



The transcendent wonder of shells.

CONCHOMANCY



There was a time when my greatest summertime aspiration was to sit hunchbacked, crouched low onto the heels of my sandy feet, collecting shells along the shoreline. I'd comb the surface and dig to unearth them, folding my favorites—some jagged and broken, others gleaming, perfect, iridescent—into the waistband of my bathing suit bottoms. The more they smelled of the sea, the better. Briny. Murky. A little bit wild and maybe a touch spoilt. They made me scrunch up my nose and imagine unseen worlds.

Maybe you, too, have eagerly held a seashell up to your ear to see if in fact, as you have been promised, the vast oceans were contained therein. Humans have long admired, even treasured, seashells as objects of wonder, beauty, science, symbolism, and magic. Throughout the Middle East and Northern Africa, beads made with shells date back nearly 100,000 years, making them some of the earliest evidence of a modern human culture. In Buddhism, a conch shell is one of the so-called Eight Auspicious Symbols, while excavations suggest that Roman emperors and Egyptian pharaohs alike valued shells right alongside precious metals and gemstones. One tale recounts the third emperor of Rome, Caligula, ordering his troops to gather seashells as “spoils of the ocean” during a wartime jaunt to Britain. (Historians have wondered if in fact he was referring to women at the brothels, or if the shells themselves were intended to be some type of wartime treasure.)

During the mid-17th century, expanded colonial trade spurred wealthy Europeans and royalty (especially the British and Dutch) to begin amassing personal collections of seashells. Shells were regarded as prizes of exploration proving wealth, worldliness, and mobility. Expeditions across oceans were chartered—explorers, hired. At the same time, ornate Dutch still-life paintings, called *pronkstilleven*, leaned into a particular predilection for depictions of shells alongside other precious subjects such as flowers, butterflies, and fruits. Balthasar van der Ast is the most famous shell painter of this period, his works of art still studied and parsed for their rich symbolic explorations of life's ephemerality, symbolized by wilting flowers or rotting fruits, and the immutability of death, often represented by stoic, gleaming, shells. A largely unknown, recently lauded Flemish painter named Clara Peeters, regarded as the earliest



Words by Dana Covit.

significant female painter of the Dutch Golden Age, also favored shells in her dark, intricate still-life paintings. In one 1612 painting, *Still Life with Flowers, Gilt Goblets, Coins and Shells*, Peeters hid small self-portraits in the golden goblet, just above a cluster of richly patterned and ribbed seashells.



In 1742, Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville, an amateur natural historian from France, introduced the term *conchyliologie*, meaning "the collection and study of shells." The word *conchyliomanie* crops up soon after to describe the then-rampant obsession with shell collecting. At the height of this mania, a *Conus gloriamaris* sold for three times the price of Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (1663) at an auction in Amsterdam. The French Rococo style of the time even draws its roots from seashells, combining the French word *rocaille*, a style of decor of using pebbles, shells, and cement to decorate grottos and fountains, with the Italian word *barocco*, or Baroque. The Rococo style, of course, favors ornate and intricate details not wholly dissimilar to those of a particularly showy shell.

Conchyliomanie eventually waned—priceless species thought to be extinct were discovered anew; Vermeer paintings reclaimed their place in the auction house pecking order. Still, shells continued to inspire, influencing artists and architects, fashion designers and amateur crafters, modernists and naturalists—and generations of romantic spirits.

Throughout the Victorian era, making *coquillage*—impressive shellwork bouquets of colorful flowers—was a popular artistic activity for ladies of leisure. Around the same time, petite works of mosaic shell art, known as Sailor's Valentines, were prized as sentimental tokens of time spent at sea. Intended to be brought home to a sailor's loved ones, the delicate objects are believed to have been made in Barbados, a popular seaport during the time, and remain collector's items.

In the early 20th century, a somewhat obscure artist named Henrietta Shore made shells a recurring theme in her paintings. Her friend, the photographer Edward Weston, was so inspired by her work—particularly the intricate form of a Nautilus—that it began to consume his own practice (take a gander at the Google Image results for "Edward Weston shells" for proof). Georgia O'Keeffe, of course, was an avid collector of natural objects—bones and flowers in particular. In the late 1920s, the shell became one of O'Keeffe's themes. She painted them small and lifelike, as well as enlarged and exaggerated, exploring their textures, details, and undulations much like one would an expansive landscape. There's plenty more, of course: Frank Lloyd Wright's design of the Guggenheim Museum is said to have been inspired by *Thatcheria mirabilis*, the Japanese Wonder Shell; Piero Fornasetti for Bucciarelli's iconic shell plates circa 1960; Judith Leiber's coveted shell minaudières from the 1970s; designer Maryam Nassir Zadeh's bewitching conch necklace rendered in blown glass, and even Miuccia Prada's recent resurrection of the puka shell necklace from the ashes of '90s mall fashion.



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The "she sells seashells" tongue-twister was inspired by 19th century British paleontologist Mary Anning, who supported her family by collecting and selling dinosaur fossils to tourists on the English coast.

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Frank Lloyd Wright would often cart out his personal collection of seashells during Sunday morning breakfasts to draw his grandson's attention to their astounding variety and instructive execution of form married with function.



Left page: Art by Balthasar van der Ast, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Right page: Background photograph by Luiny; foreground photograph of Tiffany & Co. fan, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



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Left: Images courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Right: Background photograph by Luiny; foreground photograph by Esther Bellepoque for METAL.



Photograph and jewelry by Luiny (luiny.com).
Art by Stephen Eichhorn.



Oh yes, shell mania lives on, and our attraction to them might be more than a love of something pretty. Physicists think we could be evolutionarily primed to appreciate them. Shells boast mathematically precise architecture, logarithmic spirals, and golden ratio proportions. (The rate of calcium carbonate secretion from the creatures within determines the shape of a shell's spirals and the patterns of its pigmentation.) Similar forms are repeated in the biology of our inner ear as well as far-off spiral galaxies. Shells, and their structure, feel both familiar—earthly, kindred—as well as utterly cosmic.

We know a great many things about shells; about their human history and art world import, their unique biology and processes. Even so: there is something spiritual, something untenable and mysterious that makes seashells—when contemplated with our fullest capacities for imagination, or perhaps our most ancient sense of bewilderment and awe—a special source of wonder. Holding a seashell might, on some level, register like an approximation of grasping the universe itself. Close to this edge of the great unknown, it's no surprise then that we continue to marvel at these galaxies of calcium and curiosity.



BROCCOLI LOVES



Sweet Saba Candy

Sweet Saba does not make THC-infused candy yet, but even sans cannabis, the sweets made by founder Maayan Zilberman (@maayan.zilberman) are enchanting; her sculptural shells are available at Bergdorf Goodman in NYC.



Shell Pipe

Is that mermaid blowing into a conch or puffing on the *Del Mar* ("of the sea" in Spanish) stoneware shell pipe from The Pursuits of Happiness (thepursuitsofhappiness.com)?



Weed Print Swimsuit

To wear while beachcombing: a weed print two-piece by Toronto swimwear brand Minnow Bathers (minnowbathers.com), who donate a portion of their profits to environmental and human rights campaigns. Photograph by Marishka Radwanski.

Sunday Goods

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