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ENJOY MAKING YOUR OWN PLACE MATS

By O. EVANS SCOTT

WHETHER you can draw or not, there is opportunity to be satisfyingly creative and to produce something of utility by making your table place mats.

If you design them effectively, your friends will find them as interesting as your floral arrangements and sets of mats are not only acceptable gifts but welcome contributions for stalls at fetes—a change from aprons, cushion covers, cakes, preserves and jams.

These days the tablecloth, requiring much time and effort in laundering, is often discarded in favour of the easier-to-launder place mats.

Here are some ideas for place mats that the handcraft-minded homemaker can make.

CLOTH MATS

A fairly thick fabric is best, to protect table surface and deaden noise. Choose a coarse but firmly woven cloth. Arras cloth (a furnishing fabric of hessian and cotton, obtainable in several colours) is ideal. Ordinary sugar bag hessian, natural or dyed, or any other thick, plain cotton or linen fabric, non-fluffy, can be used.

Decide on the sizes, keeping in mind the width of the material for economical cutting. Mats for the plate only, in a place setting can be about 7 in by 9 in. Larger mats, designed to take the plate and cutlery, need to be about 15 in. long. Small glass coasters, if required, should be 3 in. or 4 in. square, and you may need one or two larger mats for table centre or serving dishes.

Cut the mats straight by the thread of the material, and fringe back about ½ in. or ¾ in. (Do not make the fringe too wide as it can look very untidy after laundering). To prevent any further fraying, overcast or hemstitch the edges, or sew around with straight or zig zag machine stitching. Mats are now ready for the design.

Designs

Choose a simple, arresting pattern that can be drawn in black, waterproof Indian Ink. For most sets, a corner or side design, taking up to ¼ to ⅝ of the mat area, is quite sufficient. Try sketching designs on a piece of paper the size of the mat first, to decide size and position. If you can not draw, why not trace or copy, or even make a stiff paper stencil to draw around? Suitable designs can be found in children's picture books, magazines, greeting cards, coins and stamps and so on. The new "op art" can be adapted by those who cannot draw—use geometrical shapes and straight lines. (Partially overlap, say, a circle, square and triangle, and fill in some of the resulting odd shaped spaces with solid black, some stripes of uneven width, blots, and wriggly lines. Leave a scribbling paper and pencil by the telephone and turn your next piece of "doodling" into an "op art" design!)

Design Ideas

1. A simple conventional flower and leaf stencil can be most effective. Leave out unnecessary details and keep to bold, simple shapes like the daisy, tulip, dognose, clover leaf or wheat ear.

2. You could have a set of fruit designs—with one or two apples on one mat, pears on another, and bananas, cherries, pineapple and grapes. Choose those of distinctive shape—avoid too many similar forms.

3. Vegetables can inspire another set of designs—onion, carrots, cabbage, peas,
celery and so on—simple effective drawings of these are often featured on coloured teatowels or in cookery pages of magazines.

4. Simple animal shapes, kindergarten-style, are suitable, e.g., cat, fish, rooster, snail. Babywear motifs often feature ducks, chickens and lambs.

5. A seahorse stencil can be placed in different positions and slightly different arrangements of bubbles and seaweed drawn on each.

6. A simple yacht stencil could be used similarly, with a horizon line and a bird (line only) the only necessary background.

7. Chinese characters and dragon, or people, can be found in chequers sets, mahjong, recipe books and some magazines.

8. Animals can be copied from the new and old currency coins and postage stamps.

9. Aboriginal cave-art style drawings of snakes, boomerangs, lizards and spears can be adapted from the new one dollar note, and Australian books, magazines, Christmas cards. These can be particularly effective.


11. Line designs and borders. Borders on some table linen floor coverings and crockery, fair-isle knitting patterns, magazine headings, wrought iron scroll work and railings—all can be adapted to a design for another purpose. On large place mats, a two inch strip about two inches in from one end on each mat, or close to the edge on a small mat is all that is necessary.

Although at the designing stage you are working on only one mat, try to visualise the six mats and centre mats (or whichever number and arrangement you use) all on the table complete. Avoid the mistake of having too much pattern and too much fussy detail.
Applying the Design

Place the mat over a pad of newspaper. Draw, stencil or carbon copy the design on to the fabric. A sharpened soft-lead pencil or tailor’s chalk can be used for the guiding lines. Then, using a pen and the waterproof ink make the outlines and any fine lines (a mapping pen makes a fine line and is less likely to blot and splatter than an ordinary nib). Then change to a small paint brush and fill in the black places. Take care not to have a two-full brush when close to the outlines, as the ink may spread through the fabric and spoil the line. Where two shapes overlap it will be necessary to leave a fine line of fabric not inked in to show the outline of the foremost shape. If you do accidentally get a blot of ink on the mat, try to make it part of the design. You may be able to add an extra leaf, bud, butterfly, or bee, if on a floral design; or a sun or moon, bird, snail or pebble on an animal design, depending on the position of the blot. If cave-art style, make it a footprint, and so on.

When complete, allow to dry. Check to see if any patches have dried lighter in colour owing to a thinner application of ink and touch up if necessary.

CORK PLACE MATS

Sets of plain cork mats can sometimes be bought in stores, but the cork is best bought in sheets from a motor parts firm. Gasket cork, 3/16 in. thick, is ideal. A half sheet, costing about 80 cents, cuts into six mats each six inches square; or it can be cut into three mats each 9 in. by 6 in. and six small coasters almost 3 in. square. Using these measurements no cork is wasted.

Measure and rule the cutting lines on the cork, check that corners are square, then cut out (use old scissors). Snip a little from each corner and sandpaper the edges smooth. The easiest way to do this is to wrap a piece of sandpaper around a matchbox, hold the mats firmly together on a level surface, and smooth the edges and corners all together. This ensures that the mats remain the same size and shape. (Slightly round off the edges individually). Dust off.

Designs

As for the cloth mats, choose a simple arresting design that can be blocked in Indian ink. Keep the size of the design in proportion with the size of the mat and try to visualise the complete table setting so that you do not overdo it.

Silhouette forms are very useful. One or two palm trees or blackboys against a moon and a cloud could be drawn on all mats with slightly different horizon line, cloud, and a third smaller tree to make a different picture is a simple yet striking set. Similarly the yacht stencil idea as described for cloth mats.

When all mats are finished paint over two or three times with clear varnish to render surface waterproof and prolong the life of the mats.

If you have oil paints and can use them coloured designs can be painted on. Keep to a minimum of colours—only three or four colours or tonings of one colour, and paint with a fairly dry brush. Leave at least half of the mat unpainted—as before too much can spoil the effect. The simple, conventional or cave art or op art designs are most effective—natural designs in full colour tend to be disappointing and do not reflect the time and trouble spent on them. Varnish when thoroughly dry.

These mats are fun to make—you will probably want to do several sets. They make delightful gifts and are very acceptable for stalls at fetes.