



# The Moon from My Attic

My Life as a Designer & Artist



## Chronicles and Interviews by Alex Colombo

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- [Trends](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [Freebies](#)
- [Artists Doodle Museum](#)
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MONDAY, MARCH 25, 2013

### An Art Licensing Collaborative Win-Win Situation - Artist Debra Valencia

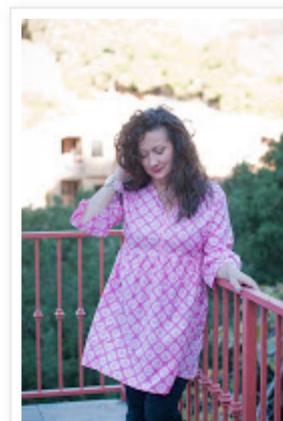


I'm starting to believe that preparing for Surtex is not that difficult, it's just very time consuming. It requires so many different small and big steps to get to the show itself so sometimes it feels overwhelming, especially if you haven't done one yet. But once I completed my booth design and some key collections that I want to show, it felt not so bad

anymore. Now I think it's just a matter of getting my plan executed on time and creating as much new and beautiful art as possible.

The most fun part of this adventure so far has been to chat with many other artists who will attend the show in May and collaborate on various aspects of this multi-faceted business. Collaborative work is my favorite and so it is also for artist [Debra Valencia](#). She is a rising star and a strong driving force behind a whole group of artists in L.A. who create beautiful art for licensing.

**TMFMA: Please introduce yourself** - My name is [Debra Valencia](#). I'm a licensed artist based in Southern California specializing in surface designs. I work with manufacturers in a variety of categories including gift, stationery, textiles, home décor, craft and fashion accessories. I'm known for my bright colors and playful mixing of contemporary patterns such as florals, paisleys and geometrics. I work in several styles with my favorite being simple hand painted shapes in dense watercolor combined with vector drawn accent prints. I work out of my home studio in Malibu with a stunning ocean view. The scenery and weather here are delightful so I can't wait to go to work each day.



Artist Debra Valencia  
PB & Jellie Tunic, "Marrakesh"

**TMFMA: What's exciting about your creative work?** The exciting part for me is having the opportunity to work on whatever theme I want.

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This is the closest thing to fine art I've had the chance to do for a living compared to my years as a graphic designer. I had a great career as a graphic designer and loved it.



© Debra Valencia - Knack 3 Melamine Collection at International Housewares Show, Chicago, "Gelato"

Eventually I yearned to do my own artwork instead of providing design solutions for my clients' businesses. I previously worked at a couple of large design firms, most notably Sussman/Prejza & Co. I also operated my own graphic design agency for several

years with a staff of 3 designers and 2 administrative assistants.

**TMFMA: Who or what has inspired you in your art?** My paternal grandmother, Socorro del Rosario Valencia was the most influential person in my life. She inspired me to cook, sew, appreciate traveling the world, and most importantly to pursue my career in art. She loved flowers and painted them frequently plus other subjects she loved. She was a self taught artist so her style was naïve but charming. As a kid and teenager, I just loved drawing, painting and trying every craft possible. It wasn't my original plan to attend art school but after a few semesters trying out different majors at a liberal arts college, I gravitated to graphic design and pursued the creative field from there.

**TMFMA: What brought you to exhibit for the first time and how many shows have you exhibited in?** I launched my first greeting card line in 2006 at the National Stationery Show. I exhibited in NSS for 2 years as a manufacturer. During my second show in 2007 I attended the NSS party at the top of the Rockefeller Center; it was there that I found out about the field of art licensing.

I started chatting with another partygoer – also without a seat as we juggled our plates and glasses of wine – as we people watched from a staircase. I asked if she had a greeting card line, too, which she did. I asked how long did it take to turn a profit, what I should expect, and how was it going for her. She turned out to be artist Suzy Toronto and told me that it was nearly impossible to make it with a small greeting card line alone. She told me about how she licensed the same art from her cards for fabric, jewelry and a long list of other products which generated additional revenue. I honestly had not heard about art licensing until that conversation but it changed my life!



© Debra Valencia -

David Textiles Fabric by the Yard, "Kyoto", Totebag made by Cheyanne Valencia

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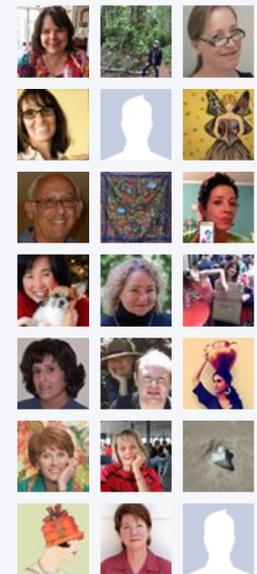
An Art Licensing True Story - by Artist j.c. Spock

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- What to Do When your Art Gets Stolen

#### DESIGN AND ART LICENSING TRADE SHOWS

- Surtex - NYC
- Atlanta Gift Show - Atlanta
- Printsources - NYC
- PaperWorld - Frankfurt
- Bologna Licensing - Italy
- Heimtextil - Frankfurt
- Indigo - Paris
- Spring Fair - Birmingham

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- ▶ 2011 (45)
- ▶ 2012 (80)
- ▼ 2013 (70)
  - January (7)
  - February (6)
  - March (9)
  - April (9)
  - May (9)
  - June (6)
  - July (5)
  - August (5)
  - September (5)
  - October (4)
  - November (4)
  - December (1)
- ▶ 2014 (37)
- ▶ 2015 (24)

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Upon returning from the NSS show, I switched gears. I pursued licensing deals in general but was also able to license my entire greeting card line to a large gift wrap company plus land my first licensing deal for 4 stationery/gift bag collections. Throughout 2008, I fully focused on licensing and spent the year building my portfolio and making connections at the Atlanta Gift Show. I made my debut as a Surtex exhibitor in 2009 and have been in the show every year since.



© Debra Valencia - David Textiles Fabric by the Yard, "Kyoto", Kitchen textiles made by Cheyanne Valencia

#### TMFMA: Do you work with an agent or do you represent yourself? I

represent myself. With my background as a graphic designer, both in-house as creative director with some large firms and running my own studio with 5 employees, it makes sense for me to do it myself. I've worked with 100's of clients directly. From landing the client, budgeting the job, negotiating the fees, drafting the contract and then creating the work, presenting it to the client and selling the concept, I've played every role.

I wouldn't rule out working with an agent in the future. I'm aware that many of the top successful licensed artists have agents. This tells me that you can get to a point where all the work can't be handled by an individual artist even if supported by an in-house staff. Top agents have great sales and negotiation techniques, long-standing relationships with big licensees and an international network of sub-agents which is certainly worth

their commission.

This question also segues nicely into the news about the new co-op agency I recently founded. I saw a need for an art licensing community as well as business education about licensing in Los Angeles. We have such a large population of creative people here. I began teaching small seminars last year on the licensing basics and launched an online networking group for local artists interested in learning how to enter the field.



© Debra Valencia - Housewares International Ceramic Mug Assortment, "Mia"

I approached Otis College of Art & Design about launching a course in art licensing and I am now currently teaching *The Business of Art Licensing* for the Spring 2013 Continuing Education program.

From there, I formed *Art Licensing LA*, a collaborative agency of 5 independent artists. We teamed up to offer manufacturers a broader range of artwork styles and topics than would be possible by a single artist. With a combined library of over 2,000 images in 5 portfolios, we currently offer fresh art of popular

licensing themes: florals, nature, wildlife, beach, food, wine, coffee, holidays, travel, pet, home, garden, baby, children, paisley, novelty, inspiration, humor and more.

We meet for monthly dinner meetings and also communicate by email and phone regularly. Like a virtual studio, in lieu of a physical space, we provide peer support with professional opinions and feedback on in-progress collections; an advisory board of sorts.



As colleagues, we cooperate together as a group to share marketing, publicity and sales tasks. The jobs are divided up by website, booth design, press releases, collateral, video direction, client outreach, etc. It is also really helpful to bounce ideas off each other and get the point of view of another designer. Once artwork is selected by a licensee, contracts and client communication are the responsibility of each individual artist. For example, two of our artists are currently licensed with the same manufacturer for ceramics but with very different artwork.



© Debra Valencia - Decal Girl iPad Skin, "Kyoto"

This business model works for us since many licensees need several styles of artwork in the same season or catalog. Our philosophy is this is a collaborative win-win situation, not a competition with each other.

We operate separate business entities but share responsibilities and that is a huge burden lifted, especially getting ready for the upcoming Surtex show. We will be exhibiting at Surtex in New York, May 19-21, 2013 in booths 734 & 736. We hope our group will thrive

and grow larger for 2014. For more information, see our website: [www.artlicensingla.com](http://www.artlicensingla.com).

**TMFMA: In your view, what was of major interest to manufacturers this year? What do you think the main trends are for 2013?** For my art, most manufacturers showed interest in my paisleys, tiles and

medallion art. This tells me that the ethnic-inspired art is still hot and I see it continuing for several years. What is next? I can only guess but I do think our concern for the environment makes us want to be close to nature. I will be combining natural colors such as greens and browns with my typical bright palettes and developing new print designs inspired by craftsman traditions: mosaic tile, fabric dying, weaving and embroidery, as well as nature: leaves, bamboo and lots of flowers.

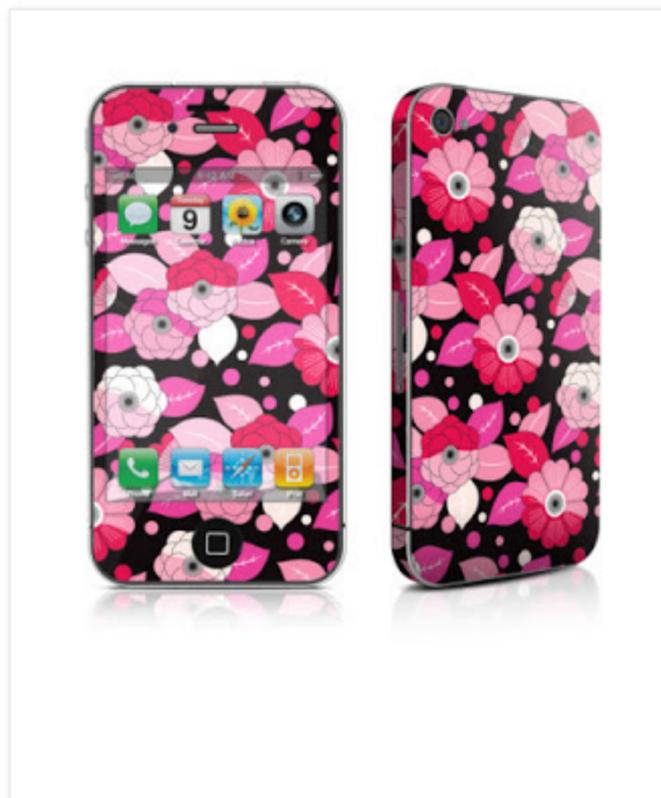


© Debra Valencia - Housewares International  
Ceramic Mug Assortment, "Hibiscus"

**TMFMA: What advice would you give other artists that are considering the art licensing field and that maybe want to exhibit in a show like Surtex?** I think art licensing can be a wonderful way for artists to earn a living. But one must be very careful

especially in the beginning. There are many ups and downs in the business. A manufacturer may show a lot of interest, request your entire portfolio and then no deal happens. It's like being flirted with by the most handsome man at a party, he asks for your number but then never calls. That can really be a let down if you let yourself get too excited by every request. In other cases, you get a contract, do tons of development work per the request of the manufacturer and then the royalty checks trickle in never amounting to more than enough to pay your utility bills. The positive side is when you get a contract with a manufacturer who loves your work, puts your art on lots of products and keeps the pipeline full season after season. That is when it really pays off. I am fortunate to have a few of those clients.

For anyone entering the field, I would tell them not to jump into exhibiting at Surtex or any other show for the initial year or two. Work on your portfolio, obtain licensing deals by making online submissions, research companies you want to work with and track down the person who makes decisions on licensing. You can still make



submissions directly that way even if the company doesn't post submission guidelines on their website. Build up your portfolio to have at least 20 collections if not more. Pay attention to the themes that are licensed the most and make sure you have some of

these in your portfolio. Don't go into debt to exhibit. It can take years to make up the difference. If you really want to exhibit, save up for it. It is worth exhibiting eventually because it really helps establish your name. Plus, manufacturers will stop to look at your work and they may be people you would have never thought of contacting or found by online research.

© Debra Valencia - Decal Girl iPhone Skin,  
"Asiana Blossoms"



© Debra Valencia - David Textiles Fabric  
by the Yard, "Bohemian Rhapsody", Maxi dress  
made by CheyanneValencia

**TMFMA: Any other useful info that you'd like to share about art licensing?** Marketing is essential and not optional. An artist must think like a business person to be successful unless they are just incredibly lucky. I know so many artists who are very talented but they are either too shy or maybe just procrastinators about marketing themselves. If you are the best artist in the world but no one knows about your art, you will not be successful. I advise spending 20% of your time, which equals one day per week on the marketing aspects of your business. This entails making regular submissions to potential licensees and by research into finding new companies you want to work with. Have a well designed portfolio with various samples which can be emailed to potential licensees. This should be supported by ongoing updates to a website, blog, Facebook, publicity, and photos of products. Also make sure you have the basics on hand: logo, business card, postcard, good headshot, well written bio in different word lengths for editorial opportunities.

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See Debra's website for samples of her licensed artwork:  
[www.debravalencia.com](http://www.debravalencia.com)

...and her facebook page for current news:  
<http://www.facebook.com/debravalenciadesign>

Posted by Alex Colombo at 8:45 AM



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**Cathy Hunt** 2 years ago

Great article. Great advice! I will look for you at Surtex. Have a great show!



**Brenda Pinnick** 2 years ago

Debra V. is a very dynamic, talented artist! Congrats to her, she has worked very hard, used her God given talents and still is a nice person besides!



**Carol Van Zandt** 2 years ago

Excellent interview, and fantastic advice! See you both at Surtex!



**Jill Meyer** 2 years ago

Debra is a shining star! Her work is magnificent, and she is the most charming, delightful and generous person one could ever hope to meet! Watch her soar! XO Debra!

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