



FORD CRAFTSMAN STUDIOS: For Love of Design

WHEN DAVID AND ANN FORD started Ford Craftsman Studios in 2004, they wagered that doing something they loved would create a better world—not just for themselves but for lots of others. The financial markets had taken a hit along with the rest of the economy, and Ann’s job with Citigroup had disappeared. David, an engineer with Lucent, had a good job, but one that drew little from his lifelong love for Arts and Crafts history and design. It seemed like a good time to align their hearts and minds along a new career path.

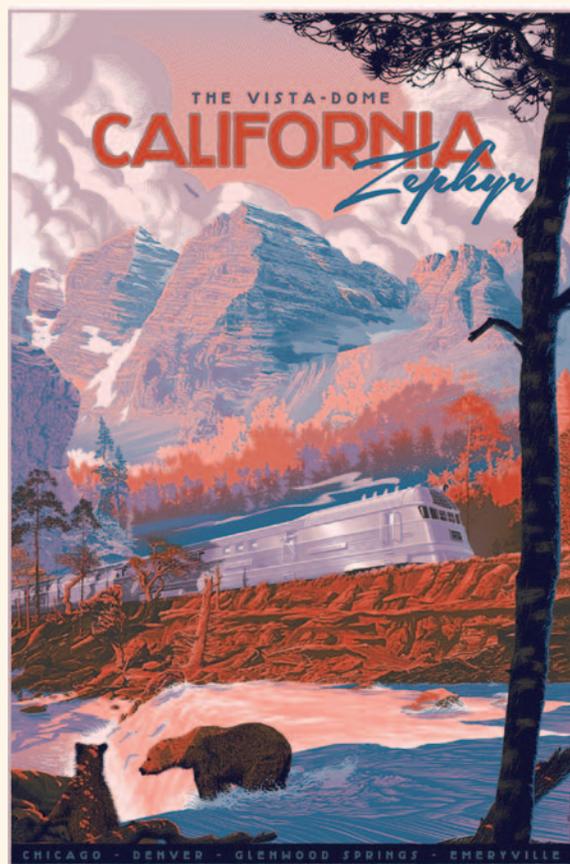
One thing they had both loved as youths was design, particularly Arts and Crafts design. David had been collecting antiques and absorbing the architecture since he was in high school. Ann had studied decorative arts in graduate school at the University of Glasgow and had spent a lot of time studying the work of the city’s most famous designer, Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

Between them, the Fords had amassed a substantial library of books, catalogs, prints and other resources on the American and British Arts and Crafts, Secessionist, Art Nouveau and Prairie Style design eras, along with a substantial collection of catalogs for millwork, house plans, embroidery designs and kits, pottery, and other art forms. All they needed was a spark of inspiration.

That spark flew when they saw a small electronic embroidery machine at the Texas State Fair.

“We thought that with one of these machines we could probably reproduce some of the original embroidered pillow designs sold as kits in the early 1900s,” David says. “We bought our first machine and set up business on the kitchen table. Ann worked out the style of pillows and I learned to program designs for the machine.

“We searched for makers of natural linen that looked like the original stuff, and heavy thread like that you would get in a kit in 1910. We eventually found a mill in Belgium that could produce natural linen that hadn’t been dyed or bleached and had the slightly irregular fiber thicknesses that looked just like our old 1910 pillow kits. And we found a German thread maker



that produced the same kind of thread sold by Brainerd and Armstrong in the original kits.

“We produced our first six pillow designs and started selling them online and to stores. A magazine published a small article on what we were doing, and within a few months of starting the company we were hit with so many orders that we couldn’t keep up with our one little machine. We bought a commercial embroidery machine the size of an SUV and modified it to handle the heavy thread and really wide stitching that is too much for most equipment to handle.

“Selling online and at shows, we’ve shipped to all corners of the world. Retailers across the U.S. and even a few in Europe carry our pillows, which can be found in rooms in big resorts. We often see them on furniture in other companies’ ads.”

A couple of years ago the Fords noticed that their pillow sales were beginning to drop off. Talking with customers at shows, they learned why: the pillows were



virtually indestructible, enduring and outlasting the punishment dished out by dogs and kids. The customers had no reason to buy more.

“We realized that we’ve reached a pretty good share of the Arts and Crafts market and we need to adjust,” says David. “We’re in the process of retiring some designs and producing new ones while shrinking the number of designs we offer.”

In addition to the pillows, the company produces laser-cut stencils. This is a smaller portion of the business, and a lot of the work is customized, with sizing for each customer’s needs.

Poster Fever

What is really fueling the company’s growth now is a group of posters that reproduce the graphic style of Depression-era posters that originated with the U.S. Works Progress Administration.

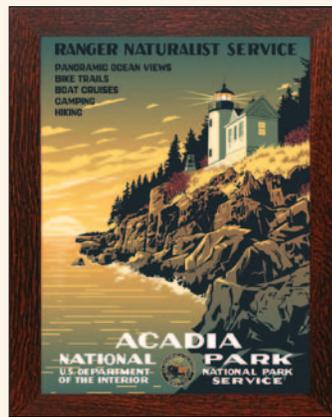
“I have long had a love for posters, and I knew that some of the original WPA national-park posters from the 1930s had been found and were in the collection of the Library of Congress.

I got high-resolution scans from the LoC and worked with a couple of artists to completely redraw the originals to produce clean, crisp prints. We partnered with Dard Hunter Studios to produce really nice frames.

“We expected this to be a short-lived project, but our first six posters were a big hit. People really liked them, and we were bombarded with requests featuring national parks that weren’t even parks in the 1930s. I reached out to some of the world’s best poster artists, and we started producing new posters in the style of the originals.

“We’re now at 20 WPA and WPA-style posters and have more in development for all kinds of subjects. There’s a movement these days to produce limited-edition screen-printed posters for older movies done the way today’s artists think they should have been done. We’ve reached out to a few of these artists and have started producing limited-edition vintage-style travel posters. We just published the first of a set of six ‘Modes of Transportation’ posters designed by Laurent Durieux, a Belgian artist. We also have in the works a ‘See the World’ series, a U.S. State Insects and Mammals letterpress series, and an expanded ‘See America’ series.”

It appears as though that newly aligned career path the Fords took a decade ago has taken them into a world of true love.



www.fordcraftsmanonline.com
877 204-9961



“I WAS REALLY DRAWN TO THE WPA POSTERS after my architecture teacher talked about them. He graduated from Chicago School of Art at the height of the Great Depression and there was absolutely no work. He heard about this government bunch that was hiring and he didn’t care what he would be doing because he liked to eat. He said they drove around the country in a truck hauling their supplies and would stop in a town and ask if there was any kind of event they needed artwork done for. He would paint signs and whatever else they needed. His specialty was big murals. The magazine that tracked him down picked up the story from some friend who had bought a farm in Wisconsin or somewhere in that neck of the woods and they found what they thought was an old tarp in the barn. They started to unfold it and realized it had paint on it. They laid it out and it was just the right size to fit on the side of the barn facing the highway. They got his signature from it and started doing research and were surprised to find out that he was still alive and retired but teaching architecture and drafting part time. He talked about stopping in a pasture while on the road and sleeping on the back of the truck or under it. They made enough money to buy their meals, some beer, and a little fun.