

*Meet eight talented women who have made their mark
on the Sarasota interior design scene*

DESIGNING WOMEN

WRITTEN BY KATE WIGHT | PHOTOGRAPHY BY WYATT KOSTYGAN

This spread, left to right:
Tracee Murphy, Jennifer
Masters, Chelsea Dunbar and
Meg Carson, this page.
Ana Santa Maria, Angela
Rodriguez, Christiana Engert,
Anne Folsom Smith,
opposite page.



AT ITS CORE, INTERIOR DESIGN IS ABOUT CREATING ENVIRONMENTS THAT ENHANCE THE WAY WE LIVE, WORK, AND FEEL. Interior designers work closely with architects and builders, often dealing with the highly technical aspects of projects. They also develop close relationships with their clients, helping them discover and refine their style while considering the emotional and practical aspects of a space. *SRQ Magazine* spoke to eight talented local interior designers who are trailblazers in their field. Each woman runs her own design firm and brings a unique perspective to the world of interiors. These women are redefining what it means to create spaces that are as functional as they are beautiful.



Angela Rodriguez **ANGELA RODRIGUEZ INTERIORS**

“I WAS AN ARTIST FROM THE TIME I COULD HOLD A PENCIL,” says Angela Rodriguez. “But when it came to a career I was also interested in the business side of things and I wanted to find something that combined business with the creative arts.” Growing up in Philadelphia, Rodriguez spent every summer from elementary school through high school taking classes at an art college while her mom worked a few blocks away. Over the years she explored a range of disciplines including drawing, painting, sculpture, photography and metalsmithing. “By the time I was deciding where to go to college I felt like I’d already had years at art school,” she says. “I was determined not to go to an art college because as much as I loved the arts I had this impression that I hadn’t found the right thing yet to make a career out of.” Rodriguez was taking business classes when she learned about interior design. The more she understood about what the field included she felt she’d finally found the career path that appealed to both her practical and creative sides. In her sophomore year, she transferred to the Ringling College of Art and Design where she graduated in 2005 with a BFA in Interior Design. In 2020, she was named to the college’s list of most Distinguished Alumni. Ringling is also where she met her husband Pablo. After graduating, Rodriguez quickly found work in hospitality design at a major firm, designing luxury resorts and spas around the globe. While she had always intended to open her own firm someday, that plan was accelerated when her office closed during the Great Recession. In response to this, Rodriguez launched Angela Rodriguez Interiors in 2009.

“In the beginning, it was just me at my dining room table,” she laughs. Fifteen years later, the business has grown to a team of ten, including her husband who has become her business partner as well as her life partner, with offices in Sarasota and Naples. In addition to working with clients in and around Sarasota, the firm takes on projects outside the area, including Manhattan and the Florida Keys. As the firm has grown, so has the Rodriguez family. Rodriguez and her husband didn’t have children when the firm first started but since then they have welcomed three. “It’s a cool thing for my kids to see the family business,” Rodriguez says. “I like to think that it’s a good model for them about work ethic and goal-setting. I think it’s good for them to see how the business has evolved, and that success doesn’t happen overnight. Hard work, commitment and perseverance all go into it.” *Angela Rodriguez Interiors, 7357 International Place Suite 105, Sarasota, 941-388-8202, angelarodriguezinteriors.com.*

“I REALLY HAD A PASSION FOR NEW YORK CITY. THE AVANT-GARDE NATURE OF THE WORK THAT WAS COMING OUT OF NEW YORK APPEALED TO ME.”

—Jennifer Masters

Jennifer Masters **AND MASTERS**

JENNIFER MASTERS HAS LED AN ECLECTIC LIFE. A self-described military brat, Masters spent her childhood bouncing around the United States and Europe where she was exposed to different architectural styles. As fascinated by math and science as she was art, Masters realized early that the field of architecture was the perfect blend of those interests. She went on to attend the University of Tennessee where she received a Bachelor of Architecture Degree. After college, she was ready to tackle city life. “I really had a passion for New York City,” Masters says. “The multiculturalism and the pace of the city appealed to me, and then just the avant-garde nature of the work that was coming out of New York also appealed to me.” In New York, a lot of architecture work consists of taking existing structures and working within them, instead of creating new builds. After moving there, Masters found herself focusing more on interior architecture than exterior architecture. She built her reputation working for large firms on projects ranging from galleries and museums to high-end residential spaces to hotels in Dubai.

“But then I wasn’t happy just doing the interior architecture of those spaces,” she says. “I wanted to also put together the furnishings so that it looked like a place that was done by one hand. And that’s how I came to be more on the interior design side of things.” Masters spent the next 18 years in New York but after her daughter was born her intense work schedule and the high cost of living prompted a change of scenery. She and her daughter relocated to Sarasota and she opened And Masters. “Getting past the age of 40, I didn’t know if I necessarily wanted to work for anybody again. The move to Florida allowed me to spend more time with my daughter, and it also prompted me to really make a go of it and start my own business,” Masters says. Seven years later, the business has blossomed, growing organically from repeat clients and word of mouth. As of this summer, Masters has added two people to her team so she’s no longer flying solo. The slower pace of living has also given Masters the opportunity to give back.

“After having my daughter I wanted to give back to the community so when I came down here I knew I wanted to join the Junior League,” she says. “It ended up being important because it helped me meet other women in town. Some of my first clients came through the Junior League and those clients are now dear friends. So that’s been a blessing in twofold. I’ve been able to do what I wanted to do, which was to contribute to the community, but also teach my daughter that giving back is an important element of being a responsible adult.” *And Masters, 630 Orange Avenue Suite 200D, Sarasota, 941-706-3300, andmasters.com.*



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Meg Carson EMCY INTERIORS

“I DO NOT WATCH HGTV BECAUSE IT CAN GIVE PEOPLE UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF WHAT IS POSSIBLE ON SMALL BUDGETS AND TIGHT TIMELINES,” SAYS MEG CARSON.

Ironically, HGTV was popular with college students when Carson was attending Florida State University in the early 2000s. While she had originally planned to major in communications, she switched her focus to interior design. After graduating she spent several years in Orlando doing commercial projects at a boutique interior design firm before moving to Sarasota in 2011 where she worked for a luxury custom home builder. Finding herself in high demand from prior clients and referrals, Carson struck out on her own and opened Emcy Interiors 2015. Now she has two other designers and an office coordinator on her team, and the firm has as many as 40 clients at any given time. Success like that doesn't happen overnight. “I would work 60, 80 hours a week,” Carson says. “It was nuts. I never saw my husband. But I got it off the ground.” Though she's developed a reputation for her coastal contemporary work, Carson's willingness to take on projects of all sizes and design styles has helped her build a loyal clientele. But while Emcy Interiors is full-service, Carson isn't available 24/7 anymore. “I used to work all day every day, Saturdays, into the night, into the mornings,” she admits. “But I have a three-year-old and a sixteen-month-old so any free time is spent with them. Now I turn it off at five o'clock. That's their time.” *Emcy Interior Design, 2580 University Parkway, Sarasota, 941-807-0479, emcyinteriordesign.com.*



Chelsea Dunbar BLU INTERIORS

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF A GOOD ROLE MODEL. “My mom owns a graphic design company. It's a woman-owned design company and it was out of our house so I watched her run a design firm for my whole life,” says Chelsea Dunbar. Dunbar shared her mother's creativity, but her interests skewed toward interior design. She attended the Savannah College of Art and Design, graduating with a BFA in interior design. She landed a job at a large architecture firm in Atlanta working on major commercial projects. “I built hotels, convention centers, offices, malls all over the world, islands in Dubai,” she says. “We did the Georgia Aquarium. It was my dream job.” In 2009, the real estate market was down and the architecture and design fields were suffering economically as a result. Dunbar watched as friends and colleagues were laid off. Pregnant with her first child at the time, she started designing neighbor's homes as a backup plan. She quickly realized working herself would give her a lot more flexibility when her son was born and decided to branch out on her own. “Shifting from commercial to residential design is like an entirely different field,” Dunbar says. “I didn't have a single resource. It was a huge learning curve. But it was fun.” She had a knack for it. In addition to high-end residential homes, Dunbar worked on projects for HGTV, doing the design work that doesn't show up on camera. She was pregnant with her daughter when she worked on the Atlanta season of *Property Brothers*. As their kids grew older, Dunbar and her husband returned to Sarasota to be closer to family. In 2015, she and longtime friend Nicole Dolan opened Blu Home and Dunbar rebranded her once eponymous design business as Blu Interiors. “I have ten women on my team right now and we all contribute to every project,” she says. “It felt wrong to have the business just be my name.” *Blu Interiors, 1830 South Osprey Avenue Suite 101, Sarasota, 941-500-4563, bluinteriors.com.*

Ana Santa Maria STUDIO SANTA MARIA

INTERIOR DESIGN IS OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD. People tend to think it's all about picking out furniture and selecting paint swatches and while that is an aspect of it, there is so much more to the profession. “I like to tell people to think of it as interior architecture,” says Ana Santa Maria. “We do the detailing, we do the selections, we pick out the paint and we pick out the wall coverings but that's the jewels to the dress. You have to make the dress first before you add all the jewels to it.”

Santa Maria knows a thing or two about architecture. Her father is an architect and she and her older brother grew up visiting their dad's job sites. It made an impression on them both. Her brother became an architect, while Santa Maria opted for a Bachelors of Fine Arts in Interior Arts and Space Planning from Ringling College of Art and Design. As a student, Santa Maria landed an internship at the Tampa office of HOK Architecture, a global firm where she was so impressive she was offered a job before she had even graduated. After several years in the industry she was ready to strike out on her own and she started Studio Santa Maria.

“I had a young family, I had two boys, and I wanted to be able to have the open schedule that I needed in order to be a mom,” she says. “It was important for me to establish myself as a mom, a wife and a professional and I found that it was somewhat difficult to do all of that when a company was depending on me. When I'm depending on myself, I know what my responsibilities are. I establish how hard I push myself in order to accomplish what I need to get accomplished.” *Studio Santa Maria, 1100 South Tamiami Trail Suite 303, Sarasota, 941-957-8187, apex-studio.com.*

“SINCE I’M FROM MARYLAND, HAVING THE ORIOLES SPRING TRAINING HERE WAS KIND OF A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN.” —Christiana Engert

Christiana Engert FROND AND FERN DESIGN

“WHEN I WAS TEN, MY PARENTS DECIDED TO CUSTOM BUILD A HOME,” Christiana Engert says. “I was able to be part of the process, getting to choose my carpet and wall colors and what went in our bathroom. It helped open my eyes to interior design as a career pathway.” Engert started taking AutoCAD courses in high school and she specifically sought out a college with an accredited interior design program, ultimately settling on High Point University in High Point, NC. This locale is also home to the High Point Furniture Market, a major furniture trade show that attracts design industry professionals from around the globe. While in school, Engert worked at the biannual market in a variety of showrooms and built relationships with interior designers. By the time Engert graduated, job offers were rolling in. She accepted one in Sarasota in part because she was drawn to the town’s natural beauty and friendly vibe. “And since I’m from Maryland, having the Orioles spring training here was kind of a match made in heaven,” she laughs. Over the next ten years Engert explored different aspects of the interior design field, working on everything from condo renovations with quick turnovers to lengthy custom builds under the auspices of an architecture firm. “I’d say the most influential part of my career was the time I spent with a high-end design firm. That’s where I cut my teeth,” Engert says. “I got exposed to the new construction process in Florida, and I developed some great relationships in the community. In addition to building her professional life, Engert also had to develop a personal life. Aside from designers who had extended her job offers, she didn’t know anyone when she moved to Sarasota. She found a sense of community through coaching youth sports. “I’m so fortunate to be part of the lacrosse community in Sarasota,” she says. “Families really welcomed me when I started coaching. I have girls that I coached when they were very young and now they’re going off to college and I’m coaching their younger sisters.” Engert opened her firm Frond and Fern Design in January 2024. While she’s new to entrepreneurship she’s already making a splash. Her first major project as an independent designer is called the Bird Key Residence. *Frond and Fern Design, 941-504-5975, frondandferndesign.com.*



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Anne Folsom Smith ANNE FOLSOM SMITH INTERIOR DESIGN

“WHEN I WENT TO COLLEGE I WANTED TO BE AN ENGLISH MAJOR. My freshman year I took a few English courses and I said, “This is not for me,” says Anne Folsom Smith. “A dear friend of mine suggested I become an interior designer. So that’s why I got into the business.” As it turned out, interior design was a much better fit. Folsom Smith received her education at East Tennessee State University and the University of Tennessee and held several jobs in the design field before launching Anne Folsom Smith Interior Design in 1983. Since day one, her office has been located in the United States Garage Building in Burns Court, a historic building from 1924 that she renovated with her husband, architect Frank Folsom Smith. Over the last four decades, Folsom Smith has received numerous awards and has had her work featured in prestigious publications including *Architectural Digest*. But she doesn’t spend a lot of time looking back. “It’s very important for people to know that we’re not an old firm that does only traditional things,” Folsom Smith says. “We’re constantly making sure we stay relevant. We are more than capable of doing any kind of design that anybody throws at us.”

This philosophy carries over to her work with the Sarasota Orchestra, where she has served as a board member for over 20 years. “The majority of people who support classical music are in their 60s and 70s. We’re trying so hard to get young people to listen to classical music and to be involved in the many programs that the orchestra offers,” she says. “The orchestra is such a vital part of this community that I would be remiss not to be a part of it.” *Anne Folsom Smith Interior Design, 330 South Pineapple Avenue, Suite 206, Sarasota, 941-957-0434, annefolsomsmith.com.*

“DESIGN IS SUCH A PERSONAL COMPONENT OF YOUR HOME THAT BEING ABLE TO COMMUNICATE WITH SOMEONE AND UNDERSTAND HOW THEY FEEL ABOUT THEIR SPACES IS VERY VALUABLE.” —Tracee Murphy

Tracee Murphy TRADE MARK INTERIORS

SOME PEOPLE KNOW FROM AN EARLY AGE THAT INTERIOR DESIGN IS THE RIGHT CAREER PATH. That wasn’t the case for Tracee Murphy who went to college for psychology. Interior design wasn’t even on her radar. “Then when I was out in the real world being an adult I bought a house and started designing it and discovered what interior design was,” says Murphy. “I started reading about it and researching it. After I designed my house I did my neighbor’s house and my sister’s house and then somebody else’s house and I thought, ‘Maybe I should go back to school.’” Murphy did just that and got a second degree in interior design. She worked at a design firm for a bit to get her feet under her before launching Trade Mark Interiors in 2006. “I started the business out of necessity basically,” she says. “I had two young kids and found I wanted freedom and flexibility. I would say I really worked part-time in the design industry for about fifteen years. Being a mom was an important thing to me and I wanted to make sure that was good.” As her kids grew older, Murphy was able to focus more time and attention on the business. Trade Mark has been steadily growing and now consists of a team of four designers and an operations manager. On September 12 of this year Murphy debuted an educational platform called the Designer Launch featuring classes she wrote where interior designers can get the accredited certification they need for licensing in Florida. Murphy’s psychology background helped her develop these classes, just like it helps her relate to her clients. “Design is such a personal component of your home that being able to communicate with someone and understand how they feel about their spaces is very valuable,” she says. “And nine times out of ten, we’re working with a couple. It helps to understand how two people coexist within a home so we can meet the needs of both parties.” *Trade Mark Interiors, 3232 South Tamiami Trail, Sarasota, 941-879-9494, trademarkinteriordesign.com.*

