

CUSTOM-MADE KALEIDOSCOPES

Written by June Grayson

If you want to give a present that will be remembered long after the party is over, give a custom-made kaleidoscope by Carolyn Bennett.

Bennett is a painter and former high school art teacher turned scope artist. "Adults love kaleidoscopes," Bennett says. "Maybe it is because when they look through scopes, it takes them back to the wonders of their childhood, or

maybe it is just the delight of being able to make constantly changing designs. Adults are buying more of my scopes for themselves than for their children."

Her kaleidoscopes range from tiny \$15.00 "magic wands" to a giant walk-in kaleidoscope for a children's play park. She has approximately 20 designs of production scopes and also makes limited editions of contemporary sculptural scopes with the high tech look which are sold in art galleries and crafts shops.

One of her most popular models is the one-of-a-kind custom scope. Ask for a message in it and she calls it a "kaleidogram".

A kaleidoscope is a mirrored tube that lets the light shine through an object case at one end. Turn the tube or the case and create constantly changing and breathtakingly beautiful designs from any jumble of mundane objects.

Small wonder that committed kaleidoscope collectors attach an almost mystical significance to these fleeting glimpses of an ordered universe in a fractured world.

David Brewster, a Scottish scientist esteemed for his research on polarized light, accidentally invented the first

kaleidoscope in 1816, thus precipitating the first wave of mirror mania. Within a few months, eager entrepreneurs sold thousands of scopes throughout Europe. Scopes continued to flourish as parlor entertainment during the Victorian age only to languish with the advent of radio and television.

The resurrection of the kaleidoscope began with the American home craft movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Talented artists started their own cottage industries and sold their scope interpretations at craft fairs and flea markets.

Perhaps only five to ten crafters could support themselves this way until the SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE published an article in 1982 about the scope resurgence. Now there are more than 50 serious artists working full time to supply the five million scopes sold annually in the United States.

Bennett was one of the first craftpersons to turn to a full time business ten years ago. She started by making scopes by hand in her living room at night. Now she has a new corporate headquarters in Media, a Philadelphia suburb, where she designs, manufactures, and ships 50,000 scopes yearly to her 1,500 worldwide accounts.

Even though she has hit the big time, she still revels in coming up with new ideas for her custom scopes. Call her and

describe your needs and she will come up with the perfect variation for any occasion.

Her favorite story concerns the shy suitor who was afraid to pop the question. "I made a scope that did it for him," Bennett explains. "I used a romantic paper on the outside of the tube. The object case held pink hearts, white pearls, and the words - Carol, will you marry me? He told me that it worked."

For birthdays, she will incorporate the favorite colors and interests of the would-be recipients. Since the tube consists of two layers of lucite, an appropriately printed paper placed between the layers can help carry out the theme. For a man who loved the sea, she put seashells in the object case. For a Valentine's Day gift, what else but hearts and flowers?

The scientific principles by which the kaleidoscope works are simple. The images are formed by two, three, or four inclined mirrors inside the tube that create reflections of reflections. The number of images depends on the number of mirrors and the angles between them. A 90 degree angle produces four images, a 60 degree angle six images, and a 45 degree angle eight images and so on.

Bennett uses "first-surface" mirrors where the silver is on the top surface of the glass or film rather than the bottom as in the common household mirror. This makes the images unbelievably crisp and brilliant as compared to those in a child's inexpensive toy scope.

Sometimes she suspends the object in the case in a special oil so that the design continues to move seductively even after you stop turning the scope.

Perhaps her biggest orders come from the corporations, charity organizations, and governmental agencies that want something different and memorable for their next promotion.

She recently did one for CBS to give to their European distributors to promote a Cindy Lauper record.

She made the 30 scopes that were gifts to Russian dignitaries on a state visit to Pennsylvania. The case was red, white, and yellow, bearing the words, Partners for Peace, and displaying the American eagle and the Russian hammer, sickle, and star.

The New York Times commissioned 1,500 special scopes to introduce a new magazine section. Bell Telephone of Ohio ordered custom scopes to promote their new Centrex. And a Houston opera

company gifted it 90 patrons with a scope worthy of the occasion.

The cost of your custom-made scope will depend on the materials you choose. A simple "Happy Birthday, George" can be relatively inexpensive. But if you get carried away and specify semi-precious gems for the object case your cost can skyrocket.

Plan on three to four weeks (five to six weeks during busy holiday seasons) so that you can receive your order in time and not be disappointed.

Someday your heirs may appreciate your ingenuity.

An antique kaleidoscope sold for \$31,229 at Sotheby's in London in February, 1987 - the highest known price ever paid for an antique scope.

If that special someone is a photographer, let him create his own kaleidoscopic images. Order Bennett's new SCOPELENS introduced in November, 1987. Attached to a 50 mm . lens for an SLR 35 mm camera, this will allow him to photograph whatever he can dream up.

"It's a happy business to be in," Bennett says.

"Kaleidoscopes bring joy to people of all ages."

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SIDEBAR (to follow story)

For ideas to create your customized kaleidoscope,
call Carolyn Bennett at Bennett Scopes, Inc.

14 South Jackson Street

POB 721

Media, PA 19063

This address contains both a retail shop for
kaleidoscopes and the workrooms.

One customized scope for that special occasion,
including perhaps a greeting and a name starts at \$25.00.

Individual customized Lucite scopes start at \$50.00.

Small scopes in quantity start at \$9.50 each. Prices
will vary according to the material used and the quantity
ordered.

The SCOPELENS costs \$450.00 including protective
case.

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