

# Designer revives an old craft with heart

BY BRIDGET A. OTTO  
The Oregonian

Old-fashioned design, quality execution and exquisite materials never fail to catch the attention of interior designer Noelle Penn. It could be the richness of her family history — she is a descendant of William Penn — that forges the connection, or her admiration of good design. Or not.

“I just love all that Victorian, goopy stuff,” she explains with a laugh. “Anything with lots of stuff on it. ... If it glitters, I want it.”

Take her love of the old sailors’ valentines she first found at an antiques and collectibles show about 25 years ago at the Expo Center. She started collecting the rare collectibles before they became too expensive, Penn says, adding that she sees them go for upwards of \$400 on eBay.

The story of the boxes intricately adorned with shells dates back to the island of Barbados.

Penn, who’s written a short history of the craft to place on display by her work, says that two English brothers in the shipping industry hired some local women on Barbados to make souvenir gifts for the hordes of sailors who traveled through to their loved ones. Soon the sailors themselves were fashioning boxes and trinkets from the shells they’d collected to busy



themselves during their idle hours.

By the end of the 1800s, many of these trinkets started to be manufactured in England and sold as collectible items. “Blank” boxes could also be bought for women to decorate with the shells that their husbands or sweethearts brought home to them from far-off places.

Anchors, heart shapes and crosses were recurring themes. Boxes became whimsical interpretations of household items, such as dressers, pincushions and picture frames.

A true sailors’ valentine

usually included a message such as “Think of Me” or “Love the Giver.” In recent years, when Penn noticed a renewed interest in the sailors’ valentines as collectibles, she began to make her own.

“I have endeavored to create these replicas using the same materials found on the originals. I design and create the marbled papers using age-old techniques, and use only vintage fabrics, postcards, photos, daguerreotypes and attachments. The Victorian scrap pieces are over 100 years old, and the shells are collected from around the globe,” she says.

Penn, who years ago decorated her Gleneden beach house in a shell motif, says every once in a while an “odd package” will arrive from one of her many friends from Scotland to Miami who send her shells. In addition to buying them from wholesalers, Penn says folks in Portland who have seen her work have been known to bring her shells as well.

She calls the delicate work of creating the sailors’ valentines “therapy.”

Bridget A. Otto: 503-221-8527;  
botto@oregonian.com;  
on Twitter @bridgetotto



Go to [OREGONLIVE.COM/HG](http://OREGONLIVE.COM/HG) for more of  
Noelle Penn's shell creations



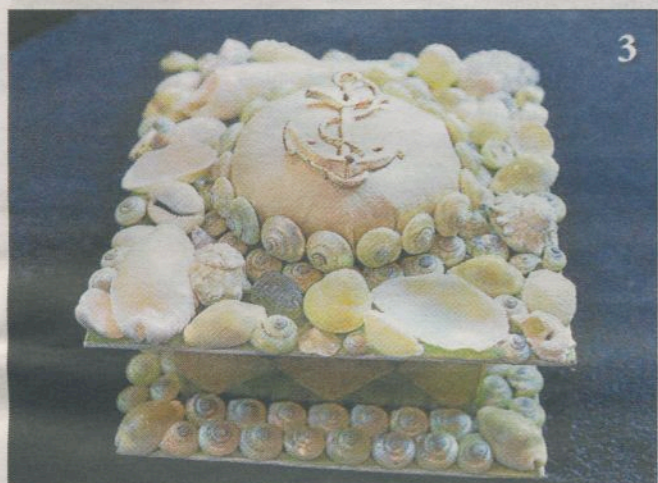
2

**1** Interior designer Noelle Penn collects shells from all over for her creations, which range from intricate crosses and horseshoes to much more elaborate pieces.

**2** The shell creations are said to have started on the island of Barbados as souvenir gifts created for the sailors traveling there.

**3** Boxes and anchors represent two of the traditions of sailors' valentines. The anchor motif dates back to the 1800s, when sailors' valentines were popular as collectibles and messages of love. They remain one of Penn's regular designs.

PHOTOS BY DOUG BEGHEL  
THE OREGONIAN



3

#### ABOUT THE DESIGNER

Penn's shell creations are available through Sixpence Antiques, 519 Third St., Lake Oswego, 503-635-0595; [sixpenceantiques.blogspot.com](http://sixpenceantiques.blogspot.com).

**Noelle Penn:** Noelle for Interiors, 503-238-8022, [noelleforinteriors.com](http://noelleforinteriors.com)