

Blott Kerr-Wilson, Norfolk, UK

Of all of nature's creations, shells have had a longstanding fascination for artists because of the beauty of their forms, colours and markings, as well as their evocation of voyages and the magic of the underworld. In Europe, a craze for shells sprang up in the 16th century, with wealthy landowners chartering ships to the New World to bring back items of curiosity. Today, the collections of modern shell hounds aren't sitting pretty, gathering dust on shelves, but are used for their work or kept as 'shell postcards', serving as memories of the places they came from. Artist Blott Kerr-Wilson first became intrigued by shells after visiting the gardens of stately homes in her youth. Now, her exquisite murals and shell-house commissions are as luminous, beguiling and opulent as the shells themselves.



'When I first started, I would only use British shells,' Blott says, 'because I didn't have any money and could get them for free. As time went on, the world of shells and of buying them absolutely opened up to me. I didn't have a clue that there were all these different varieties available.'





Blott's obsession with collecting shells over beyond shells into textiles and art. The portrait above the fireplace is of her mother in Paris, while the tapestry cushions on the sofa were made by a friend. 'I absolutely love them,' she says. 'I don't buy one, I buy five. I do things en masse.'

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Blott Kerr-Wilson describes her work as making tapestries with shells. 'I create stories for myself,' she says. 'Each piece is emotional, and whatever is going on in my life at that time goes into it. Sometimes when I look back at a work, it's really tight, because there was a lot going on in my head at the time. And then there are much calmer, more peaceful ones, like the one in my studio.' Blott is referring to the elaborate yet beautifully restrained mural on her easel, due shortly to wing its way to a client in New York. Using only *Haliotis asinina*, the mother-of-pearl interiors of the shells catch the light, owing to the murmuration movement she has cleverly whipped into shape.

Blott's purpose-built studio next to the house is a like a sweet shop, where the walls are stacked not with sherbet lemons, but with shells. And don't be fooled by the organization of the glass jars. 'There is no order in nature,' she insists of the dolly mixtures of shells within. 'I have them arranged in the jars because I find the results incredibly beautiful. I like to surprise myself with a shell I've forgotten about and start it using again.'

She gathers and she makes. Whether it is her shell collection or the many other bird- and sea-related items amassed in her home, things don't come and go, they get added to. Textiles, lights and paintings made by friends are both objects of beauty and revealing of personal journeys. 'They are all connections with people and memories from jobs,' Blott says. 'I like to surround myself with things that make me smile.'

Born in Wales, Blott was sent to boarding school in England at the age of eight. 'I had this very strange upbringing,' she says. 'We didn't really spend any time with my parents.

My sister and I were feral, but the one thing we did do was go and visit gardens. They are so boring when you're little, but I saw the shell houses and grottoes and it stuck with me. When I moved into my council flat in Peckham, where I thought I would live forever more, I made a shell room.' That was her first, and the one that won a competition in *World of Interiors* magazine in 1993.

Since then, Blott has been a thriving artist, living for twenty years in France near La Rochelle. She now lives on the north Norfolk coast, cold-water swimming in the sea, and is a trustee of the Glandford Shell Museum, a couple of fields away. She is in a place where she is truly meant to be. Her pretty painted bungalow, with its French-style shutters, is in sync with the landscape, the pink matching the wheat fields at certain times of the year. Inside, the interior is packed with handmade textiles and art, including some of Blott's own pieces, made from cowrie and mussel shells.

'This is the shell I love the most,' she says of the mussel. 'It's the one that gets put on the compost heap – nobody notices it – yet it is the only blue shell that exists in nature. There are loads of different mussels, including a pheasant shell with a turquoise inside – it really does look like a feather.'

Blott is drawn to shells for their beauty and the incredible ways in which they can be used. Their attraction extends to how shells like the cowrie have been used by native peoples in embroidery, as well as for currency. 'I have a respect for the cowrie, because it's got this incredible history,' she says, 'when you think that tribes used it who weren't even close to the sea. It's just extraordinary how a shell can have that power.'

In the kitchen, there is a mishmash of possessions, from Welsh tea towels to collected eggs, shoe trees with phone chargers hanging off them and tropical Murex shells. Of these, she says, 'I'm not a fan of the spikes or the pink inside. They are a bit Barbara Cartland for me.'





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Blott spends a lot of her time sorting, arranging and rejecting shells, as each one is different yet so similar. Whereas a painter has control over their own work, each time Blott places a shell, she has to adjust and readjust it to fit the next. The shells take the lead.





BLOTT'S
TIPS FOR
USING SHELL
ARTWORK

- 1 Believe in yourself, and have patience. Every piece of work goes through an ugly stage – you just have to work through it. The likelihood is that you will come out of it and be proud of what you have done.
- 2 Use the shells that you find and that you want to use. Play around with them and be free.
- 3 Create a frame and work within it. If you don't, you won't have any borders and that's really scary.
- 4 Try not to leave any cement showing around the shells. This means that you will need to go slowly. Work on a small area at a time.
- 5 If the finished piece is to go on a wall, try to create it standing upright, rather than lying flat. This way, you can see how the light will look on the shells.
- 6 Start anywhere but in the middle, unless you are creating a spiral.



A visit to Blott's house is also a pilgrimage to the bijoux shell museum in Glandford, only two fields away. It is the sweetest home to one of the finest seashell collections in the UK, of which Blott is a trustee.

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