

she sells sea shells

For children, collecting shells from the beach is a rite of passage. For some, that interest develops into a career as a shell artist, as design writer Aimee Farrell reveals.

The marvel and mystery of seashells has enchanted humankind since prehistoric times. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, English aristocrats were gripped by shell mania, amassing vast collections of rare and breathtaking specimens. The desire to collect these tiny seashore treasures has run in tandem with the inclination to decorate with shells, and England's bucolic landscape is scattered with peculiarly elegant grottoes and houses that are little architectural odes to the magnificence of shells.

Opposite: Detail of Rockhall by Blott Kerr-Wilson



Though shell mania has long since lulled, we're currently in the midst of a shellwork renaissance. 'There is a huge revival in shelling,' says the shell artist Blott Kerr-Wilson, pointing to the work of fellow practitioners like Tess Morley and Katherine Lloyd. 'It's wonderful to see how many people are experimenting with this free material.'

The artist Tess Morley's work includes the painstaking, decade-long restoration of the Goodwood Shell House in Sussex – one of England's finest and most extraordinary examples of the art of shelling, dating to the 1740s. Alongside restoration, Morley crafts everything from intricate sailors' valentines to humble salt cellars to shell grotesques with her uniquely baroque-style ornamentation. Meanwhile, the oceanic creations of Katherine Lloyd – who works from her garden studio in Wimbledon – are defined by their crisp, modern simplicity. A case in point: the pleasing, almost watery flow of the Shell Bar she conceived for the private members' club 5 Hertford Street.

There's a similar sense of dynamism in the work of Blott, who is currently creating a series of brand-new shell houses for clients everywhere from the West Country to the Channel Islands, alongside more sculptural works of art and shell-embellished decorative objects. Unlike the follies of the past, today's shell structures are conceived as functional outdoor rooms such as dining spaces and airy summer houses. At Belcombe Court in Bradford-on-Avon, for instance, Blott transformed an oriental garden outhouse into a charming pebble-and-shell adorned grotto. 'They're no longer dank and dusty spaces,' she says.

Now sixty, Blott's life in shells started in the early 1990s when she decked every last inch of the bathroom in her Peckham flat with shells, a space immortalised by *The World of Interiors* magazine. 'From that moment on, I became "the shell lady",' she says. 'Shells are the way I express myself.' Her first commission, completed in 1995, was the majestic interior of The Shell House at Ballymaloe Cookery School in southern Ireland.



Opposite: Harrington carver chair photographed in Belcombe Court folly with shell installation by Blott Kerr-Wilson



Detail of shell installation by Katherine Lloyd

It takes close to three months for Blott to complete the interior of a single shell house. 'I can look back at a design and see the tension and relaxation that I was feeling at the time in the placement and pattern,' she explains of the emotive creative process. Taking cues from the client's own interior tastes, the peccadilloes of the architecture, and the movement of light in a space, Blott works freehand to conceive dynamic custom arrangements. 'I never plan or sketch things out,' she says. 'I just always assume that I'll have the right number of shells and it will work out. My mind works in patterns.' Her designs are nothing short of extraordinary: at once playful, experimental, and brilliantly eccentric – the very definition of what she terms 'modern shelling'. When it comes to creating your own artwork, she suggests staying mindful of the shape of the shell – it's this unique silhouette that will bring movement and dynamism to the design.

Perhaps best of all is the democratic nature of the craft. For those hoping to try their hand, Blott advises only employing shells that are found in abundance as some are protected or restricted. Equally, utilising shells that are a by-product of the food industry is a good way to source them in quantities. Blott's own north Norfolk studio is filled with glass jars brimming with hundreds of different varieties of shell, many of which she has been given.

Shellwork is also a chance to celebrate the often-overlooked wellspring of shells found on local beaches. 'At first sight, British shells can look boring,' she says. 'But when you put them together, they have such beauty and colour. British mussels, for example, are the only blue shells in existence.' So next time you're on a coastal stroll, take a moment to look again at the beauty beneath your feet.

See more shell works of art on Instagram:
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