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JUNE 2018 | WWW.FLORISTSREVIEW.COM

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Meet nine designers who left careers in the sciences for fresh starts in floristry

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Scientific Minds, Creative Hands

Meet nine floral artists who left careers in the sciences for fresh starts in floristry.

BY JULIA MARIE P. SCHMITT, AIFD, EMC

If you talk with artists from any discipline and ask them their opinion on math or science, a common response is: "I went into a creative field so I don't have to 'do' math." Yet for a rare few, math and science form their approach to the arts. By combining the left-brain logical and analytical thinking with the right-brain creativity and intuitiveness, a complex contrast evolves that befuddles logic while creating a new amazing and inspiring reality.

Such is the case with these featured floral artists. None began their careers in the floral industry, but for various reasons, they left their intended career paths and entered the world of flowers. Instead of cutting off all ties with their previous lives, they have merged their past professions with their new creative passions. Pulling heavily from their math and science backgrounds, their floral designs push modern floral art into a new, exciting and uncharted dimension.

Their paths into the creative world may be viewed as accidental, unintended or sheer coincidence. No matter what the logical explanation, the floral industry is now a richer and better place because these amazing minds have brought something new and exciting to the industry that cannot be labeled or put into the proverbial "box." Their scientific and mathematical minds are creating art in their new laboratories of the flower studios.



Harijanto Setiawan

HARIJANTO SETIAWAN
Singapore
Former Career:
Architect



Structure, precision, passion and pushing the boundaries of floral art is at the heart of the designs of internationally renowned floral artist **Harijanto Setiawan**, owner of **Boenga Pte. Ltd.**, in Singapore. Anyone who has seen his work realizes quickly he is in a league all his own.

Top photo: Harijanto Setiawan

Harijanto Setiawan continued

Educated as an architect in Indonesia, Setiawan was hired by the Singapore government to design airports. “When designing airports, they are 75 percent about practicality and 25 percent about aesthetics. If you were designing a shopping mall, it is 50 percent practicality and 50 percent aesthetics,” explains Setiawan. “I love beautiful things, and after seven years, I felt stagnant. An airport is just an airport, and people come and go. They do not stay to admire the beauty. My calling is more expressive. I needed to do something with more emotion.”

So, in 2002, Setiawan decided to start a business that entailed faster results and not as much preparation time. “I started a flower shop because I always loved flowers as a child,” he confesses. But he did not leave his previous profession behind. By combining his craftsmanship with his unique eye for architectural design, he creates floral art that seamlessly joins the design elements of form, movement, textures and color with the unique characteristics of exotic botanicals.

“Architecture design gives me inspiration. With huge weddings, we need to create props and constructions into which we can incorporate flowers. These structures give me a good foundation in which to design,” comments Setiawan. “Using mathematics, I calculate everything constantly. I love the process and the journey of sharing the process. I love complex design.”

Known for his extreme, over-the-top designs, which are heavily influenced by his training as an architect, Setiawan excels in combining the commercial and business aspects of the floral industry with artistry. “With the commercial part, we have the money and the budget. Art is relative, and the pay is less,” he shares. “In Asian cultures, the perceived value is in having more flowers. When you give less product, you need to show the soul of the work. We sell what I call ‘quick-fix flower art,’ which are architectural structures with flowers. Therefore, it has a sense of value for the consumer yet still with a sense of art. I feel you must share knowledge so that people understand it.”

At the heart of his designs is one thing. “All my work points to architecture. I always use it without knowing. It is automatic.”

AGNA MAERTENS, EMC
Beernem, Belgium
Former Career:
Chemistry, Physics, Biology
and Math Teacher



Most 12-year-old children enjoy playing sports, taking dance classes and hanging out with their friends. For **Agna Maertens, EMC**, owner of **Agna Maertens EMC Floral Designs** in Beernem, Belgium, her first interests were a bit different. “When I was 12, I had skeletons of animals and insects,” she reminisces. “I had a microscope and was inspired by everything to do with biology and chemistry.”

Growing up in Belgium with a love for science, Maertens decided in high school to pursue a career in the academic world. After



Agna Maertens, EMC

teaching high school chemistry, math, biology and physics for 20 years, she took a break and decided to jump into another life.

“I had a home-décor shop and did some designing with artificial flowers, but I wanted to use real flowers,” she recalls. “I realized you can’t just ‘jump’ into flowers without knowledge. I wanted to continue teaching, but teaching flowers. So I followed a two-year floral course in Belgium, which I finished in one year.” While competing in a *Helleborus* competition in 2015, Maertens was introduced to **Tomas De Bruyne, EMC**, and began working in the floral industry.

Carrying her math and science background into her newfound passion for floral art, Maertens merged her former profession with her new one. “I love creating new techniques. I discover new techniques with mathematics. I like geometric shapes such as triangles, rectangles and circles. There are proportions to them,” she explains. “I use formulas to design. My husband and son are good with formulas, too, so sometimes I ask them to help me with my formulas.”

Her inspiration is also drawn from the science world. “I get inspired by the life I see in a microscope. I have created many pieces based on microscopic creatures. I love chemistry as well. I worked with burning sugar to create carbon for pieces,” Maertens explains. “Once I was waiting at a train station and looked up at the ceiling. I saw what looked like triangles and squares within each other, which had a nice proportion. It inspired me.”

As Maertens continues to challenge herself to design flowers precisely by formula, one wonders if her studio is a floral shop or a scientific laboratory where new wonderful creations are being calculated and realized.



Agna Maertens, EMC

BEATA KAAS, EMC
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Former Career:
Civil Engineer /
Architectural Technologist



Lounging on her back porch enjoying her morning coffee and admiring her flower gardens, **Beata Kaas, EMC**, owner of **Kaas Floral Design** in Toronto, Canada, seems as if she has been designing floral art her entire life. However, one is quick to realize that the opposite is true.

“I grew up in Poland, and my entire family were engineers. In those days, everyone wore white lab coats. I played in my parents work space on their drafting boards,” reminisces Kaas.

Following the family pattern, she graduated with a civil engineering degree with a concentration in water systems. “I learned how to design and calibrate water breaks for rivers and other water sources.”

Defecting to the Canada in 1985, Kaas began her 20-year career as an architectural technologist working on industrial buildings. “I had opportunities to do some interior designing within some of the buildings I worked on. I really enjoyed that.”

Kaas confesses that she was always passionate about flowers. “Poland has a big culture of flowers. Flowers are omnipresent. When you visit someone, you always bring three things: a gift, alcohol and flowers. I grew up in a town of 2,000 people, and



Beata Kaas, EMC

there are 10 flower shops there.” In 2010, after being tired of sitting behind a computer, she decided to take the plunge, change careers and study to become a certified designer in Canada and in Europe.

“With engineering projects, you spend three or four years to see the fruits of your labor. With flowers, it is instant gratification. The best part is that I am not obligated to adhere to building codes,” laughs Kaas. “But I do follow the guidelines to good design in the floral industry.”

Kaas has not left her technical background behind all together. “When I consult, I offer my clients drawings that show the eleva-

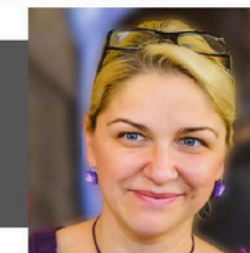


Beata Kaas, EMC

tion of the design pieces and the proportion of the floral art to the actual space,” she explains. “A lot is subconscious, and I can figure the calculations without measuring. I always observe the proportions of the Golden Ratio [1:1.618]. I try to give my clients strong graphic designs connected in some way to flowers. I focus on strong colors and a lot of geometry.”

“I take a lot of my inspiration from architecture. I freelance with an architecture team. I have access to an architecture representative who shows me the new products like wall panels with texture or some of the most amazing wallpapers that seem like metal or leather. My mind starts spinning on how to ‘borrow’ these materials and do something with them with flowers!”

LAURA DRAGHICI
Ploiesti, Romania
Former Career:
Economist /
Financial Manager / Banker



Laura Draghici

When you are a successful bank manager with an EMBA (Executive Master of Business Administration) degree and years of financial experience, the last thing people expect is for you to become a retail florist. **Laura Draghici**, owner of **Chic Fleuriste** in Ploiesti, Romania, did just that and followed her heart to become a successful florist in her small town.

“As a child, there was not artistic life,” explains Draghici. “Both of my parents were math teachers. Math was very easy for me because that is what I knew growing up.”

Graduating with a degree in economics, Draghici worked for 15 years as a financial manager before starting her own financial consulting firm. During this time, she took a floral theory course and a series of hands-on workshops with top European designers.

“After I took the courses, I began playing with flowers and giving my arrangements as gifts to friends.” By word-of-mouth, individuals started to recommend her.

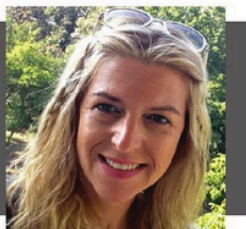
“People wanted flowers from me. They had not seen arrangements like I was making. I started to make a lot of money and thought it was better to have a flower shop instead of a financial company.” So Draghici opened her flower shop in 2013 to everyone’s amazement.

“My town is small, and everyone knows me. I told them I quit banking and started a flower shop. Everyone said it was not possible.”

What has been her greatest success as a flower shop owner Draghici credits to what she learned and practiced during her 15 years in the world of finance. “I know a lot of people. They see me as reliable. I have proved to them that they can talk with me and trust me. I am empathetic and try to understand what my clients want. I listen first, and then I tell them what I can design will be unique. I want to make them happy,” she reflects.

She also believes in following your heart. “It is important to follow your dreams. If you work and think you can do it, you can reach your dreams. I made the choice to become a florist, and I am happy,” Draghici informs.

ANIA NORWOOD, AIFD, EMC
Newport Coast, Calif., USA
Former Career:
Civil Engineer /
Architectural Technologist



Hanging off a ladder, **Ania Norwood, AIFD, EMC**, freelancer and owner of **Ania Norwood Design** in Newport Coast, Calif., diligently creates geometric patterns with string for a ceiling-to-table floral installation. “This is a long way from my days in Poland working in hydrology and designing water breaks,” laughs Norwood.

Growing up in the former Soviet Union-controlled Poland, Norwood’s career path was predestined by the government. “I was placed into civil engineering courses that concentrated on architectural technology,” Norwood recalls. “In the architecture field, there is a lot of geometry, physics, chemistry, calculus and math. It is a very precise science. I eventually came to love it.”



Ania Norwood, AIFD, EMC

In 2001, she moved to the United States and began looking for a job in the field of architecture. To further her career, Norwood enrolled in an AutoCAD (computer-aided design [CAD] and drafting) course.

“When I was taking classes, I came across a basic floral design class,” she explains. “So I signed up and, thus, began my floral career.” While working in a flower shop once a week as part of her course requirements, Norwood was encouraged by the staff to study floristry at a local college. “Once I began studying, I just could not get enough. I was hooked. So after six years as an architectural technologist, I left my previous career and became a floral designer.”

As Norwood developed as a floral artist, she began to differentiate herself from other designers with her constructions and her unique use of materials. “I love building and creating both small and large structures. These features make it easier to create balance and support for the flowers. This part comes very easy to me. It looks to others that it is not going to work, but I know it will,” Norwood remarks. “I love constantly playing with different elements and flowers together. The product you work with will dictate how you work with it. Sometimes the product even forms your idea.”

Her approach to her art is an outgrowth of her former career. “I look at all the aspects of my floral design and then ask myself how do I add an ‘architectural lens’ to this design,” she explains. “Flowers are an expression of what we do, of art, of fashion or of architecture. All media are connected and are combined with flowers. There is always something intriguing and inspiring.”



Ania Norwood, AIFD, EMC

MARGARET HINKLEY
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada
Former Career:
Biologist / Entomologist



Every child plays with bugs and insects growing up, but for **Margaret Hinkley**, owner of **Two Buds Floral Artistry** in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, working in the field of entomology was a happy accident. After graduating from college with major in biology with a minor in chemistry, Hinkley applied for a job in the field of entomology.

“I had done a paper on mosquitoes, and there was a job opening with the Edmonton Urban Forest. I applied and got the job,” Hinkley remembers. For eight years, she worked to prevent the introduction of pest and diseases into the unaffected elm trees within this wooded area.

Her floral career started as a part-time job while she was in college. “I moved back to Edmonton to finish my college degree, and I needed a job. I was at the mall, and the flower shop was hiring. So I began as a bucket washer,” Hinkley shares. “I watched the designers, and I saw it was much more than just a bunch of flowers. By adding the element of design, it became art! I just loved it.” In 2015, she started her flower shop with her best “bud” since third grade. In 2017, she left her entomology career behind.

LINDA WHITTEN
Dallas, Texas, USA
Former Career:
Kinesiologist



For a first-generation American whose parents immigrated to the United States from Vietnam, the hope was to live the American dream and have the opportunity for a better life. Thus, **Linda Whitten**, owner and creative director of **Wedfully Yours** in Dallas, Texas, was expected to go into the medical profession for financial reasons. “My dream was always to be a wedding planner and designer,” reflects Whitten. “My parents thought that was funny.”

Following her parent’s wishes, Whitten enrolled in college to be a nurse. With her upbeat and energetic personality, she realized that she wanted to help people to get better and feel good about themselves. “I was intrigued with helping someone live longer and have a healthier lifestyle.”

A college guidance counselor suggested she study kinesiology, the science of human movement. Embracing a passion for understanding how all the systems in the body work together to achieve better health, Whitten delved into the world of anatomy and biology and became a personal trainer after graduation.

However, after planning her own wedding, her life changed. “I had been a buyer at a local gym for three years, and sitting behind a desk was not for me. I was supposed to be a wedding planner,” Whitten muses. “So I started my own business planning friends’ weddings.” A year after becoming a wedding planner, she added flower designing to her business.



Margaret Hinkley

Margaret Hinkley continued

Her biology studies have influenced her floral business. “My background has given the knowledge of plants and flowers. I love plants, flowers and trees. These products really push me to appreciate nature. I always use branches and leaves, and my designs look like they are growing from the ground,” explains Hinkley. “I love natural scenes. I love natural floral installations. It is like art. However, what I put a lot of emphasis on is making sure everything is clean. It just might tie into my pest and disease management and prevention days,” Hinkley says, smiling.



Linda Whitten

Linda Whitten continued

“Floral planning and wedding planning coincide together. Flowers play such a huge role in all weddings.”

Yet her approach to floral design is quite unique. “When I am consulting with a bride or teaching a class, I explain the anatomy of the flower and how each single flower is part of a larger arrangement. Focusing on the morphology is really important,” she remarks.

Being influenced by her education in kinesiology, the key to her creativity is movement. “Each piece has a role and a certain movement, much like each individual part of a human body. When I make bridal bouquets, I create mostly natural, organic styles. This is where movement plays a part. When the bride is carrying it, I want everyone to see how the flowers would grow naturally and let the stems ‘go’ where they want. I guess you can say that I have transferred the scientific method and analytical thinking I learned in college to floristry,” Whitten laughs.

**NATASHA LISITSA
AND DANIEL SCHULTZ**
San Francisco, Calif., USA
Former Careers:
Electrical Engineer (Natasha)
Architect (Daniel)



Standing in front of a floral art installation created by the husband-and-wife team of **Daniel Schultz** and **Natasha Lisitsa**, owners of **Waterlily Pond**, an event design and floral art studio in San Francisco, Calif., it is not surprising that there is an architect in the family. What does come as a bit of a shock is that both started their careers in scientific fields. “Our math and science backgrounds translate in what we do in our floral art installations,” explains Schultz.

The two met in California while Schultz was working as an architect and Lisitsa, an electrical engineer from the Ukraine, was working in Silicon Valley in the high-tech industry. Thanks to the crash of the dot.com industry and a bit of burn out, Lisitsa visited a career counselor.

“They suggested I try something in the creative field. I said I did flowers for fun, and I was told to try being a florist. I took an Ikebana class, fell in love with flowers and never looked back,” Lisitsa recalls. While she was discovering her new career, Schulz left his job as a



Natasha Lisitsa and Daniel Schultz



Natasha Lisitsa and Daniel Schultz

building architect and began freelancing.

“We began working together for the first time in 2001 at a friend’s wedding. We installed a piece that went along the pathway leading to the ceremony. It was different and was our first art installation,” comments Schultz. “I had been doing small art installations with efficient space suspension since college, but I never intended this alternative career.”

Combining their skills, interests and passion for design, Schultz and Lisitsa started Waterlily Pond in 2001. “Doing large-scale designing takes on a life of its own. It is a great opportunity for expression and to come together using the strongest of our combined talents,” explains Lisitsa. While incorporating manipulated metal into their work, Schultz adds furniture-making techniques, giving their artwork a different aesthetic.

He explains, “I use math and a lot of physics on a day-to-day basis for calculating area, volume, load. It is lightweight engineering. Natasha is our production manager.”

“We have a production meeting every morning at breakfast,” comments Lisitsa. “We brainstorm ideas.

Natasha Lisitsa and Daniel Schultz continued

We figure out what we will do. When we start doing something, Daniel makes a model. It is an organic process with design ideas. If both of us are not both onboard, we work on a project until we are. We do all our designing together.”

Their dynamic teamwork, mixed with their unique backgrounds, has enabled them to carve out a unique place in the floral world, where their motto is “Go big or go home, and the sky is the limit,” – literally.

J. PAUL JARAS, AIFD
Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada
Former Career:
Architectural Illustrator



Sitting quietly in a corner of a workroom, at a table buried under cardboard slates and measuring devices, **J. Paul Jaras, AIFD**, freelance floral artist and floral instructor from Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada, intently calculates the dimensions and space intervals of a downward-hanging acrylic bridal bouquet. His notes, which might be deciphered only by a mathematician, are the “creative soul” of his designs.

“I look for mathematical solutions and apply them to what the aesthetics require,” smiles Jaras, with his boyish grin. “Math and science is just a part of me.”

Trained and educated as an architectural draftsman, with a background in architectural technology, fine arts and fashion design, Jaras has always been attracted to both the analytical and the artistic sides of design.

“I am aware of the relationship between geometric form and the realizations of an idea in 3-D. I use the Golden Rectangle [a.k.a. Golden Mean, Golden Ratio, 1:1.618] in everything I do creatively,” he explains. “I have always loved drawing and do everything on paper. I guess this points back to my draftsman days and my love of fashion-pattern making. I like going from 2-D to 3-D in cloth.”

Falling into the floral industry, Jaras describes, as a



J. Paul Jaras, AIFD

“happy accident.” “I was visiting a friend who was working in a flower shop. The owner was doing a wedding, and he showed me how to make corsages and boutonnieres. He liked what I made and had me make nine more. So began my floral career in the 1990s.”

His analytically inspired designs seamlessly demonstrate the strong relationship between the structure, container and botanical materials. “I love precise, simple, pure aesthetics that showcase the elements and principles of design and that are breathtaking,” he elaborates. “Everything always points back to working with measurement and scaling plans for me. I have always enjoyed it. It is always a part of how I think of design. It is satisfying for me to create a design model and then create the design for real. Most of the time, I will sketch it and then create from there.”

For Jaras, “I always have an idea of the end result, but I feel a good design in my heart. I strive for excellence and not perfection. That is why my philosophy is that my current design is the best that I have done. It is the culmination of what I have done and learned to this point. I continue to push myself to go as far as possible.” ■



J. Paul Jaras, AIFD