

EPISODE 79

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:00:04.1] ANNOUNCER: Welcome to the Creative Empire Podcast. Each week, Reina Pomeroy, the life and biz success coach, and Christina Scalera, the attorney for creatives, are taking you up close and personal with successful influencers in the creative community and tackling your biggest business hurdles. Their mission is to help you, creative entrepreneurs, think beyond your daily biz so you can make the brave decisions that build your Creative Empire.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:35.9] CS: Hello, welcome back to another episode of the creative empire podcast. Reina and I are joined today by Bonnie Christine. Bonnie is a surface pattern designer, and she's a graphic designer, but her journey is a really cool one. She's self-taught, and I'm going to let her tell you all about how she got started in this business, how you can find her designs all over different fabrics, and rugs, and all kinds of different things that you can have in your home to enjoy. She just came out with a new print line of calendars for 2017.

She is everywhere, and on all things. It's really amazing. Bonnie, welcome to the show.

[0:01:11.5] BC: Hey, thank you so much! I'm really glad to be here, and thank you for having me.

[0:01:15.7] CS: Yeah, of course! I just totally forgot to mention goinghometoroost.com, which is your blog, and that's huge. If you're not already following Going Home to Roost, I recommend right now that you just put your phone down, pull over, and then go look at it on the side of the road, because it's such a cool blog. I love following along with it and the Roost Tribe. So yeah, we would love to do more about how you got into what you do now, and maybe explain what surface pattern design is for the people that just don't understand what it is yet.

[0:01:45.1] BC: Sure. Yeah, I'm a surface pattern designer, and fabric designer, and basically that means that anything, any kind of surface that has a designer pattern on it, I would be

somebody that a company could call on in order to do the art work for that. Probably where you're sitting right now, you can look around and see tons of stuff. Everything from curtains, and rugs, and pillows to notebook covers, cellphone covers, fabric, clothing, all kinds of things.

The industry is really cool to be a part of, and really endless in the ways that you can be a part of it too. I think you mentioned self-taught. I went to business school. I think it's been about eight years ago now I went to business school, and didn't really know what I wanted to do, and man, I graduated and realized that this was the journey that I wanted to take. I really kicked myself for it for a little while because I didn't go to design school.

Since then I kind of have come full circle and realized that business school was actually an integral part of being able to be successful, because you have to know how to handle the back end of the business, but that led me on this journey of being self-taught. This was like seven or eight years ago, where nobody had heard of surface pattern design. Nobody was teaching it, and it was like this big huge secret, and since then I feel like it's totally exploded.

When I got started, I was just splicing together Adobe Illustrator tutorials online, and I distinctly remember learning from these two dudes that were designing like robots and lizards in Illustrator, and I was trying to take their skills and turn it into what I wanted to do with it.

[0:03:20.7] CS: What? That's crazy.

[0:03:24.7] BC: I don't know. It took me about 18 months to start making repeating patterns, which is the backbone of surface pattern design in Illustrator, and it took me about 24 months, two years, to get my first licensing gig. So since then — that was with Art Gallery Fabrics. I am on my ninth fabric collection with art gallery fabrics since then, and I've also added several other products like ribbons, rugs, tea towels, aprons, pillows, cell phone covers, and I had a thread line, and just a ton of really fun stuff, and more stuff in the works. It has definitely kind of taken off, but it was a slow start.

[0:04:03.7] CS: Yeah, I think when I first heard your story, what was most inspiring is it kind of struck me as funny, because you were like, I'm really not like that. I wasn't that good at drawing. You showed us how — and you really did show us how you used your Waycom tablet, I think, to

show us how you developed the skill to draw. It wasn't even something — I don't want to say that you weren't innately talented, but I think you are — you have a lot of talents, but it was definitely something that you just kind of had some raw talent for and really changed that. I think you said that you had 106 patterns or something at some point that you made. Then you just scrapped it and started over?

[0:04:41.2] BC: Yeah, sort of. I should add to my first story that because I'm self-taught and it took me so long to figure out what I needed to know, I have since become super passionate about sharing what I know, and I've condensed kind of all the vital information for the technical information for Adobe Illustrator, and also the industry information, into some courses that I offer now. That's kind of my giving back to the whole industry is how I feel about it.

For sure, I wouldn't consider myself like a traditional artist. I wouldn't necessarily sell my sketches and stuff that I use, but I do sketch most — I would say 95% of my designs do start with a pen or a pencil and paper sketch, and then have just sort of learned how to master them and rework them as I go. The hundred patterns that you're talking about is for sure pretty much how I trained myself.

I wasn't sure — I was stressed out about a signature style, and what that meant, and what was mine, because I didn't inherently know what it was going to be. It was through designing that it kind of came to life on its own. I was through a hundred plus patterns before I started to really see a style, and have a body of work that I was proud of and wanted to pursue with industries.

I talk about that a lot because I feel like people are in such a rush. They do five, six, seven, eight patterns, and they're ready to show them and get licensed. There's a lot of reasons why you should slow down and make a ton of patterns, and I'll tell you this too. To this day, every time I sit down to work on a collection, I learn new things about Illustrator, and I change my workflow. It is only through the slowness of practice that you will refine your skill, but the other cool thing I think is that — I've heard other surface pattern designers say this too, that it's that early work where no one knows who you are, you have nothing licensed, that you actually create some of your favorite work for your entire career.

That's true for me. Some of my absolute favorite patterns — and also most successful patterns — were made back in the days before I had ever shown anybody my work. I don't really know why that is. I mean, I don't really work from briefs, but I guess there's no deadlines, there's no expectations, you're just totally designing from your soul, and it's a time not to be rushed. It's a time to really savor and cherish and take slowly.

[0:07:17.5]RP: I'm hearing too like, this ability to create rather than creating for expectations in that, and like taking your time, because you want to create something beautiful or something that's coming out of your soul. There's — I think, when you're in the business of being creative, it's really hard to kind of stay on top of that like, having to be creative all the time flow.

[0:07:38.6] BC: Yeah, for sure. Because when you have the deadlines and no expectations, if you're feeling off, then you just don't mess with it. When you do have all those things, you pretty much have to plow through whether you're feeling it or not.

[0:07:50.7] CS: Yeah, one of my favorite things, Bonnie, about you and Going Home to Roost is that slow care to take care of everything, and it's like — Going Home to Roost in of itself is a great example of this, where it wasn't a blog that you're trying to get tons of traffic to, you just kind of — it seems like you were blogging about things that you were passionate about, and things that you loved, and your gorgeous home, and the ways that you can use your fabrics and teach people how to do things, and it really evolved organically from there.

From there, the Roost Tribe as well, and so one of the things that I love about your blog is that it does feel like cozying up to a friend with coffee or tea, and just kind of sitting down and hunkering down for the evening. Going through it is a really nice experience, and I think that's reflected throughout every pattern that you do. You come up with different collections each year. Where are you drawing some of that inspiration from?

[0:08:46.0] BC: I think one thing that hopefully makes me unique, but I also try to teach to anybody that I'm teaching, is to tell a story through your work rather than just kind of come up with this idea and push through it. Really put a piece of your life into your work, and some of the things people will never even know, other than me, that things will end up in my work that are

really meaningful. It's like a picture that I took, and I'll always remember where I was in the day that it was where I took it, and it turned into, morphed into this pattern design or something.

I always try to tell a story through the collections, and make them meaningful from a personal standpoint, and I feel like that just somehow comes through and registers with people. I do themed collections, and a couple of my favorites were after my two children. They're called "Hello Bear" and "Hello Ollie", and Bear and Ollie are my two children. They are like little children's inspired lines. Other collections — I did one called "To Cultivate". I was really geared towards gardening and kind of growing from the earth, which is something that I love, which is why I did it.

I did one called "Forest Floor" recently, and that one was like, literally every element was sketched or photographed off of foliage in my town, which is called Pisgah Forest. It's just kind of telling the whole story. That's kind of what I suggest, I lost your initial question.

[0:10:14.7] CS: No, I was just asking where you got your inspiration from, and I love that your collections are consistent. You know, it's yours, but at the same time they're all so different.

One of the other things that's just always intrigued me about you and your line of work is you're a working mom, and typically when people go out, they leave their nine to five, or whatever their corporate job is, and they decide to be an entrepreneur, they see the traditional paths, right? It's like, "Okay, well I'm really good at graphic design, so I should be a graphic designer. I should do people's logos, I should do their branding, I should do their websites." And they just don't think about other alternatives to cash flow, I guess is what I'm trying to say.

You make your money from not just licensing your designs, but also your blog, and Roost Tribe, and all that kind of stuff. It's very interesting to me, because it's somewhere where you're not beholden to a client at every moment. It's something that we see on the podcast all the time is that a lot of our audience thinks that the only way forward is more clients.

Would you mind just kind of like, talking about what it's like to find that alternate path to financial freedom?

[0:11:27.8] BC: Yeah, that's a great question, and something that I'm really passionate about, and don't really talk about all that often. It was intentional. It was an intentional move. It didn't just happen for us — and by us I mean my husband and I — is that we intentionally wanted to do something that we loved. We didn't want to feel like we had to get up and go to work. We wanted to do what we loved. Whether or not that made money or not wasn't really a huge part of it. My husband is a cycling coach, and a fly-fishing guide, and those are the things that he loves. At the end of the day, we love what we do.

Okay, there's a couple of points I want to make. For one, some surface pattern designers will work to briefs, which means Hallmark calls them and says, "We want a Valentine's Day card. These are the colors, this is the theme; design it for us." I have never done that. I like to work from my heart, and create a body of work, and put the work out there and see who is interested in picking that up, which is honestly how a ton of us do work. It's a very valid way to do it, and how surface pattern designers do it. I just think that that's kind of so beautiful, because you get to kind of do whatever you want, stay true to where your heart is and what your style is, and then see who is interested in picking it up from there.

I think it's really hard — I've heard a lot of artists who kind of came from that direction, maybe they got — they're super talented, and maybe they worked for Hallmark or someone like that for years and years, then they want to branch off on their own, and it's really hard for them to find a signature style, because they can pretty much do anything. Which has its ups and downs. Being able to do anything is great, but at the same time, companies really want a look and style to buy into.

Anyway, that's just how I've setup to work that. The other thing is that I didn't make any money for a very long time. When I was learning, which was about two years, and then really from signing my first contract, I didn't even get my first paycheck for another year. It was about three years where my husband had to really — he was making like, below average income too. We had one car. We sold a car, we didn't, you know, eat out ever, always struggled. He supported me, and it was about three years before things started to kind of turn around. Since then, it's grown and grown.

Just to say that it is a sacrifice to be able to follow your dreams. You have to be willing to sacrifice, and if you're not willing, then a different career option is probably better. I did make some money during that time, but it was really minimal and inconsistent from blog advertising, and Etsy shop, and stuff like that.

The last point I want to make, too, is that I feel like my whole business kind of turned a point, turned a corner, when I decided on one thing. I decided to basically make everything I was doing passive income.

Everything can basically sell limitlessly, and so when I first started out, I was doing handmade. I was doing handmade aprons, and tea towels, and pillows, which is great. I have a huge heart for handmade, and I still sell some handmade stuff. I'm a huge supporter of it. But from a business perspective, you can literally calculate what the maximum amount of money is that you can make in a day. How many pillows can you make in one single day, and times that by how many days you're willing to work in a year, and that's your max income. Unless you start doing something different with manufacturing, and hiring employees, and stuff like that.

Pretty much everything I do now is all basically selling without a ceiling, is how I think about it. Licensing has the potential to sell, licensing art work has the potential to sell, let's say a million dollars. Not that I'm doing that, but let's just say. It has the potential to make a million dollars. The classes I teach, I teach them once, and I sell them over and over again. The Roost Tribe is a membership that I have, and I'm able to do the content, and it's open to as many members, a million members, you know?

E-Books, and things like that, have really been the turning point and key to my success. I feel like it's being able to kind of be in charge on a whole business from that perspective. Did I explain that well?

[0:11:27.8] CS: Yeah, I would say so!

[0:15:52.3] RP: So interesting. One thing that I loved about listening to your story, and a lot of the entrepreneurs that we've interviewed, is that you might have a particular skill set, but then you take it to the next level and do something kind of unexpected with it. I feel like that's what

you've done with yours; that you found a really specific niche for you that you love doing, and you're really good at. I think a lot of people see what's kind of out there, maybe like being a graphic designer, and all they see is "I have to do wedding stationary" or "I have to do branding."

Does that make sense? It's not really a question, but I think that there is something really unique about people who have honed in from like, the bigger skill that people talk about. Like, kind of on the surface level, or society level, and then they take it to the next level like you have. So I'm just appreciating the fact that you have found this very specific, not really well-inhabited niche back in the day, and now you're really a prominent person in this industry. I'm just grateful that you've kind of walked us through that path.

[0:16:51.4] BC: That's cool, yeah, because I have designed one wedding suite and a couple of logos, but they were all for friends. Yeah, none of that is in my day-to-day work flow, and in fact I think graphic — we're very closely related, but graphic designers do logos and stationary sets, and I think illustrators are kind of more — really at the end of the day, we're all doing the same thing. We can cross and merge each other's boundaries very easily.

[0:17:21.4] CS: Yeah, for sure. If somebody is looking to get in to — I think Illustrator's a program that scares a lot of us, right? I use Photoshop, because Illustrator is so scary.

[0:17:32.3] BC: I think the same way about Photoshop.

[0:17:34.2] CS: That's funny. Yeah, I mean, if somebody is looking to get into Illustrator and they've never used it before. How can they do that? How can they just kind of get in there, and maybe have a better experience than just getting really frustrated and overwhelmed?

[0:17:48.7] BC: Sure. Illustrator — and I forget this, because I have mastered the program at this point. A great way for me to remember is to open Photoshop and fumble around. I'm like, okay. I'll never forget that when I started in Illustrator, it might have well been a different language. I could have learned German easier than I learned Illustrator.

It was not easy. Illustrator is not going to be easy, but this is what I have to say about that, is I used to remind myself all the time, it is just a computer program. I can totally do this, I can

master this no matter how long it takes. I can figure it out, and once you know it, then the sky's the limit. I mean, you're unstoppable, and it's a skill that will last you a lifetime, but I feel like it is the barrier to entry, and it is what weeds out the weak. If you want to do this, you have to buckle down. There is no shortcuts around it. You have to put in the time to learn the program, and then — you probably were leading into this, and that's one thing I teach.

Come take some of my classes on Skillshare or Creative Live, and I will totally take you from opening up the program to mastering some of the way more difficult techniques.

The unique thing is about my courses are that I have really weeded out the information that you don't really need. A lot of people use Illustrator for a lot of different things, and you won't have to kind of jump around the bits that aren't really necessary for illustrating work with my courses. They're all really streamlined. Yeah. It's not easy, but it is definitely possible, and more than that, it's worth it.

[BREAK]

[0:19:26.1] CS: How would it feel if someone laid out a business plan, a road map, or some kind of strategy that would get you started, and get you closer to the goals that you dream of accomplishing in your business? Well, Reina and I actually have done this. All you have to do to get this totally free resource is head to creativeempire.co., and click on "free workbook". We will deliver to you 50 of our most potent, powerful strategies and proven tactics to getting your businesses visible, booked, and profitable. If you would like to have this in your business for totally free, you can grab that at creativeempire.co. We'll see you there.

[INTERVIEW CONTINUED]

[0:19:26.1] CS: Yeah, it's certainly been — it looks like it's been worth it for you, but I think the real question here, Bonnie, is do you teach how to illustrate lizards? I'm just kidding.

[0:20:20.7] BC: I'm just making sure that I'm clear. I have not taught lizards.

[0:20:24.7] CS: Not yet? We'll have to get back to that.

[0:20:28.5]BC: With the skill set that you learned, you can do whatever you want. If lizards is your thing, you'll do this.

[0:20:34.1] RP: That's hysterical.

[0:20:37.2]BC: Tessellating lizards. I remember the class very well.

[0:20:40.9] RP: That's awesome. If somebody's looking, I'm sure you have a course on this, or maybe many courses, but if you were to encourage somebody who is looking to maybe pursue — or even just learn a little bit more about whether they should license or not, license their work and really create that passive sort of lifestyle that you were describing earlier. What would you tell them? What are the ups and downs?

I think we typically hear only about the easy stuff, and like how much money you can make with it, but I think there's a lot of stuff that you have to learn along the process as well. Is there anything that you'd share along that?

[0:21:17.1] BC: Sure. Yeah, if you are — I have three courses total on Skillshare and also on Creative Live, and they're very similar. The first two are on Illustrator, and the last one is on portfolio design and contacting companies. That's where you can go for like a lot of in depth information, but for sure, if you are ready to start contacting companies, or you don't know how, or that's where you want to end up one day, what I suggest is finding your style, and then having let's say between two and four — I mean, probably three is ideal, collections that you're ready to show the world.

A collection should be a set of eight to twelve designs that are all cohesive. They're like a themed collection, and they should all kind of tell a story, and coordinate regarding color and style, okay? The tips that I give on the portfolio is that you should be really happy with the patterns that you're presenting, and you should find the balance between showing your breadth as a designer and how much you're capable of, but also remaining true to your style. Does it make sense that all three of these are — three collections are in the same portfolio, because a

company is probably going to want to license you if you have kind of a cohesive look and style to your work.

The other thing is that I think a lot of people don't want to think about, or don't really think about, is — I get the question a lot — is how important is your online following? And can you do this without an online following? You definitely can do this without an online following, but the way that you should look at it is a company is going to be more inclined to license you if they look at your following, and know that by bringing you in, they're going to be introduced to your 20,000 new people or whatever your number is. Also depending on your online following, a company is going to use that as validation. Like okay, they already have this many people who love what they're doing, so it's kind of like a check that they can do to know that you're well received in the industry already.

What I suggest is if you haven't started yet, to just start. Open social media accounts. Start a blog and just start. I mean, we all have to start, and we all have to get our followers. Really slow, but it does start to snowball at some point, and so consistency is key. You just have to start, and you have to stay with it, and if you do those two things then you will grow a following. You'll kind of get your foot in the door to being even more attractive to licensing opportunities.

[0:24:06.2]RP: Yeah, so cool. I think that something similar is the case with people who publish with bigger publishing houses as well; books, and it's better to have a following than not to have a following. You get your audience by engaging one person at a time, getting one follower at a time.

[0:24:24.2] BC: That's right. One at a time.

[0:24:28.2]RP: Besides your course, is there another resource or place that they might find more information, or just how to even sift through all the noise of how to license? Christina's really good at talking about the legal stuff, but the non-legal materials there.

[0:24:43.9] BC: Definitely refer — go ahead Christina.

[0:24:46.0] CS: Yeah, I think a lot of people have a question about how to even just get that first portfolio in front of somebody that's even going to look at it. I'm sure there's just stacks and stacks of them that these companies receive. How do you stand up?

[0:24:57.8] BC: Yeah, definitely. It is so important to stand out from the crowd, because depending on who you're contacting, some of these art directors at these companies, they can receive a hundred portfolios a week. It's insane. First of all, a lot of people don't even know who to contact. What I would suggest is just start paying attention to the names on the products that you love, or the websites that you love, because everything you love was made by someone.

Start looking up the producers, the manufacturers of your favorite notebook, and just start kind of — start asking Google what companies are open to licensing. There's also a book, I can never remember the name of it, but it comes out every year. It's like *The Artist Licensing Guide* or something, and it's on Amazon, and it comes out every year, and it's basically a big book of all the company — not all of them, but it's a huge book of companies that are actively licensing artists. That's a great place to start, too. I can send out the link so we can make sure to have it for people.

Then once your work is ready, you literally just have to get in touch with the company, look on their website, find their phone number, call them. It's really nerve racking, and I mean, I still get so nervous, but as soon as I blurt out my first sentence about hey, this is my name, this is what I do, can I speak with your art director, then the conversation starts to flow, and everybody is so nice.

One thing that I always try to remember is art directors have — it is their job to see new work. You're not bothering them. It is absolutely their job to be in the now of who is out there, what their work looks like, and I mean, this is their whole job. They want to see your work. They want to see your new work. If they've seen your portfolio, and you come out with new work, keep them in the loop with what you're doing.

It could be instant, they could instantly feel you and license you, and it could take months and months or even years of back and forth before they are ready to commit. It's all been very worth it for me.

[0:26:58.8] CS: Yeah, I heard many stories where seasons change, trends change, people, they submit one portfolio, and they keep updating, keep improving, keep trying and their style just comes back in. They finally submit — they may have submitted to the same company five times, 20 times before, and this time around, their color pallet, their style, their trend, it's on for that year, and so they get accepted, and that's how they get their foot in the door.

I would encourage any of you guys out there to continue trying. If this is something you're interested in — and if it's not service pattern design, it's something else, still relevant. But Bonnie, looking to the future, and looking at what you've built so far with your family, your blog, your service pattern design, all of your pursuits, what does your creative empire in the future look like?

[0:27:49.5] BC: That's a great question, and honestly, I don't think too far in the future because I feel like I get overwhelmed. I literally try — I still try to take things a day at a time, but I have some super exciting opportunities that are in the works that I'm hoping — I can't share yet, but they are probably 2017 things going on that I'm really excited about. Really, my heart is in the day-to-day of fabric design, and so I'm just really excited to kind of keep working on collections.

Seeing what people do with the fabric that I design is just unreal. I'll never get over the feeling that it is to see what people in turn do with their creativity. It's just a really cool thing to witness. We are ultimately — I haven't shared this yet with anybody, but I'm taking the ultimate Going Home to Roost plunge. We just decided to move back to our hometown. I am literally going home to roost, and back in the same home town where my husband and I met, and our families are, and we're building a house there. That is also like really something I'm excited about for the next year, just kind of really growing our roots and getting the place where our kids will grow up.

[0:29:01.4] CS: That's beautiful. Yeah, this is the next question as well, where can people find you? Because everything that you do — Lisa Jacobs was on the show a little while ago, and we were talking about just — everything that you do is just so pretty. It's one of those things where we go back to the beginning of the conversation, where you did things so intentionally and slowly, and you're very careful, and you do it on purpose, right? It shows in everything that you do. When people want to see what this looks like in your life, where can they go to find that?

[0:29:36.7] BC: Thank you for saying that. Sometimes I don't know. At the end of the day, it's just kind of me over here inside. To hear that what I'm doing is being read the way that I want it to be is really special. Thank you for saying that. You can find me on my blog at Going Home To Roost. I also have a membership called the Roost Tribe, which is basically where I kind of dump anything I learn along the way. I put there, and it's really all over the place. It's recipes and printable birthday cards to Adobe Illustrator tutorials and live Q&A sessions.

Really good industry insights, so there's over five years of content right now in the library, and new content gets added every Friday. It's a huge resource if you want to come join. We have a monthly and a yearly membership there, and other than that, Instagram is where I'm at. My handle is @goinghometoroost there as well. I'd love to meet you there too.

[0:30:39.1] CS: Yeah, thank you so much, Bonnie. We really appreciate you coming on and sharing all this insight with us. Everybody listening...

[0:30:44.4] BC: You're so welcome.

[0:30:46.9] CS: Everybody listening. Please go out and build your Creative Empire, maybe intentionally, today.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:30:53.0] ANNOUNCER: Are you ready to build your own empire? For more information, show notes, downloads, and tips on how to do it, head to www.creativeempire.co, where you can find out more about this week's episode and the two lovely ladies behind it all, encouraging you to build your own creative empire.

If you enjoyed this week's show, it would mean so much to Reina and Christina if you could take two minutes to go to iTunes and leave a review. It's a little thing that makes a big difference for the show.

[END]

