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## Ikebana: An Ancient Tradition of Contemporary Healing and Artful Practice

Jennifer K. Fortuna PhD, OTR/L  
*Grand Valley State University – USA, [jennifer.fortuna@wmich.edu](mailto:jennifer.fortuna@wmich.edu)*

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## Ikebana: An Ancient Tradition of Contemporary Healing and Artful Practice

### Abstract

Dr. Ricardo Carrásco, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, is an occupational therapy professor and ikebana artist. He provided the cover art for the Summer 2021 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). Ikebana is the ancient Japanese art of arranging flowers. “Kanta of the Wind, Sun and Moon” is an ikebana design made from blue and white Phalaenopsis orchids, chrysanthemum, bear grass, and heirloom driftwood. This *gendaika*, or freestyle design, is a haiku tribute to the wind, sun, and moon. Dr. Carrásco has been practicing occupational therapy and ikebana for more than 5 decades. As an occupational scientist and therapist, he has experience working in pediatric, academic, research, mental health, and wellness practice settings. Dr. Carrásco currently serves as headmaster of the Banmi Shofu Ryu school of ikebana. His story is shared from a sense of duty and obligation to preserve this ancient tradition of contemporary healing and artful practice.

### Keywords

occupation, occupational therapy, ikebana, Japanese, art, flower arranging, Ricardo Carrásco

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Jennifer Fortuna, PhD, OTR/L

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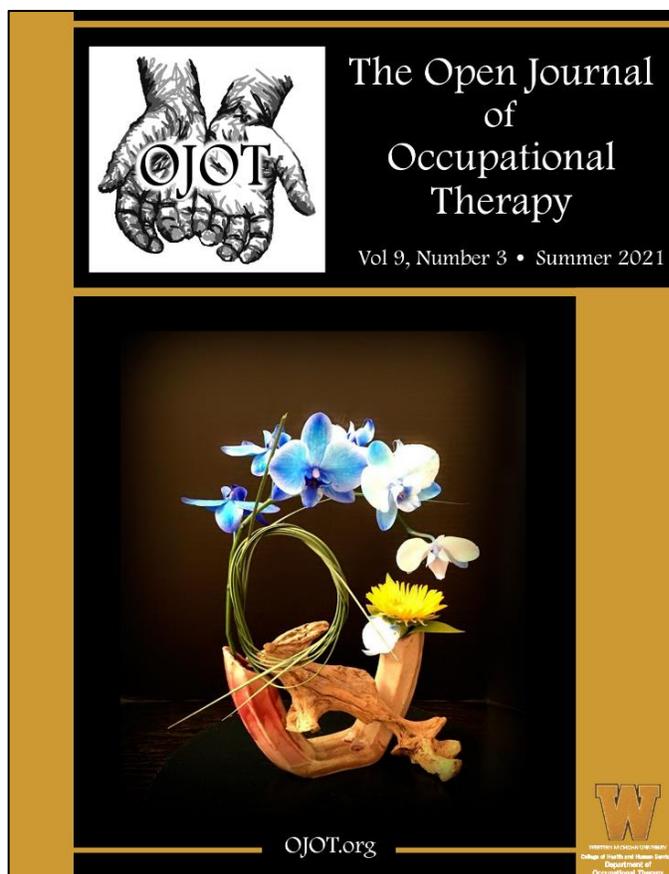
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Ikebana is the ancient Japanese art of arranging flowers. Rooted in a Buddhist flower offering ritual, ikebana was brought to Japan in the sixth century. Each school of ikebana has its own unique style. Banmi Shofu Ryu is a modern school of ikebana, even though its mother school, Shofu Ryu originated in the 16th century. In Japanese, *shofu* translates to pine, or living breeze (Banmi Shofu Ryu of Ikebana, 2019). Certain rules and methods guide the construction of an ikebana arrangement. For example, the overall design should be minimalist and replicate nature. A purpose, such as a story line or haiku, must be incorporated. Heaven, earth, and man are the three main branches of a Banmi Shofu Ryu ikebana arrangement. Thoughtful consideration is given to each element. The height and placement of each branch is intentional. Design aesthetics have a distinct *kado*, or way of the flowers, and *ma*, which is the essential empty space and time for life to grow. The natural structures of stems and leaves provide shape, line, and form. Flowers are used to enhance color and contrast. Thin blades of grass tie everything together. The school frowns on the use of wire and inorganic materials. Driftwood adds texture, substance, and a connection with nature. In Banmi Shofu Ryu, driftwood is an essential design element. Heirloom driftwood pieces are handed down from previous *iemoto*, or headmasters. For Dr. Ricardo Carrásco, ikebana is an expression of spiritual creativity that evokes feelings of calm, mindfulness, and relaxation.

Dr. Carrásco, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA, is an occupational therapy professor and ikebana artist. He provided the cover art for the Summer 2021 edition of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). “Kanta of the Wind, Sun and Moon” (see Figure 1) is an ikebana design made from blue and white Phalaenopsis orchids, chrysanthemum, and heirloom driftwood. Thin strands of bear grass are looped into a sphere. The double mouthed container was created by Dr. Carrásco. This *gendaika*, or freestyle design, is a haiku tribute to the wind, sun, and moon. Dr. Carrásco has been practicing occupational therapy and the art of ikebana for more than 5 decades. As an occupational scientist and therapist, he has experience working in pediatric, academic, research, mental health, and wellness practice settings. Dr. Carrásco currently serves as headmaster of the Banmi Shofu Ryu school of ikebana. His story is shared from a sense of duty and obligation to preserve this ancient tradition of contemporary healing and artful practice.

Dr. Ricardo Carrásco was born and raised in the Philippines. Growing up in a traditional Filipino family, he was raised with a strong work ethic. Dr. Carrásco grew up believing in the power of “doing.” His childhood was rich with memories of family, nature, and flowers. Dr. Carrásco’s grandfather owned rice fields. His backyard farm was comprised of 10 acres devoted to sugar cane, vegetables, and herbs. “Mother had a small garden in the house,” said Dr. Carrásco. “She would pick gardenias and orchids

**Figure 1**  
Cover Art for OJOT Vol 9, No 3, Summer 2021



and arrange them in containers.” Flowers were part of Dr. Carrásco’s art and spirituality. Over time, flowers became the common thread that would enrich his life and future practice.

Dr. Carrásco’s parents always wanted him to become a teacher, but he rebelled. “I wanted to be a marketing executive,” he said. Ultimately, Dr. Carrásco did become a teacher. In 1964, he earned an elementary teaching certificate from Pasig Catholic College in the Philippines. “Once I became a teacher, I went back to school to earn a degree in marketing,” he said. In 1968, Dr. Carrásco left teaching to work as a senior account executive at a Chicago-based advertising firm. He was assigned the Asia-Pacific region. “I traveled constantly, from country to country,” he said. Dr. Carrásco married an artist and they relished in all things art. In Taiwan, they were introduced to ikebana. “We took weekly lessons with sensei Banmi Yoneko Fooks,” he said. “We were the only two students in the class.” Dr. Carrásco rode his bicycle to ikebana lessons. On the way, he stopped at the flower market to fill his basket. “Banmi made it clear that I needed to start teaching and become a sensei,” said Dr. Carrásco. Soon, he started assisting Banmi and began teaching others the ancient art of ikebana. “Moribana Futa Kabu” (see Figure 2) is a pond-like ikebana design made from purple Dutch Iris, Dianella Flax lily flowers and leaves, Limonia, and wormwood driftwood in a *suiban*, or shallow container. This arrangement replicates nature in the form of a fish path. The ceramic fisherman completes the design.

**Figure 2**

“Moribana Futa Kabu” (2021) by Dr. Ricardo Carrásco



In 1972, Dr. Carrásco was about to be promoted to an executive position at his marketing firm when he moved to Taiwan with his family for an appointment with the United States Department of Defense Dependents Schools (DoDDS) and National Cheng Kung University. “I realized teaching was not really that bad, but I still wanted something more,” he said. Through career counseling, Dr. Carrásco discovered the occupational therapy profession. He enrolled in the occupational therapy program at the University of the Philippines. “In occupational therapy school, my life experiences were appreciated by faculty,” he said. Dr. Carrásco was offered a teaching assistant position and he began teaching his classmates. “I realized that I was meant to be a teacher,” he said. In 1978, Dr. Carrásco earned a Bachelor of Science degree in occupational therapy at the University of the Philippines. While in the program, he connected with Dr. Jean Ayres. “We met shortly after Dr. Ayres published her first book,” said Dr. Carrásco. “She served on my doctoral dissertation committee.”

In 1982, Dr. Carrásco earned a Master of Science degree in education with an emphasis on creativity and special education of the gifted and talented. Dr. Carrásco went on to complete a fellowship at the United Nations. He was invited by the Surgeon General to teach for DoDDS Europe and received a royal invitation to serve at the first International Pediatric Rehabilitation Conference in Saudi Arabia. Dr.

Carrásco enjoyed his clinical experiences, but wanted to do more. In 1983, he transitioned to academia as an assistant professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at The Medical College of Georgia, known today as Georgia Regents University. Dr. Carrásco also served as fieldwork coordinator and program chair. In 1990, he earned a Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology with concentrations in neuropsychology and occupational dysfunction. Over the next decade, Dr. Carrásco continued teaching and clinical practice as an occupational therapist and developmental neuropsychologist. In 2011 Dr. Carrásco was recruited for the role of Founding Chair of the entry-level Doctor of Occupational Therapy (OTD) program at Nova Southeastern University (NSU). He remains in this role today.

Dr. Carrásco has made substantial contributions to the occupational therapy profession. His scholarly activities include several peer-reviewed publications, books, and invited presentations. Dr. Carrásco has served for numerous local, state, national, and international organizations. The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) has recognized Dr. Carrásco's leadership and contributions with prestigious awards, including an invitation to join the Roster of Fellows and the Award of Merit. Throughout his eventful career, Dr. Carrásco remained devoted to the art of ikebana. "Chabana" (see Figure 3) is an ikebana design made from a single large Marigold, a sprig of Brazilian pepper, and Podocarpus in a small vintage container. The composition sits on top of a vintage double stand. Hand-shaped mud men provide perspective and proportion. *Cha* (tea) *bana* (flower) arrangements are typically small in proportion for tea table ceremonies.

For Dr. Carrásco, ikebana is the discipline and practice of mindful and contemplative activity.

"It brings a close connection to nature and puts meaning into everything you do," he said. "Ikebana is an expression of spiritual creativity." Dr. Carrásco views the interaction between mindfulness and nature as part of being spiritual. "It's about communication, connection with nature, and reflecting what nature brings to your life," he said. "Even thinking about the process puts me into a mode of contemplation and calms me down." Dr. Carrásco has traveled the world teaching ikebana to others. In 2009, Dr. Carrásco created a *hashibana uate*, or upright and narrow design, during a live demonstration for the Bamni Shofu Memorial Retreat (see Figure 4). He has led demonstrations in Japan, at the Epcot International Flower and Garden Festival, and for private organizations. During his demonstrations, Dr. Carrásco often gets feedback from the members of the audience. "People approach me afterwards, often emotional, saying it relaxed them and they connected with what I was doing," he said. On one occasion, Dr. Carrásco talked about flowers as a meaningful occupation. A woman waited until everyone left to approach him. "She

**Figure 3**

"Chabana" (2021) by Dr. Ricardo Carrásco



wanted to let me know she was very anxious due to personal reasons, but watching me create the designs totally calmed her down,” he said. “I encouraged the woman to practice ikebana on her own.”

Nearly 50 years after the first ikebana lessons from Banmi, Dr. Carrásco maintained a close relationship with his sensei. “I still have the containers from my lessons in Taiwan,” he said. In 2008, Dr. Carrásco was called to Banmi’s death bed. At the time, she was living in Hawaii. Dr. Carrásco traveled there as quickly as he could. When he arrived, Banmi was saying goodbye to everyone. “Her dying wish was for me to take over the school,” said Dr. Carrásco. “I was not expecting this.” Over the next 5 years, he channeled Banmi and made changes to the school. “I was just an assistant to Banmi before,” he said. “I had to watch videos of other sensei to learn what

to do, not only in arranging flowers, but to properly dress in full kimono before a demonstration.” Dr. Carrásco had to learn strict protocols. “You are not supposed to let the kimono touch the ground when getting dressed,” he said. At a Buddhist temple, one of Dr. Carrásco’s Japanese *deshi*, or students, gave him a *furoshiki* to stand on. In Japanese culture, a *furoshiki* is a piece of fabric used to wrap items such as gifts. Dr. Carrásco’s *furoshiki* has red edges within which his kimono must stay. He tucks the bottom section of the kimono into the *obi*, or belt, to keep it from touching the floor. *Geta*, or traditional Japanese shoes, add an additional height and layer of protection.

Dr. Carrásco has many fond memories of his time learning ikebana from Banmi. He describes their relationship as fictive. “When you cannot pass something on to a blood relative, you use fictive kinship,” he said. Banmi picked Dr. Carrásco to be the headmaster of the Banmi Shofu Ryu school of ikebana because of the kinship between them. “Banmi introduced me as her kin for over 50 years,” said Dr. Carrásco. “I did not realize until her death that I had not given a name to our relationship until I read a book in anthropology on learning through apprenticeship.” When Banmi passed away, Dr. Carrásco inherited all of her containers and driftwood that had been passed down from generations of sensei. “In ikebana, driftwood is historical and spiritual,” said Dr. Carrásco. Heirloom driftwood is a hallmark of Banmi Shofu Ryu ikebana design. “Hashibana Saba” (see Figure 5) is an ikebana design made from Stargazer lilies, yarrow, Podocarpus branches, and heirloom bamboo driftwood. Hashibana saba translates to flower bridge of a low horizontal format. Dr. Carrásco created hashibana as required by ikebana tradition for a new *iemoto*, or headmaster, to introduce a design element at the school.

Dr. Carrásco recognizes an inevitable infusion between ikebana and his teaching, scholarship, and service. He supervises the teaching of an ikebana class for occupational therapy students in the NSU OTD program. “Students receive their supplies consisting of flowers, driftwood, line materials, tools, and containers and learn ikebana for two days,” he said. Dr. Carrásco is currently leading a research project on the effects of ikebana on anxiety and cortisol levels in students. He has written two books on ikebana

**Figure 4**

*Dr. Ricardo Carrásco (2009)*



that are currently being finalized. Dr. Carrásco included essays about what occupation is, why ikebana is a purposeful occupation, and what it means to purposely arrange flowers. He engages in service through demonstrations in the community and for international ikebana chapters. Dr. Carrásco plans to represent Banmi Shofu Ryu at regional conferences and world conventions in the near future. In addition, he is training an ikebana sensei to evolve to higher levels (e.g., apprentice to professor) and is developing a curriculum for sensei to use as a guide. “Right now, it is too technical and complicated for most to use,” he said. “I want to translate so it can be understood by anyone.”

Dr. Ricardo Carrásco shares his story from a sense of duty and obligation to preserve ikebana as an ancient tradition of contemporary healing and artful practice. Flowers are part of Dr. Carrásco’s art, spirituality, and life. Engaging in ikebana induces feelings of mindfulness and relaxation. As an occupational scientist, therapist, and educator,

ikebana informs Dr. Carrásco’s teaching, scholarship, and service. For Dr. Carrásco, ikebana is the common thread that has enriched his life and practice. “As I go through the week, ikebana is always on my mind,” he said. “Everything evolves around ikebana.”

**Figure 5**  
“Hashibana Saba” (2021) by Dr. Ricardo Carrásco



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**View more of Dr. Ricardo Carrásco’s ikebana arrangements in the [OJOT Gallery](#)**

**Watch a video demonstration of:**

**[Banmi Shofu Ryu of Ikebana](#)**

**Visit the website:**

**[Banmi Shofu Ryu of Ikebana Traditions](#)**

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