
Products become customized vehicles of personal expression in Art Center at Night's surface design class

by [Mike Winder](#) December 18th, 2013



Patterns from Debra Valencia's Kyoto collection.

Can you imagine a world filled with nothing but solid colors and smooth surfaces?

If not, then thank a surface designer, those daring individuals who transform our vanilla products—everything from iPad cases and coffee mugs to tote bags and pillowcases—into personalized vehicles for individual expression.

In this spring's upcoming [Art Center at Night](#) *Introduction to Surface Design* course, taught by artist and designer [Debra Valencia](#), students will learn about the styles and techniques used in creating surface designs by exploring case studies, product categories, themes and other business basics of earning a living as a surface designer.

What exactly is surface design? "Surface design has been around for centuries but mostly limited to textile design or wall decoration," says Valencia. "Now it's its own design field, with artists and designers coming from many backgrounds."



“Introduction to Surface Design” instructor Debra Valencia.

Why the sudden boom in surface design? Valencia says it can be chalked up to a combination of technological advances in digital printing and high consumer interest. “Fashion trends have made our culture pattern crazy,” she laughs. “Also, technology has both changed the ability and made it more affordable to apply repeat prints and textural treatments to nearly anything and everything.”

And it is. Smartphone cases, handbags, wallets, eyeglasses, dinnerware, placemats, tablecloths, rugs, wallpaper, curtains, bedding and shower curtains are just a few of the products showcasing the handiwork of surface designers.

“In my class, each student will develop several coordinated collections based on themes like everyday floral, geometric and their choice of a novelty theme, like baby, ocean, forest, food, holiday or animals,” says Valencia. “All of which are marketable collections in demand by manufacturers.”



Valencia's Kyoto collection as applied to gift bags, cards, journals, calendars and list pads.

And Valencia knows what manufacturers want. Her [Vida Valencia](#) greeting card company, which offers 130 items including a line of pop-up cards designed to hold gift cards, is exclusively licensed to distributor Jillson & Roberts. Her expertise also includes creating branding, packaging and product design for dozens of companies like Hasbro, The Cheesecake Factory and Hilton Hotels and Resorts.

She has also served as a part-time faculty member in the Communication Arts department at Otis College of Art & Design for more than 13 years and is currently teaching private seminars on the Business of Art Licensing. *Introduction to Surface Design* is the first course she's taught at Art Center.

"I love interacting with students and seeing what they come up with," she says when asked about what she's looking forward to most about teaching the course. "Also, there's a certain surprise element to surface design once you start playing with all the different ways you can do a repeat pattern. Whether you hand-painted the pattern, or drew it on a computer, you can get lots of exciting, unexpected results. I think the students will really enjoy that technical angle."

Art Center at Night offers nearly 200 courses in design and the visual arts, taught by award-winning instructors who are artists and designers practicing in their fields. New courses for the Spring term include All About the Lens!, Comic Book Illustration + Graphic Novels, Intermediate Advertising and Finding Your Voice. Registration for the Spring term is now open. Classes begin January 13.