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Lisa Congdon: The Self-Taught Design Pioneer

Known for her colorful, bold, and whimsical folk art-inspired illustration and design style, Lisa Congdon brings joy and passion, fueled by her own self-taught journey, to the modern world of graphic design. Congdon is a fine artist, illustrator, and writer, producing works driven by her experiences with mental health, social justice, being queer, and being a woman. “And while all of those things can feel really dark and hard sometimes, there is a certain amount of joy that I feel, and that’s always what I want to try and express to the world” (Johnson, 2021), she shares.

Although her path to recognition, self-acceptance, and finally, love, was unconventional, Congdon has achieved the reputation as a pioneer not only in design, but also as a mentor and a teacher. Congdon currently lives in Portland, Oregon with her partner Clay Walsh and their two dogs. She is “an avid cyclist and swimmer, and is often training for an athletic event or race” (Essmaker, 2012) when she’s not in the studio or inspiring others.

Early Life and Finding Self-Love

Born January 17, 1968, Congdon strongly aligns with her zodiac sign, calling herself the “quintessential Capricorn”, a sign known for their independence, ambition, and loyalty, as well as bossiness, superiority, and competitiveness. Confident from the get-go, her mother describes her birth story as follows: she “walked out of the womb onto the birthing table and asked for a pastrami sandwich on rye with extra yellow mustard” (Congdon, 2021, No.1). The artist grew up in upstate New York, and then in a tract housing development in Northern California suburbs outside of San Francisco and San Jose. She is the middle child of three and daughter of a textile artist mother and nuclear physicist father. Congdon has always greatly admired her parents and sought to earn their approval. She recounts sitting at the kitchen table, being fascinated by her father writing equations with his perfect penmanship (Congdon, 2021, No.

1). She credits her mother with establishing a household that valued creativity, and describes her childhood as one with paints, crayons, and trips to art classes and museums, and even compares her to Martha Stewart (Essmaker, 2012).

Based on the characteristics of her parents, Congdon identified intelligence and wit as important to her family at a young age, but never considered herself a smart or creative person. Instead, she attributed those traits to her older brother and younger sister, who both tested for a gifted program in school. When young Lisa asked her mother why she was not tested, her mother replied, “Lisa, you are not gifted. You are a hard worker” (Congdon, 2021, No.1). That simple statement, in its attempt to be honest and straight-forward, may have changed the course of Congdon’s life for years to come. Instead of embracing the differences between herself and her siblings, Congdon eagerly tried to fit in. She notes that in the America she grew up in, differences were seen as a flaw. So, the young artist made conformity her “ultimate goal”, and went so far as to study *The Official Preppy Handbook* (Millman, 2021), a white, middle-class American teenager’s style guide, to earn the respect of her classmates.

Congdon would eventually seek therapy in adulthood to confront her desperate need for approval from her parents and everyone around her. Her true journey to self-love began when she entered the dating world, finding herself attracted to artists and creatives because she admired these traits in others, but never imagined them to be within herself. She admits, “I was choosing people who reaffirmed this notion of myself as mediocre and not enough... and unworthy of presence and love” (Congdon, 2021, No.1). Struggling in an unhealthy relationship in her twenties, Congdon began meeting with a therapist. But instead of opening up, Congdon consistently lied about her situation because she did not want to be held accountable for putting herself in her own unfortunate circumstances. After finally admitting the truth about her bad relationship, Congdon broke up with her partner and ended her therapy sessions. Later, at age 32, Congdon began seeing a new therapist, whom she credits with saving her life. This new therapist helped Congdon realize that she sought out distant relationships because that is what she thought she deserved, and the new therapist taught her

that she had agency over her own life and happiness. Upon facing this realization, Congdon decided to confront her demons, throw the expectations she had for herself out the window, and create art. Congdon first decided to commit to embracing creativity when she stumbled across the book, *Creative Visualization* by Shakti Gawain. She devoured it in one night, ready to begin a much happier chapter of her life afterward. She says, “Part of my job as a newly creative person was to reinvent my personal narrative to keep the parts of it that felt authentic and good, and to let the rest go... I allowed myself to visualize, to literally fantasize, about creating a life in which I was a joyful, happy, and thriving human being” (Congdon, 2021, No.1).

The Queer Experience

Part of Congdon’s journey to self-acceptance and rediscovering her creative, inner child was accepting her sexuality. At the age of thirteen, she “began having feelings, or sort of recognition that (she) was gay”, (Congdon, 2021, No.1). As an eighth grader in 1981, Congdon didn’t know anyone among her friends, family, or popular culture who was gay. In the early eighties, she acknowledged that while it was not socially acceptable to be gay, it was even worse to be lesbian. Hiding photos of Brooke Shields and repressing her feelings, Congdon continued to navigate her teenage years in the closet. In her twenties, Congdon finally started to embrace her sexuality when she met a group of other lesbian women in a teaching credential program at San Francisco State University, and she began entering into relationships with a variety of artistic, yet emotionally unavailable, women. Congdon soon found herself in an unhealthy eight-year relationship with a woman who struggled with addiction and mental illness, and Congdon took on the role of caretaker, and the job of “keeping her happy, even alive” (Congdon, 2021, No.1). This was the relationship that initiated Congdon’s therapeutic experience. When the artist finally confronted her own self-sabotaging habits, she also had to address the feelings of shame she associated with being lesbian. Determined to become a healthier version of herself, Congdon vowed that she would not enter another serious relationship until she had done the work necessary to heal from her trauma. Finally, after growing into the person and artist she currently is, and after four years of being single,

Congdon met her wife Clay in 2008. They have been together for 14 years, and in June 2022, celebrated nine years of legal marriage (Congdon, 2021, No. 1). Throughout Congdon’s portfolio, the evidence of “queer joy” symbolism is prominent. The illustrator uses a bright, happy color palette, rainbow symbolism, and messages of positive affirmations to bring pride to the forefront of her work. Today, Congdon works with a variety of clients to benefit LGBTQ+ organizations and give back to the queer community.



Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3. Illustrations from Lisa Congdon’s portfolio that feature rainbows, bright colors, and positive messaging, resulting in an overall feeling of queer love and affirmation.
<https://lisacongdon.com/pages/portfolio>

Imposter Phenomenon and the Female Experience

Throughout her artistic journey, Congdon also suffered imposter phenomenon, commonly referred to as imposter syndrome, which she largely attributes to the female experience. She notes that women from her generation were taught to “sit in the background and stay quiet” (Congdon, 2021, No.2), so these feelings are common among many women. On her podcast, *The Lisa Congdon Sessions*, Congdon explains the origins of the term “imposter phenomenon”, a phrase coined by two female psychologists who conducted a study in 1978 that focused on high-achieving women and their attitudes about success. The study defines those with imposter phenomenon as people who “are convinced that they are frauds, and that they do not deserve what they have achieved” (Congdon, 2021, No.2). Congdon herself

directly experienced imposter phenomenon at the very beginning of her artistic career, when she began to earn notoriety as an illustrator and started receiving enquiries about her work. She recalls one example, when she received an invitation from the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco to be part of a group show, and thought that they had sent the invitation to the wrong “Lisa Congdon” (Congdon, 2021, No.2). Although imposter phenomenon is largely accepted as a real occurrence within the art community, and female community today, it is not without its flaws. When the study was done in 1978, “the impact of racism, classism, xenophobia, and other biases were not taken into account” (Congdon, 2021, No.2). Congdon notes that the term “imposter syndrome tends to put the blame on women’s insecurities as the problem, when in fact for many women, especially women of color...the intersection of their race and gender often places them in a precarious position at work” (Congdon, 2021, No.2). Lisa Congdon continues to speak out about social justice issues and often uses her artwork and social media platforms to comment on policies that affect women and persons of color.

Congdon’s Self-Taught Artistic Journey

Because Congdon had never thought of herself as a creative, she had no expectations for herself when she started producing art and taking herself more seriously as a creative professional in her thirties. “The idea of being a professional artist was so far out of my reality that I never would have even considered it, and for several years I simply entered a love affair with making stuff in the privacy of my own apartment”, she confesses (Congdon, 2021, No.1). Abandoning all assumptions she had about herself and what an artist looks like allowed Congdon to fully embrace the craft of creating a style and voice unique to her quest to create her own happiness. She says, “I had spent a lot of time feeling really unhappy, and I thought, ‘This makes me feel really good; I want to do this all the time.’ I still didn’t say, ‘Oh, this makes me so happy; I want to do this for a living.’ I didn’t even think that was possible. I just wanted to spend all my time outside of work making stuff—so I did” (Essmaker, 2012). Of course, Congdon’s self-taught experience was not without intimidation and imposter phenomenon, but she succeeded in overcoming these feelings with practice. Lisa Congdon is

very vocal about her belief that one does not have to study art to become a successful artist, despite being a teacher herself. “I had to reject this notion that someone who went through academia has more legitimacy as an artist than I do” (Congdon, 2021, No.2), she muses. Congdon, who achieved success through the Internet, recalls a time when the art world had people, systems, and educational institutions put in place that allowed some individuals to become professional artists while keeping others away, even those with enormous talent. However, she does believe there is some value to a formal art education, such as participating in critiques with professors and peers to challenge your own expectations and create something new. (Congdon, 2021, No.5). Congdon’s untraditional path to success is part of what makes her a pioneer of the modern design world.

Instead of a formal education, Lisa Congdon attributes her iconic, easily recognizable style to loads of practice and venturing out of her comfort zone —something everyone has within their own capabilities to do. The artist insists that there are plenty of people who have the potential to be fantastic creatives, but stop after the first attempt because the result isn’t what they had originally envisioned. Congdon emphasizes that those who have unlocked the secret to becoming successful artists are the people “who are able to recognize that in order to get to their vision, they need to continue showing up to practice their skills and they are able to push through the fear and past the desire to procrastinate to shut down the voices in their heads that tell them they’ll never get there” (Congdon, 2021, No.3). The designer also identifies that it’s not enough to create single works, but bodies of works. She encourages other artists starting out to begin creating challenges for themselves, which produces successful experiments. For example, Congdon describes a project when “I worked mostly in the color blue for an entire year and not only did I create over 75 paintings, drawings, and collages held together by color, but working in monochrome also forced me to think outside of my normal bag of tricks about how to make my subject matter work as I played with a limited color palette” (Congdon, 2021, No.3). Practicing and developing her style led to more inquiries and press and in 2006, Congdon had her first show at a little shop in Seattle. Then from 2007-2011,



Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6. Painted works from Lisa Congdon's personal project, *Experiments in Blue*, 2016. Figure 4 shows a dark blue hand behind a pattern of sky blue flowers. Figure 5 depicts a pattern influenced by textile design in a single blue hue. Figure 6 shows a folk art-inspired collection of objects arranged in a pleasing composition. The works are part of a greater collection of pieces created in a monochromatic blue color scheme. <https://www.artisticmoods.com/experiments-in-blue-by-lisa-congdon/>

she owned a shop and gallery in San Francisco called Rare Device. Owning the store and having the creative side businesses allowed Congdon to go part-time at the non-profit she was working for and soon she made the transition from a stable career in education to working as a full-time artist. After three and a half years, she ended up selling the store because she was so busy with commission work (Essmaker, 2012). Despite achieving her goal of becoming a professional artist, Congdon did feel some guilt about leaving her comfort zone in education. "I went into teaching right out of college because I wanted to give something back to the world. My whole identity was wrapped up in what I gave back every day; that was how I felt good about myself. One of the hardest things for me to overcome when I made the decision to leave my career in education was this sense that I was abandoning my commitment to give back to the world and I felt so much guilt about it" (Essmaker, 2012). Fortunately, Congdon has since re-entered the teaching world as a mentor to aspiring artists and creatives.

A Collection a Day and Finding Success in the Digital Age

The unique, self-generated projects Congdon produced throughout the early years of her career and posted on the Internet led professionals such as designer Debbie Millman to refer to her

as a “pioneer”. One of Congdon’s most successful experiments is her book, *A Collection a Day*, which really “introduced (her) to the global marketplace” (Millman, 2021). Critics at The Atlantic say, “A Collection a Day catalogs all 365 of Congdon’s quirky, obsessive, endlessly curious collections of tchotchkes —erasers, pencils, vintage stamps, mushrooms, receipts, medals, maps, sea urchins, and just about everything in between—in a beautiful volume that’s somehow calming and centering in its neatness, a rare oasis of order amidst the chaos of the everyday stuff that surrounds us” (Popova, 2021).



Figure 7 and Figure 8. Photographs from Congdon’s book, *A Collection a Day*, 2010. Figure 7 shows erasers in various warm hues arranged at 90 degree angles. Figure 8 features a composition of different colored clothespins, also organized at 90 degree angles.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/10/a-collection-a-day-lisa-congdons-obsessive-and-unusual-art-project/247057/>

In addition to practice, Congdon credits her success to being in the right place at the right time as the Internet was emerging as a platform for artists to share their work. Congdon says, “In the beginning that was my blog and Flickr. And then it was Twitter and Facebook. And then Instagram. Over time, I posted pretty much every day. I connected with other artists and bloggers. And, eventually I connected with leaders in the illustration industry and people who would hire me. I built a following for my work, and I became known. Then I was able to make a living at it” (Connelly, 2018). As she continues to incorporate digital tools into her work, Congdon notices that her work has evolved simultaneously with technology. Since using an iPad in September of 2017, she admits that new technology alone has already made a new transformation in her art practice and career (Millman, 2021).

Style and Influences

Lisa Congdon champions a bold, graphic style that “radiates positivity,” enticing a variety of major companies to collaborate with the illustrator to bring “joy and beauty to their brands” (Johnson, 2021). Growing up in the 1970’s as a daughter of a textile artist, the bright colors and bold graphic design style is very much a reflection of Congdon’s childhood. Two elements of design that make Lisa Congdon’s work so recognizable is her use of a minimal color palette (seven to twelve at most within a single work) and the symbolism she evokes throughout her pieces. She says, “You will see symbols all over my work that reoccur in the same form but in different colors and placements” (Connelly, 2018). Writers at The Dieline, an online website for package designers, summarize Congdon’s overall style and voice perfectly: “Lisa’s style is one that’s graphic, bold, and playful. The animals she creates aren’t just adorable; they have character and personality expressed through stoic poses and gentle, human-like eyes. Ferns, cacti, and flowers are as vibrant and varying as nature itself. Impactful words are made even more so through carefully handcrafted letters. And yes, while her work might fill you with an overall feeling of positivity (rainbows! sunshine!), she’s not afraid to take on serious topics with her design” (Johnson, 2021). Congdon’s style has also evolved over time. While she began her career as a painter and still prefers that medium, her recent digital work has steered her style to appear more graphic and flat.



Figure 9, Figure 10, and Figure 11. Digital illustrations from Lisa Congdon’s portfolio, showing her mastery of a limited color palette, her handlettering talents, and the symbols and animals within her works that define her style. <https://lisacongdon.com/pages/portfolio>

Some of Congdon's notable clients include Target, Amazon, Google, Warby Parker, Method, Comme des Garçons, REI and MoMA (Congdon, 2022). We see the continuation of her collection motif in the project, "Things I Saw at MoMA and Loved", the 2015 notebook collection she produced for the famous museum featuring illustrated collections of things including chairs, coffee instruments, and audio equipment.

Congdon has also recently expanded her portfolio by experimenting with packaging design and venturing beyond flat surfaces. For her 2021 collaboration with popular soap brand Method, the designer produced a positive, uplifting design that echoed elements of her earlier works, slightly altered to fit the curved edges of the packaging.

Other recent projects that have brought Congdon critical attention include her mural for the Warby Parker store inside Washington Square Mall in Portland, OR, her cover for Wired Magazine for which she won an American Illustration Award, and her international identity work for the American Museum and Gardens in Bath, England. Congdon is particularly passionate about partnering with brands that reflect her own values, interests, and hobbies. In 2022, she announced a collaboration with Schwinn



Figure 12. "Things I Saw at MoMA and Loved", notebooks featuring different collections, inspired by Congdon's collection works. The notebooks feature black drawn collections including chairs, coffee and tea pots, and audio equipment. <https://eastboroughshop.com/products/lisa-congdons-things-i-saw-and-loved-at-moma-notebooks>



Figure 13. Lisa Congdon collaboration with Method soap brand, featuring illustration adapted for soap bottles. Each bottle depicts a different colorful, flat graphic illustration, featuring the rainbow, animal, and floral symbolism the artist is known for. <https://thedieline.com/blog/2021/7/14/method-x-lisa-congdon-limited-edition-launch?>



Figure 14. Lisa Congdon's mural for Warby Parker, featuring a variety of colorful, flat illustrations and "Nice to See You" in handlettering. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CUP5DZCIW9j/>

bikes, with proceeds benefiting the “Venture Out Project, a nonprofit organization focused on creating a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community to experience nature” (Congdon, 2022). The cyclist has also participated in other athletic-themed collaborations including partnerships with All Bodies on Bikes, Little Bike Bag, and Brooks Running. Congdon has received critical acclaim for her style, collections, and collaborations. In March of 2021, she was named “One of the 50 Most Inspiring People and Companies According to Industry Creatives” published by AdWeek. With all of the recent success that has come her way, it is safe to assume that this is only the beginning for the illustrator.

A variety of factors have influenced Congdon’s work throughout her career. Congdon has been vocal about the influence of folk art within her portfolio, stating “My work has always been influenced by a sense of nostalgia, by folk art, and by midcentury design” (Jepsen, 2018). Other designers who have influenced her work include “Alexander Gerard, Paul Rand and Ellsworth Kelly, all of whom use the very limited flat palette. They’re all—or at least two out of the three—influenced by folk art as well,” she tells Debbie Millman in her interview for Design Matters (Millman, 2021). Congdon also has a penchant for nostalgia

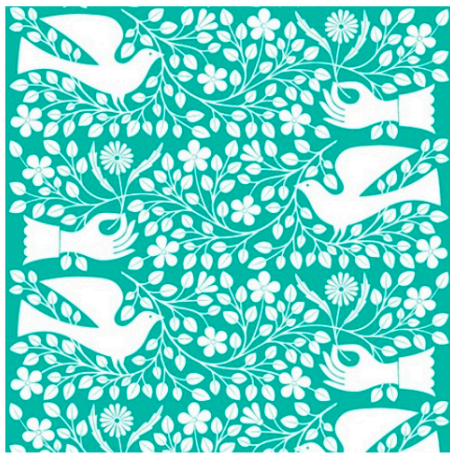


Figure 15. Monochromatic wallpaper design depicting birds, leaves, and hands in a folk-art style by Alexander Gerard. <https://www.grapheine.com/en/graphic-design-en/alexander-girard-design>

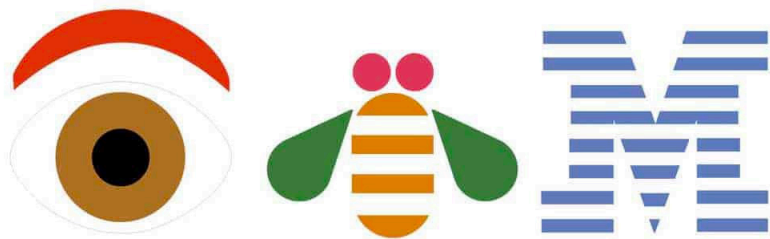


Figure 16. IBM Logo Redesign by Paul Rand, logo designer who defined the 1960’s. The new logo features, an eye, a bee, and the letter “M” in the company’s classic striped design. <https://inkbotdesign.medium.com/paul-rand-biography-top-10-logos-quotes-work-books-60a216f15e7>

and old things. Growing up surrounded by textiles, quilts, and modern art posters all over the house, the artist uses traces of these mediums and other nostalgic factors throughout her portfolio. She remembers, “When I was a little girl, I wanted to be an archaeologist. If you follow me online, you know I love old things, and I collect lots of old treasures and that I have so many collections of old things (which are also a big part of my work). And when I was little, I dreamt of going to junkyards and unearthing treasures” (Jepsen, 2018). However, when it comes to inspiration, truly nothing is off limits for Congdon. The artist finds it everywhere—from the streets, to books, to film, to the Internet. And once she finds something that evokes emotion, she uses that inspiration to drive her work (Jepsen, 2018).

Inspiring Artists Today

Today, Lisa Congdon uses her experience and self-taught journey to inspire and educate young people and other artists. She is the host of the podcast, *The Lisa Congdon Sessions*, and the cofounder of The Long Table Foundation, which provides professional mentoring and grants for Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian artists and creative entrepreneurs (including those of mixed race or ethnicity) (Congdon, 2022). Congdon has also authored ten books, including *Art Inc: The Essential Guide to Building Your Career as an Artist* and *Find your Artistic Voice: The Essential Guide to Working Your Creative Magic*. A teacher by trade and current instructor at Pacific Northwest College of Art, Congdon encourages artists today to stay true to themselves. “Draw from yourself, not from what other people are doing, that’s number one” she says. After years of trying to fit in, Congdon has finally reached self-acceptance, and has embraced who she is as an individual. She says, “I’ve stopped worrying about what others think about my work or if it’s going to sell. The irony is that I’ve been more successful over the past year than I ever have” (Essmaker, 2012).

Although Lisa Congdon is a relatively new artist, her story about achieving self-acceptance and self-love in the face of adversity, resulting in a colorful, uplifting style of work, inspires and continues to influence up-and-coming designers today. She is a hero to female, self-taught, queer, and other marginalized communities of designers previously shut out of the traditional art world, and continues to do work to pave the way for new design pioneers to leave their mark.

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