DATEBOOK

FASHION

Silken Inspirations

Scarf designs draw on religious imagery from around the world

By Trish Donnally
CHRONICLE FASHION EDITOR

Angela Joy Coppola is describing the conception of Sacred Silks, her new scarf company, when the toll of the Grace Cathedral bells wafts through an open window. Is this coincidence or divine intervention?

Last year, a mutual friend invited Coppola, Alan Jones, the dean of Grace Cathedral, and his wife, Cricket, to lunch at the French Laundry in Yountville. Their friend suggested that they ride together since all were coming from Nob Hill, where Coppola has her office.

Six hours later, the three had become well acquainted. Cricket was particularly interested in Coppola's background in fashion. Coppola had been corporate creative director at Faberge, then the largest perfume company in the world, at the age of 28. Later, she owned an advertising firm for 16 years, counting Celine, Max Mara and Levi's among her clients. Cricket asked if Coppola would help with ideas for the cathedral's gift shop.

Soon after that, Coppola, who lives at the Brocklebank, was strolling around Huntington Park on Nob Hill. A glance at Grace Cathedral revealed the evening light reflecting off the East Rose Window in a way that Coppola had never before noticed.

"I saw a gorgeous silk scarf in my mind's eye — it was the East Rose Window," says Coppola, 57. She and Cricket went to work the next day creating a scarf to sell in the gift shop.

"Then I thought, I should do this for the churches, temples and mosques around the world," Coppola says.

One year and 13 silk scarf designs later, Coppola is in business.

Coppola visited 12 of the 13 sacred sites that are reflected on her scarves. She found inspiration for one scarf in Springfield, Ill., at the First Presbyterian Church where Abraham Lincoln worshipped. A window there, designed by the jeweler Louis C. Tiffany, became her "Dove Window" scarf.

She found a window designed by Henri Matisse in Pocantico Hills, N.Y., at the Union Church where the Rockefellers attended services. Nelson Rockefeller had commissioned the French Impressionist to design a window in honor of his mother, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. Matisse finished this design, which became the basis for another scarf, two days before he died at age 85.

In London, at St. Paul's Cathedral, where the wedding of Diana and Charles and the funeral of Winston Churchill were held, a mosaic ceiling inspired another scarf. In San Francisco, the labyrinth at Grace Cathedral became tracings on silk too. Each design in the collection has a story behind it. But perhaps the most inspiring story was what Coppola learned during her travels.

Coppola, who was adopted by a Jewish mother and Italian Catholic father, was raised Catholic. She converted to Buddhism in her 20s. While researching designs for her scarves, Coppola attended services and listened to the prayers of various congregations. She was struck by how similar they sounded, despite the different denominations.

"No matter what the religion, the prayers were all the same — world peace, love and kindness to one another," she says. "I hope to have people see no matter what your religion is we really all have the same wish."

Sacred Silks are produced in Italy, France, Japan and Korea. They feature hand-rolled hems and range from $25 for a pocket square to $85 for a 35-by-35-inch silk twill scarf. Coppola donates 10 percent from the sale of each scarf to the institution that inspired them. For more information, call (877) 788-7455.

"I feel like these are works of art. I'm taking them out of the cathedrals and giving them to the world."
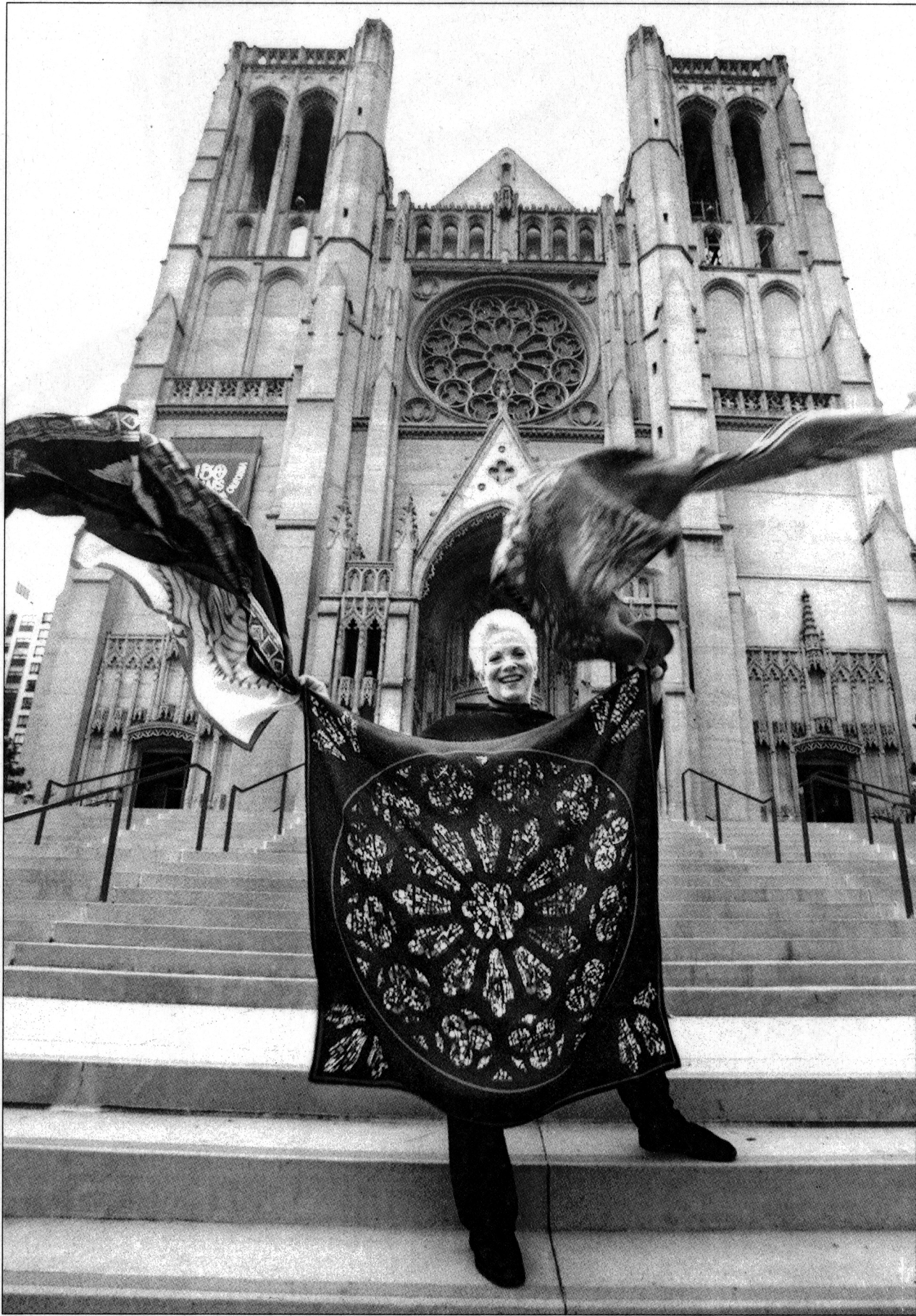
LIZ HAFALIA / The Chronicle

SACRED SILKS: Angela Coppola's new collection of silk scarves reflects imagery of various places of worship around the world. It all started with this scarf above, which was inspired by the East Rose Window of Grace Cathedral. The designs below are, from left to right: the Union Church Matisse scarf, the Sacred Silks Signature Designs, the Tiffany Dove Window and the Verditas Labyrinth.