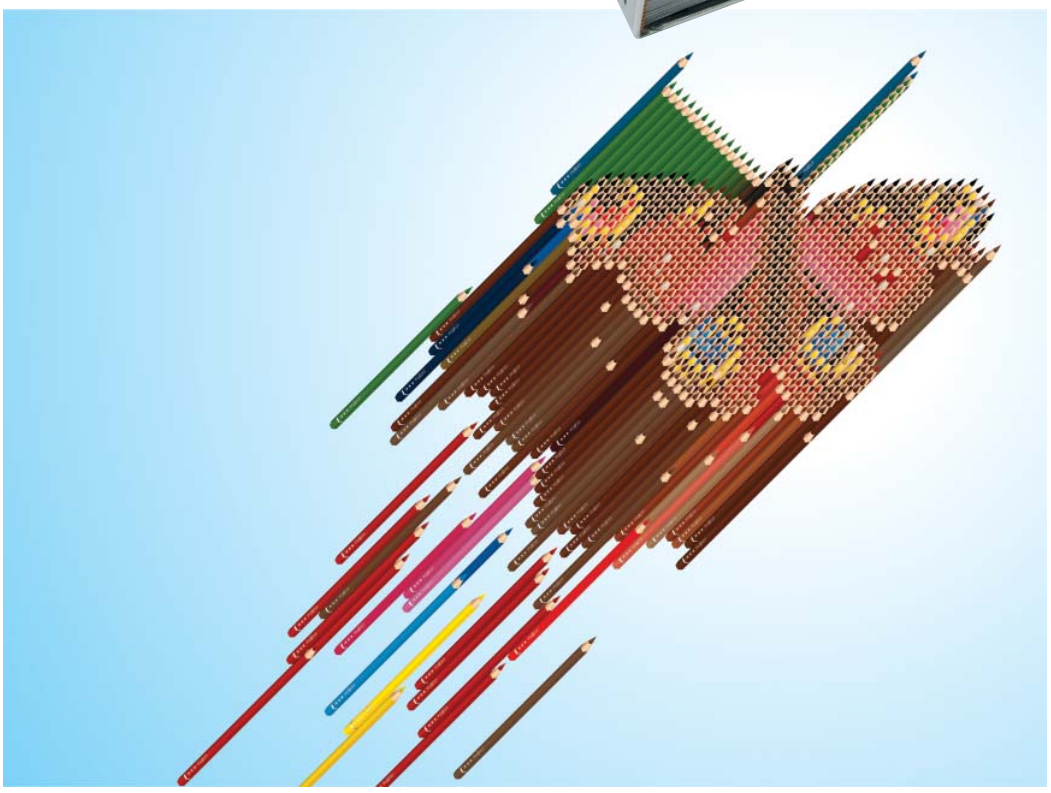
# SELL YOUR DESIGNS

**Who says you have to suffer for art? There are plenty of ways your designs can make you more cash...** **words** Sean Ashcroft

Designers are by nature adventurous creatures, so exploring new ways to make money from their talents is something that should appeal on every level. Each year seems to bring another potential market for creatives, with graphic designers branching out into designer toys, online galleries or skateboard designs, among others.

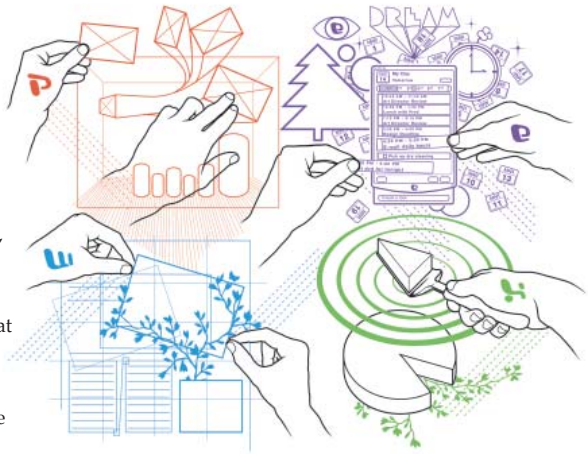
Perhaps the biggest boom area right now for designers – and particularly illustrators – is the online T-shirt market. One of the best-known sites is Threadless (*www.threadless.com*; see page 25). Another is Spreadshirt (*www.spreadshirt.com*), which has a Marketplace area. Here designs can be uploaded, viewed, rated and bought by users. When a customer picks a T-shirt, its designer receives a self-determined commission.

To help designers maximize profitability, Spreadshirt has a 'What's



*FL@33 created* **Butterfly Sculpture Containing 818 Pencils** *as an A1 poster for a book launch.*

*Above* **Australia-based illustrator Jeremyville has created a mini-industry around his distinctive characters; these tees are a tiny part of an output that spans from vinyl toys to custom trainers.**
*Top right* **Mr Papillon Qee is a toy designed by FL@33.**
*Bottom right* **Lev Berry's T-shirt designs, such as this one, are helping him gain exposure and earn money.**



Hot' area, where they can keep tabs on the kind of design that's selling best, as well as those that are highly rated by the site's users.

One attraction of Spreadshirt is that it offers designers a free online shop that can be embedded into their own site. This takes care of everything from payment processing, production, and shipping to after-sales. At present, there are over 300,000 so-called 'shop partners'. This approach is almost risk-free, because if you sell nothing, you lose nothing but the time you've invested. The downside, though, is that making money requires a sustained marketing effort. The team behind Spreadshirt say that many of its most successful designers use other online tools such as Google Adwords to promote their products.

*Above* ***Lev Berry finds Threadless a valuable money-spinner.***
*Below* ***One of Alexis West's characters.***

Some designers and boutique agencies prefer to set up and run their own shops to sell their ranges.

FL@33 (*www.flat33.com*) is a multi-disciplinary design studio established by Agathe Jacquillat and Tomi Vollauschek. The pair also have a sister company, *Stereohype.com*: it's a graphic art and fashion boutique that was launched in 2004. "It's a creative playground for us, but also a platform for emerging designers, illustrators, artists and photographers, who are featured next to established talents," explains Vollauschek.

Stereohype products include T-shirts, badges, books and magazines; products are shipped to all corners of the world.

Running a successful shop takes time and, at the outset, money, says Vollauschek: "We were initially surprised how much money it costs to set up a proper online shop. The costs for your database-driven shop and proper internet payment service are quite high, and so is manufacturing and storing one's stock.

"It took us over a year to establish Stereohype as a profitable online boutique that's more than an expensive hobby," he continues. "Once regular wholesale orders kicked in and media coverage was high enough, it all started to make business sense."

## CHARACTER STUDIES

Alexis West (*www.alexiswest.com*) specializes in graphic illustration and photography, but also runs a character illustration Web site called The Swinging Seesaw (*www.theswingingseesaw.com*), where he sells character prints and illustrations.

"The Swinging Seesaw is an important output of my creative personality," explains West, "but my main source of design income comes from my main body of work [traditional graphic design, editorial and fashion illustration and Web design commissions]. My character illustration work is more of a personal study – a bonus derived from a personal interest."

When he first devised The Swinging Seesaw, West received encouraging interest for limited-edition prints, so decided to set up a small store area on the back of his Web site. Unlike FL@33's experience, it wasn't the logistics of setting up the store that proved problematic, but rather, sourcing merchandise: "Setting up the store itself was very smooth; PayPal offers a simple solution for setting up a basic cart and

## CLICK FOR ART

**Online galleries are an increasingly common source of extra income for designers and illustrators. Click for Art (*www.clickforart.com*), for instance, offers limited-edition framed art prints and boxed printed canvases from over invited 50 artists and illustrators from around the world. One of these is Nik Ainley (*www.shinybinary.com*), a freelance illustrator and designer.**

**"So far it has been pretty successful," says Ainley. "Click for Art is fairly new, though, and I was one of the artists they started with, so I am still seeing them as a growing entity. It has been exciting seeing my work exhibited in big galleries and meeting people who are really enthusiastic about digital artwork."**

**Membership of Click for Art is by invitation only, but Ainley says that anyone who "believes that your work is something people would like to have hanging on their walls" should send in some samples.**

**Long before Click for Art, Ainley relied on DeviantArt (*www.deviantart.com*), which calls itself the "largest online art community". It also has an online store, where traditional art is sold alongside digital art, photography and manga illustrations.**

**"This was where I first showed my work, and it remains a good place to get feedback and to spot emerging talent," says Ainley. "I also use it to sell cheaper poster-style prints, as opposed to the high-quality art prints on Click for Art."**

**But Ainley says the relationship between artists and Click for Art "is more businesslike" than any of the other gallery sites. "There is regular contact and the opportunity to be involved in different projects they have available. They also have a strong 'real world' presence through exhibitions, which the other sites don't."**

## COMICS

What started out as a penchant for a comic-book style of illustration has morphed into a major source of income for London-based Ned Woodman (*tinyurl.com/2wr56v*).

Woodman has been illustrating since 2001, his work ranging from educational books, murals, flyers, magazine work, book covers, TV graphics and computer game concepts. Now, though, most of his work comes from illustrating comic books, such as Max Flash (*tinyurl.com/39263g*).

"[Working in comics] wasn't a conscious decision," explains Woodman. "I've never really drawn for anyone but myself, and naturally gravitated towards a comic style, as it lent itself to my sense of humour. For me, what people term as 'comic art' is often the most exciting and cutting-edge form of illustration."

Comics, Woodman says, can certainly provide a viable source of income. "Publishing in general can be quite a constant area for work, and I think that once you get a break into this field, more jobs tend to fall into your lap as a result. There is always a need for graphic illustration – whether it's comics, graphic novels or illustrated stories. The market, although not always big bucks, is always evolving and needs new input. It can be incredibly rewarding."

## "Exhibitions can end up costing you money"

checkout, and this is all I use. But it took a lot of research into the production side, as unfortunately high-end print materials are not the easiest things to source in the UK."

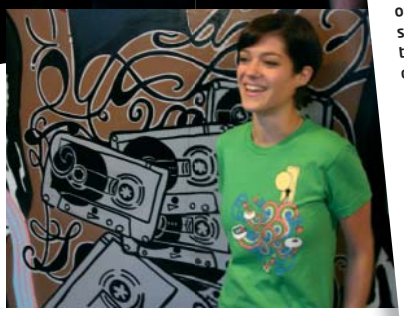
He says the initial planning stage was the most difficult part of setting up a store. "You have to plan whether you are going to produce stock yourself as and when required or have stock ready. I decided to produce on demand, because it's easy to run a print and pop it in the post when ordered."

In the overall art and design timeline, digital ventures such as online stores are a mere blip, whereas exhibiting work in bricks-and-mortar galleries is an ancient practice. But does this still make commercial sense for today's designers?

FL@33 takes part in both group and solo exhibitions, and has recently displayed works in Paris and Frankfurt. "It's a great way of getting to know people," explains Vollauschek. "We usually manage to find buyers for some of our exhibited work, but generally believe that exhibitions can easily end up costing you money – and don't even get started on time," he says, referring to the amount of time that preparing for an exhibition consumes. Exhibitions are not so much about earning extra cash, contends Vollauschek, "but they can create great opportunities for future business – you can meet potential clients and future collaborators, have private views, and it's good PR".

*Above left* ***A poster by Jeremyville, showing his own illustration and spin-off projects, dotted with pieces by big-name collaborators such as John Shakespeare and Miss Van.***

'Recycling' a style is one means of maximizing income across one's design interests. Designers with an instantly recognizable style tend to be better placed to do this than most. Jeremyville (*www.jeremyville.com*), for example, readily admits that all his output – whether it's clothes, toys, trainers or snowboard designs – "is very 'Jeremyville' in style – I don't do any generic designs for clients; they



*Threadless gives designers the chance to have their designs rated –and worn by – the public, making it a nifty way to get critical feedback as well as earning extra money.*

## THREADLESS

For T-shirt aficionados and collectors, Threadless (*www.threadless.com*) is something of a gold standard.

The T-shirt competition site was founded by US-based designers Jake Nickell and Jacob DeHart. Each week, professional illustrators and amateurs alike submit designs that are put to a public vote, with six selected, printed and sold through its online store each week. The winning designs receive a cash prize of $2,000. Designers who are reprinted are sent a further $500.

Designers who submit to sites such as Threadless (or its rival Spreadshirt) need to be alert to small print, as this varies from site to site. For example, if your design is selected for use by Threadless.com, you sign away "the entire right, title, and interest" in your design, including copyright and moral rights. By contrast, Spreadshirt's terms and conditions over the use of designs are non-exclusive to them.

Newly qualified designer Lev Berry (*www.elleevee.com*), who is based in Sydney, is proof that, used carefully, Threadless can offer designers a source of income.

"Right now, my competition winnings are bringing in more money than my freelance work," he says. "I still have a low profile as a graphic designer, so winning Threadless gets my name out there." However, he cautions that earning Threadless dollars means doing research and understanding your market.

He advises all Threadless hopefuls to look closely at the Threadless catalogue (*www.threadless.com/all*) and submit a design that is "truly original". "Voters know what has been printed before, and are looking for something new and interesting," he says. "At the same time, if you want to cash in on trends, you can also figure out what sells and create a design around a popular theme," Berry adds.

He says that the T-shirt design submission picture (or animation) that voters see on their web browser is pivotal to success. "A typical voter usually scores hundreds of submissions a day so you need to capture their attention quickly and then show your design quickly. Get creative with your submissions, so the voter sees something new every time they vote on your designs."

Having a fluid style works on Threadless, reveals Berry. "Change your ideas and graphics to create something unique. Submitting to Threadless is low-risk, high-profit, so it pays to experiment with your graphics."

One thing to bear in mind is that winning designs remain the copyright of Threadless when printing on clothing and wall graphics. This means a winning design cannot be sold as a T-shirt by the designers independently of Threadless. "But the designer can still use the design for screen prints or posters," says Berry.

*For recent graduates like Lev Berry, who are still building up their client roster, T-shirt design Web sites can be an invaluable means of earning cash – and getting their names known.*

come to me for my varied yet identifiable look".

Having such a distinctive (and marketable) creative voice also helps with Jeremyville's productivity: "If you are a professional designer, then having an eye on how long you spend on something is crucial, because you need to work out if your time is profitable and effective."

Recycling single pieces of work can be another way to boost income. FL@33's Vollauschek says they "do sell a few prints of artworks we created for exhibitions or as self-initiated projects," but they rarely 'recycle' projects this way. "Some unpublished works might make their way into another project, but that's it."

With a nod to character-centric illustrators like Jeremyville, Vollauschek adds: "There are some masters of recycling out there who apply their host of characters repeatedly onto every

"You need to work out if your time is profitable"

canvas they can get their hands on, but these people are mostly illustrators who enjoy popularity by being known for a particular style. This is something we respect but try to avoid ourselves."

Recycling work should come with a warning, warns Nik Ainley. "If you want to exhibit or sell commissioned work, you should be very sure that the original client is OK with this. It might be the case that they won't want it displayed in any way other than for their use and your private portfolio."

He adds: "Generally, I just try to produce the best work for each

*Mr Papillon Qee, a toy designed by FL@33 for Toy2r, was one of 20 winning entries in the 'Design-a-Qee UK' competition. It was then produced in Hong Kong.*

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## TOY DESIGN

A Jeremyville (*www.jeremyville.com*) illustration is instantly recognizable. The Sydney-based illustrator's highly stylized, cartoonish characters have become his trademark, winning fans all over the world.

More than anyone else, Jeremyville helped create the limited-edition designer toy market when, in 1995, he produced an inflatable toy called Space Puppy. "I guess this pre-empted the whole genre, and sold around 20,000 units," he says.

Jeremyville has built on this success with a number of toy commissions, including a promotional character for Coke called Trexi, which was part of the company's 2006 World Cup promotional drive in the Far East.

Jeremyville later spotted another gap in the toy market. "I wrote the first book in the world on designer toys, called Vinyl Will Kill," he says. "It was definitely a labour of love, but it does help spread the word of Jeremyville – although that was not the motivation behind it. I am a true fan of designer toys, and love creating them, and I was surprised a book did not yet exist, and I wanted to be the first [to write one]."

So what advice does the master of designer toys have for those looking to branch out into this area?

"Do a lot of research, and also have a really unique concept. Don't repeat what is already out there; difference and your own unique style is everything."

It's advice that Alexis West feels has been ignored by far too many character designers looking to move into the designer toy space.

"My advice to anyone into character design is to completely forget about toy design," says West. "The problem is, too many people are blinded by the idea of creating a toy, and this is creating a market that's over-saturated, clichéd and uninspiring. Toy production should really be the final destination of a completely natural creative journey."

*Alexis West produces character-based prints such as this one, which he sells through his Web site. He has also produced a figurine of one of his characters, but advises character-based designers not to get too hung up on toy production as a goal.*

*FL@33 created this customized Dalsouple rubber floor for their office, where it works as a kind of banner advertising their work.*

commission without thinking of any future uses or profit opportunities. I think this in itself should help the commissioned work come in, which is by far the best way to make money."

### SELF-PROMOTION

But, as London-based illustrator Ned Woodman explains, design ventures cannot always be measured in monetary terms: "You could include this [interview with *Digital Arts*] as a venture, because magazines probably hit the biggest audience, illustration-wise, and that often leads to more work and gets your name out there."

He adds that Web sites such as iStockphoto (*www.istockphoto.com*) – which let people download illustrations copyright-free – can also lead to bigger, better-paid jobs. "Often, little jobs you do here and there catch someone's eye and they get in touch. The more you get out there in the public domain the better the chance of being noticed – stickers, flyers, that kind of thing, can also lead to interest."

> "Commissioned work is by far the best way to make money"

Alexis West agrees, explaining that when "I got a posting on the late, great Pixelsurgeon, my site went to the top of Google overnight, and I was subsequently contacted with some great propositions. These are great ways to create a presence. The Internet is a free worldwide resource, and you should use it." DigitalArts