

House&Home

Interiors | Less skilled embellishments can be flat and twee but the best work has an 'eccentric grittiness'. By *Serena Fokschaner*

In her Anglesey studio, perched high on a rocky outcrop overlooking the Irish Sea, artist Mel Campion is holding a silvery abalone shell up to the light, scrutinising its shape and colour. Shells are Campion's medium: inky-blue mussels, green-grey asses' ears or moon-white clams, neatly stacked by species on her long work bench, then affixed to blank surfaces to make crustaceous works of art.

Shellwork stretches back to antiquity, when it was used to decorate Greek and Roman pagan temples. But Campion, who studied fine art, sees herself as a "baton holder" for the latest generation of shellers trialling new methods and materials. Not just for grottoes or gardens, shell embellishment is spilling into interiors, bringing conchological charm to bathrooms or dining rooms.

There are endless possibilities, says Campion. She has dyed shells black with charcoal powder to conjure a moody atmosphere and lined a dining room in a tactile mix of velvet and mussels. In a windowless loo, iridescent shells, tweezered into place, have been cascaded across walls like sculpture. A cornice, festooned with flowers and foliage made

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(Clockwise from main) Kin House by Mel Campion and Lucy Barlow; Blott Kerr-Wilson's work in Rye; 'Black Tongue' grotesque by Tess Morley (prices from £3,000); Mel Campion at work — Owen Gale; The George in Rye, Roy Matthews

from hundreds of Venus clams, was another "immersive experiment", she says. And at the theatrical Kin House hotel in Wiltshire, she collaborated with designer Lucy Barlow on an indoor grotto whose shimmering shells twinkle like fireflies in the dark.

Less skilled work can be flat and twee. The best creations have an "eccentric grittiness", says Campion. "A profusion of shells has tremendous energy, like the ebb and flow of the tide. You learn to follow their shapes to achieve that."

Earlier versions were also designed to awe — for different reasons. In the 17th

Shells with a modern sheen



entered a competition for the magazine *The World of Interiors* in 1993. Readers were asked to design their dream room. Kerr-Wilson submitted the bathroom of her south London council flat, which she had already transformed into a shell-adorned haven. "After that the phone never stopped ringing. Such was the power of the press then. People would ask if I was the shell lady — and could I do their dining room or folly."

She was an early champion of single-shell compositions, such as a 3 metre-wide circle undulating with mussels. For the Grade II-listed George Hotel in Rye, redesigned by Ptolemy Dean Architects, she covered one wall in shells left over from the town's annual scallop festival. "They used to be considered junk. But I'm not interested in the qualities of individual shells," says Kerr-Wilson, who now lives in Norfolk, where she keeps a kayak for beachcombing. "I'm not a collector. Shells are my material; the way they work together, the shapes I can achieve is what matters."

In Renaissance Italy the revival of classicism, and a rising interest in the natural world, sparked the fashion for shell decoration. Garden designer Charlie Day was studying sculpture in Florence when he discovered the Grotta Grande in the Boboli Gardens. "On boiling summer afternoons I'd escape in there," he says. Designed by architect Bernardo Buontalenti between 1583 and 1593, a series of three atmospheric rooms is lined in rocks, sponges and shells — not real but carved by sculptor Pietro Matti with Michelangelo's four, monumental "Prisoners" supporting the walls. "I was blown away by its

or 18th centuries, exotic imports such as giant clams or nautilus shells signified a patron's wealth. Today's makers are inevitably more ecologically aware. They use native species — razor clams, whelks or limpets — foraged from shorelines, or restaurant waste such as oyster and scallop shells.

Blott Kerr-Wilson, who has worked for interior designers such as Martin Brudnizki, is on a mission to "modernise" shellwork. "Because of its associations with grottoes it can be viewed as a bit dark and cobwebby," she says.

Her shellwork career began when she





theatricality: the tumbling rocks, the combination of materials," says Day. "It was a formative influence."

Day, who trained under leading grotto builder Belinda Eade, encourages clients to factor in a shell-lined retreat, "For escapism — and drama," he says. For the restoration of an 18th-century folly in Yorkshire, he installed rows of shells and cascading rocks, stuck on mortar, for picturesque effect. A Poseidon head, carved from scratch, adds antique gravitas. It was designed, he says, "to emulate my hero Michelangelo — in a very minor way".

Tess Morley also sees shellwork as an art, not a craft. "I'm not a shell lover, to me they're a medium. I enjoy working

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with natural materials in unusual ways," she says. Her first pieces were shell masks, which led to her fantastical "grotesques": three-dimensional panels inspired by a mix of the foliage-sprouting Green Man and 16th-century artist Giuseppe Arcimboldo's portraits composed from fruit or vegetables. Morley developed her own technique to make them. She uses mesh for the form, the shells attached with conservator's putty.

She has a following in the US for her kit-form panels. "Clients send me a plan of the room. I'll draw the design using stencils and shell it out." The numbered



(Clockwise from top left) Blott Kerr-Wilson at work; 'The Bath Birds' in Kerr-Wilson's bathroom; Anthony Redmile's commode sold for £25,000; Charlie Day's Malton Shellhouse — Claire Bingham, Kensington Levee

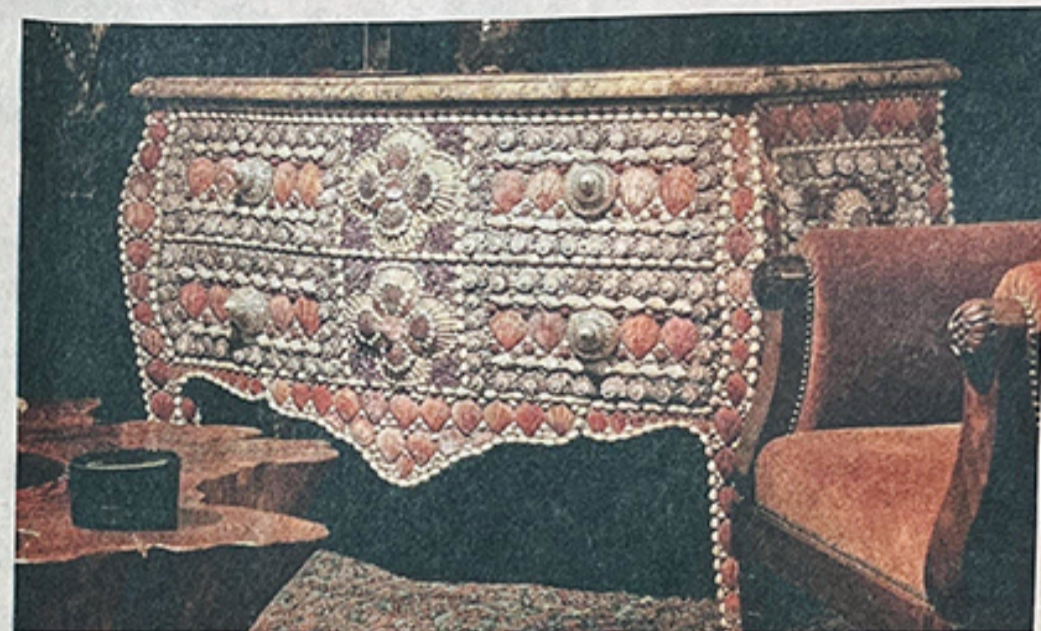
sections — a hit with Hamptons homeowners, she says — are shipped to clients to be installed in powder rooms.

Morley also worked on the restoration of the shell room at Goodwood, in Sussex, regarded as one of the best in the UK for its intricate detailing. It was probably executed in the 1730s when grotto mania gripped the upper classes.

"There were two approaches. One was formal and geometric — the decoration echoing the lines of the architecture. The other wilder, more naturalistic," says Nicola Stacey, director of the Heritage of London Trust. Alexander Pope's

Thameside grotto at Twickenham, rescued from dereliction by the trust, exemplifies the natural look. A team of conservators, "guided by an artistic eye," says Stacey, reinstated the poet's original decoration — rock, glass and slivers of mirrors to reflect riverine traffic. It is now open to the public.

Most shellwork of the past is unsigned, so practitioners are largely unknown. Mel Campion cites Mary Delany, an 18th-century artist and shelter who turned her hand to urns, chandeliers and the chapel attached to her home, outside Dublin. In the mid-20th



century, conjures up the magic of the natural world, without being sentimental," says Foster. "And modern shellwork harks back to the age of Romanticism, reminding us of the social preoccupations of the time. It's a history lesson and an invitation into the imagination."

Kerr-Wilson agrees. "We all bend down to pick up shells. Each one tells a story that makes us smile. Lots of people are doing their own shellwork. I'm always getting emails asking for advice on materials or techniques."

William Thuillier is one of those keen amateurs. The art dealer had always "longed" for a shell bathroom. He lives in an 18th-century folly in Hampshire, where arched windows overlook parkland laid out by Capability Brown. The Gothic building, with octagonal drawing room, was designed as a bathhouse.

"By chance, I met someone who had been involved in the restoration of the grotto at Leeds Castle [in Kent]. They gave me a sackload of shells left over from the project," he says. Then came lockdown. Thuillier — with direction from his partner, decorative painter Alvaro Picardo — set to work. He laid out the shells on the lawn before sticking the motifs on to walls, mirrors and bath: "A painstaking process, not helped by friends who spotted bits I hadn't covered." A subterranean room became a pink and white Rococo wonderland.

Thuillier enjoys the idea of perpetuating a "long, strong tradition — rooted in the ancient world" that continues to captivate. "There's something about shells: their elegance, their robustness and the childlike wonder they invoke that rises above fashion."

century, antiques dealer Peter Coke drew on his love of 19th-century sailor's valentines — octagonal shell-worked love tokens — to make fantastical sculptures. His contemporary, the designer Anthony Redmile, used shellwork for eccentric effect on antique furniture.

Val Foster, of antiques dealer Foster & Gane, recently acquired a rare Redmile. The 18th-century commode was covered in shells and gems, offset by amethyst and rock crystal. It sold "in a flash," she says, for £25,000 at this spring's Decorative Antiques and Textiles Fair, in Battersea. "Shellwork