



Sacred and secular themes — florals, geometrics, abstracts — decorate Honduras Threads' pillows.

Reaping what they sew

Partnership with Honduran co-op results in stylish rewards

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The designers are Texan, the sewing Honduran, the fabric combinations — anyone's guess.

That's the fun of opening each tightly wrapped bundle that lands, unheralded, at the Kessler Park doorstep of M'Lou Bancroft's house. Any stash of these elaborate pillow covers might expose a flash of SpongeBob SquarePants fabric or Tweety Bird trim. "You never know," says Ms. Bancroft.

But surprise is what this Oak Cliff woman has come to expect from Honduras Threads, the Central American sewing co-op she helped start five years ago.

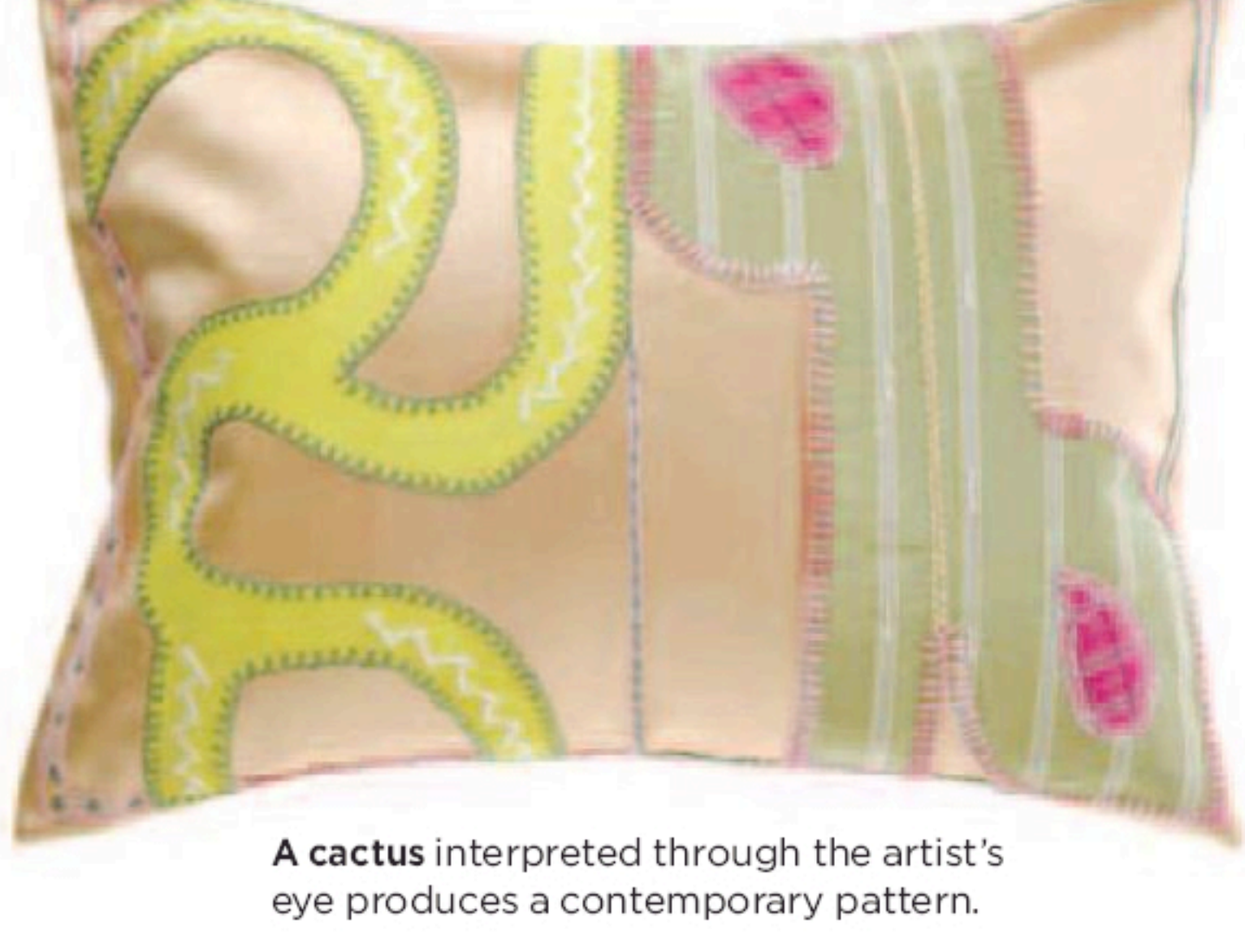
Surprises await not only in its one-of-a-kind textiles, but in how formerly unskilled workers have cobbled a distinct, if hard-to-peg handicraft style.

"You look at these and they don't look like they were made in Honduras, but you can tell they weren't made in Kansas," says Ms. Bancroft. "There's something about them."

Dallas artist Pamela Nelson, a friend whose drawings and collages serve as loose templates for much of the handiwork, admires the "innate sense of balance" in the textiles. Crafters turn her designs into both somber and exuberant pieces.

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A T H O M E



A cactus interpreted through the artist's eye produces a contemporary pattern.

Novice seamstresses develop own style

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"If you're talking color theory, they're very sophisticated," Ms. Nelson says. "I love the outrageous ones, the real wacky ones, best. Sometimes I'll think: I'm going to have to buy this because nobody else would love it. And then people end up fighting you for it."

Ms. Bancroft — a Peace Corps alumna and "do-gooder from way back," as Ms. Nelson calls her — flew to Honduras in 2001 on a mission trip with the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation. The church group went to dig wells, paint sanctuaries and try to boost job options for women most commonly working six days a week as maids or in chicken-processing plants.

"They were just miserable," says Ms. Bancroft, her no-fuss silver hair and wardrobe signaling a woman concerned with substance, not show. She remembers an Episcopal bishop in the region suggesting the sewing co-op, with its promise of congenial work conditions and self-management. But no one prepared her for the steep learning curve ahead.

Unlike neighbors Guatemala and Panama, Honduras had no traditional fiber arts. The co-op's first efforts, in July 2002, were rough. "They knew one stitch — the chain stitch," says Ms. Bancroft. "It was just a disaster."

Along with start-up training in embroidery and appliqué, organizers packed thread and fabric swatches together to suggest color combinations. They also showed the novice seamstresses photographs of Ms. Nelson's collages and made how-to line drawings as backup.

"We were teaching them in the beginning," says Ms. Bancroft. "Now they've just taken off."

Their early ragged samples gave way to today's precision crop of textiles stacked bountifully across living and dining rooms in the Bancrofts' one-story house.

"I never know exactly when I'm going to get them," Ms. Bancroft says, unpeeling black plastic from that morning's arrivals: a dense batch of pillows with holiday imagery.

"I was almost out of angels," she says with a nod.

Ms. Bancroft routinely totes armloads of inventory to parties arranged for marketing the crafts.

Four times a year, she travels to Honduras hauling duffel bags stuffed with fabrics and notions. She doesn't hesitate to enlist friends as couriers, warning them: "Don't you dare go to Honduras without telling me."

Since the first sewing group gathered in Santa Cruz Arriba, the nonprofit Honduras Threads has grown to six co-ops and 80 members in villages near the capital of Tegucigalpa. Its signed, one-of-a-kind pillows and table runners offer price tags of \$50 to \$200, nearly all of it routed back to the co-op for salaries and expenses. Honduras Threads buys basics from Central American mills. But its bursts of iridescent taffeta or stately toiles come by way of donations from friends and the interior design industry.

Ms. Nelson's home studio in downtown Dallas serves as an occasional drop-off point. Her light-drenched loft, divvied out of a former commercial building, houses dozens of the artist's own paintings, plus a cheeky array of Honduras Threads.

Ms. Nelson dresses her giant brown sofas with a scattering of river-pattern pillows, her bedroom with a tumble of frothy florals. One collector, she notes, uses pillows as the only dash of color for her whitewashed beach house. She's also seen pieces double as place mats at dinner parties and framed in a series on the wall.

The artist, who has long claimed homey handicrafts as inspiration for her own work, delights to see co-op wares occasionally displayed as framed art. Apt tribute, she says, to the oft-unheralded domestic crafts.

"These are the small applied arts that make life so much better," she says. "They just lift up the world."

Diane Reischel is a Dallas freelance writer.

WHERE TO BUY

■ The textiles are sold at Stoney's Wine & Gifts, 2804 Greenville Ave., and the Church of the Incarnation bookstore, 3966 McKinney Ave.

■ For more information on Honduras Threads, contact co-founder M'Lou Bancroft at [214-941-6626](tel:214-941-6626) or go to www.hondurathreads.org

■ To learn more about Pamela Nelson and her work, go to www.pamelahnelson.com



Pamela Nelson (left) and M'Lou Bancroft are driving forces behind the Honduran co-ops' decorative textiles based on Ms. Nelson's and others' designs.