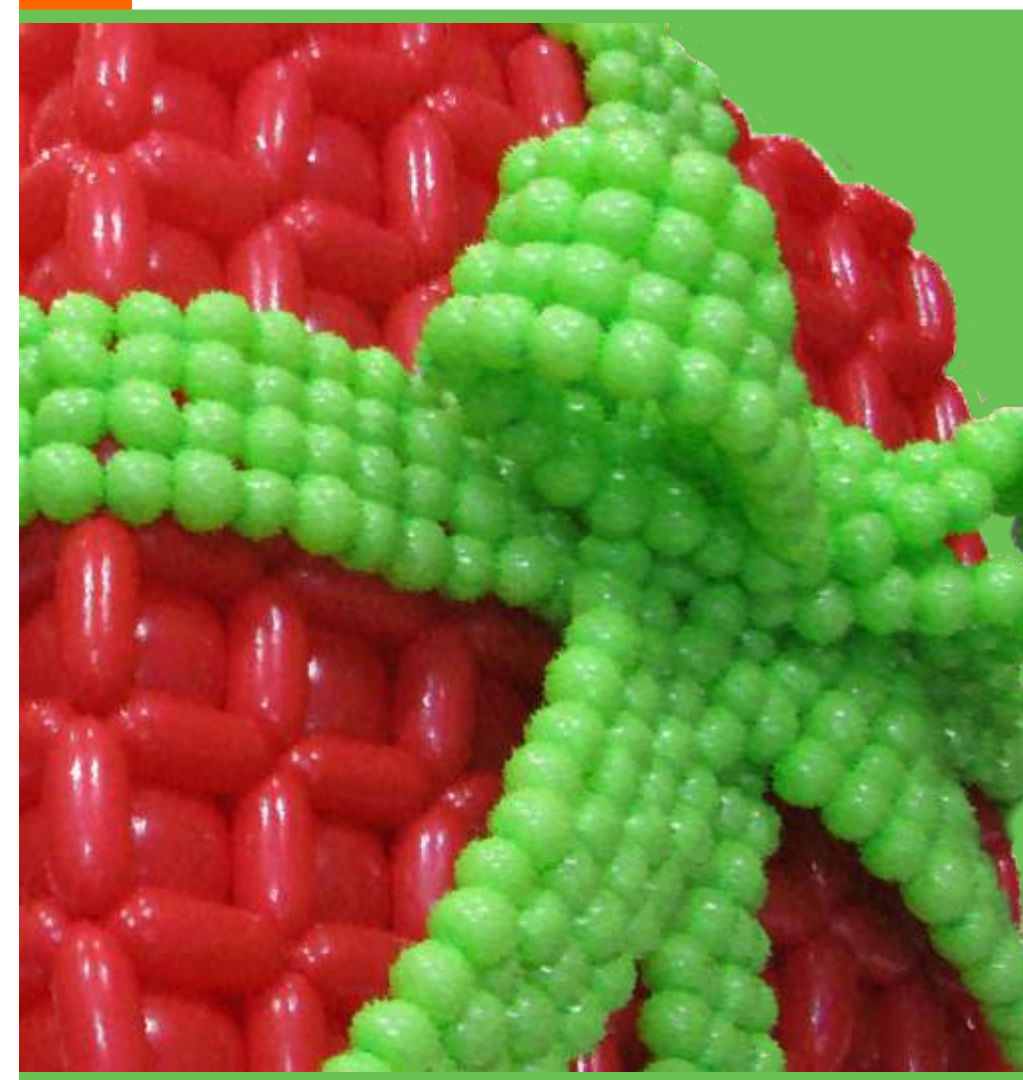




# CORSO BALLOON ART

BASE PRINCIPIANTI - INTERMEDIO  
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www.balloonexpresscagliari.com

DESIGNER SHOWCASE



Federico Onida, CBA, of Balloon Express Shop Cagliari in Sardinia, Italy

**AS A YOUNG BOY,** Federico loved drawing and playing with Lego® blocks. Years later, he's taken his passion for creative design and channeled it into a rewarding career in balloon art.

### Acquiring New Skills

With an extensive background in the world of entertainment performances—including stilt-walking and juggling—it was only a matter of time before Federico would discover balloons. In 1996, his entertainment teacher started showing him balloon twisting. He became more and more interested in balloons as a creative outlet, learning his first twisted sculptures by watching a



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Marvin Hardy DVD. He also started attending different balloon events and competitions.

Just a few years later in 1999, Federico was introduced to the Qualatex® distributor Balloon Express®—along with a whole new world of balloon sculptures. With a new desire to pursue a career in balloon art, he started his own Balloon Express Shop franchise in Cagliari (the capital city of the island of Sardinia). "Turning my passion into 'work' was very difficult at first, and even today it takes great commitment and sacrifice," Federico said. "But I've had a lot of satisfaction and success."

As part of the commitment to grow his business, Federico earned his CBA® designation in 2002. He also became a regular attendee at industry events, often competing—and placing—in various competitions. "I have never walked away from a training course or event without having learned something," he said.

### Creating for Customers

At his Balloon Express Shop, Federico has one employee to help him on a daily basis, but also calls on a team of relatives and friends when additional help is needed. He offers everything from balloon deliveries and traditional balloon decor, to custom pieces featuring the latest techniques. In addition, his shop carries party supplies, costumes, and other party-related merchandise.

Federico's specialty is creating animals, characters, and objects (especially motorbikes). "I always like to reproduce reality, so I love studying pictures and drawings of the subject," he said. "After that, I design the project with the right sizes and proportions like the original."

Most of his business comes from private parties including birthdays, babies, graduations, and weddings. "Since we started proposing wedding settings, couples have wanted balloons for their most important



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day," Federico said. Weddings in Italy are very traditional but the effect that he calls the "Magic Touch" has become a must. This is a Column topped with a helium-inflated 3' balloon, which is filled with anywhere from 40 to 100 smaller balloons. The bride and groom pop it with the "magic wand" and the small balloons fly away. "It's a sign of good luck and a good omen," he said.

Aside from traditional bouquets, the hot-air balloon is one of the most-requested arrangements from his customers. Federico creates these in any size and for any occasion. Because he's known for reproducing objects and animals, he also gets a lot of special requests of this nature. On a larger scale, he provides decor for shopping malls, markets, restaurants, and other public spaces—especially for grand openings and other special occasions.

Federico's favorite balloon to work with is the small-but-mighty 5" Round latex. As simple as it may seem, it's very versatile and useful to create everything. It's also a fitting reflection of his philosophy on balloons: "If you respect a balloon, even the smallest one, it will respect you and it will let your creativity flow."

### Promoting His Business

Federico usually gives out a business card to every customer who comes into his shop, along with occasional fliers. However, he still believes that word of mouth is the best form of advertising. His two Facebook pages—one personal and one business—have also helped him reach out to more customers. "This was also the best way to let people know about my experience at the World Balloon Convention, such as sculptures, competitions, and awards," he said.

Based on his own experience in the industry, Federico has plenty of other advice to offer on running a successful business, including:

- Provide a high-quality service, from the materials and equipment to the finished product. ▶



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- Showcase a thorough display of your work, which encourages customers to purchase.
- Have a knowledge of the culture and customs of the community in which you work.
- Maintain a portfolio with great pictures that enhance your compositions.

He also stresses the important role that educational events have in stimulating business and design growth. "Finding new ideas to improve your work goes hand-in-hand with meeting people who share the same problems and difficulties, but also solutions and success," he said.

Taking advantage of educational resources including books, DVDs, and magazines has also helped him to grow his own business, along with enhancing his knowledge in other fields such as comics, toys, and handcrafted objects.

"Balloon art is like all the arts, a mix of passion and technique," he said. "If you only have the passion but you don't have good hands, or vice versa, you won't get that far." Both must be developed, he said, adding that the balloon business is even more difficult because you also need to add vending/sales skills to the mix. "You must find the right balance."



### Seeking the Next Challenge

Throughout his balloon career Federico has won dozens of awards, including Master Designer at World Balloon Convention 2014, and also taught in more than 10 countries around the world. But he's always looking to accomplish more. Someday, he'd love to create a balloon "theme park" of sorts—either a realistic balloon reproduction of the dinosaur era, or a micro-world of insects.

According to Federico, the secret to his own success boils down to two things: commitment and dissatisfaction. "Never be satisfied; always improve," he said. "Always take care of the details because they will account for the wonder of the entire work." ■



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