

Amazing albums

Artist creates tomorrow's heirlooms

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You could call designer Lauren Clayton's creations scrapbooks, but that would be unfair.

Not just to Clayton, but to the books themselves.

Clayton, 23, a Stamford artist, prefers to call what she makes for her growing list of clients "heirloom books." Bound in materials like raw silk and told on sheet of fine paper, the books are intended to be works of art that preserve family history and personal stories.

"Everyone has a life story that is very special, that's valuable and personal, no matter how simple," says Clayton. "Unfortunately, a lot of those stories are stuck in boxes that nobody knows what to do with."

Clayton has found a stunning way to tell them.

Choosing from among stored photos and mementoes – traditional keepsakes like letters, birth certificates and wedding invitations, and not so traditional items like jury summonses and uniform patches – Clayton crafts highly personal memories bound in designer fabrics.

Using high-end computer graphics and artistic and design skills she honed at New York City's prestigious Cooper Union School of Art, Clayton began making heirloom books as a class project.

Now it's her occupation and the core of her Stamford-based design business, Studio 162. Her portfolio is on display at Tulips of Greenwich and the Noelle Spa for Beauty & Wellness in Stamford.

"The first books I did were for my family. And the experience was really powerful and meaningful," she says, adding she was particularly moved when it came to documenting the courtship of her parents and grandparents and their stories as immigrants from Jamaica. "I learned so much about my family, my parents' relationship, my grandparents' relationship and myself. Just by going through boxes of stuff that nobody had done anything with.

"I think a lot of us don't do enough with old photos and keepsakes because we don't know what to do with them," she says. "Everyone has these pictures of standing in front of the Christmas tree or a wedding album. I try to pull all this together to tell the story of the family."

Clayton interviews her clients to learn about the story they want to tell and does some writing to pull each book together.

"I find that by turning personal keepsakes into books, and adding text and photos, and using really personal icons, they can be translated into something really meaningful," she says.



For Cathy Brewer-Moore and Pieter van Steen, a Stamford couple who married after a romantic meeting on a cruise ship, Clayton took personal photos from their vacation, their love letters, postcards and their joyful wedding picture and turned them into an elegant book; she wrote simple text to tell the story of their romance. The pages consist of vintage maps—selected to match the ports the ship visited—overlaid with photos and reproductions of their letters, including envelopes and stamps..

For another Stamford couple, who met in a courthouse where one was working as a lawyer and the other had been called for jury service, Clayton told their courtship and marriage story in a book that used a courthouse identification pass and a jury summonses as recurring icons.

"They had a real sense of destiny about their relationship," says Clayton. "So I told their life stories by cutting the pages in half until we come to the part when they met. Then I went to one solid page."

Not all of Clayton's projects are so romantic, but many are just as sweet. She specializes in small accordion-style books—most of them feature babies and young children—where the pages unfold to reveal pictures and replicas of building blocks bearing the subject's initials.

While several of the books have been commissioned as gifts for grandparents, Clayton says they also make wonderful keepsakes for the children themselves. "I love going through stacks of baby pictures and sort of picking out the ones with the most interesting expressions," she says. "You put them together the right way and you can tell so much about a child's personality."

The books range in price from \$125 to 3,000, depending on the amount of work involved. Clayton estimates a book in the \$3,000 range would take about 60 hours of work and is in keeping with the hourly rates of a free-lance graphic designer would charge.

"You see the way people cry when they get these," she says. "It's overwhelming. I think they think it's worth it."

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