

Floor patterns focus of latest MHV exhibit

by JORDAN ROSS

A new exhibit at Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach serves as a vivid reminder that generations of Mennonites spent their downtime walking on sunshine. *Resurfacing: Mennonite Floor Patterns* opened yesterday in the museum's Gerhard Ens Gallery.

It showcases the art and research of Margruiete Krahn, a Neuberghthal resident who has been captivated by Mennonite floor patterns since she first discovered them more than 20 years ago.

"Everybody had forgotten about this practice," she said in an interview this week as curators put the finishing touches on the exhibit.

It all started in 2001, when Krahn was board chair of the Neuberghthal Heritage Foundation.

The century-old Friesen housebarn—one of many still standing in Neuberghthal, an impeccably preserved single-street Mennonite village and national historic site—was undergoing renovations.

"The contractor was starting to rip apart the carpet and the linoleum that was in the living room and all of a sudden there were these floor patterns," Krahn recalled. "He ran over—we lived right next door—and he said, 'Margruiete, you've got to see this.'"

Krahn began documenting other floor patterns discovered in the Mennonite West Reserve. A photo collage included in the exhibit shows three dozen different examples of the art form, which was traditionally practiced by women during the summer months. The patterns range from simple sponge designs to intricate birds and flowers.

Krahn has even excavated sections of hand-painted floor. A worn kitchen floor hatch removed from the 113-year-old Klippenstein House in Neuberghthal is in the exhibit.

Andrea Klassen, MHV's senior curator, said the brightly coloured patterns shake up the notion that Mennonite homes were drab.

"We have these stereotypes of what Mennonites are, and this kind of undercuts that almost completely."

Krahn agreed, saying, "It's important to put some of these assumptions to the test and to show what really was."

Some Mennonite homes had two or three layers of floor patterns, indicating the restless creativity with which the artists approached their work.

In 2003, Krahn began recreating floor patterns on large, heavyweight canvases. More than a dozen of the large floorcloths, which she paints in her home studio, hang in the exhibit, including her first piece, based on a pattern found in the Neuberghthal Commons housebarn.

Krahn isn't precious about her work, which is designed to be walked on when it isn't hanging in a museum.

The exhibit also includes three recreated *sarai*, delicate sawdust patterns sprinkled onto earthen floors using a colander. Krahn said the earthen floors were made from a mixture of clay, manure and straw.

The practice of decorating the wooden floorboards of a home predates Mennonites' arrival in Canada. Krahn described it as "a feminine folk art" done simply to bring beauty to the home.

"The upper class had tile floors, so this was really I think more of a practice of the lower class," she said.

The exhibit complicates strictly utilitarian views of Mennonite culture by showing they did create art for art's sake.

"There's no good reason to spend this much time painting your floors," Klassen said. "This provided beauty and an artistic outlet."

Klassen said some Mennonite historians weren't very interested in the significance of floor patterns, and dismissed them in favour of written sources.

"By pushing it off to the side, I think you're missing something big about what Mennonite private life was like, what the lives of Mennonite women were like," she said.

Klassen hopes the exhibit leaves visitors mulling "the practical, ordinary ways that Mennonites have filled their lives with beauty."

Krahn's work has helped to preserve an aspect of Mennonite history that was in danger of being forgotten.

"Nobody was documenting this. Nobody



Margruiete Krahn, a visual artist and researcher from Neuberghthal, paints large floorcloths in the style of traditional Mennonite floor patterns.



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knew about this," she said.

Linoleum arrived in southern Manitoba in the 1920s, and people upgraded to the durable flooring as their pocketbook allowed. Ironically, covering up the floor patterns preserved them for future discovery.

Krahn said she is as interested in the history of Mennonite floor patterns as she is in the artistic creativity they represent.

The exhibit features the stories of the women who painted floor patterns. Krahn has interviewed many artists over the last six years.

"I started getting the story, and the memories they just flooded, and I'm continuing to get those stories and more patterns."

Brushes were seldom used by floor pattern artists, so when Krahn paints a floorcloth, she sticks to traditional tools of the trade: pots,

toes, ropes, pails, bicycle tires, rags, sponges, and even balled-up socks. Stencils were made of cereal boxes or meat wrappers.

Floor pattern artists typically mixed their own paint. A panel at the exhibit features a traditional recipe for milk paint.

Krahn said yellow ochre and red oxide were the building blocks of many older floor patterns. Grey became common in the 20th century, when geometric patterns emerged, some of which mimicked linoleum designs.

Krahn continues to document floor patterns, and still gets emails from people around the world.

"It's changing how people are looking at flooring," she said.

Exhibiting floor patterns gives the public a chance to see an art form that is normally

only found in private homes or in abandoned structures that are too dangerous to visit.

Most contemporary examples are found in the West Reserve, an hour's drive away. In the warmer months, MHV visitors can see a floor pattern in the village's summer kitchen. Krahn created the vivid yellow pattern, based on one found in a housebarn in Sommerfeld, in 2010. She returned last fall to repaint it.

Krahn was on hand to answer questions at yesterday's exhibit opening. Klassen said plans are in the works to have Krahn return later this year to host workshops where people can create their own floorcloth.

Resurfacing is on display at MHV until April 1. The exhibit will later travel to Abbotsford, B.C., Saskatoon, Sask., Waterloo, Ont. and down to Kansas.



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