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Leadership Inspiration: Candace Wheeler— Bringing Beauty and Work to Women

By Mary Pat Campbell

Editor's Note: In the Leadership & Development Section's Leadership Inspiration Contest, entrants were asked to tell us what inspired them to be better actuarial leaders. Here is an entry from the "Admirable Leader/Personal Mentor" category.

In November 2001, I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, looking for peace and beauty. I was well-rewarded by a special exhibit on Candace Wheeler. I have found inspiration in her designs as well as her life story.

Candace Wheeler started her career as a professional decorator and designer when she was nearly 50 years old. She was partnered with Louis Comfort Tiffany, helping invent the idea of professional interior decorators. Wheeler designed and made gorgeous silk draperies and door hangings. But she quit the company because they were restricted to a very rich clientele, and she wanted to bring beauty to the masses.

She founded a women's decorative arts collective in 1877, the Society of Decorative Artists, to promote the designs of American women and to make available "the beautiful home" to the average middle-class homemaker. In addition, she founded the New York Exchange for Women's Work in 1878, which was the Etsy¹ of its day. She was trying to help women as both consumers and producers.

A huge issue was the poor economic outlook for widows of Union soldiers from the U.S. Civil War and widows in general. It was difficult for women to earn money at that time, and while some got by on widows' pensions, the 1870s were particularly tough. In 1873, a worldwide financial crisis hit, which led to a depression that lasted until 1879. The need for rewarding work for women, in both an economic and artistic sense, was deep.

While Wheeler was helping create work for others, she made her own in designing and producing textiles and wallpaper. Wheeler came up with interesting weaving techniques to make shimmering illusions on the cheap—a woman might not be able to afford silk hangings for her home, but she could afford a cloth



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. Boudinot Keith, 1928.
www.metmuseum.org.

cross-woven with black and red thread, which produced silk-like optical effects.

Wheeler made patterns that were seemingly varied and organic, though of course they repeated in a very predictable way. Later on, Wheeler wrote books, such as *Household Art* (1893) and *Principles of Home Decoration with Practical Examples* (1903), teaching design principles women could apply in their own homes, and showing how it could even be done on the cheap.

Wheeler was a creator, a business-builder, a network-weaver—someone who spread beauty and knowledge that gave others the ability to create for themselves. I see her inspiration as a person whose influence was felt on multiple levels in different roles; one can lead by creating art and then showing others how to create for themselves. I always think of her when I am writing about beautiful spreadsheets.

A final note: Wheeler actively worked until the age of 80, but she still was producing books after that, with her final one, *The Development of Embroidery in America* (1921), published two years before she died at the age of 96. Now *that* is an inspiration. ■



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ENDNOTE

¹ Etsy is a peer-to-peer e-commerce website focused on handmade or vintage items and supplies, as well as unique factory-manufactured items, that had 54 million registered members by the end of 2014.