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Meet the Minds – Barbara Rourke and Jason St. John, Bells & Whistles

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Barbara Rourke and Jason St. John came together by breaking all the rules. The former classmates merged their creative backgrounds on separate coasts into a holistic ethos that elevates hospitality environments into a luxe, otherworldly experience. Here, the cofounders and creative directors of the Los Angeles-based design practice **Bells & Whistles**, discuss navigating the design process and how their vibrant brand identity comes together.

What is your background?

Barbara Rourke: I grew up in a small beach town in New Jersey. It was two blocks wide with the ocean on one side and the bay on the other. I was always creating something, whether it was a giant flower power VW bus mural on my wall or sewing my own clothes.

Jason St. John: I'm a California kid. If I wasn't at the



Jason St. John and Barbara Rourke

beach, I was riding bikes around Point Loma in San Diego.

When did you know you wanted to be a designer?

BR: Growing up a beach kid, I wanted to be a marine biologist but in my later teens, I was introduced to the New York club scene—when it was still amazing and filled with club kids—and changed my focus to fashion design. I moved to California in 1998 and met Jason, who opened my eyes up to the world of furniture design.

JSJ: I was one of those awful students that drew in class all the time. I never stopped, but I never wanted to be a designer or an artist. I just grew into it.

What are some of your earliest design memories?

BR: I'm lucky to have an extremely creative family. My mom taught me to sew and make all kinds of crafts at a very young age, and my dad is a talented musician. My grandmother was also a great painter and always had a camera around her neck. We were definitely always creating.

JSJ: My parents' house was chosen for the San Diego Home and Garden Designer Showcase. A different designer did each room in the house. It was a hodgepodge of crazy 1970s style and it made me realize how both cool and utterly awful interior design could be.

Why and how did you start your own firm?

BR: Jason and I were both attending community college and were diving into our furniture design class. We had this super class of the most talented people and our professor, David Fobes, had a big impact on us. He taught us so much and helped shape how we think about design and who we are as designers today. When we were thinking about going to art school, he encouraged us to start our own business—so that's what we did. We were young and eager enough to just go for it. Neither of us have a degree and neither have worked for any other interior design company, so why not just start your own business, right? It's now been 20 years since we started.

JSJ: While all my friends went to college, I toured with a band that I loved. After a few years of seeing the world, I decided to take some art classes at Mesa College and fell in love with a class taught by our mentor David Fobes. I took five or six semesters and built a furniture, painting, and sculpture portfolio that I shopped to a few schools. The tuition wasn't an option for me, so Mr. Fobes suggested we start our own business. The rest is history.

What is one of your recent projects and what are the design details?

BR: We just completed the flagship store for the jewelry brand **Marrow Fine**. I absolutely love this project. These clients were some of the best people to work with and gave us carte blanche to really go for it design wise. The most fun part of our job is getting to know the people we are creating the space for and design a space that truly personifies them. The design narrative we came up with for the space was a 'romantic, glam-rebel, magical, surrealist, futuristic gypsy-luxe sanctuary.' Obviously, we created a dreamy wonderland of eclectic, femme-brutalist displays, velvety textures, a 'babe cave' with

oversized crystal wallpaper, an iridescent and sherbet-colored counter—all with a futuristic, postmodern, ultra-luxe vibe.

How do you two strike a successful working dynamic?

BR: We've been working together for so long that we have an innate design language between us and our individual design strengths are very complementary to each other.

JSJ: Trying to paint on the same canvas with someone is very challenging. The creative process isn't naturally democratic, so you have to train yourself to design and work together. It's counterintuitive to not always listen to your own internal voice, but it's 100 percent necessary for a good design to flourish.

What are your greatest lessons learned?

BR: Always say yes, even if you've never done it before. You will figure it out.

JSJ: Try to remain calm. Opening a restaurant or space is incredibly stressful, and it can consume you. It's terrifying to borrow millions of dollars, hire a designer, and hope for the best. Our job encompasses lots of different angles of the process, and the most important thing is to keep your cool and make it happen.

What are the most challenging and exciting aspects of your job?

BR: The most exciting part of our job is to start and to finish. It's so much fun to brainstorm and do the conceptualizing. And then it's so rewarding to see all your hard work come together at the end. When you've been living in a 3D model for months, it's amazing to see the finished design in real life.

JSJ: We've been designing nonstop for 20 years now, so it's always exciting. Every day is a new challenge and a new path opens to us. We've been blessed with great clients and wonderful projects. The challenges seem trivial. We can't complain.

How would you describe your design language?

BR: Something I really love about this job is the opportunity to marry our design language with the extremely different concepts of our clients. Whether it's a vintage Mexican restaurant, a minimalist juice bar, or a glam-luxe jewelry store, our design language is the common thread that gives our projects that noticeable Bells + Whistles vibe.

JSJ: I'm colorblind, and I suck at interior design. I'm a sculptor by nature, and my mind is thinking about space and volumes. I'm mostly focused on the relationship between people and architecture and objects, and the effect it can have on their emotional state.

Is there an architect or designer you most admire?

BR: I love the Swedish company [Note Design Studio](#). They have such an ease at maximal minimalism that Swedes just pull off so effortlessly. Their use of color and shape is really inspiring to me. They pull off a design that is current, fashion forward, and timeless all at the same time.

What is your dream project?

BR: I would love to design my own café. I love to cook and would love to be on the other side of our

process. It's always so hard to pour your heart and soul into a project, then hand over the reigns at the end.

If you could have dinner with anyone, living or dead, who would it be?

BR: My gram. She was such a major part of my childhood and always inspired me and encouraged my creativity. I would not be who I am today without her.

Where would you eat and what would you be having?

BR: Probably at home, and I would cook her a soup inspired by the ones she would make growing up.

If you weren't a designer, what would you be?

BR: A chef.

JSJ: A sculptor.
