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FROM SKETCHES TO SCARVES, HER ART EVOLVES DEENA C. BOUKNIGHT, Special to The State

LIKE MANY WITH an artistic bent, Alicia Leeke initially sought a more practical career path. She majored in journalism at USC and worked her way up the corporate ladder in public relations, marketing, book publishing and, finally, outside sales at GBC (General Binding Corp.). However, her interest in art and creative expression is ever-present.

Therefore, little by little, Leeke has been working toward a goal of making a living with her hands. A natural talent, plus classes at the Columbia Museum of Art, have allowed her to blossom as an artist.

In her home are walls and walls of post-impressionistic painting - acrylic cityscapes and expressive people in vibrant colors. Most of her paintings are gentle distortions of linear perspective, but some are abstracts. Leeke is drawn to painting churches, scenes from France, which she has visited three times, and downtown Columbia.

"I like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's subject matter and Georges Rouault's use of strong black lines, and I like to take mundane, less interesting settings of different parts of Columbia and make them more vibrant," Leeke said.

The more she learns and experiments as an artist, the more Leeke is inclined to create a variety of works for display in homes. In proprietor Mike Doran's new store on Devine Street, called Fontenay, her monotypes, sketches, paintings and plant prints are displayed among the shop's antiques, reproductions and new furnishings.

After she took a silk painting class from Columbia artist Judy Hubbard, she began making silk scarves, which she has sold to customers who not only want to wear them, but also frame them or drape them over sofas, chairs or even canopy beds.

"I love the fluidness of the dye, the way it flows onto the silk," she said. "It's a different and fun medium." To make the scarves, she first stretches the silk fabrics on wooden frames and then draws on them with a fabric dye before beginning the painting process. She said she often paints and draws after work at her sales job, sometimes until 1 a.m. Some scarves can take a few weeks to months, depending on her free time.

The same is true with Leeke's other artistic interests. Some of her scarf designs are loose and geometric, while others are detailed. One scarf she recently sold featured an elaborate Japanese dinner scene. "Alicia's work just evolves," Doran said.

A painting may lead to a sketch, which may lead to a scarf design, which leads to decorative mouse pads. "My goal is to reach a high level of success with my art," she said.

When she recently won a trip to France from her company, Leeke and a friend, whose mother is French, sought out the museum of their favorite French artist, Maurice Utrillo, and she studied the brushstrokes and color and light techniques of the masters.

"The brushstrokes and the texture is what I'm most fascinated in no matter what I'm doing," she said. "Painting and drawing is so soothing for me, but it's also challenging.

"I like the statement that (local artist) Guy Lipscomb once made, that painting is nothing but solving problems. I have to agree with that. You have something that's blank and you have to decide what to do with it."

More info: To find out where Leeke's art is displayed or to discuss commission work, e-mail info@alicialeeke.com.