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# COASTAL LIVING

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*Fanciful SHELL  
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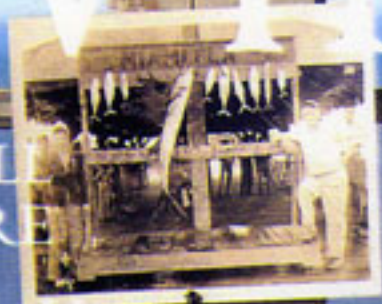
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# SHELL GAME

*New shell-encrusted furniture symbolizes the long tradition of our fascination with travel, the rare and exotic, and—of course—with the sea. These intricately designed mosaics of seashells are both fanciful and fascinating.*

Shell furniture can be kitschy or chic, depending on the context," says Christopher Gow, whose ability to recognize the difference not only earned him a tidy profit but also inspired him and a business partner, Giampiero Ruzzetti, to design their own shell creations.

It all began in 1995, during a routine stroll through an antiques shop in the walled city of Carcassonne, France. Christopher Gow, then a sculpture specialist for Sotheby's, noticed four odd pieces of furniture: a chest of drawers, drop-front desk, console table, and pier mirror.

French and dating to the 18th century, each had been covered in shells that had been painstakingly glued on in exquisite patterns by some unknown artist, probably in the 1920s. Gow quickly plunked down about \$12,000 for all four pieces. Eight months later, the set fetched more than \$70,000 at auction.

The shell mirror at left now hangs in Oscar de la Renta's Dominican Republic vacation home. It was inspired by pieces such as the Louis XV-style console at right, which sold at Sotheby's for \$14,950.

Today, with the help of French mosaic maker Laurent Ribis and Italian shell artist Viola Recchi, Ruzzetti and Gow create new shell-encrusted furniture, selling their work to a predominantly coastal clientele. They turn ordinary pieces into beautiful, whimsical objets d'art.

Earliest examples of elaborate shell mosaic work on furniture came from the islands of the southern Pacific, a

primary source of the world's largest and most unusual shells. At the end of the 15th century, Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope and opened trade to the Pacific. Merchants returned with holds full of new materials to incorporate in furniture making, including shells. A Western fascination with shells developed and continued to grow throughout the rococo period of the 18th century. Carved shells began to

cover the knees and handrests of chairs, and, later, gilded mirrors, console tables, and torchère stands.

Europeans also began to incorporate shell forms into their gardens.

Gardens as distant as the Pitti Palace in Florence, Goodwood House in Sussex (pictured on page 22), and Stourhead, in Wiltshire, incorporate grottoes where visitors can still sit among tables and benches covered by shells and crustaceans.

Sometimes created as religious shrines, grottoes are dark, cave-like hideaways often lined with pebbles, shells, and colored glass, and sometimes dripping with pools and waterfalls. "In Catholic grottoes, there is a tradition of using shells because they're associated with religious iconography," says Susan Niles, associate professor of



BY LOGAN WARD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF MCNAMARA



*"Shell furniture was always meant to be fanciful and humorous. It is not intended to knit brows. The best has always*

*been a bit irreverent, and transcended the traditional limitations of taste to inspire joy and wonder."*

*—George Read, antiques lecturer and former director of English furniture, Sotheby's.*

sociology at Lafayette College.

Today, a famous shell-encrusted pavilion still stands at Rambouillet, a 14th-century château in the news this year as the site of mediation between Serbs and Kosovo Albanians. Outside Dublin, Ireland, singer Marianne Faithfull lives in Shell Cottage, constructed as a playhouse for Irish aristocrats in the 18th century. The centerpiece of the house is a domed room covered with an elaborate pattern of shells, moss and seaweed, and fragments from precious vases. These historic homes and grottoes inspired Ruzzetti and Gow in their modern work. "A grotto is a place of escape," says Gow. "We want to achieve the effect of a grotto but with a single object, like a mirror."

Ruzzetti and Gow, who also sell silver-coated ornamental shells, have become knowledgeable amateur conchologists. Over a few years, they have learned the Latin names of some 100 different mollusks—univalves, bivalves, and chitons. They import some shells from the Philippines and order others from Miami and Fort Myers, near this country's premier shelling destination, Sanibel Island.

Though early sales of the shell work have been very promising, theirs is still a fledgling business. Currently, the by-appointment-only showroom, studio/workroom, shipping room, and business office are within Gow's apartment in midtown Manhattan's garment



The side table below is covered with cinnabar limpets, cowries, and mother-of-pearl. Babylonia spirata shells and tritons trim the drawer and apron.



district. Shells are stored in dozens of large cookie jars lining the high shelves of Gow's kitchen.

The result is a varied array of pieces, including ornamental boxes and obelisks (which sell for \$200 and up), and three types of mirrors: all-white (\$1,800), multicolored (\$1,800), and black-framed with white shells (\$1,500). Ruzzetti and Gow design furniture primarily by commission—but sometimes just for fun, like the corner cupboard shown at left. It has mother-of-pearl from India, small starfish on a layer of tiny purple shells, and a nautilus shell at the top. The cupboard's shelves, however, posed an interesting problem. "We needed a flat, neutral surface, but we wanted texture," says Gow. "Other backgrounds, like painted faux finishes, didn't work." Their solution? Beach sand, glued on like glitter.

Recalling the four French pieces that were his inspiration, Gow grows almost reverential. "The shell pattern was not symmetrical," he explains. "Yet it was not merely a morass of shells. They were carefully juxtaposed, arranged in such a way to lead the eye across the surface. To look at them was both soothing and exciting." The same adjectives easily apply to Ruzzetti and Gow's creations. ♣

Resources on page 200.

Contributing editor Logan Ward lives in Brooklyn, New York.



