can be very competitive when compared with the price of wallpapering, or even painting a room. The potential for creating various effects is endless, she says.

"You can create the look of Dutch tiles, bricks, or whatever." Her list of clients include several Markham-Stouffville area businesses, as well as homeowners, or people who want that added touch on a blanket box, chair, or coffee table.

Her work can be seen on the walls of Bruce County Oak and Pine in Stouffville, on the floor of the front window display of the

Kauffman Gallery in Markham, and in the dressing rooms of Eleven Joseph Street in Markham.

"People appreciate the fact that what I am doing is hand-done artwork", she claims. "It appeals to those who like unique hand-crafted things."

Gretchen's artistic interests go back to her school days in Wilmington, Delaware.

"From Grade 7 to 12, I took scholarship art classes in Wilmington", she explains.

She came to Stouffville with husband Jim in 1981. After stenciling her own home, she decided she'd like to do the same thing for other people, providing her with the opportunity to contribute a few dollars towards raising a family that includes five children.

"Necessity is the mother of invention", she smiles.

"We had a large family on a small budget." While she doesn't entertain notions of getting rich at stenciling, she does approach it with a discipline usually associated with full-time pursuits.

She's forever coming up with new applications of the historic artform. Her latest project has found her bringing back the 'fire-board', a wooden fireplace cover that was used in colonial days to keep dust, debris, and chimney swallows from finding their way inside the house when the fireplace was not in use.

Gretchen will be setting up shop at the Country Decorating and Collectables Show March 19 and 20 at the Markham Fairgrounds.

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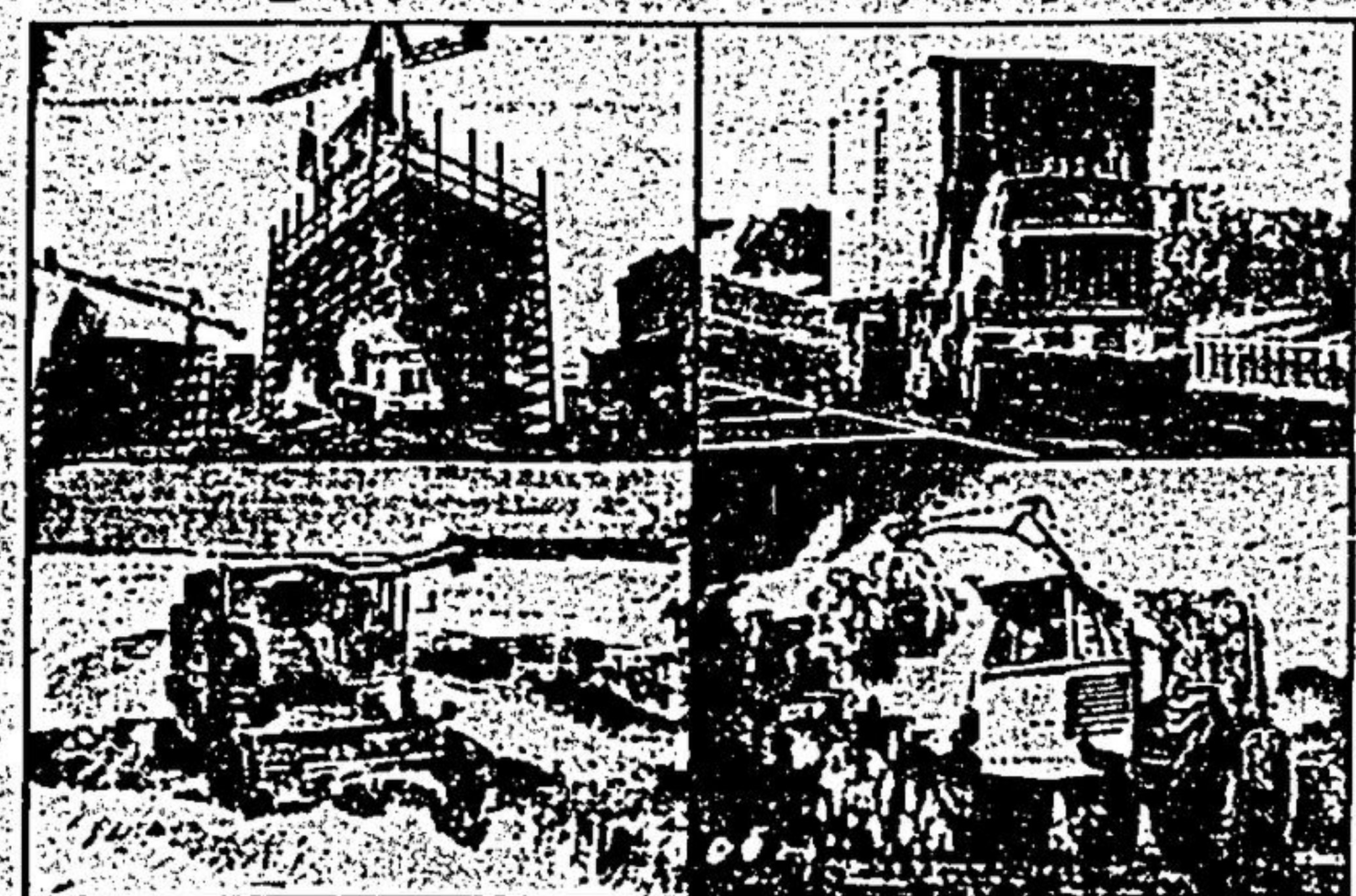
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