



# Wild & Whimsical

A colorful bohemian aesthetic plus a strategic approach to business add up to a successful brand for surface designer **Barbra Ignatiev**.

BY Allison Malafrente

Barbra Ignatiev's bold outlook on life translates seamlessly to the bright, beautiful floral designs she creates in her sunny California studio. Through her independent surface-design company, BARBARIAN® by Barbra Ignatiev, featuring "Art for the Wild-at-Heart," she licenses her work to a variety of manufacturers who then transfer her whimsical prints onto everything from stationery, swimwear and bedspreads to plates, pillows and planners. Retailers that carry her designed products include Anthropologie, Bloomingdale's, HomeGoods and Staples. With close to 20 years in the product-design field, more than 900 designs to her credit and a boatload of business savvy, Ignatiev offers useful principles for fine artists and designers alike who aim to develop a successful studio practice.

## MINDSET AND VISION

Ignatiev found her way to surface design through several years of soul searching and intentional career development. She earned a BFA in illustration, but after graduating she suffered a long creative dry spell. The artist soon realized that what was missing from her education were the mental attitude and leadership skills needed to



The **Ideal Beach House print** began as Ignatiev's visualization of her and her husband's dream of living closer to the ocean and owning a beach house. "I put this print on leggings for me and on a shirt for him. We strut around Santa Cruz, and people probably think we're crazy—but we're actually a walking vision board for our future beach-house life!"

turn her art into a successful business. Rising to the need, Ignatiev set out on her own educational journey, guided by online business courses as well as books on creativity, entrepreneurship and mindset, including Brené Brown's *Dare to Lead* and Elizabeth Gilbert's *Big Magic*. "First I did a lot of journaling to discover what I truly wanted, and then I made a plan with small steps to get there," she says. "I discovered that my heart really wanted to be an artist and to own that title, so BARBARIAN originated from a deep desire to live a brave and colorful life."

Ignatiev spent 15 years working for several product-design studios prior to launching BARBARIAN, but it was her first design job at a paper converter for tabletop items that opened her eyes to the possibility of painting for surface design. "Although I didn't actually create the art at my

first job, I learned how to take existing art and edit and manipulate it for products," she explains. "This was the first time surface design was presented to me as a career path, and I loved it! I love how surface design is both creative and practical. For me, it's about surrounding yourself with art and creating your own world. It's about putting your art *everywhere*, so I really think you should want to look at and live with your art first. Design your own reality, and more than likely, other people will want that reality too."

One of Ignatiev's earliest strategies when launching BARBARIAN was to release so much art that it would be hard for people not to notice it. "In 2014, I gave myself the goal of creating one piece of art a day in just 30 minutes," she says. "Whether or not I loved a design, I would post it on my online shops [Society6 and Zazzle] and get feedback based on what was bought. Then I focused on the intersection of what people liked and what I enjoyed making. I eventually got better at making art, and although I now spend more time on a design, I still say that done is better than perfect. Maintaining momentum and enjoying the process are my goals, not perfection. Today, I keep a consistent goal of finishing one design per day, and I typically release about 10 designs a month."

In addition to sharing her designs in her online stores, Ignatiev posted them to her Pinterest, Instagram and Facebook accounts. It wasn't long before she had hundreds of designs circulating online, and major retailers began

approaching her. Three years ago, Ignatiev landed a professional agent who further circulated her art at trade shows and helped her attract top clients. In the last five years, BARBARIAN has garnered more than a dozen licenses in the U.S. and overseas. "Inadvertently, I've created what people refer to as a 'lifestyle brand,' but that was never my intention," she says. "It happened because I made the art I wanted to see; I covered my life in it, and I made sure others saw it as well."

## FROM STUDIO TO LICENSEE

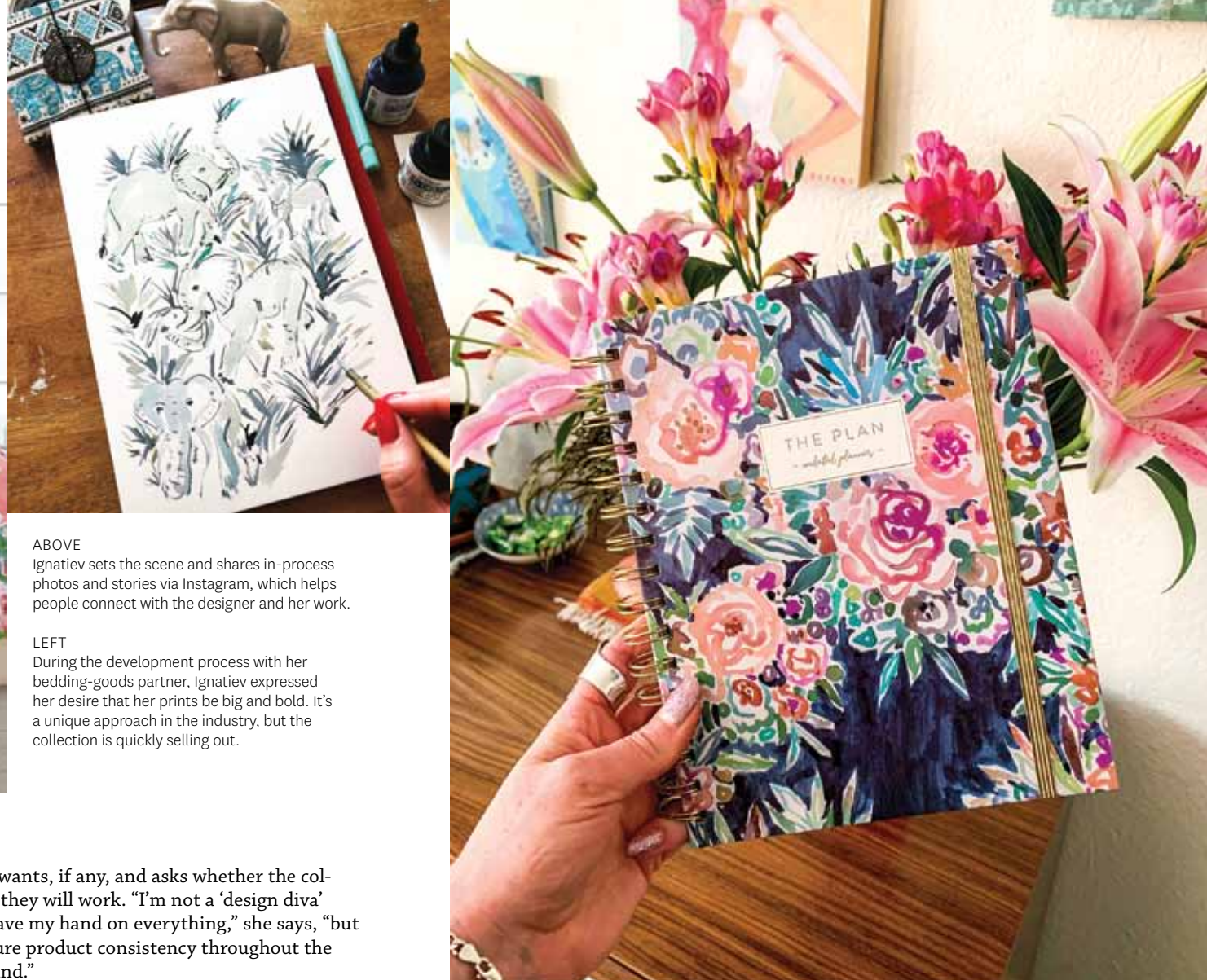
On a typical day, Ignatiev's creative process starts with an idea or vision that inspires her. Sometimes this comes from a dream or desire that she wants to see become a reality; other times it arises from something as simple as seeing a beautiful flower while strolling around her Oakland, Calif., neighborhood. Seated at a large painting table with her favorite upbeat music playing, she starts by drawing or painting a design on paper, usually with watercolor and



ABOVE The whimsical print BEWBS (slang for "boobs") addresses the body positively. "Body shaming is pervasive," says Ignatiev. "I use my art to change the narrative in a delightful way."

LEFT This mug is part of Ignatiev's ongoing collaboration with Lang companies. They've produced hundreds of products with her designs, including gifts, leather goods and calendars.





**ABOVE**  
Ignatiev sets the scene and shares in-process photos and stories via Instagram, which helps people connect with the designer and her work.

**LEFT**  
During the development process with her bedding-goods partner, Ignatiev expressed her desire that her prints be big and bold. It's a unique approach in the industry, but the collection is quickly selling out.

As part of the BARBARIAN collection at Staples, this planner sold next to the notable Martha Stewart and Cynthia Rowley brands.



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step-by-step tutorials.” Ignatiev also shares peeks into her process through Instagram, noting that “people seem to love seeing the colors

bleed as much as I do.” New design releases appear in social media posts and her weekly e-newsletter.

Through the e-newsletter, Ignatiev shares honest and encouraging thoughts about a recent design, an idea on which she has been ruminating, or general thoughts about creativity. She sometimes tells relatable stories about struggles or rough patches she may have faced that week, always turning the negative to positive with a touch of humor. The artist often offers a free design download or some sharable file, and she ends every e-newsletter with the closing, “Big Love.” That larger-than-life spirit of loving others, living bravely and spreading positivity is clearly the cornerstone of everything Ignatiev does through BARBARIAN and the wild-at-heart art she continues to share with the world. 🍀

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▶ **FOR MORE INFORMATION ON BARBRA IGNATIEV AND BARBARIAN, VISIT [BARBRAIGNATIEV.COM](http://BARBRAIGNATIEV.COM) AND [INSTAGRAM.COM/ABARBARIANHEART/](https://www.instagram.com/abarbarianheart/).**

pencil. Although she uses a variety of brands, Ignatiev particularly loves the vibrancy of Dr. Ph. Martin’s watercolors and the smooth surface of Fluid hot-pressed watercolor paper, which she says also scans well.

After completing the painting to her liking (and dancing around her studio while she waits for the layers of watercolor to dry), the artist scans the piece into her MacBook Pro computer and uses her Wacom tablet to start building the art as a seamless pattern. Using editing tools in Photoshop, she cleans up the scan, cuts and pastes pieces to arrange a continuous pattern and edits the color to achieve the right levels of saturation, chroma and harmony. “Creating a seamless pattern is my specialty,” she says. “There’s something very satisfying about a piece of art that can be boundless and expansive.”

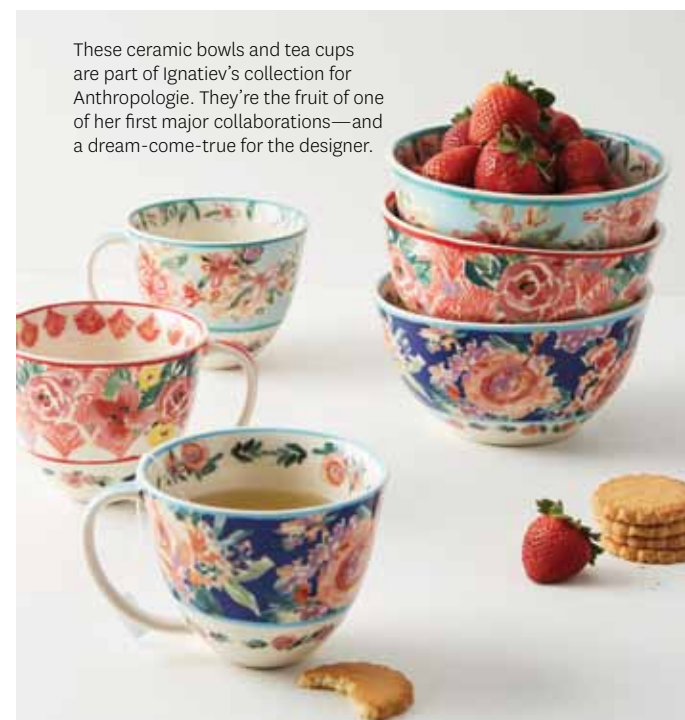
Rather than taking custom orders or commissions, Ignatiev works in a way that allows creative freedom. Through her design-a-day practice, she amasses an ever-growing portfolio of her favorite designs. Then companies can apply to access her portfolio and license specific offerings. Once a design is licensed, Ignatiev begins a series of conversations and approvals that continues from the conceptual stages through final production. This ongoing communication ensures a quality layout and adherence to her style guide. Ignatiev mentions the importance of being an accommodating and open collaborator, especially when the licensee is laying out the art on the product and inquiring about scale and placement. The artist explains

the changes she wants, if any, and asks whether the collaborator agrees they will work. “I’m not a ‘design diva’ with a need to have my hand on everything,” she says, “but I do need to ensure product consistency throughout the BARBARIAN brand.”

### CONNECTION, POSITIVITY & BIG LOVE

Ignatiev has recently realized the importance of sharing her backstory and process with fellow creatives and aspiring artists. “I’d forgotten how interested people are about the steps of creativity and the story behind the art, since I’m usually so entrenched in my own work,” she says. During the early COVID-19 shelter-at-home days, she sent her followers an invitation to join her in her studio for a glimpse of her day-to-day creative life. In her invitation, she expressed her thankfulness for the escape and relief that the creative process lends her and then offered to host a behind-the-scenes online getaway: “This will be a beautiful, delightful place to escape to. A place of hope, connection, and inspiration.”

Viewers who participated via a private Facebook group received four weeks of access to Ignatiev’s studio, including tours, first looks at new art, exclusive downloads and open Q&As. “I think it’s a great way to connect on a deeper level with other humans,” she commented after a week into the event. “People are curious about the life of an artist, and I love sharing in a more free-form style, rather than



These ceramic bowls and tea cups are part of Ignatiev’s collection for Anthropologie. They’re the fruit of one of her first major collaborations—and a dream-come-true for the designer.