

Words & Pictures

In each issue, **mutterhood** profiles a creative artist to peek into their process and discover what influences and inspires them. This time we're featuring :

JILL BENT

I am a designer and seamstress with an intense love for vintage fabric and housewares. I work with both vintage and new fabrics, designing and sewing items for the home: pillows, tote bags, table linens and bedding. In the fall, I take up knitting and make a line of handmade scarves to add to my shop. I also make a small collection of handmade clothespeg dolls around the holidays to indulge my love for adorable

and quirky little things. I work only with natural materials because they wear well, wash well and age well. Linen, hemp, cotton, and wool, these materials just feel the best to me. I work at home from my third floor studio in Cambridge, Mass.

When did you start your business?

Before becoming a seamstress, I worked in a college library for 10 years, first in Special Collections, working with antique and rare books, then as a collection development specialist in my interest areas of anthropology and English literature.

After having my second child, I decided I wanted to be at home with my kids full time and start my own creative business on the side. I've always been a seamstress and had been collecting vintage textiles for years, so it felt very natural to take this path.

I started my business in 2008, right around the time that Etsy was taking hold as an online marketplace for handmade and vintage wares. (For more about Etsy, see page 29.)

I sell my handmade and vintage items online on Etsy, and I also sew for a few stores in the Boston area.

In the fall of 2013, I added a collection of vintage housewares to complement the handmade items in my shop. I've always been drawn to old things with

patina and character that can still be used in everyday life. I love cooking and spend a lot of time in my kitchen, so vintage kitchen and servingware take center stage in my online shop. I buy things for my shop that I would love to have in my own home. Sometimes it's hard to draw the line between what stays and what goes.

Describe your business philosophy.

My philosophy is to stay small and sustainable. I like repurposing things that are old but still useful. I like to be able to make each handmade piece that comes out of my shop myself, and know that it's well made and beautiful. I like the idea of making a few special things that will be loved and well used, rather than putting too many new things out there in the world. I believe that the process of making things by hand is really important. There's something very satisfying about it.

Running a small business means doing the sourcing, making, marketing and shipping on my own. This is the biggest challenge for me, to wear all these different hats. There are certain things that are just not possible for me to do, like big wholesale orders or selling to many stores.

Overall, I'm really happy working this way. I'm also lucky that I have a great community of creative friends with small businesses in the Boston area. Having this network is really important, and I try to make time to get together with friends to talk business, trade ideas, collaborate on projects and get inspired creatively as often as possible. It's vital to communicate with other people doing the same type of thing.



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How do you decide what to make, or what vintage pieces to sell?

I like to keep designs simple and let the materials I'm working with take center stage. Usually I find the fabric first, then decide what to use it for. After coming across a beautiful piece of vintage fabric, its condition and size dictate what it becomes. Something strong and sturdy becomes a bag or pillow that can handle daily use; something delicate becomes a lavender pillow or a little zipper bag to hold your favorite jewelry.

Vintage objects for my Etsy shop are selected on their visual appeal and condition. I look for things that are useful in daily life, rather than just decorative. If I would love to have it in my own home, I buy it. I tend to like things that are simple and sturdy in design: heavy, white ironstone china; antique grain sack fabric with great texture; vintage white enamel cookware with a pop of red or blue around the edge.

I look for the sort of things that stand up well to time, things you could look at every day on your counter or table and never tire of. I also love antique china in pretty floral patterns and vintage fabrics in bright, cheery colors.



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Mostly, an object or a piece of fabric just speaks to me and I know right away if I like it or not. And I love a bit of vintage wear and tear on an object. For me, it just adds to the character and appeal.

Have you ever felt a strong attachment to a vintage piece?

Yes! Everything in my shop fits into this category. I really feel a connection with everything I buy. I love the idea that I am relocating objects to places where they will be used and appreciated again. I've always had the sense that objects have a life and history of their own. I like to think about who might have created, used and loved the piece before me, and who might enjoy using it in the future.

Since I've started my vintage shop, there have been two things I bought with the intention to sell, but can't. I found two vintage dolls that are just too dear to part with. Now they sit next to one another on my sewing table inspiring me every day. I suspect there may be others that join them in the future.

What about handmade pieces?

Often, it's hard for me to part with beautiful fabric. I solve this problem by keeping any leftover pieces, no matter how small, and making something like a tiny lavender pillow or a little banner from it. Then I can always keep it around to inspire me. You should see my scrap fabric bag and the wall



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above my sewing table. Both are filled with scraps too precious to throw away.

Describe your aesthetic.

My aesthetic comes from growing up in an old-fashioned, rural town in New Hampshire and from my parents, who are artists and craftspeople. My dad restores antique furniture for a living; my mom is a hand weaver and a painter. I grew up in a house built in 1820 with antique furniture and lots

of handmade objects and art. My parents are part of a very creative community, so I was always surrounded by people who had their own businesses and lived life on their own non-conformist terms. These very special people continue to inspire me to this day.

I would say my aesthetic is a mix of New England country style and Scandinavian country style, things that are practical and simple with color and pattern thrown in for good measure here and there. I like lots of white walls mixed with old wooden furniture and china; vintage stripes and florals; soft, faded colors; oriental rugs; weird old paintings; and a few simple modern things to mix it all up. And a little greenery in the form of house plants and flowers, especially in the winter. I spent a lot of time outdoors as a child, swimming, biking, skiing, ice skating, and just exploring in the woods and fields around my home. The natural world always inspires me as well.

Are you a photographer by training?

I'm a self-taught photographer.

I always want to capture a scene or moment or object that I love, and photography lets me do that. I've cobbled together my skills from reading the blogs of artists and photographers that I admire, and from reading the instruction manual to my simple camera. Recently, I've had the opportunity to work with a professional photographer, and I have learned so much from her, mostly that I still have a lot to learn.

I really love taking photos of things that inspire me in my day-to-day life. Just looking at a photo that I took a few years ago can take me back to that point in my life, and remind me of what I was doing and thinking about at that time. It's about creating a visual diary for myself and a record of what I have done.

On the business side, it's fun to style and present objects so that others will enjoy them visually too. I try to combine what inspires me in my everyday life with how I present the items in my shop. I like to set up a scene that draws the viewer in. Styling and shooting objects is like creating a still life painting and I want the image to be one that makes you want to dive right in and live in that world.



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Describe your packaging.

I always love receiving something that is beautifully wrapped and packaged, and I want to give my Etsy customers the same experience. I want people to feel that when they receive their order it's a present, something really special, where thought and care has been put into both making the object and wrapping it. I like trying to tie together

the colors of the object with the ribbon, paper, and stamps that I use to decorate each package. I also like to include a handwritten note with each order as a way to connect with my customers.

What led you to Etsy? Describe your experience with the organization.

Etsy was just taking off when I started my handmade business and I decided to give it a try. It is the perfect solution for me, because it puts me in touch with customers all over the world. Etsy is huge now, however they continue to provide great service to their online sellers. They are always working to improve the site and offer new resources to sellers, especially in terms of business and social media advice. It is a great online community.



Describe your relationship with customers.

I love getting to meet customers in person at trunk shows and craft fairs, but the reality is that most of my customers are online, often across the country or even the world. Because my business is small, I have the time to communicate with each customer. I really enjoy this interaction, especially since my work can be so solitary. Mostly, I just feel very honored that there are people out there who enjoy my work and want to add it to their home. Sometimes I will get a message from a customer after they have received their package and love it. That's the best! I always write back to let them know they have made my day.



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What's the most important quality for a creative business like yours?

I think the most important thing is to stay true to your vision and never give up! You have to keep plugging away at it and trying new things. It was hard for me to take the initial plunge and put my things out there on the internet, but it turns out it's actually very easy to do. You just have to take a deep breath and put yourself out there!

I think the hardest lesson I've learned is that you really do need to keep at it to sell online, and often from many different angles. Social media has changed so much in the past few years, and it's important to keep on top of the changes and roll with them. I'm not

saying I'm good at that part of it, but I'm trying. It's a work in progress balancing making things with promoting them.

How can our readers get in touch with you?

Please visit my website at www.jillbent.com for links to my online shop and blog. On my blog, there are links for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest, which I update frequently with shop news and tidbits from daily life. You can also contact me at info@jillbent.com.

Imagine a place where the most creative artisans from around the world sell their work — knitters and ceramicists, jewelry designers and lampmakers, woodworkers and collectors with a perfect eye for the best vintage pieces. It's all there for you to see, and you can buy any of it without even getting up from your chair.

That's the idea behind Etsy, an e-commerce website that's become the world's largest and hippest online marketplace for small, independent creative businesses.

Launched in 2005, Etsy's growth is eye-popping: Total sales in 2013 alone topped \$1.35 billion (yes, billion) from more than 20 million items, the majority of which are one-of-a-kind pieces. Today, Etsy boasts more than 30 million members and hosts more than 1 million active shops in 200 countries.

Say you're a woodworker who makes cutting boards. On Etsy, you can set up your own online storefront to sell the boards where you post pictures, describe the items and how you make them, show how many are in stock, and then provide the price. Customers order straight from your store; they can also leave comments about the product and rate the buying experience.

Shop owners pay Etsy 20 cents to list an item, and Etsy receives 3.5% commission for every item sold. According to Etsy, that means that 95 percent of the price per item goes directly to the seller.

"I think Etsy does a great job of providing a platform for businesses to grow and change according to their needs," says Jill Bent, owner of Jill Bent Handmade and Vintage, an Etsy shop. "It works well for me, because I can do things at my own pace and it's very user-friendly. There's also such a strong community among sellers."



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It's that relationship that makes Etsy different from other online markets.

"Our goal is inspiration, not just sales," said Alison Feldman, Etsy editor-in-chief for Pinterest, recently on the Pinterest blog. That philosophy is echoed in Etsy's own words: "We're the world's most vibrant handmade marketplace."