

Lush Designs - Homewares



Lush Designs is renowned for its whimsical, fairy tale-like prints, which adorn everything from lampshades and cushions to bed linen and wallpaper. The homewares company, co-owned by Marie Rodgers and Maria Livings, has been at Cockpit Arts' Deptford incubator since the building opened in the early 90s. Today, the business sprawls through several studios on the first floor, a bustling hive of creation, production and distribution run by Marie, two permanent staff members and, currently, two apprentices. They have two shops in Greenwich and East Dulwich, which Maria manages, as well as an online shop and stockists worldwide.

When Marie and Maria arrived at Cockpit Arts they had been running a successful homewares business for several years, but the studios they were working from in South East London kept being redeveloped. "When we came to look around, the building at Deptford still hadn't been finished," Marie recalls. "We were very lucky that it was just opening as we were being evicted from our old studio."

When asked what attracted them to Cockpit Arts, Marie is very definite: "Cockpit owns the Deptford building, so it's great having a secure base that you know you're not going to be evicted from," she says. "We'd also never been with other craft businesses. Coming from a fine art and print background it's been amazing. I think it's turned us into a more creative business."

Marie and Maria met at Maidstone Art College in the early 80s, where they studied painting and printmaking. After moving to South East London, their business evolved through their work in theatre and community arts. But it wasn't until they arrived at Cockpit that their signature illustrative prints took off. It happened thanks to an opportunity to design a range of giant lampshades for the first London Design Festival. "We designed and made huge lampshades with animals on for the cafe space at Cockpit Arts at a time when no one was really making lampshades," explains Marie. "It was great doing a project like that, where you are doing something for yourself. That was where our business was really born; it was when we started doing printed surface designs."

As the business began to expand rapidly, Marie and Maria found themselves in need of staff. "We'd worked on our own for so long, but we were so busy it was clear I needed help," admits Marie. Their first employee arrived thanks to a tip off from fellow Cockpitter Katharine Morling, who told Lush that Lewisham Council were running a graduate placement scheme. It turned out to be one of the best decisions they made. Yvonne was hired on a graduate placement and ended up staying with Lush for six years, only leaving to join British product design behemoth Tom Dixon.

After Yvonne left, Lush took on another graduate, Tamara, who similarly started on work experience and is now employed full-time to run the wholesale and production side of the business. Nesba, their other full-time staff member, has worked with them for 10 years now, running Lush's online sales. "We have a history of successes with hiring people," smiles Marie. "Our staffing is now very stable and we have some great people working for us."

In 2013, Cockpit launched its Creative Employment Programme, an initiative to help studio holders take on their first employees and to increase opportunities for employment in the craft sector. Although by this point Lush was fully staffed, Marie was interested when Imogen Gray, Cockpit's Incubation Project Manager, approached her about hiring an intern. "Although we weren't desperate for extra help at the time, Maria and I were open to the idea of giving someone an opportunity," Marie explains. "Jasmine came to us on a six-month internship. She'd been looking for a job for two years when she came to Lush. She'd been doing lots of poorly paid, bitty jobs, trying to get into the arts, and she just needed someone to give her break. I tried to teach her how to look for jobs properly and not get taken advantage of. It was good to be able to give her an opportunity to see how the workplace should be in the arts. And she was good. I would have kept her on after the internship finished but she found work as a sculptor back in her home country, in Spain.

On the back of this success, though, Marie has now taken on two apprentices, again through Cockpit's current Apprenticeship scheme. "Imogen has been absolutely instrumental in helping us hire both Jasmine and now our two apprentices, Sarah and Ellen," says Marie. "We get approached all the time with opportunities, but Cockpit was so supportive with this, we couldn't say no."



In the end, Imogen did all the advertising, collated the CVs and even sat in on the interviews with Marie. The apprentices chosen were both struggling to get a foothold in the arts world. "When I interviewed them, one was working in a school uniform shop, the other in a restaurant - but I couldn't decide between them, so I took them both" Marie smiles. This decision to take two apprentices was partly due to the fact that Lush had just been offered a concession at Heal's this coming Christmas, which will run in their flagship store from early November until the end of December. "The concession will need constant staffing," explains Marie. "I realised this would be a great project for Ellen and Sarah to run. They are both on a business admin apprenticeship, and our business has a lot of admin! I'm training them to manage stock levels and get a collection ready for a show, among other things. They'll be in charge of that project and we'll over see it."

Talking to the apprentices themselves, it's clear that Marie's confidence in them is paying off. "It's brilliant here," says Sarah. "I feel like we've learnt a lot already. We have the balance of working in the shop and in the studio. Marie and Maria want you to get involved in everything and help you understand all the different aspects of the business. Plus, they've been really understanding and helpful with supporting all the extra stuff, like looking for part-time jobs to support our apprenticeship income, and finding somewhere to live."

Ellen agrees. "The longer I'm here, the more I see new jobs that I might want to do," she says. "We went to Pulse [an interiors trade show] on Monday, which was amazing. I came away buzzing with ideas. I'm now thinking I might look at event organising, for example, but I'll have a better idea by the end of the year."

Six weeks into the apprenticeship Marie is full of enthusiasm for the girls. "So far, they've both been fantastic," she says. "Young people are amazing. They pick things up really quickly. Ellen and Sarah needed an opportunity. I think they'll do well."

"I think apprenticeships are a great idea," she concludes. "The idea that Lush Designs can give someone an opportunity and that an organisation like Cockpit Arts can help us implement this is really fantastic."

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Photos: Kamil Kurnikoff