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Delfina Falcao hones her skills working with glass, wool and ceramics.

Scientist's new career a perfect fit

Ottawa taken with newest crafter

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Delfina Falcao has more university degrees and has produced more studies on ergonomics than folks have fingers.

But after a career helping surgeons operate better and shoe-makers save money on leather, this former university professor has retitled her chair.

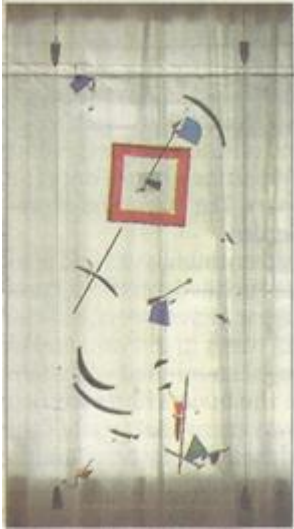
Now, Falcao is using her talents to produce wildly colourful glass panels and patterned carpets you would normally expect to see in an art gallery.

She's also slick at murals that combine paint and glass. Three years ago, Falcao turned away from the science of studying human measurements and designing products that fit, not stress, body parts to

become a full-time artist. Since then, she has become a sparkling light in a city gripped by long, dull winters. And even though it was grey and rainy outside her home last week, inside the walls sparkled.

My tour started with her bold cobalt-blue glass table in the dining room. 'The table has no legs to confound human limbs, since Falcao anchored it to the wall with a hefty black iron U-joint, leaving the glass top to float on two tapered struts made of vintage Riga pine from Russia. 'The table is elegant and strong, distinctive and practical.

'The table, made by Falcao in the 1980 while she and her husband, Hector Guestrin, were working in her native Brazil, dearly shows both sides of the artist's brain- the analytical, scientific side and the artistic lobe.



One of Falcon's dangling artworks

It was the analytical side that saw Falcao earn degrees in industrial design in Brazil and conduct an exhaustive study for the shoe industry that looked at the shape of Brazilian feet. Brazilian feet are shorter and wider than the feet of most other nations, but the country's shoe industry earns most of its money on exports and creates shoes for an international market.

Falcao offered the industry her findings, and also perfected a process to dramatically reduce the amount of leather wasted during shoe production.

In 1988, Falcao and Guestrin left Brazil for England, where she earned further degrees while working with industrial design students at the University of Manchester. At this time she launched an extensive study to observe plastic surgeons at work and redesign their surgical tools to cause less stress on their hands and wrists. She earned another degree, applied and won patents, and the surgeons praised her proto- type tools. But budgets dried up and the prototypes didn't go into production.

The couple returned to Brazil for more study, then landed in Ottawa in 1994 to take jobs at the National Research Council and in the technology sector.

It was a round of further budget cuts while working with a design group at Nortel that prompted Falcao to jump careers.

"I love this stage of my life. There is more freedom. Before it was always cut, cut, cut. Now I have the freedom to create," says Falcao, who as a child watched her now 79-year-old mother paint fine patterns on porcelain. A sister and brother are also artists and her daughter, Julia Falcao Guestrin, 18, has finished her first year in fashion design at Ryerson University in Toronto.

Three years ago, Falcao walked into Michele Villeneuve's Dalhousie Street studio with a multi-coloured rug tucked under her arm. Villeneuve, a veteran designer, was impressed and began introducing Falcao to clients.

"My immediate reaction was: 'Here is someone who is very special.' Ottawa is very hard to break into and most people that have the money don't often take risks."

Falcao is worth the step into the unknown, Villeneuve says, struggling to put together the right words to describe a body of work that goes from glass mosaics to wall murals to unique cushions to industrial mats embedded with glass.

She adds that the artist goes beyond ethnic to joyful and lush, partly because she uses primary colours.

Falcao readily admits she is influenced by the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian and Austrian painter Gustav Klimt.

Like them, she prefers geometric shapes, straight lines and old colours. Then she adds her own twists and textures when working in her basement studio.

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Her glass mosaics helped designer Penny Southam win a design award for a custom bathroom.