



FLORAL DESIGN

How Celebrity Florist Emily Thompson Developed Her Wild Style

    By: [Joyce Newman](#) | January 12, 2017

Fresh off of creating an exciting floral arrangement for the award-winning restaurant at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the design team at Emily Thompson Flowers gets back to work at their South Street Seaport studio – all decked out with wreaths, ribbons, and rocks.

Outside the studio, shoppers strolling by stop and stare at the gorgeous evergreen garlands and container plants on display. Walking indoors, the strong flower and pine fragrances sweep through a quaint, shelf-lined shop, overflowing with artistic objects for sale.

Rosemary topiaries sit side by side with black linen gift bags of shiny anthracite coal; floor-to-ceiling shelves hold brass candlesticks, stones, and gift cards, each with beautifully hand-written tags revealing price and provenance.



Famous White House Holiday Designs

Thompson's work is best known for its sculptural and naturalistic elements, which were inspired by the florist's childhood home in the Northeast Kingdom, Vermont. Her clients not only include major museums, popular magazines, high-end retailers, and chic restaurants, but the Obama White House, where she spent a week, a few years ago, as a guest designer of "Holidays at the White House." Her approach to this project, like many others that followed, was to wildly celebrate the natural world.

Emily Thompson's clients range from major museums, popular magazines, high-end retailers, and chic restaurants to the Obama White House— where she spent a week, a few years ago, as a guest designer for the holidays.

For the ornate White House East Room (the ballroom), Thompson and her team hung huge garlands shaped like eagle wings around the windows. They were woven from long, thin pine boughs and rose from floor to ceiling. Evergreen trees were dressed with garlands and raw quartz ornaments. Mirrors were draped with velvet ribbons strung with sycamore pods and sweetgum balls.

Thompson said that her only guideline from Michelle Obama was "to bring the outside in." And she sure did. For the Palm Room— a passageway between east and west wings— her design concept was a peaceful rock garden, using mosses and bulbs that continued to bloom in the coming months.

To find the rocks, Thompson and her husband loaded a pick-up truck carrying huge stones from her father's Vermont property to Washington, D.C. Then Thompson's crew spent a week installing all of the arrangements, and ultimately they even included a pine cone rendition of Bo, the presidential dog.



South Street Seaport Studio

Having studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and earned an MFA in sculpture at UCLA, Thompson eventually moved to New York and first set up shop in Brooklyn, moving to her current Seaport studio and shop in Manhattan two years ago. A team of eight staffers (and extra hands brought in for the busy holiday season) tackle the work. They stand at long, high tables covered with botanical materials, much of which come from the local flower market in New York.

What was new this past holiday season, said Thompson at the time, was a crescent-shaped wreath made from Carolina sapphire juniper branches— adorned with berries and kumquats, bay leaf, and giant eucalyptus pods.



Also new this year were carefully-crafted holiday cards that were letter-pressed in gold by the local print shop, [Bowne Printers](#), then hand-finished with pine or cedar needles in the studio.

Among several different holiday wreath designs, Thompson's willow/magnolia wreath and the paper white bulb wreath were the most difficult to create. She explains: "The willow/magnolia wreath is tricky because it doesn't use a conventional wreath form; you must create a form with green willow branches. And the paper white bulbs are also challenging because they must continue to grow, so they need to be handled gently and attached with delicate methods."

Special hand-made tree ornaments offered in the shop include some amazing tassels made from eastern white pine needles. "We beg our branch guys to find us the longest pine needles," jokes Thompson. The ornament, which almost looks animated, is composed of two tassels with acorn tops, about 5 inches long, strung with copper cord.



Sculptural Designs

The sculpture garden at New York's Museum of Modern Art is visible alongside its two-starred Michelin restaurant, "The Modern", where, every week, Thompson's team creates new sculptural floral designs. The arrangements are "in conversation" with the outdoors as they incorporate branches, vines, and grasses that commingle with other forms of wildlife.

For a project at The Frick Collection, in a room lined with Rembrandts, Turners, and Vermeers, Thompson's hand-painted vases were used as centerpieces on the tables in a nod to the museum's famous Arnhold Collection of Meissen Porcelain. The arrangements glowed, like colors in still-life paintings, with roses and their hips, dahlias, hawthorn berries, and fruits.

Thompson's design for a winter wedding at The National Arts Club in Gramercy Park used Edwardian motifs and eccentricities, with gigantic vegetable topiaries and a huge urn sculpted in asparagus spears. As just one of countless examples of her personal aesthetic and predilection for innovation, such arrangements have become the cornerstone of the Emily Thompson brand.



Unique Containers

Some of Thompson's arrangements work beautifully when composed in simple, but effective containers; for example, Thompson suggests using a white fluted baking dish to create a classic-style centerpiece made with ginger-pink, fragrant roses ("Romantic Antike"), blackberries, passion vine, and foliage from heuchera (coral bells). She writes, "I love to pair roses with raspberries and blackberries, perhaps because the plants are in the same family, and are such natural companions."

Other arrangements might enlist enameled pitchers, vintage cake stands, or copper pots that double as vases, which are magically transformed by her designs. Her "recipe" for a rustic copper pot arrangement, for instance, is: pea pods on the vine, golden echinacea, cosmos, artichokes, and red viburnum berries- all meant to evoke "an old stone farmhouse in Provence". And- like all of Thompson's work- an arrangement that's a feast for the eyes.

[Emily Thompson Flowers](#) is located at 142 Beekman Street in the historic South Street Seaport district of Manhattan. The shop is open Tuesday through Saturday from 12-7 PM and by appointment on Mondays.