



# Elsa Lenthal

PHOTOGRAPHY BY | Ruth Ribeaucourt



French-born Elsa Lenthal creates one-of-a-kind 'Fuseaux de Lavande' lavender wands using ancestral techniques woven with beautiful antique and vintage ribbons created by one of France's last ribbon makers. Her work is a wonderful marriage of Provençal tradition and contemporary design.



For the last two years I have been proud to call myself an 'Arlesienne,' as my family and I now live in the ancient town of Arles. I grew up in a small town called les Baux de Provence, where I currently have my atelier and where I cultivate the lavender that I harvest for my 'fuseaux de lavande,' or lavender wands.

My workshop and lavender fields are located on the grounds of my parents' home; an eighteenth-century farmhouse surrounded by olive trees, pine trees and what we call the 'garrigue' which is the traditional Provençal scrublands, scented by thyme, rosemary and wild herbs.

My studio is a small wooden cabin, which my father and uncle built themselves based on the model of a typical Canadian log cabin. It is a haven of peace, cut off from the world; my only company is the singing of the cicadas and the birds who have taken up residence in the trees above. It is a space where I feel good, and it is conducive to contemplation and inspiration.





*All of my favorite childhood memories have been created here and I know every inch of these forests and the surrounding hills.*

I was born in Paris to a French father and a Canadian mother. We settled in Provence when I was one year old. My parents essentially decided to leave the capital in search of a better quality of life. So I grew up surrounded by the wild nature of Provence, and as I am an only child, this beautiful countryside was my playground until the day I returned to Paris to study art.

Artistic creation has always been part of my life. My father is a graphic designer, photographer and sculptor and my mother is an exceptional seamstress, so I was fortunate to have been born into a very creative environment. As a child, I would spend hours making things out of cardboard, pieces of wood and scraps of wire. So it seemed only natural that I would study art. I received an initial degree in graphic design at ESAG Penninghen and then at ATEP in France.

I made my first lavender wand when I was just 12 years old. One summer, my mother went to cut a few sprigs of lavender in the garden and showed me how this craft was made in the 1700s. I loved this artistic pursuit and every summer after I would harvest lavender and braid my ‘fuseaux de lavande.’

The first lavender wands appeared in Provence in the eighteenth century. At that time, the “Provençales” used to weave fresh lavender every summer. The wands were then placed in their wardrobes to perfume their linens and protect from moths. The lavender wands were also part of a bride’s dowry, as a symbol of love and happiness.



It was at the age of 17 that I thought it would be fun to try and sell them to make some pocket money. That summer, my boyfriend and I would pack up the car and drive to market. We would set up a small table and chairs, and once there we would start to make the lavender wands in front of a captive audience. At the end of the morning, our basket would be empty; it was crazy, our wands would sell out as soon as they were made. As the years passed, my stand grew to be very popular and I was asked to sell at the most beautiful markets in the region. So in 2009, I made the decision to formally create my company, Fuseaux de Lavande de Provence.

My favorite material is lavender, in all its forms; fresh, dry, and essential oil. I use the ancestral knowledge passed down through generations of my family and combine this with a modern flair so that my wands can become contemporary decorative pieces. I really feel strongly that all my creations should serve both an aesthetic and functional purpose; my technique enables the lavender flower to preserve its essential oils, and over the years a squeeze on the wand liberates more perfume.





*My work is directly inspired by Provence and its rich artisanal heritage.*

I seek out quality and strive to make my wands very beautiful and unique. The ribbons that I use in my wands are woven by one of the very last French ribbon weavers in the famous ribbon-making Loire region of France. I cultivate and harvest my own Lavandin with absolute respect for nature, without using pesticides or chemicals.

The weaving of the lavender wands consists of several stages, all equally important. From the selection of lavender sprigs, to folding, to weaving, everything must be done meticulously. It requires patience first and foremost, but this rather repetitive work is quite meditative at first glance. And the soothing and relaxing virtues of lavender favor this state of calm necessary for the successful completion of a lavender wand.







*"Impose your luck, embrace your happiness and go toward your risks; by looking at you, they'll get used to it."*

—RENÉ CHAR

The smell of fresh lavender, the meticulous gestures to bend without breaking the lavender stems on the flowers, the regular weaving of the stems with a satin ribbon to enclose the flower and allow it to keep its fragrance...it was a revelation for me.

For the past two years, I have set up an art rehabilitation workshop with male detainees in the Salon de Provence prison. At the beginning of summer, I share my know-how, then I come back regularly to spend the time showing them all the little finishing details that will make their wands really stand out. It brings me such intense satisfaction to know that my homegrown lavender now scents the air of this prison. But most importantly to know that no matter what terrible (and often stupid) mistakes they have committed—they are still capable of creating beauty with their hands. I have seen the men in these workshops grow immensely in confidence and it really makes me very happy.







## I love that my atelier is a reflection of my personality

A wooden cabin in nature, full of my memories brought back from my many travels around the world. It's a cocoon in which I isolate myself to let my mind escape and be fully available to creativity. It is also a place to live and I lived there every summer before my children were born. The outdoor table was used as a makeshift work table during the day to make my lavender wands and turned into a festive table in the evening when my friends would come for an alfresco supper.

Multiple colorful glass bracelets that I brought back on my first trip to India are among my favorite objects. They are found in all sizes and colors in markets all over India. They are not worth very much because they break so easily, but that is one of the reasons why I find them so precious. To put them on your wrist, the seller first massages your hand with oil so that the bracelets slide over your wrist without breaking. They make a bell-like tinkling sound that has become my trademark. I often have thirty of them on each wrist and some eventually break as I'm harvesting lavender or creating my wands. I love them.



Everything inspires me. Nature. Color. Moods. I also love to go window shopping in front of grand interior design shops and I have been known to spend hours poring over interior design magazines. My mother is my greatest ally; she has wonderful taste and I always ask for her feedback when I have a new idea.

Convincing my family that I could live off my passion was my biggest challenge. Coming from a privileged and rather intellectual background, it took time for my loved ones to understand that this activity, which is essentially artisanal and not fine art, was very important for me and brought me immense satisfaction. I do not think my parents imagined that their daughter would make a living selling lavender in the Provençal markets in the summer!

It is hugely satisfying to have watched how my creative business has grown. Today I have two boutiques with a talented collective of artisans, and my lavender wands are sold all over the world—so I don't feel like I need to justify my creative lifestyle choice anymore, which is so gratifying!

My greatest pride is to perpetuate this tradition of weaving lavender because it is a craft that has almost completely disappeared; we are only a handful still making lavender wands in Provence. Which is one of the reasons why I propose workshops every summer. It brings me so much joy to pass on these ancestral techniques and know that this tradition will not disappear.

ELSA LENTHAL

**WEBSITE:** FuseauxDeLavande.com

**INSTAGRAM:**

@FuseauxDeLavandeProvence

My lavender wands can be found in my boutique:

Le Savoir Raire des Alpilles

1bd Marceau

13210 St Remy de Provence and LE3

3 rue Jouvène

13200 Arles

At markets during the summer from June to September: Tuesday at Gordes, Wednesday at St Remy, Friday at Eygalieres, Saturday at Uzes

