



Alisa Coburn's entry to a notebook design contest that took place just after the e-course launched.



From Dream to Job

LILLA'S ART CLASS

Here's a fun new trend: creative e-courses. You can learn something when it suits your schedule, with classes taught by inspiring people all over the world. Journalist Caroline Buijs peeked in on the new online course "Make Art That Sells," offered by the Lilla Rogers Studio School, and learned what illustrators get from the class.

Last spring, American artist and artists' agent Lilla Rogers started offering her first e-course, "Make Art That Sells." Lilla has run an agency for illustrators since 1994, and looks after lots of big name illustrators, including some Flow favorites like Lisa Congdon and Suzy Ultman, as well as Silvia Dekker, whose work can now be found at American retail giant Target.

I'm not an illustrator but I'm very crafting-curious and I wanted to see what it would be like to take a course like this. Lilla kindly allowed me to e-audit the class, watching from the sidelines (without actually having to complete assignments – whew!), and checking in with the participants to get a sense of what they learned.

Early on, Lilla told me via e-mail that she feels this class is one of the best things she's done in her career. Before she started, she asked herself: "How can I best help an artist to thrive, find her own voice, have fun, work hard, and make art that sells?"

In the five-week e-course, participants learn about the various markets where they can sell their work – and not those they would've easily thought of themselves. If you're an illustrator (or designer or graphic designer) who already makes illustrations for magazines, for example, you learn that your work could also be

used for fabric designs, or for gift items – a pencil case, maybe. Every week you learn about another specific market: Bold Fabric (from quilt covers to oven mitts), Home Decor, Children's Books, Wall Art (stickers, posters), and Gifts.

MISTAKES ARE ENCOURAGED

It all starts at a beautifully designed website – how could it be otherwise? – that's colorful and well organized. That's where you, as a participant, log in. You're welcomed by a logo in the shape of an old village schoolhouse. With its red roof and two chimneys, it looks like something straight out of a fairy tale, and gives you that "first day of school" feeling. How nice.

Lilla's e-course doesn't offer just the one golden tip on how to sell your work. It brings together lots of advice, knowledge, practical information, and inspiration from a variety of sources, including a number of Lilla's artists. The experienced illustrator Suzy Ultman, for example, talks about her fabric designs. Every morning, Suzy doodles on sticky notes and that often leads to her real designs. Plenty of experts are featured in the course – on video – and you can pick up lots of knowledge and tips from ➡

“The feeling of being influenced by others changes slowly into feeling inspired by others”

their interviews. Evie Ashworth talks about the great American fabrics brand, Robert Kaufman. From her, we learn that bright colors sell, and that there are certain themes that fit particularly well with the Kaufman brand, and (quite usefully) that every year the company can take on about twelve new designers.

The other nice thing about an e-course is that its participants include people from all around the world. The very fact that your “classmates” come from such varied backgrounds provides its own inspiration.

For example, I spoke to Alisa Coburn, a professional illustrator from Australia, who decided to take the e-course to add to her portfolio and hone her skills. Others enroll to learn tips on better self-promotion and to listen to expert advice on what sells and what doesn’t. Even though she’s been working professionally for a few years, Alisa found the course quite intense, because she was encouraged to stretch her skills. She made mistakes along the way: for example, creating a fabric design and then discovering that the repeating pattern didn’t quite match up. But, she

CREATIVE E-COURSES

Back at school –not in a classroom, but at home on your own sofa, on your own computer, and doing the work when it suits your schedule. Still, you’re following a course in a particular time period “together” with other students throughout the world. That is, in short, what an e-course is. You learn through videos, assignments, and chats about work on Facebook, for example. Find creative e-courses at:

- * [Carlasonheim.com](#): Courses by American artist and illustrator Carla Sonheim on technique and creativity.
- * [Craftsy.com](#): From making jewelry to knitting to... well, actually anything in the craft area.
- * [Creativebug.com](#): Big network of bloggers and creative types who give courses in handicrafts: from making stamps to patchwork.
- * [Makeitindesign.com/designschool](#): Learn to make pattern designs for stationery, fabrics, etc.

was learning, and daring to fail, and she feels that that is essential to growth. “I know from experience that I learn and grow when I’m lured out of my comfort zone,” says Alisa.

Another participant, Antonija M. from Croatia, shared with me a little film about what the course had taught her: “Friends: It’s easier to make good work when you are surrounded by good friends: thanks to fellow students. Fun: People buy your pleasure. Make sure that you’re having fun in your work. Discover: Try new things, develop your style, challenge yourself. Stand out: Make your work eye-catching.”

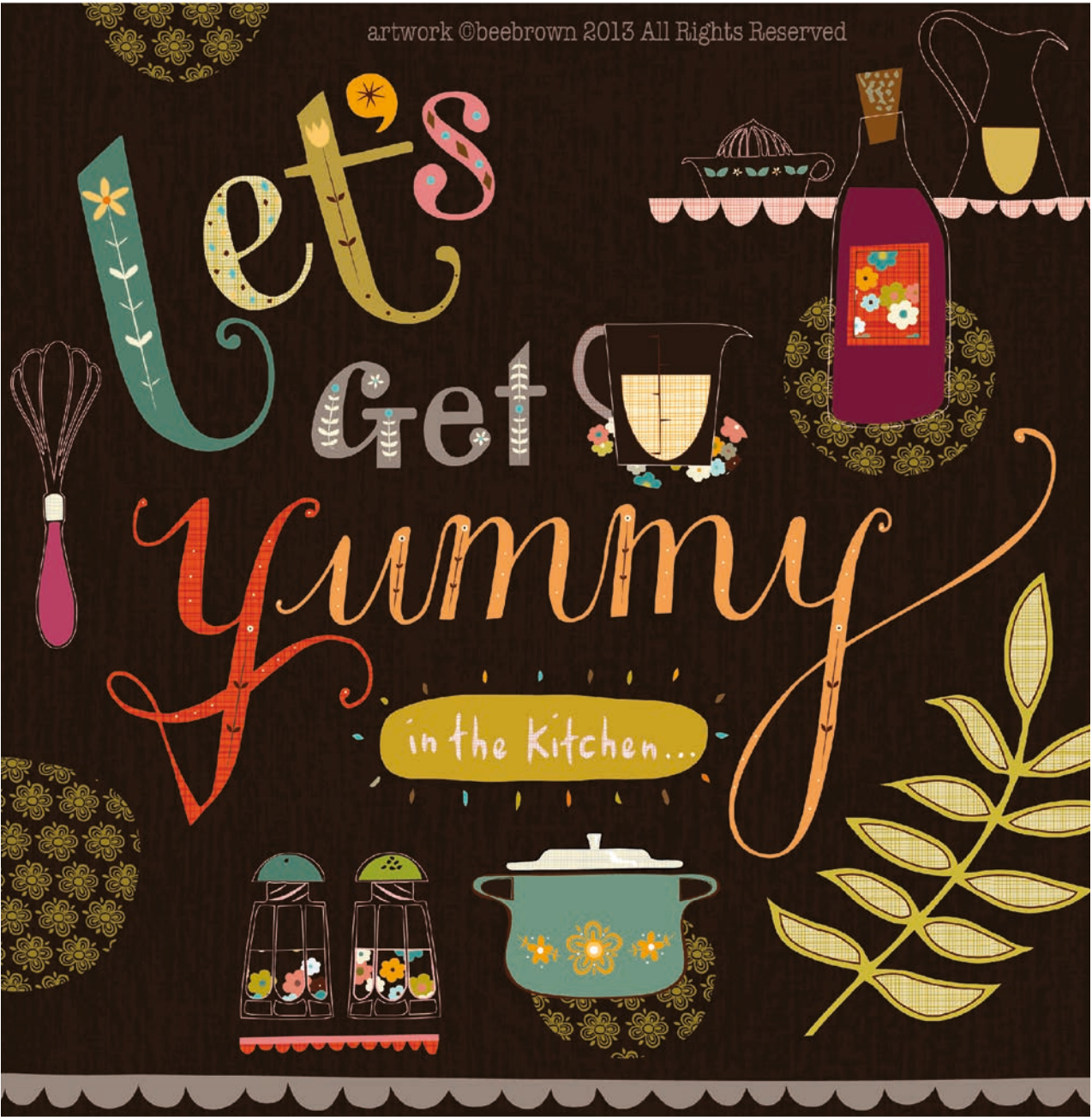
DAILY PLEASURES

Every day, except on weekends, Lilla posts topics on the closed section of the website devoted to the e-course, where participants log on with a personal password. She allows students to download PDFs of the posts to archive for personal reference. On Monday, the posts are the longest, because that’s when Lilla introduces the highlighted subject of the week. These posts – sometimes text with illustrations, and often videos of Lilla giving a short lecture – are full of useful tips. In Week 1, which is focused on Bold Fabric, it’s explained that a customer can only see a small piece of fabric that’s sold on a roll, so using eye-catching colors is key.

In her posts, Lilla also encourages students to analyze styles. An effective way of doing this is to examine their own work and that of others. The more experienced you become at analyzing work, the more you discover your own style. And then the feeling of being influenced by others slowly changes into feeling inspired by others.

Besides listening to the experts, students also have to get down to work: twice a week they get an assignment. On Monday, it’s a mini-exercise, and whatever students make can be used later in the week – which is very handy – for the “Big Assignment,” which is posted every Wednesday. The Wednesday assignment always involves making work on a professional level, so students can include the results in their portfolios. If the result is successful, that is. Lilla deliberately divides all the assignments up into a few steps, to make it easier to get started.

The mini-exercise in Week 1 gets students drawing a mushroom in different ways: “Put on your control-freak hat and draw a mushroom as accurately as possible.” Or, “Do two or three sketches with material that you’re not familiar with.” With this mini-exercise,



Bee Brown's assignment for Week 1: Design a vintage-inspired fabric pattern using vegetables and kitchenware as themes.

participants are encouraged to first study the subject, for example by heading down to the local woods or just visiting a greengrocer, for example, or Googling pictures of mushrooms. Halfway through, Lilla returns to offer this useful tip: “Don’t spend more than an hour on research, because knowing what (not) to spend time on belongs to a professional way of working.”

HAVE FUN

Another tip from the course: try to have fun with your work, because work made with pleasure is work that sells. Also, don’t think too much about the results. It’s good not to make things harder than they need to be (especially with a mini-exercise): draw at your kitchen table or in a café, for example.

When you take a course in a real classroom, you show your teacher your work and she offers feedback. So how does that work with an e-course? When you consider that more than 500 people have taken Lilla’s online course, you know she won’t be able to give everyone personal feedback. Yet she’s found a solution: on Sunday, all the students post their assignments on Flickr, where the e-course has a closed group. On Tuesday, Lilla discusses on video about 10 or 20 of the submitted designs.

But do you get anything out of it if your work is not chosen? Yes, says English illustrator Bee Brown, a participant in the course. “Lilla discusses material that’s relevant to everyone. And it works. The nice thing is that you can then go back and fix your own work. I found that very effective.” In addition to a private Flickr group, there ➡➡



Work Alisa Coburn did in Week 1 of the e-course.
Afterward, Alisa won a contract with Australian publisher
Hardie Grant to illustrate children's books.

is also a private Facebook group, where students enter a private section of the website to post messages. This community is a really good addition to any network: one definite benefit of an e-course.

On Flickr and Facebook, the tone students strike with one another is mild and respectful – Lilla always insists on that. She doesn't want the five weeks to turn into a competition, and tells everyone not to compare themselves with one another. Moreover,

ABOUT THE COURSE

For prices, start dates, and other practical information on the course, see Lilla Rogers' website: LillaRogers.com. The course described in this article is Part A; there is now also a Part B, in which Lilla introduces other markets (e.g. print). Lilla developed two courses with Beth Kempton. Her previous e-courses include "Do What You Love," which she created for an organization that seeks to empower and inspire women to really do what they want in their lives (dowhatyouloveforlife.com).

* Alisa Coburn can be found on inkcaravan.com.

* For more on Bee Brown, read beebrown-hive.blogspot.co.uk.

one person might just be starting out while another might have already had years in the profession. That made me think of Brené Brown, who in her research on vulnerability discovered that comparing yourself to others is the greatest killer of creativity.

"That closed Facebook group was a very safe place to give each other comments and encouragement," says Alisa. "Everyone is talented, and also lenient and generous. I hope we keep doing this in the future."

Course participant Bee Brown is also enthusiastic about the atmosphere. "Especially in this competitive world, I've found it a blessing that our group is not like that, and everyone helps each other," she says. "Sometimes, in an early stage of the assignment, I've posted my draft sketches and it's nice to get feedback and hear whether you're on the right track. And sometimes all you need is a fresh pair of eyes to look at it with you."

Besides getting a better understanding of what customers are looking for, Alisa says she's learned a lot about color and layout in the e-course. "I can't ever look at my work in the same way as before," she says. In addition, Alisa now knows that everyone has his or her own particular talent. Bee has also experienced that, she says. "Doing a course like this, you learn to listen again to what you yourself find beautiful."

And it's never wrong to go back to your current work and possibly make changes. Or, as Lilla says, "Talent is a muscle. The more you exercise it, the stronger it gets." ●