

SACRED SILKS

Parlaying diplomacy and a unique idea into a finished product

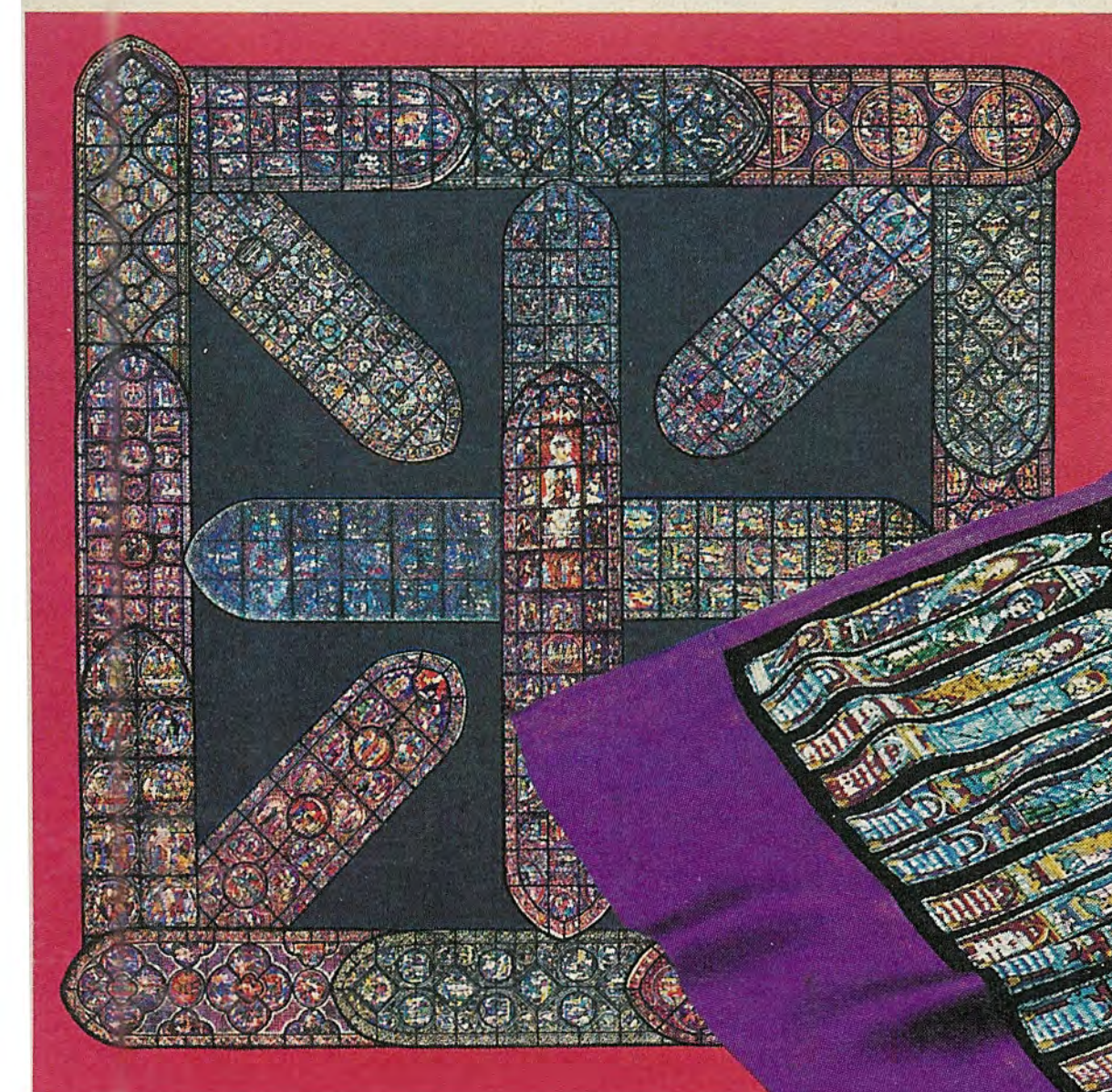
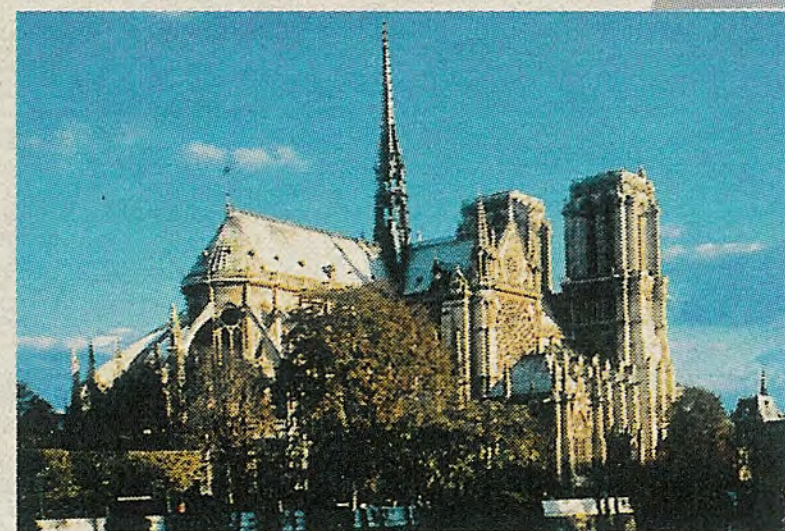
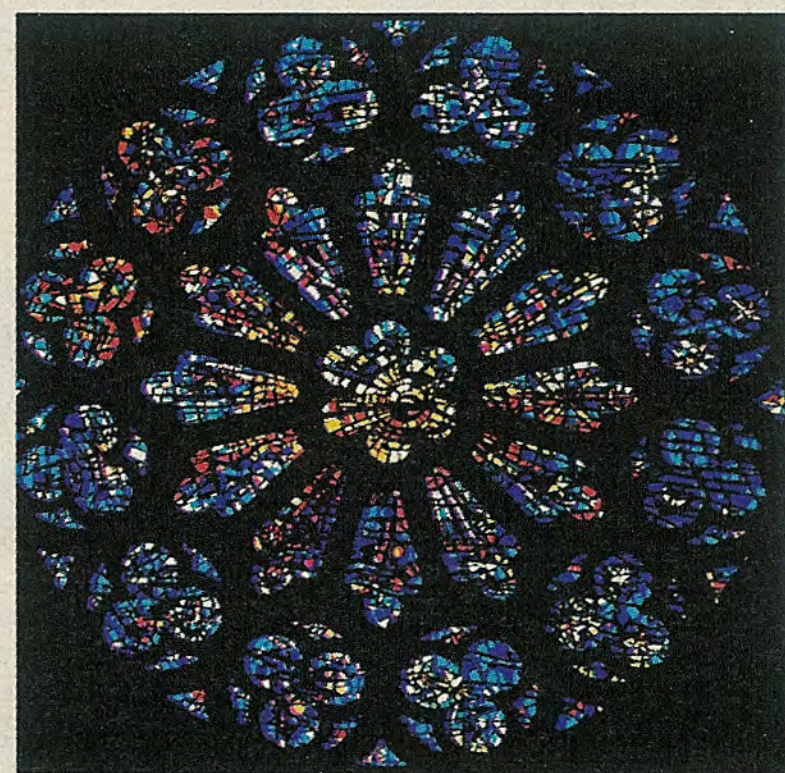
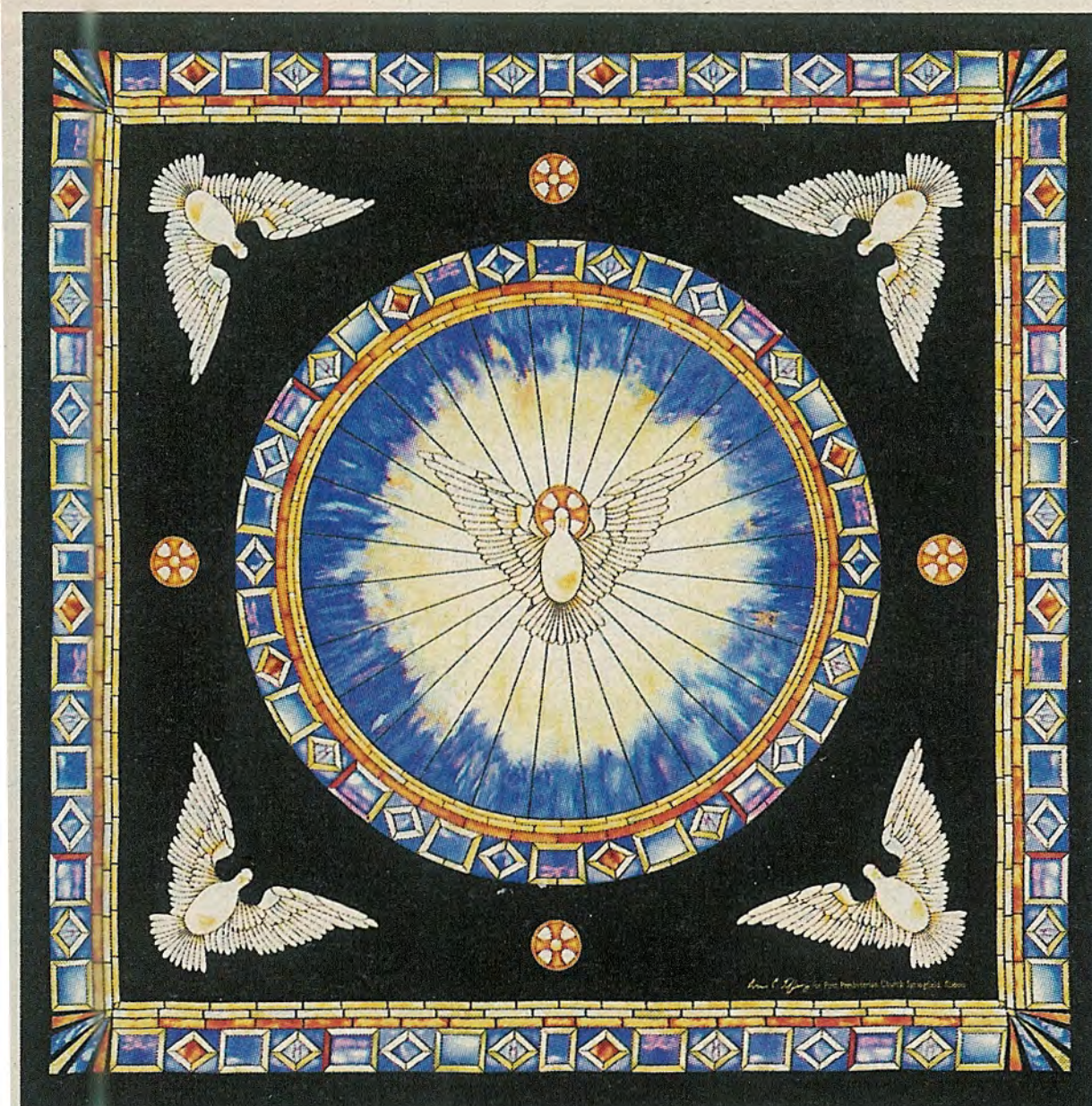
BY SERENA MARLER

Angela Coppola spins a good yarn in more ways than one. Her stories are as compelling as the silks she sells and have played a crucial role in shaping the direction of her one-year-old company, Sacred Silks.

Sacred Silks is a unique idea. Coppola chooses the most aesthetic part of a religious site — a ceiling, window, labyrinth or spire — and transforms the image onto screen-printed silk twill or charmeuse-bordered silk georgette. A percentage of the proceeds are given back to the relevant institution. Coppola works closely with each to find an image and end product that everyone feels comfortable with. “We want each church, temple or cathedral to like their product — it’s important to us and it’s easier for them to market,” she says.

The Sacred Silks process is complex and takes great diplomacy on Coppola’s part. And it still doesn’t always work out. Coppola recently approached the monks of a Tibetan monastery about reproducing one of their

Scarves at far left, top to bottom: Tiffany Dove, Creation of the Birds, Notre Dame of Chartres. Near left, top to bottom: Rose Window scarf, Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, Notre Dame Paris scarf. First long scarf below: Notre Dame Paris. Second long scarf: Temple Emanu-El. Far right, above: Temple Emanu-El. Far right: Woman models Tiffany Dove scarf.



sand paintings. "I foolishly mentioned that one of our scarf designs had been produced as a pillow," she said. "Of course it's sacrilegious to sit on Tibetan art. And even though I tried to assure them that we would only make a scarf, they refused."

Sacred Silks marries Coppola's innate fashion sense with her equally strong spirituality. "This business keeps me grounded," says Coppola. "I feel privileged to have come up with this idea. To be able to bring religious art to a wider audience by taking it out of the churches and temples and into people's homes is so rewarding."

Fashion is in her blood. Coppola was Fabergé's corporate creative director at the tender age of 28 and ran her own fashion-based advertising agency in The City for 16 years. Her spirituality (Buddhism) has been a key component in her life since the '60s, and she recounts stories of Eastern philosophy and Werner Erhard. "I was right there in the '60s," she said, "trying to figure out what peace and happiness meant."

Coppola's inspiration (call it "divine") was the Rose Window of San Francisco's Grace Cathedral. A chance meeting with the Cathedral's Dean Alan Jones and his wife Crickett and an evening stroll past the site were the catalysts. The Dean and his wife were looking for ideas for the Cathedral's gift shop and thought her fashion background could help. The evening light made Coppola view the East Rose Window in a totally different way — as a scarf!

The stage was set and the Dean's wife and Coppola set to work on a vibrant primary colored rendition of the Cathedral's East Rose Window for the gift shop. It was an instant hit and still ranks third on Sacred Silks' best-seller list. The Rose Window design has such special meaning to Coppola that it has been incorporated into the company logo and into a repeat miniature design for the signature print called Sacred Circle.

Since then, Coppola has added scarf upon scarf to the Sacred Silks collection, which brings the current total to 19, seven of which are new this year. Five ties, three pocket squares and one pillow add to her scarf repertoire.

The weight or momm (a pound equals one momm) measures the quality of silk. Sacred Silks' are 12 and 14 momm, quite a sumptuous volume. The scarves are of a comparable quality to other high-end designer scarves that sell for at least twice the price. Each is hand-rolled and designed by hand, as well as by computer.

Foreseeing the success of the Grace Cathedral Rose Window scarf, Coppola decided to take the show on the road. "I thought why limit this to San Francisco? Why not try this out with other religious institutions around the world," she said. So Coppola took off on a European trip: part-vacation, part-research.

Just before she left, she went to a party in her building. "It was one of those events that you don't really feel like going to, but I had already accepted and I

like to keep my word," said Coppola. "And it was lucky that I did. There I met a man who had worked for five years as the American liaison for a major silk designer in Como, Italy!"

Coppola was introduced to Giorgio, the Como silk designer; they forged a great working relationship and the pair continue to do great business together. Coppola also went to Lyon, France — another major European silk center. En route she stopped at Paris' Cathedral of Notre Dame, inspiring her best-selling scarf in black silk georgette with



Washington, D.C. National Cathedral. Right, Cathedral scarf with model.

a vibrant purple silk charmeuse border.

Notre Dame of Chartres, which dates back to the 12th and 13th centuries, was another important visit for Coppola. (The Joneses of Grace Cathedral were married there and Chartres' rector, Francois Legaux is Honorary Canon at Grace Cathedral.) The resulting richly hued Chartres rendition in silk twill combines 17 colors to form a representation of 21 of the Cathedral's 176 incredible stained-glass windows.

The other major European capital Coppola visited was London. Westminster Abbey was her first choice for a business partnership. "I made an appointment with the manager of the gift shop but I was so disappointed when he told me that the scarves were too expensive for his clientele," she said. "He then mentioned that St. Paul's (Prince Charles

and Lady Diana Spencer were married there in 1981) had more upscale visitors and that my scarves would fit in perfectly. So I jumped in a cab and raced over there, but it was 4:30 p.m. and the gift shop was just closing. Evensong was in progress, so I decided to stay. I was so moved by the music, the architecture and the incredible mosaics."

Returning the next day, Coppola struck a deal with St. Paul's. The result is The Creation of the Bests — a medley of burnt orange and plum in silk twill. The Creation of the Birds, equally vivid with a mint green border, is a new addition for 2000.

Silk scarves or squares are one of the most versatile fashion accessories. French women have always been big scarf wearers, Jackie Kennedy adopted the look as her signature and Grace Kelly once used one as a sling for a broken arm. A scarf can dress up a casual sweater or finish off a plain suit and there are countless ways to do it. Fashion houses from Hermes to Nordstrom have published "how to" books on the subject. "I have found one new way of wearing a scarf and I'm sure there are plenty more," said Coppola. "I love wearing mine in a series of knots — like braiding," she says.

So what's next? "I've been thinking about a Pashmina for next winter and maybe a bedspread," she said. "A friend of mine just bought a quilted version from a major designer for \$6,000 — it looks great and seems like a fairly easy process: nine silk squares (scarves) sewn together and quilted to create one piece of fabric!"

Some have the view, like the Tibetan monks, that these scarves are works of art not fashion and should be framed not worn. Sacred Silks also believes that these scarves should be treasured and provides a framing service in its catalog. "I have one customer, an architect in Texas, who does just that," she said. "He buys numerous scarves from us and then has them framed, along with other works, for his clients."

Sacred Silks are available by mail order; call 1-877-788-7455 (SILK) for a catalog. Retail outlets include Grace Cathedral Gift Shop and the Museum Company Store, Hillsdale; Stanford Shopping Center; 42nd St./5th Ave., New York and two stores in Las Vegas. ☼

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