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Sailors' Valentines: Shell Mosaics from Victorian Barbados

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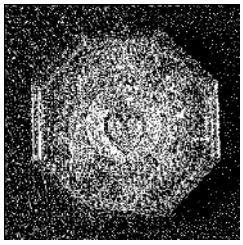

Abstract

Octagonal shell mosaics—colloquially known as sailors' valentines—were produced in a cottage industry by black and brown Barbadian women for the burgeoning Caribbean tourism industry in the Victorian era. As a commercial colonial craft, sailors' valentines have been occluded in art historical discourse. Nevertheless, these vibrant collages foreground the multivalent significance of creolised material culture circulating within modernising colonial economies. Through their artful assemblage of shells, they not only embody the legacy of eighteenth-century natural philosophy and the picturesque movement, but also reflect diasporic West African spiritual and aesthetic practices engaged in creating an Afro-Barbadian cultural autonomy within a plantation society. This article traces the material evolution of sailors' valentines from their origins in British conchology and craft to their implication in the rise of international seaside leisure. Honing in on the adaptation of shell mosaics in the Victorian Caribbean as object emissaries of a post-emancipation island tourism economy, it considers how they were engaged in rebranding the British West Indies as a consumable natural wonderland. The article concludes with an assessment of contemporary sailors' valentines that invoke the creolisation of Barbadian shell mosaics to negotiate global cultural interchange, while critiquing the environmental legacy of the Victorian consumption of nature.

Introduction

Shell-work, the ornamental application of shells to paper, wood, and wire supports, was an amateur craft practice and industry in the Victorian period. This article is concerned with the latter category—commercial shell-work—produced for sale at tourist destinations around the globe in the nineteenth century. It takes as its focus octagonal shell mosaics commonly, albeit erroneously, known as sailors' valentines, manufactured in Barbados by black and brown women.[1] The genre is exemplified by a mosaic in the Strong National Museum of Play, which holds one of the largest institutional collections of sailors' valentines (fig. 1).[2] In this vibrant marine collage, rows of tellin, limpet, emerald nerite, rice, moon snail, and purple sea snail shells are placed in geometric segments.[3] In the central medallion, the figure of a padded heart is bordered by abrus seeds (*Abrus precatorius*) and crowned with a fan pierced by a raised rosette. This focal point is encircled by a decorative band of spirula shells (*Spirula spirula*) inscribed "A Gift from a Friend". A curved, eight-pointed star, interspersed with swag-like crescents punctuated by smaller rosettes, radiates outwards to the vertices of the Spanish cedar (*Cedrella odorata*) frame.

Figure 1

Gift from a Friend, circa 1850, Barbados, shells, jequirity seeds (Abrus precatorius), cardboard, glass, brass, cedar, 34.2 × 34.2 × 3.8 cm. The Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, New York (74.648). Digital image courtesy of The Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, New York (all rights reserved).

Despite continued enthralment with these enclosed miniature grottos in the museum and decorative arts sectors, sailors' valentines have been occluded in art historical discourse because of their marginal status as a commercial colonial craft.[4] As Rozsika Parker has demonstrated, the division of art and craft that emerged in Western Europe during the Renaissance was driven by gender in addition to class, wherein a professionalising culture of painting and sculpture was privileged over the decorative arts.[5] Within the latter category, an art historical bias towards leisured amateur creation over commercial production devalued the skills and labour of professional craft workers. This art/craft binary intersected with early anthropological distinctions between the so-called traditional, non-commercial artefacts of the cultural other and what were perceived as inauthentic souvenirs produced for the tourist market. In recent decades an emphasis on the commodity status of art and craft objects circulating within global capitalist economies has

revealed the limitations of such categorisations.[6] While the commercial craftwork of North American and Australian First Nations peoples as a form of economic agency and self-identification has undergone rigorous analysis, the Caribbean shell-work trade has received less attention.[7]

Reading the shell, as Beth Fowkes Tobin has done, as an artefact "subject to multiple discursive and semiotic systems", this article seeks to unpack the creolised material heritage of shell mosaics from Victorian Barbados.[8] It begins with an analysis of sailors' valentines as a product of the post-emancipation economy that provided a flexible means of income for a mobilising workforce of brown and black women, while sustaining Afro-Barbadian spiritual and aesthetic practices. Tracing the evolution of Caribbean shells in the European marketplace from commodity to collectible, the article situates sailors' valentines within the cultural framework of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century conchological display and shell-work, wherein shell arrangements were inflected with Enlightenment natural philosophy and the picturesque envisioning of the seaside. Focusing on the marketing of sailors' valentines as "native manufactures" at the Bridgetown Curiosity Shop (1878–1925) of brown natural history dealers Benjamin Hinds and George Gordon Belgrave, it argues that Barbadian shell mosaics were enlisted as object emissaries of an island tourism industry predicated on the "rewilding" of the Caribbean from a plantation to a natural wonderland. The article concludes with an assessment of contemporary sailors' valentines that invoke the creolisation of historical shell mosaics to negotiate global cultural interchange, while critiquing the environmental legacy of the Victorian consumption of nature.

A Post-emancipation Island Industry

Sailors' valentines have long been perceived as a form of shipboard craft, occupying mariners' idle hours at sea. In the 1960s Judith Hughes, a decorative arts specialist, dispelled this myth based on her analysis of their variety of materials and standardised design.[9] In addition to a large quantity of shells, their production required wood, glass, glue, cotton, newspaper, cardboard, fancy paper, paint, varnish, and screws—an assortment of items not easily procured at sea. Mosaic

compositions, moreover, are governed by a high degree of uniformity as epitomised in the Strong Museum valentine: central medallions decorated with figural motifs of hearts, rosettes, bouquets, or nautical imagery are encircled by alternating shelled segments encased in glazed, octagonal boxes made of cedar or mahogany (*Swietenia mahagoni*).[10]

Valentines also often include generic dedications or sentiments—"To My Sweetheart", "For My Mother", "Truly Thine", and "Forget Me Not"—that reflect branding on Victorian souvenirs, suggesting that they were manufactured for a commercial market. Numerous references to Barbados in inscriptions point to this island as a place of manufacture, as revealed in a hinged double mosaic, also in the collections of the Strong Museum, featuring the text "A Present from Barbados" (fig. 2). Like the single valentine, this double mosaic showcases a variety of shells from the Caribbean, including chitons, cowries, doves, and strigillas. Over thirty species of univalves, bivalves, gastropods, and cephalopods endemic to this region have been identified in extant valentines, further substantiating a Barbadian site of origin.[11]

Figure 2

Present from Barbados, late nineteenth century, shell, paper, cotton, cedar, glass, metal, 23.1 × 46 cm. The Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, New York (74.689). Digital image courtesy of The Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, New York (all rights reserved).

Barbados, the easternmost island of the Lesser Antilles, was by the nineteenth century a regional centre of supply and distribution to European, American, South American, East Indian, and Chinese merchant marines, as well as a depot for the

British Navy and a stop for whaling ships returning from the Pacific. In the Victorian era it was promoted as a tropical health resort by colonial administrators, cruise ship companies, hoteliers, and island retailers. Routes were plentiful: steamer lines departed regularly from England and the east coast of the United States, while a network of smaller vessels provided regional transit for inter-island and South American tourists and labourers, as revealed in a map from *Stark's History and Guide to Barbados and the Caribbee Islands* (1893) (fig. 3). Bridgetown, the bustling maritime capital of Barbados, would have provided a steady market for sailors' valentines. "At no other port in the Caribbean Islands", declared James Stark, the author of the *History and Guide*, "is to be seen so great a fleet of merchantmen and coasting vessels".[12]

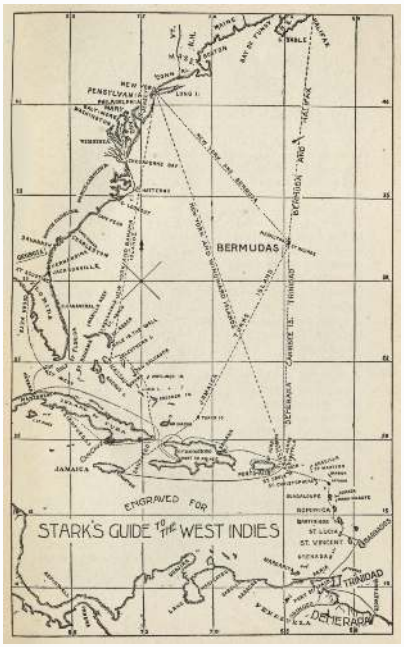

Figure 3

James H. Stark, *Map of the West Indies*, 1893, engraving, in Stark's History and Guide to Barbados and the Caribbee Islands, 3. Williams Collection, John J. Burns Library, Boston College (F 2001.S79). Digital image courtesy of Williams Collection, John J. Burns Library, Boston College (all rights reserved).

With reefs and lagoons replete with branches of coral outcrops, submarine caves, marine prairies, sandy beaches, and a stable intertidal zone host to a diversity of marine fauna, Barbados's marine environment has long been integral to the island

economy.[13] Well before the Spanish and Portuguese occupations in the sixteenth century, Barbados was home to the Arawak and Kalinago peoples, Amerindians from mainland South America who relied on aquaculture and fashioned tools from shells, including adzes, axe-like tools carved from the inner whorl or lip of the conch (*Strombus gigas*), which were used to cultivate the cassava plant (fig. 4). In *The Natural History of Barbados* (1750), Welsh clergyman and naturalist Griffith Hughes remarked upon the "great number" of these "scooping chisels" dug up on the island, referencing the shell remains of these indigenous settlements.[14]

Figure 4

Adze blade, undated, Barbados, shell, 6.9 × 2.5 × 1.2 cm. The British Museum (Am,+.4408). Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The British colonisation of the island in 1627 and the introduction of sugar cane in the 1630s initiated a market for plantation labour supplied through the mass forced migration of West African peoples from Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Cameroon, and the Ivory Coast until the Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1807.[15] Like the Arawak and Kalinago before them, enslaved Afro-Barbadians depended upon fish and shellfish for nutrition, gathering cockles and clams in the

seagrass beds and harvesting sea urchins on the foreshore. Discarded shells were recycled into adornment and handicrafts, including sailors' valentines.[16]

Shell mosaics were a unique creole product of Barbados. A familiarity with carpentry was required to construct their octagonal cases, which reflects the establishment of an island woodworking industry that serviced the plantation economy. Beyond European furniture makers who travelled to Barbados to meet colonial elite consumer demand, the industry was supported by highly skilled enslaved and free craftspeople who relied on indigenous timbers used in mosaics such as mahogany.[17] While the cases of sailors' valentines are indebted to plantation carpentry, their shell mosaics are informed by colonial fancywork practices described by Hughes as an edifying "amusement of the ladies" on the island.[18] Shell-work was a fashionable Georgian craft that was considered a rational amusement, a socially condoned feminine pursuit perceived to productively occupy the mind. In a colonial context, it not only reinforced and performed gendered virtues of refinement and industry, but also provided an intimate vehicle for British women to connect with the Barbadian environment through a sustained engagement with its natural materials.

In addition to featuring imported woodwork and shell-work practices, sailors' valentines suggest the influence of diasporic West African spiritual and aesthetic traditions employed to maintain a sense of Afro-Barbadian cultural autonomy within plantation society. Ethnobotanist Anthony Richards has argued that their form resonates with the *opon Ifa*, a circular wooden divination tray used by the Yoruba peoples of south-western Nigeria who made up a significant percentage of Barbados's enslaved population.[19] In a 1930s *opon Ifa* in the Art Institute of Chicago, the tray's round frame, which evokes the Yoruba concept of the cosmos, is divided into decorated segments that resemble the banded compartmentalisation of sailors' valentines (fig. 5).

Figure 5

Areogun, Opon Ifa (Tray), 1930s, wood and pigment, Yoruba, Osi-Ilorin, Nigeria, 5 × 45 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago (1999.289). Digital image courtesy of The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource New York/Scala, Florence (all rights reserved).

The inner border, moreover, is carved with a ring of cowries evoking the linear style of collage employed in shell mosaics. Cowrie shells (*Cypraeidae*), varieties of which are included in sailors' valentines, hold complex significance in many West African cultures; incorporated into rituals, amulets, ornaments, and garments, they are invested with protective talismanic properties, in addition to functioning as a form of currency until the late nineteenth century. In the *opon Ifa* their representation references the use of the shell during divination sessions, sixteen of which—a multiple of the octagonal geometry employed in shell mosaics—are cast onto the tray to create patterns used to communicate with Orisa deities.

Like the cowrie, the incorporation of abrus seeds in sailors' valentines is embedded in Afro-Barbadian heritage. Of South East Asian origin but prevalent on the African subcontinent, the seed, which is valued for its saturated red colour, is ritually applied to hardwood masks employed in Nigerian life cycle ceremonies. Affixed to the wooden substrate with beeswax, the seeds' application creates an

encrusted surface that imbues such masks with spiritual potency.[20] Endemic to Barbados, abrus seeds were also prized for their medicinal properties and were used by enslaved Afro-Barbadians as an expectorant and febrifuge (a medicine used to reduce fever), protector and poison.[21] Containing the toxin abrin, they featured in obeah practices, which, as Griffith Hughes observed, were "tenaciously" upheld by the enslaved communities.[22] Early nineteenth-century debates over legislation of anti-obeah laws directed at—as Stapleton Cotton, governor of Barbados from 1817 to 1820, argued—"cases where Obeah men or women might use the influence of their art, for the promotion of insurrection and rebellion", suggest that obeah rituals involving abrus seeds were considered by the colonial administration as an act of resistance to the plantation system.[23]

The political purchase of sailors' valentines is indicated by a scrap of newsprint from the *Barbadian* used as padding, which was discovered during the conservation of a mosaic from the Kendall Whaling Museum.[24] Entitled "Public Meeting", this excerpt transcribes an assembly of the "Free Coloured and Free Black Inhabitants" of Barbados, chaired by Samuel Jackman Prescod on 6 May 1833 to address the local lack of enforcement of the "The Brown Privilege Bill".[25] With the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which came into effect in Barbados in 1834, previously enslaved Barbadians, while considered free under British law, were indentured during an apprenticeship period to maintain island sugar production, and their conditional emancipation did not extend to the civil rights of British subjects. Their tenuous legal status was exacerbated by class tensions in the free community between members of a conservative wealthy minority that continued to support the plantocracy and those from a lower socioeconomic base that advocated against the racial limitations of what was perceived as a colonial code of governance.[26]

Enmeshed in politics of community, class, and race, the production of sailors' valentines also responded to the restructuring of local labour during the apprenticeship period. With the transition to plantation day labour and the tenancy system, black and brown Barbadian women increasingly provided for their households as men travelled for more lucrative employment opportunities,

including on the Panama Canal.[27] Women were engaged in both the production and the distribution of handicrafts, which offered a flexible, alternative source of income to the meagre wages of day labour and the micro-harvest of provisions such as cotton, aloes, and arrowroot. This turn to handicraft production is acknowledged in an 1834 petition of the "Free Coloured and Free Black Inhabitants of Bridgetown", which argued that "the restrictions under which [we] formerly labored … debar[red us] from the acquisition of land, [and] drove [us] for support to the handicraft trades".[28] As Jerome Handler has argued, huckstering, or hawking, was an entrenched practice of the internal market system that had developed in tandem with the plantation economy.[29] In addition to foodstuffs, women sold handicrafts, including shell-work and pottery, on the streets, at markets, on the wharves, and at hotels.[30] The introduction of sailors' valentines corresponds to the influx of free women in this burgeoning market.

Pre-existing handicraft cottage industries characterised by a gendered division of labour, such as the manufacture of local earthenware in family-run enterprises at Chalky Mount, offer a production model for sailors' valentines.[31] While both women and men harvested the shells required for mosaic production, men constructed the wooden cases and women arranged the shell-work. Shell harvesting, captured here in a turn-of-the-century photograph depicting shell fishers in St. Thomas by Charles Blackburne, an American importer of goods from the Caribbean, was arduous work that required an understanding of local littoral environments, especially wave exposure and tides (fig. 6). Nerite snails, limpets, and chitons were found in the intertidal rocky zone and were prised off rocks with a knife, while tellins, turrids, clams, and spirulas, located on the tideline and in the shallows near the water's edge, were harvested through sifting sand and water.[32]

Figure 6

Charles W. Blackburne, *Shell Fishers, St. Thomas*, 1897–1912, photo-negative-glass plate, 10 × 12.5 × 0.2 cm. International Center of Photography (2013.81.16). Digital image courtesy of International Center of Photography, Gift of John Noll in honor of Richard Waldmann (all rights reserved).

Once an adequate supply of shells was amassed, shell-work commenced with the preparation of pasteboard strips covered with coloured paper to form partitions in the wooden cases, which were then filled with newspaper or cotton batting. Manufactures affixed hide glue to this base and arranged shells on the sticky surface in dense, overlapping rows. The orientation of the shells alternated between partitions to enhance the textured surface of the mosaic.[33] Raised rosettes, such as those in the Strong Museum mosaics, were created, as described in the Victorian handbook *Art Recreations* (1861), by setting petal-like shells "close together for the center" and placing "other similar shaped shells around in circles, the largest outward", dipping their anterior ends into hot wax to secure the arrangement".[34] When the shell-work was complete, glass was slotted into the inner band of the case. For double mosaics, brass hinges and a hook and eye were attached with manufactured screws. Distinguished among commercial Victorian shell-work by these hinged, protective cases conducive to transport, sailors' valentines were compact and durable; they fitted comfortably in a portmanteau, attesting to portability as a key factor in their design.

Dated and provenanced valentines reveal that they were sold to a market of European (including British), and American naval officers, merchant marines, and travellers from the 1830s through the early twentieth century, corresponding directly to the post-emancipation Victorian period in Barbados.[35] New Englander David Chapin Warren, for instance, acquired a double shell mosaic inscribed "Souvenir from Barbados", while trading lumber and manufactured goods for sugar, pitch, rum, mahogany, and palm oil at Caribbean ports for J. S. Emery & Company between 1884 and 1894. Warren, who was captain of the coasting schooner the *Edward Johnson* and was often accompanied on his travels by his wife, Jeannette, brought his valentine back from Bridgetown to Boston. Fitted with a brass chain, it was placed on display at the couple's summer residence in Islesboro, Maine.[36]

Caribbean Shells in Conchology and Craft

While their creolised form and production evolved out of Afro-Barbadian plantation culture and the post-emancipation island economy, the Victorian reception of sailors' valentines was entrenched in the cultural history of Caribbean shells on the European market through their incorporation into systems of collection and display. Shell mosaics, in particular, evolved out of the interface between eighteenth-century conchology, the study of molluscs, and the feminine craft practice of shell-work. Both shared a set of material processes engaged in sorting, cleaning, and arranging shells, and were considered rational amusements associated with aesthetic principles of beauty and the cultivation of taste. A concern for this overlapping praxis governs Griffith Hughes's chapter on shells and shellfish in his *Natural History of Barbados*, which was "not only written to gratify the Curiosity of the inquisitive Philosopher, but [also] to improve the Imagination of the Female Artificer".[37]

Eighteenth-century conchology was an interstitial science in which taxonomy of form vied with the artistic arrangement of shells as a philosophical stimulus to contemplate the rational principles of beauty. As Emma Spary has demonstrated, conchological display was governed by aesthetic criteria from contemporary

treatises on beauty and taste, wherein symmetry and uniformity were balanced by variety and contrast.[38] Such criteria are visualised in Dutch apothecary Albertus Seba's posthumous *Loccupletissimi Rerum Thesauri Accurata Descriptio* (1734–65), which operates as a cabinet of curiosities in print. The *Thesaurus* features several shells from the Caribbean as revealed in a hand-coloured plate of an Arabian tibia (*Tibia insulaechorab*) surrounded by concentric arrangements of tapering spiralled turret, auger, and tibia shells (fig. 7). The effect is one of artful juxtaposition that encourages the viewer to compare specimens through a pre-Linnaean tripartite enquiry of description, comparison, and ordering.[39] A geometric framework distinguished by bilateral symmetry denotes rational order, while the contrast of pattern between specimens—enhanced through the alternating orientation of turrets and augers from apex to siphonal canal—lends a beguiling diversity.

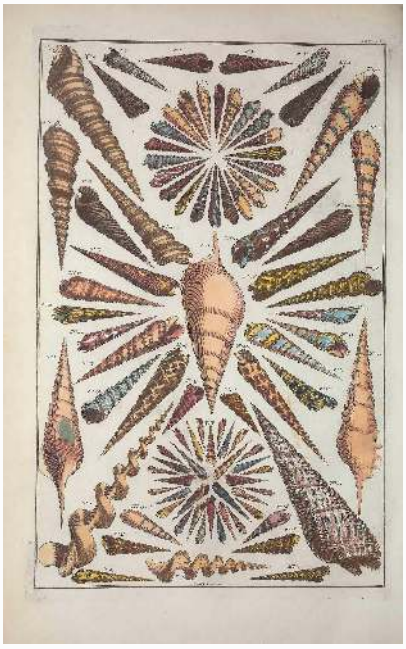

Figure 7

F. de Bakker, Turret shells, Augur shells and Tibias from the Indo-Pacific and the Caribbean, 1758, hand-coloured etched plate, *Tomus III, Tabula LVI* in Alberta Seba, *Loccupletissimi Rerum Thesauri Accurata Descriptio* (Amsterdam: Wetstenium, Smith & Janssonio-Waesbergios, 1734–1765). Digital image courtesy of Biodiversity Heritage Library, Smithsonian Institution (Public Domain).

Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century shell drawers in collectors' cabinets conform to these aesthetic principles of symmetry and variety, revelling in an ordered profusion of shell colour, shape, and texture. Assembled in colonial New South Wales, a shell drawer in the Dixson Collector's Chest (circa 1818), invokes the bilateral symmetry of Seba's composition (fig. 8).[40] Whereas shells float on the page in conchological illustrations, geometric partitions lined with carded cotton are employed to organise specimens in shell drawers, providing a precursor for the composition of sailors' valentines. In the Dixson drawer, dense groups of Australian shell varieties are arranged in a sixteen-point star, creating a dynamic, textured pattern of ridge, whorl, blotch, and dash anchored in the repetition of form and variation of colour. Crafted from Australian rosewood (*Dysosylum fraseranum*) and red cedar (*Toona ciliata*), native timbers of interest to the colonial administration for its economic potential, the Dixson chest displayed the natural wealth of the colony for the investor in addition to the natural philosopher, while demonstrating the cultural refinement of colonial resources.

Figure 8

Shell drawer, *Dixson Collector's Chest*, circa 1818, Australia, 56 × 71.3 × 46.5 cm. Dixson Galleries, State Library of New South Wales (DG R 4). Digital image courtesy of Dixson Galleries, State Library of New South Wales (all rights reserved).

Housed in libraries and drawing rooms, shell chests and cabinets were in dialogue with Georgian decorative arts, particularly women's shell-work. Instructions for

creating shell mosaics on architectural supports as well as grotto-work and wired sculptural shell assemblages were published in arts manuals such as Hannah Robertson's *The Young Ladies School of Arts* (1766).[41] Shell-work, which provides an imbricated evolutionary model for sailors' valentines, was a leisured amateur craft practice that was employed to perform gendered virtues of discipline and accomplishment as well as to demonstrate taste and wealth, while offering an acceptable avenue into contemporary natural history practices with an international scope.[42] Judged according to its level of execution, harmonious arrangement, and degree of mimesis, shell-work presented a unique art form that combined the skill sets of sculpture and painting. "What the painter performs by an assemblage of different colours properly distributed", was, according to Griffith Hughes, "produced by a disposition of shells, as their different tinctures, shapes, or sizes, happen to direct the fancy". Profile and proportion were also prioritised so that "shell-work part[ook] of the Nature of Painting, if not of Statuary; imitating not only by colours, but a full relieve [*sic*]".[43]

Floral motifs, influenced by Linnaean botany and the sentimental language of flowers, dominate Georgian shell-work, contributing to the prevalent use of rosettes in sailors' valentines. Mimesis is a key concern in a bouquet of intricately wired English wildflowers and exotic species, including honeysuckle, lilies of the valley, anemones, carnations, roses, tulips, and a passionflower (fig. 9). Each bloom is articulated with petals, pistils, and stamens secured to wire stems wrapped in silken thread and embellished with paper leaves. To mimic the striated petals of a tulip in the centre of the bouquet, the shell-worker has employed the sunrise tellin (*Tellina radiata*), a white bivalve with distinctive pink rays from the Caribbean that is prevalent in sailors' valentines. Such botanical accuracy was enshrouded in sentiment through the language of flowers, a vocabulary that ascribed emotional, moral, and religious meaning to flora. To the right of the tulip, for instance, a prominent passionflower (*Passiflora caerulea*)—decorated with cut-paper corona filaments and silken anthers—represented faith through its association with Christ's passion.[44]

Figure 9

Shellwork bouquet, circa 1800–1820, Great Britain, shells, wire, silk, paper, 52.1 × 41.9 × 15.2 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (W.32:1-1926). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Beyond its floral symbolism, the passionflower, native to subtropical South America, transported exotic nature into the British domestic interior. Echoing the shelled rooms and follies crafted at British estates, shell-work operated as a grotto in miniature through which its maker and audience could contemplate shifting geographies. "What can be more delightful to the Imagination, than a Grotto?" muses Hughes. "With what truly romantic Ideas must it inspire one, to sit in a Room furnished with the Riches of the most distant Shores and Oceans!"[45] Shells were not only an aesthetic prompt for the sublime but also a romantic consumable, the artistic arrangement of which formed a pleasurable exercise in acculturation. They familiarised the foreign, offering a malleable medium for British women to tangibly assess a material world that was expanding through colonialism and trade.[46]

Floral shell-work and geometric conchological display coalesce in a late Georgian octagonal shell mosaic that heralds the hybrid design of sailors' valentines (fig. 10).

While the geometric format resembles the display of shells in the Dixson Chest, the sculptural flowers in the mosaic's widest band evoke the embroidered intricacy of the wired shell-work in the Georgian bouquet. The predominance of rice shells and inclusion of commercial art materials in the composition, moreover, point to a shift in the production of shell-work in the nineteenth century from an elite amateur practice to an industrialising middle-class pursuit. Favoured for its slender, whorled form and white colour, the common rice shell (*Olivella floralia*) was "sold by measure, or by the box, at most conchological repositories", reflecting the influx of Caribbean shells on the European market at the turn of the century and their subsequent devaluing as collectors' items.[47] The employment of cardboard partitions covered in gilt fancy paper, which was available from manufacturers such as Ackermann's Repository for the Arts, reveals the commercialisation of craftwork and its transformation from a prohibitive pursuit into an accessible modern commodity.

Figure 10

Octagonal shellwork plaque, circa 1800–1850, Great Britain, shells, wire, pasteboard, fancy paper, wood. Height: 35.6 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (W.233:1-1923). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Galvanised by the establishment of an international network of shell suppliers and retailers, commercial shell-work was produced on an industrial scale in the Victorian era. Established in London in 1833, Marcus Samuel's import–export business, which acquired shells, corals, ivories, and semi-precious stones from ships returning from eastern trade routes, sold shell-work wholesale to retailers in Paris, Le Havre, and New Jersey.[48] The shells were cleaned and polished in his Upper East Smithfield factory, a process that required boiling them in water, extracting their animals with a pointed instrument, soaking the shells to get rid of dirt and saline, filing their outer coating to remove the epidermis and accretions, and applying a thin layer of gum Arabic, egg white, or mastic dissolved in spirits as a varnish to enhance colouring.[49] Once prepared in this manner, shells were manufactured into shell-work or sold wholesale to domestic purveyors at seaside resorts at Ramsgate, Brighton, Newcastle, Hull, Leith, Scarborough, and the Isle of Wight.

Across the Atlantic, K. B. Mathes's manufactory in Batavia, New York, which boasted "worldwide collecting and buying facilities", produced shelled novelties "for souvenir goods, advertising purposes, etc." for the American market.[50] His *Illustrated Catalogue of Fancy Shell and Wood Novelties* (1905) reveals a flabbergasting range of products, including boxes, frames, crosses, horseshoes, wall pockets, letter holders, paperweights, pincushions, thermometers, match-safes, toothpick holders, napkin rings, card racks, purses, miniature furniture, and figurines.[51] Caribbean shells were frequently employed in such merchandise, including murex and cone varieties, and the "large and showy" queen conch (*Strombas gigas*), lauded by Mathes as "the greatest selling shell in the world".[52]

No longer exotic, Caribbean shells were transformed into rustic ornaments linked to the picturesque movement and the seaside leisure industry against the backdrop of an industrialising natural landscape. Resonating with the rational virtues of grotto-work praised by Griffith Hughes nearly a century beforehand, shells continued to operate as an aesthetic stimulus in the Victorian interior. The social reformer Charles Kingsley, for instance, praised the urbanite who, "amid all

excitement and temptation of luxury and flattery", kept "her heart pure and her mind occupied in a boudoir full of shells".[53] Shells were also enfolded into picturesque discourse, which transformed nature into a diverting, artful contrivance. Their organic form displayed the key principles of the picturesque as espoused by William Gilpin: irregularity, variation, and roughness. Through their incorporation into shell-work and other domestic ornaments, shells were engaged in a material variant of picturesque composition that brought the sea into the home.

Through the advent of rail and steam transport, Victorians flocked to the coast to escape dense urban living and to partake in the restorative effects of sea-bathing. Armed with baskets, nets, and jars, they descended on the beach, braving tidal pools and slippery rocks in search of choice specimens, stripping, in many instances, the littoral zone of its marine organisms.[54] Amusements on the shoreline, esplanade, and pier sprung up in response to such marine mania, catering to the travelling *flâneur* and *flâneuse* accustomed to the meandering pleasures of modern spectacle. From the public aquarium—which as Judith Hamera has argued, appropriated the perceptual allure of the shop window, garden, and panorama—to the beachside ramble, in which the discovery of glistening shells, feathery tufts of seaweeds and corallines, and jewel-like anemones was matched by a successive unveiling of scenic coves, inlets, and escarpments, such scopic diversion was informed by the picturesque tour.[55]

Geared to the marine enthusiast, field manuals and guides such as Philip Henry Gosse's *A Naturalist's Rambles on the Devonshire Coast* (1853), John George Wood's *The Common Objects of the Sea Shore* (1856), and Kingsley's *Glaucus, or The Wonders of the Shore* (1859), combined surveys of coastal scenery with empirical analysis of marine specimens in the littoral zone. Gosse's description of the fishing hamlet of Brixham, for example, perambulates between cliff face and rock pool:

> *The coast is rocky and precipitous, and is indented with little coves the most picturesque imaginable … Under the large stones at low water Trochus zizyphinus [Calliostoma zizyphinum] was numerous, a handsome shell, very*

regularly conical, and marked with triangular spots of purple on a grey ground.[56]

Coastal landscapes and conchological specimens were thus juxtaposed in a pictorial composition of vista and detail in which the mind's eye was encouraged to imaginatively rove and consume.

In the context of seaside tourism, this compositional strategy offered the reader a domesticated ocean, the products of which were available for collection and arrangement through seaside industry. Souvenirs peddled at seaside resorts sought to emulate the oscillating optics of the picturesque tour through the employment of Caribbean and other imported tropical shell species which were admired for their "gorgeous and glowing" beauty and variety, and employed to memorialise the coastal environment.[57]{-57) In a marine diorama advertised by Mathes as a "fancy box with a lithograph marine view in [the] background and sea shells and mosses strewn along the beach as a foreground", shells become a synecdoche for the coastal landscape, an embodiment of a shell-strewn foreshore—or foreground—rather than a mere framing device.[58] Such commercial shell-work, supplied by manufacturers like Mathes and Samuel, was sold in large numbers at seaside destinations as mementos for holidaymakers.

Efficient and economical, this souvenir shell-work represents the direct antecedent of sailors' valentines. It was mass produced, smaller in scale, simpler in design, and employed fewer and larger shells than its Georgian counterpart, as revealed in a late nineteenth-century box in the National Museum of American History (fig. 11). Fashioned from gilt pasteboard, the hinge-lidded rectangular frame, fitted with a mirror and satin pincushions, rests on a serpentine-edged base with splayed feet. Its exterior is encrusted with symmetrically arranged seashells reminiscent of eighteenth-century conchological display: a central cowrie on the lid, sunrise tellins on the front, and abalones on the side. The box's edges are bordered by iridescent periwinkles, which were used on an industrial scale in commercial production, favoured, as Henry Gardiner Adams observes, for "their peculiar brilliancy of hue, which they possess when seen through the medium of glistening water".[59]

Figure 11

Shellwork box, circa 1893, United States, shells, paper, mirrored glass, silk, pasteboard, 14.61 × 13.1 × 21.6 cm. Division of Home and Community Life, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution (28022). Digital image courtesy of Division of Home and Community Life, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution (all rights reserved).

As portable grottos in which the consumer could engage in a ready-made reverie with the sea, Victorian shell-work, through its mass production, was transformed from commodity to collectible. Widely available, it was lampooned in popular literature for its false artistic pretensions and spurned in art manuals for its lack of taste and ingenuity. In John Leighton's illustrated parody, *London Out of Town, or The Adventures of the Browns at the Seaside* (1847), the holidaymakers gawk at "a tortoiseshell tom cat and milkmaid made of shells, which from their inaptitude to the purposes applied may be considered gems of art".[60] Leighton's sardonic critique of shell-work as a tasteless, imitative art—evocative of the views of mid-century Victorian design reform—is reinforced in art manuals in which the aesthetic value of shell-work is correlated with its commercial production. *Elegant Arts*, for example, decries the "gaudy" shell-work found "at most watering places" in England as cheap and mechanical, while *Art Recreations* bemoans the "stiff appearance" of imported shell-work sold in American seaside shops.[61] Such criticism suggests that the encroachment of economic enterprise on amateur

production and its elision of class demarcations constitute a critical underlying tension of Victorian shell-work.

Belgrave's Curiosity Shop and Tropical Tourism

Through the international expansion of modern seaside leisure, commercial shell-work production was creatively adapted to support burgeoning colonial tourism economies, including those in the British West Indies. With the post-emancipation decline of the sugar industry and the United States' increasing investment in the Caribbean in the late nineteenth century, tourism provided a lucrative alternative to agriculturally based island economies, contributing to the development of transport, hospitality, and retail infrastructure.[62] Geared to prospective tourists and investors, a tropical variant of the picturesque dominates Caribbean travel and exhibitionary narratives, in which the idyllic coast and primordial jungle are conjoined into a consumable natural paradise.[63] Conflating retail with tourism, Belgrave's Curiosity Shop, located in the tourist precinct of Bridgetown, integrated island souvenirs associated with this paradisal staging of Barbados, including sailors' valentines, into an immersive installation of tropicality. Composed of fragments of the Caribbean seascape, shell mosaics not only embodied an island picturesque, but through their promotion by the Belgraves as "native manufactures", served as an exemplar of post-emancipation Barbadian industry.

Seaside leisure, transplanted from British and American coastal resorts and supported by Barbadian labour, was central to the evolution of Caribbean tourism. While local operators ran sport fishing expeditions for flying fish, barracudas, kingfish, and sharks from Bridgetown Harbour, Barbados boasted several watering places, including Hastings, where "sea-bathing", according to *Stark's History and Guide*, was "the finest in the world". Here, travellers could lodge at the modern spectacle of the American-owned Marine Hotel, "the largest … in the West Indies", which offered a premier vantage point "to see with comfort all the beauties of the coast and inland scenery Barbados affords".[64] Popular excursions included a visit on the Barbados Railway, established in 1881, to the coastal hamlet of Bathsheba in the parish of St. Joseph on the windward side of the island (fig. 12). Visitors

experienced thrilling vistas of the rugged coastline, “where the rocks, worn by the tremendous surf, take fantastic shapes”, while marvelling at the sloping inland hills “thickly studded with fruit trees” and “variously tinted foliage” of giant ficus, citrofolia, cabbage palm trees, and mahogany trees.[65] Fields of sugar cane, windmills, and labourers were relegated to staffage in these touring itineraries in favour of a roving exploration of rocky coast, sandy shore, and luxuriant forest.

Figure 12

The settlement of Bathsheba on the east coast of Barbados, circa 1890. Digital image courtesy of Popperfoto / Getty Images (all rights reserved).

In Victorian travel literature on the British West Indies, a combination of beach and jungle provides the basis for a tropical variant of the picturesque, which exploited what was perceived as the “exotic, strange, or grandiose forms” of the Caribbean’s equatorial environment.[66] Like its European counterpart, the tropical picturesque was an aesthetic of construction. As Krista Thompson has suggested, it relied upon the “tropicalization”, or re-wilding, of the existing landscape—in the case of Barbados, one largely denuded by plantations—through the staging of a “premodern” wilderness of crystalline waters and verdant vegetation facilitated by modern forms of leisure.[67] Beyond re-envisioning the Caribbean landscape, the tropical picturesque was fabricated, as Mimi Sheller has demonstrated, around a “bodily experience of immersion” in the tropics—from an exhilarating train ride to Bathsheba to a boating excursion around the vibrant marine bower of Bridgetown harbour.[68] In illustrated books and photographs, the built environment and

landscape design, island tours and amusements, coast and gully were composed into a sensorially enticing "natural assemblage" for the tourist-consumer.

Shell mosaics and other local fancywork assembled from distinctive natural materials not only embodied this constructed island picturesque in microcosm, but, through their circulation in the tourist market, also operated as object emissaries of the tropical Caribbean. A number of extant sailors' valentines bear an 1880s trade label for Belgrave's Curiosity Shop, the retail enterprise of brown natural history dealers Benjamin Hinds Belgrave and George Gordon Belgrave, which operated in various Bridgetown locations from 1878 to 1925.[69] The Belgrave brothers were descendants of Jacob Belgrave II, a planter of European and African descent with significant land holdings, who was a prominent advocate in the struggle for the civil rights of previously enslaved Barbadians.[70] Members of an exclusive minority of the island population, they represented, as George McLellan, a writer for the Barbados *Weekly Argosy*, observed, a "growing force" of influential brown urban retailers, which in the late nineteenth century was "mak[ing] itself felt in the colony's industrial and commercial life".[71]

According to the Curiosity Shop's trade label, the Belgraves' merchandise was divided into two departments: "Marine Specimens and Native Manufactures in Fancy Work".[72] Among the former department, "conchology [was] well represented in all its wide and charming domains, from the beautiful Argonauto argo to the green pea shell", the latter (*Smaragdia viridis*) a staple in shell mosaics.[73] Other curiosities included cured snakes and taxidermied alligators from British Guiana, which suggest that the Belgraves procured products through an inter-island trade network.[74] The shop's fancywork encompassed "alluring assortments of pink and white coral, fish scale, shell and sea-fern bouquets, mimosa seed (*Mimosa pudica*) and Spanish bayonet (*Yucca aloifolia*), tortoiseshell jewellery, native dolls, and lacebark (*Lagetta lagetto*) work in d'oyleys [*sic*], fans, [and] lamp shades".[75] A brochure provides insight into the prices of such stock and the clientele who purchased it. While "deep sea shells [*sic*] and sea specimens of over one hundred varieties" were available "from twenty dollars a collection", shell-work wreaths, necklaces, chains, and brooches sold from 25 cents to one

dollar each, as well as by the dozen.[76] Testimonials from Albert Gunther, keeper of the Zoological Department of the British Museum (1886) and travellers from the yacht *Sunrise* (RYS, 1889), and the yacht *Kothailes* (RMYC, 1899) attest to the quality and value of the Belgraves' wares.

Emphasised as a product of local industry through the term "native manufacture", the Curiosity Shop's fancywork symbolised mobilising Barbadian labour patterns, in contrast to the island's legacy of indentured labour. Those within the colonial establishment saw it as a vehicle for the economic improvement of working-class Barbadian women, as signalled by the establishment of a Women's Self-Help Association in Bridgetown to "assist native women in disposing of their work".[77] In *The Negro in the New World* (1910), colonial administrator Harry Johnston suggests that such fancywork provided evidence of local manufacturers' contribution to the developing West Indian tourism economy:

> *Special attention … should be called to their taste and skill in ornamental work, made out of brightly coloured sea-shells, fish-scales, feathers, wood, dried plants, which is sold to eager tourists … I know it is the fashion to laugh at such arts at present as not to be dissociated from the 'forties and 'fifties of the last century; but … this modern work in Barbados … instances a remarkable taste in colour and design which possesses an originality of its own.*[78]

While island fancywork was symbolic of Barbadian productivity in the post-emancipation era, for Victorian tastemakers it was reminiscent of the formulaic shelled trinkets hawked at British seaside resorts. Commenting on the "well-known Bahama shell-work" observed while visiting Nassau, Lady Anna Brassey offered mitigated praise:

> *The shells of which it is composed are exquisitely beautiful when closely examined; and the taste and dexterity displayed in arranging them are worthy of much praise. I could not, however, think the effect when completed really good; for it reminded me somewhat painfully of similar works of "art" produced at Ramsgate and Margate.*[79]

Decrying commercial production, Brassey's judgement suggests that colonial shell-work was assessed according to the same class pretensions as its British counterpart even if its quality of manufacture blurred racial boundaries.

Both as collections of shells and exemplars of Barbadian fancywork, the Curiosity Shop's sailors' valentines straddled its two departments of marine specimens and native manufactures. Several double-shell mosaics are visible lining the bottom shelf of a display cabinet in an early twentieth-century postcard of the shop's interior by Otto Leder (fig. 13).[80]{-80) Uniform in design, their serial display suggests mass production under the purview of the Belgraves. Advertising "brass bound despatch boxes", the dealers had access to the labour and materials required to construct the octagonal cases of sailors' valentines, while their wide-ranging stock of fancywork suggests that they organised the in-house production of shell-work or commissioned it from local vendors.[81] The partitioned arrangement of valentines not only was conducive to a division of labour consonant with a cottage industry model, but also facilitated customisation based on consumer demand.

Figure 13

George Gordon Belgrave (photographer) and Otto Leder (publisher), Curiosity Shop Barbados, 1904. Postcard, 8.9 × 14 cm. Private collection. Digital image courtesy of Molly Duggins (all rights reserved).

As Leder's postcard reveals, the industrial production of such "native manufactures" was enveloped in an exotic display typical of island curio shops which, as Johnston observed, boasted jumbled arrangements of "ornaments from

fish-scales … stuffed toads and strange fish".[82] Highlighting the variety and scope of merchandise through its juxtaposition, this dynamic layout, as Barbara Stafford has argued, prompted "mental locomotion", encouraging the visitor to "fill in the gaps" between objects to compose a material narrative of tropicality.[83] In this regard, the Curiosity Shop's botanical "native manufactures" provided a foil to the shell-work on exhibit. Embellished with feathery fern collages evoking an arboreal wilderness, doilies made from the gauzy bark of the *Lagetta lagetto* tree with borders crafted from the sheath of the mountain cabbage palm presented a consumable material jungle as a counterpart to the embodied seascapes of sailors' valentines on offer (fig. 14).[84]

Figure 14

Doily, late nineteenth century, lacebark (Lagetta lagetto), mountain cabbage palm, ferns, Barbados and Jamaica, 19.37 × 19.37 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E.741.1955). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

As a vehicle for object narrative building, this haptic form of display reflects the exhibition strategies of the British West Indies at international exhibitions in the late nineteenth century.[85] Featuring trophies of rum casks, stands of sugar cane, variegated woods, an alligator, a shark, fish, turtle shells, hummingbirds, corals,

shells, shell-work, oil paintings, and photographs of island scenery offset by hanging hammocks and an abundance of tropical verdure—palm fronds, mahogany plants, ferns, aloes, and grass plumes—the West Indian Courts at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London in 1886 sought to transport metropolitan visitors to the tropics (fig. 15). As the exhibition commentary suggests, these displays were conceived as holistic installations that demonstrated organisers' "attempted blending of form and colour to constitute a picture".[86] Through this integrative design, the West Indian exhibits were transformed into a three-dimensional tropical landscape consonant with the "natural assemblages" of the Caribbean in travel literature.

Figure 15

Frank Watkins, *The Barbados Section—Colonial and Indian Exhibition: British Guiana, West Indies, and British Honduras*, 1886, engraving, in Illustrated London News, 25 September 1886. Digital image courtesy of Look and Learn / Illustrated Papers Collection / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).

The Belgraves, who sent submissions to represent Barbados at international exhibitions, condensed such tropicalisation into the intimate interactive space of their shop.[87] They encapsulated the exhibitionary convention of displaying colonial natural resources and their refinement into products through their

merchandise. Sailors' valentines represent this exhibitionary impulse in miniature. The use of mahogany and cedar in the cases of mosaics reflected the colonial interest in economic botany and the practice of cultivating exotic species through craftsmanship, much as the Dixson collector chest showcased Australian woods.[88] As a collection of shells, mosaics highlighted the variety of Caribbean conchology and, by extension, the marine resources of the island. As a form of fancywork produced by "native" labour, they signified the refinement of marine resources through local industry.

By the early twentieth century, this colonial narrative of resource exploitation and refinement was subsumed in the economic redefinition of the British West Indies as a tourist destination. A photograph of the Curiosity Shop's facade in about 1900, taken by Charles Blackburne, reveals a doorway flanked by two shark carcasses opening onto the thoroughfare of Broad Street (fig. 16). These specimens evoked the bounty of sport fishing on the island and signalled to the visitor the shop's status as an attraction in its own right. Not only did the Belgraves have a tourist bureau on the premises that offered a list of "Favourite Drives for Picturesque Scenery", but its "wonderful stock", as advertised in *The Red Book of the West Indies* (1922), presented "an eloquent and instructive object lesson in the strange shapes and designs by which Nature expresses itself in its various kingdoms of life".[89] In promotional literature, an inspection of the Curiosity Shop was presented as a rational amusement much as Victorian public aquariums, museums, and exhibitions filled with varied displays of natural products were marketed as a form of ameliorating leisure.

Figure 16

Charles W. Blackburne, *Cooper's Photo Studio and Belgrave's Curiosity Shop, Bridgetown, Barbados*, 1897–1912, photo-negative-glass plate, 10 × 12.5 × 0.2 cm. International Center of Photography (2013.81.16). Digital image courtesy of International Center of Photography, Gift of John Noll in honour of Richard Waldmann (all rights reserved).

As mobile advertisements for a modern Barbados, sailors' valentines collapsed the island's immersive marine amusements of swimming, fishing, and beachcombing into a tangible memorial of a tropical holiday. Crafted from shells, which along with corals and plates of colonial algae make up the sand of Caribbean beaches, they physically embodied the Barbadian foreshore, offering a picturesque materialisation of the seaside.[90] Their wave-like, rippling encrusted surfaces, encased by a porthole-like frame, promised a portal to what Stark describes as the "rare, and never-to-be-forgotten panorama" of the coast with "groves of cocoa-nut palms, bent gracefully over the water's edge … and stretches of gleaming sand".[91] Through their circulation and display, they conveyed a miniature marine wonderland on mantles, walls, and whatnots across the Atlantic.

Contemporary Sailors' Valentines

With their commercial manufacture dwindling by the 1920s, Barbadian shell mosaics were subsumed into British and North American nautical histories as a form of sailors' folk art. Associated with Victorian print culture that romanticised

the mariner's return, they were implicated in a gift economy of objects handcrafted at sea along with scrimshaw, knotwork, and woolwork, which was reinforced through their inclusion in visual whaling narratives at maritime museums and historic seaports.[92] This sentimental commodification sparked a revival of the art form along the eastern coast of the United States and Canada beginning in the 1960s, with self-taught practitioners looking to Barbadian shell mosaics in public and private collections as models.[93]

Fuelled in part by the publication of Judith Hughes's research on their commercial origin and the rise of Caribbean scholarship on the cultural legacy of plantation society, shell mosaic production was revitalised in Barbados in the 1970s. Dedicated local practitioners such as Sterlin Blackman and Douglas Blackburne have reimagined traditional designs using novel materials including dyed sand and hairspray, while engaging with the Afro-Barbadian heritage of the medium.[94] Their work is featured in a documentary series on sailors' valentines produced by the National Cultural Foundation of Barbados in 2022, which not only analyses the art form as a resourceful product of plantation society, but also, through its aesthetic immersion in contemporary Barbadian art and design, suggests that it has become a vibrant cultural emblem of national identity.[95]

Today the creation of sailors' valentines flourishes on a global scale. Conchology and shell art fairs, culminating in the annual Sanibel Shell Show, provide an international platform for artists from the Caribbean, United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Japan to display their work competitively. Professional practitioners offer courses and workshops dedicated to shell art, while social media abounds with do-it-yourself tutorials for the interested amateur, the results of which are hawked on online marketplaces such as Etsy. Beyond these educational and commercial initiatives, sailor's valentines, along with other genres of souvenir shell-work—such as that produced by the Aboriginal Australian community of La Perouse, New South Wales—have infiltrated the fine arts sector through exhibitions that assess the work of contemporary artists experimenting with the creative potential of the medium.[96] These exhibitions not only highlight the cultural multiplicity inherent in the historical production and form of such shell-work, but

also suggest the elision of ideologies segregating the categories of art and craft, professional and amateur.

The exhibition *Exquisite Shells: The Art of Sailors' Valentines*, curated by Sarah Johnson and held at the Cahoon Museum of American Art in 2019, established parallels between shell art, sculpture, and assemblage, integrating mosaics into the visual language of artistic discourse.[97] Through an analysis of the work of Ralph Cahoon and Bernard Woodman, Judy Dinnick, Sandi Blanda, Grace Madeira, and Hatsue Iimuro, Johnson formulated a set of aesthetic criteria for contemporary sailors' valentines distinguished by both an adherence to tradition and formal innovation. A global range of shells, some of which were never known to historical practitioners, are employed not only as a sculptural medium for their colour, form, and texture, but also as a commentary on the ethical consumption and environmental imperatives of marine ecosystems. Whereas designs are informed by the radial symmetry and floral motifs of historical valentines, through the inclusion of non-traditional materials such as paintings, scrimshaw, plastics, and found objects, compositions morph into saturated multimedia assemblages. Themes extend beyond the maritime and sentimental to engage with cultural exchange, corporate capitalism, community activism, and entangled ecologies.

Combining kaleidoscopic shell patterns with artisanal parquetry, lacquer, leather, and weaving practices, Hatsue Iimuro, whose work was showcased in the Cahoon Museum of Art exhibition, explores the centrality of the sea in Japanese culture, from its reference in folklore and food to national history and natural disaster as manifested in the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami.[98] In *Mosaic World* (2019), Iimuro enlists the sea urchin as a defining motif, playing with its fivefold symmetry to create a concentric design boldly arranged over two registers (fig. 17). From a double urchin shell centrepiece, delicately perforated with a diamond-cutter, buoyant floral shell chains of cherry blossoms, dahlias, and roses radiate outwards to the edges of the composition like spokes from the hub of a wheel, atop a sixteen-point star pattern of coquina clams, rose cup tellins, and purple urchin spines. The angular intricacy of these patterned segments reverberates with the tessellated woodwork of the frame, which was produced in collaboration with parquetry artist

Koichi Tsuyuki (fig. 18). Employing the *Hakone* technique, developed in the Edo period and featuring timber native to Mount Hakone such as cherry, dogwood, ash, mulberry, and camphor, Tsuyuki has embellished the frame with geometric configurations of razor-thin veneers, distinctive of this artisanal practice, which echo the valentine's internal mosaic of shells.[99] Through this imbricated "mosaic world", Iimuro invokes the creolisation of sailor's valentines as a metaphor for global cultural interchange.

Figure 17

Hatsue Iimuro, *Mosaic World*, 2019, Hakone parquetry, green sea urchin, purple sea urchin, coquina shells, rose cup shells, olive rice shells, spirula, and sea urchin spines, 55.9 × 55.9 × 7.62 cm. Digital image courtesy of the artist (all rights reserved). Photograph by Toshiki Asakawa, 2109.

Figure 18

Hatsue Iimuro in collaboration with Koichi Tsuyuki, *Mosaic World* (detail), 2019, Hakone parquetry, green sea urchin, purple sea urchin, coquina shells, rose cup shells, olive rice shells, spirula, and sea urchin spines, 55.9 × 55.9 × 7.62 cm. Digital image courtesy of the artist (all rights reserved). Photograph by Toshiki Asakawa.

The prominent use of sea urchins in Iimuro's work, moreover, speaks not only to her Japanese heritage, but also to her mindfulness of marine ecological crises in the Anthropocene. Culinary delicacies in both Japan and Barbados, sea urchins are increasingly at risk from overfishing in East Asia and the Caribbean.[100] By

showcasing urchin shells and spines in her compositions, Iimuro highlights the depletion of such marine resources. In addition to marine invertebrates, the bivalves, gastropods, and cephalopods that produce the shells used in sailors' valentines are also under threat from human consumption and from ocean acidification, warming, and pollution. The legacy of such environmental devastation is linked to the industrial age that generated Victorian shell-work; Marcus Samuel's London-based shell manufactory, for instance, developed into the international Shell Company, which commissioned the first tankers designed for the bulk transportation of kerosene and oil, initiating one of the most substantial environmental impact narratives in recent history.[101]

In response to our imperilled marine ecosystems, Brooklyn-based artist Duke Riley, who cites Ralph Cahoon as a formative influence, fashions sailors' valentines from refuse gleaned from New York waterways. His large-scale, candy-coloured mosaics transgress art/craft dichotomies in their exuberant amalgamation of discarded plastics, which lure the viewer in through their enticing consumer design that resonates with the commercial objectives of Barbadian shell mosaics.[102] In *I'm Delicious, Come On Get Your Money's Worth* (2020), a riotous, synthetic jumble of mauve tampon applicator tubes, mint dental pics, and a blue spectrum of lighters arranged in a geometric vocabulary of fan, crescent, and lozenge shapes is interspersed with oyster, mussel, and pecten accents that reference the diminishing number of shells Riley encounters while beachcombing (fig. 19). His mosaics are craftivist by design; in confronting the viewer with the convenience-driven consumer choices that are polluting the seas with a matrix of microplastics, Riley seeks to incite incremental change with all the swagger of a buccaneering pirate.[103]

Figure 19

Duke Riley, *I'm Delicious, Come on Get Your Money's Worth*, 2020, found plastic trash, mahogany, 170.1 × 170.1 cm. Digital image courtesy of Duke Riley Studio / Photograph by Danny Perez (all rights reserved).

Characterised by a visual and hermeneutic density, Riley and Iimuro's contemporary valentines commune with the multivalence of shell mosaics produced in Victorian Barbados. As creole objects, sailors' valentines represent a fusion of European and West African scientific and spiritual, aesthetic, and cultural practices of shell collection and display that responded to the unique economic and environmental factors of plantation society. Derived from geometric shell drawers in eighteenth-century collector's cabinets, their arrangements of Caribbean shells resonate with the visual strategy of comparison through juxtaposition grounded in rational principles of beauty. Beyond their conchological appeal, through their laborious assemblage as a form of women's shell-work, sailors' valentines are encoded with the gendered virtues of refinement and industry that were appropriated by the colonial administration to demonstrate the potential of human and natural resources in the post-emancipation British West Indies. Driven by stylistic innovation and commercial enterprise, they were deployed by black and brown Barbadians as a vehicle for economic and cultural agency in island tourism

anchored in the construction of tropicality that capitalised on the Victorian romance with the sea.

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Footnotes

1. As Tim Barringer and Wayne Modest have demonstrated, the colloquial term "brown" was used in the Victorian British West Indies to identify people of mixed African and European heritage. See Barringer and Modest,

"Introduction", in *Victorian Jamaica*, ed. Tim Barringer and Wayne Modest (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 28.

2. A number of these mosaics were exhibited in the museum's exhibition *A Gift from a Friend: Sailor's Valentines* (1985), curated by Susan Williams.
3. The following works were consulted for shell identification: Lesley Sutty, *Seashells of the Caribbean* (London: Macmillan, 1990), and José H. Leal, "Southwest Florida Shells", Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum, https://www.shellmuseum.org/shell-guide.
4. Brandywine Museum of Art, "Treasures from the Sea: Sailors' Valentines and Shellwork", 27 May–23 July 2006, https://www.tfaoi.org/aa/6aa/6aa266.htm; Diana Bittel, "Sailor's Valentines", *Incollect*, 9 October 2013, https://www.incollect.com/articles/sailor-s-valentines; Sarah Johnson, *Exquisite Shells: The Art of Sailors' Valentines* (Cotuit, MA: Cahoon Museum of American Art, 2019); Daisy Allsup, "Why We're All Falling for Sailors' Valentines", *Financial Times*, 27 May 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/a6a82521-38e9-40e9-89b3-e10c4fd0f0df.
5. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 5.
6. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 3–4.
7. See, for instance, Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), and Maria Nugent, "An Economy of Shells: A Brief History of La Perouse Aboriginal Women's Shell-Work and Its Markets, 1880–2010", in *Indigenous Participation in Australian Economies II: Historical Engagements and Current Enterprises*, edited by Natasha Fijn et al., 211–27 (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2012).

8. Beth Fowkes Tobin, *The Duchess's Shells: Natural History Collecting in the Age of Cook's Voyages* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 9.
9. Judith C. Hughes, "On Sailors' Valentines", *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* 29, no. 1 (November 1961): 3–6.
10. Valentines range from 8 to 15 inches in diameter (20.3 to 38.1 cm). See Strong National Museum of Play, valentines 74.702, 74.637, 74.638, 74.640, 74.645, and 74.649.
11. Judith Hughes, "The Most Common Used Shells", n.d., Judith C. Hughes Papers, Joseph Downs Collection, col. 875, box 5, folder 5, Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library; John Fondas, *Sailors' Valentines* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002), 13. Shells typically used include *Callista eucymata*, *Chiton tuberculatis*, *Columbella mercatoria*, *Cypraea spurca aricularis*, *Fissurella barbadensis*, *Janthina janthina*, *Mitra barbadensis*, *Olivella floriala*, *Smaragdia viridis*, *Spirula spirula*, *Strigilla mirabilis*, *Strigilla pseudocarnaria*, *Tellina radiata*, *Trivia pedicula*, *Daphnella lymneiformis*, and those from the family *Naticidae*.
12. James H. Stark, *Stark's History and Guide to Barbados and the Caribbee Islands* (Boston: Photo-Electrotype, 1893), 1–2.
13. Sutty, *Seashells of the Caribbean*, 5.
14. Griffith Hughes, *The Natural History of Barbados* (London, 1750), 7. Hughes was the rector of St. Lucy parish in Barbados in the 1730s.
15. Jerome Handler, "Life Histories of Enslaved Africans in Barbados", *Slavery and Abolition* 19, no. 1 (1998): 129.
16. Anthony Richards, "Sailor's Valentine: A Barbadian Innovation", episode 2, National Cultural Foundation of Barbados, YouTube video, 1:24, uploaded 21 August 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8YCADqm7wo; George H. H. McLellan, *Some Phases of Barbados Life: Tropical Scenes and Studies* (Demerara: Argosy, 1909), 7.
17. John M. Cross, "Victorian Furniture in Jamaica", in *Victorian Jamaica*, ed. Tim Barringer and Wayne Modest, 421.

18. Griffith Hughes, *Natural History*, 267.
19. Richards, "Sailor's Valentine", 2:00, 5:13; Babatunde Lawal, "'One's Head Is One's Creator': The Interconnectedness of Word and Image in Yoruba Art", in *Speaking of Objects: African Art at the Art Institute of Chicago*, ed. Constantine Petridis (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2020), 191.
20. See, for instance, a Koro *Ngambak* (crest mask), early to mid-twentieth century, cat. 48, in Petridis, *Speaking of Objects*, 122, and an Ebira Ekuecici masquerade, twentieth century, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979.206.23. Raphael Chijioke Njoku, *West African Masking Traditions and Diaspora Masquerade Carnivals: History, Memory, and Transnationalism* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2020), 109.
21. Judith Carney, "African Traditional Plant Knowledge in Circum-Caribbean Region", *Journal of Ethnobiology* 23, no. 2 (2003): 179; Susan A. McClure, "Parallel Usage of Medicinal Plants by Africans and Their Caribbean Descendants", *Economic Botany* 36, no. 3 (1982): 293, 295.
22. . Griffith Hughes, *Natural History*, 15–16; Stark, *Stark's History and Guide*, 165.
23. Quoted in Jerome Handler, "Slave Medicine and Obeah in Barbados, circa 1650 to 1834", *New West Indian Guide* 74, no. 1/2 (2000): 78; Carney, "African Traditional Plant Knowledge", 171.
24. Judith Hughes, "On Sailors' Valentines", 6. The collections of the Kendall Whaling Museum have since been transferred to the New Bedford Whaling Museum.
25. See "Public Meeting", *Barbadian*, Wednesday, 15 May 1833, n.s., 843, transcribed in Neville Connell, Director of Barbados Museum and Historical Society, to Mrs. Kendall, 29 September 1959, Judith C. Hughes Papers, col. 875, box 5, folder 6.
26. Jerome Handler, *The Unappropriated People: Freedmen in the Slave Society of Barbados* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974),

85–95.

27. Bonham Richardson, *Panama Money in Barbados, 1900–1920* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 3.
28. "Address of the Free Coloured and Free Black Inhabitants of Bridgetown", 2 April 1834, quoted in Handler, *The Unappropriated People*, 122.
29. Handler, *The Unappropriated People*, 125–28.
30. Molly Duggins, "'Native Manufactures': Sailors' Valentines and the Caribbean Curio Trade", in *Sea Currents in Nineteenth-Century Art, Science and Culture*, ed. Kathleen Davidson and Molly Duggins (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 83–87.
31. Joseph Moxley, *A West Indian Sanatorium and Guide Book to Barbados* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1886), 97–101; Stark, *Stark's History and Guide*, 124–25.
32. Sutty, *Seashells of the Caribbean*, 3; Nelson Marshall, *Understanding the Eastern Caribbean and the Antilles* (St. Michaels, MD: Th'Anchorage, 1992), 48–51.
33. Judith Hughes, "How They Were Made", n.d., Judith C. Hughes Papers, col. 875, box 5, folder 5.
34. Levina Buoncuore Urbino and Henry Day, *Art Recreations* (Boston: J. E. Tilton, 1861), 299.
35. For mosaics with dated inscriptions, see Strong National Museum of Play, valentine 74.696, in Fondas, *Sailors' Valentines*, 72–73, 82–83; Grace Madeira, "Antique Sailors' Valentines", in *Sailors' Valentines: Their Journey through Time*, ed. Grace Madeira et al. (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2006), 21.
36. Richard Malley, "Captain Warren's 'Souvenir from Barbados'", *Mariners' Museum Journal* 14 (1987–88): 11; Mariners' Museum, object file, 1987.07.01.
37. Griffith Hughes, *Natural History*, 269.

38. Emma Spary, "Scientific Symmetries", *History of Science* 42, no. 1 (2004): 5, 16. For more on conchylomania and its intersection with rococo design, see Jessica Priebe, *François Boucher and the Art of Collecting in Eighteenth-Century France* (London: Routledge, 2021).
39. Rainer Willmann and Jes Rust, "The Zoology and Botany in Albertus Seba's Thesaurus", in *Albertus Seba: Cabinet of Natural Curiosities*, ed. Irmgard Musch, Jes Rust, and Rainer Willmann (Cologne: Taschen, 2005), 26.
40. Elizabeth Ellis, *Rare & Curious: The Secret History of Governor Macquarie's Collectors' Chest* (Carlton, Vic.: Miegunyah Press, 2010), 39–43, 235.
41. Hannah Robertson, *The Young Ladies School of Arts: Containing a Great Many Practical Receipts* (Edinburgh: Wal. Ruddiman Junior, 1766), 172–73.
42. . Amanda Vickery, "The Theory and Practice of Female Accomplishment", in *Mrs. Delany and Her Circle*, ed. Mark Laird and Alicia Weisberg-Roberts (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 106–7.
43. Griffith Hughes, *Natural History*, 267.
44. Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 182–87.
45. Griffith Hughes, *Natural History*, 267–68.
46. Arianne Fennetaux, "Female Crafts: Women and Bricolage in Late Georgian Britain, 1750–1820", in *Women and Things, 1750–1950*, ed. Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 92.
47. *Elegant Arts for Ladies* (London: Ward, Lock, 1856), 16. "From the West Indies, shells have been brought in such abundance, and [are] of so little interest, that a strong prejudice exists against them. The collections received from thence are made by the natives, and calculated to please mere novices only". John Mawe, *The Voyager's Companion, or Shell Collector's Pilot* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown and Greene, 1825), 14.

48. Robert Henriques, *Bearsted: A Biography of Marcus Samuel, First Viscount Bearsted, and Founder of "Shell" Transport and Trading Company* (New York: Viking Press, 1960), 14–15, 22, 31.
49. Henry Gardiner Adams, *Beautiful Shells: Their Nature, Structure and Uses* (London: Groombridge and Sons, 1855), xiv, xv.
50. K. B. Mathes, *Illustrated Catalogue of Fancy Shell and Wood Novelties: For Souvenir Goods, Advertising Purposes, etc*. (Batavia, NY: The Firm, 1905), unpaginated, Brian Sutton-Smith Library and Archives of Play, Strong National Museum of Play.
51. See Mathes, *Illustrated Catalogue*; Carole Smyth and Richard Smyth, *Neptune's Treasures: A Study and Value Guide* (Huntington, NY: Carole Smyth Antiques, 1998).
52. Mathes, *Illustrated Catalogue*, 9.
53. Charles Kingsley, *Glaucus, or The Wonders of the Shore* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 55–56.
54. Silvia Granata, "'Let Us Hasten to the Beach': Victorian Tourism and Seaside Collecting", *LIT: Literary Interpretation Theory* 27, no. 2 (2016): 102, 103.
55. Judith Hamera, *Parlor Ponds: The Cultural Work of the American Home Aquarium, 1850–1970* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 1–2, 17.
56. Philip Henry Gosse, *A Naturalist's Rambles on the Devonshire Coast* (London: John Van Voorst, 1853), 46–47.
57. Adams, *Beautiful Shells*, xv.
58. Mathes, *Illustrated Catalogue*, 13.
59. Adams, *Beautiful Shells*, xv.
60. John Leighton, *London Out of Town, or The Adventures of the Browns at the Seaside* (London: David Bogue, 1847), xiii.
61. *Elegant Arts*, 16; Urbino and Day, *Art Recreations*, 299.

62. "Life in Barbados", *Kansas Agitator*, 21 October 1904, 3. For more on rising American influence in the Caribbean at the turn of the twentieth century, see Nicola Foote, ed., *The Caribbean History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2013), 199.

63. Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003), 36.

64. Stark, *Stark's History and Guide*, 57.

65. Stark, *Stark's History and Guide*, 120; McLellan, *Some Phases of Barbados Life*, 77.

66. Krista Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.

67. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*, 6.

68. Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean*, 38.

69. "B. H. Belgrave, Dealer in Marine Specimens and Native Manufactures in Fancywork", trade label, circa 1880. For an example of a valentine featuring Belgrave's label, see New Bedford Whaling Museum, valentine 00.223.4, which is illustrated in Judith Hughes, "On Sailors' Valentines", 6, figure 4.

70. Jacob Belgrave II (1770–1828) campaigned for the right for freedmen to give testimony against a white person in a court of law and to vote. By 1816, his family owned three of the largest plantations in the southern parishes of St. Philip and Christ Church, with at least 243 acres and 130 slaves. See Handler, *The Unappropriated People*, 121; Robert Morris, "Progenitors and Coloured Elite Families: Case Studies of the Belgraves, Collymores and Cummins", *Journal of the Barbados Museum and Historical Society* 47 (2001): 61.

71. McLellan, *Some Phases of Barbados Life*, 51; Henderson Carter, "Resisting Hegemony: Black Entrepreneurship in Colonial Barbados, 1900–1966", *Business and Economic History On-line* 14 (2016): 5, 9, https://thebhc.org/sites/default/files/Carter_BHC%202016_Schwantes_FINAL_0.pdf.

72. “B. H. Belgrave”, trade label, circa 1880.

73. Allister Macmillan, ed., *The Red Book of the West Indies* (London: W. H. & L. Collingridge, 1922), 383.

74. Letter from Connell to Hughes, 8 August 1959, Judith C. Hughes Papers, col. 875, box 5, folder 6.

75. Macmillan, *The Red Book*, 383.

76. *Belgrave’s Curiosity Shop*, sales brochure, n.d., Judith C. Hughes Papers, col. 875, box 5, folder 6. The brochure is reproduced in Ann Wetherald-Treadway Schutt, “History”, in *Sailors’ Valentines: Their Journey through Time*, 10.

77. The Bridgetown Women’s Self-Help Association is described in Grace Sheldon, “Across the Caribbean”, *New York Times*, 26 April 1896, 27.

78. Harry Hamilton Johnston, *The Negro in the New World* (London: Methuen, 1910), 226.

79. Anna Brassey, *In the Trades, the Tropics and the Roaring Forties* (London: Longmans, Green, 1885), 347–48.

80. See also Stark, *Stark’s History and Guide*, 178, which includes a photoprint of the Curiosity Shop’s interior.

81. *Belgrave’s Curiosity Shop*, sales brochure.

82. Johnston, *The Negro in the New World*, 226; Rodney Harrison, “Consuming Colonialism: Curio Dealers’ Catalogues, Souvenir Objects and Indigenous Agency in Oceania”, in *Unpacking the Collection: Networks of Material and Social Agency in the Museum*, ed. Sarah Byrne et al. (New York: Springer, 2011), 55–82.

83. Barbara Stafford, *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 33–34, 74–75.

84. For more on Caribbean lacebark, see Steeve O. Buckbridge, *African Lace-Bark in the Caribbean: The Construction of Race, Class and Gender* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

85. Wayne Modest, "'A Period of Exhibitions': World's Fairs, Museums and the Laboring Black Body in Jamaica", in *Victorian Jamaica*, ed. Barringer and Modest, 529.
86. Edward Reinach, *Jamaica at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition* (London: Spottiswoode, 1886), vii–viii, x. See also "The Colonial and Indian Exhibition", *Supplement to the Art Journal* 48 (December 1886): 28.
87. Their products made up part of the Barbados section of the West Indian and Atlantic Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924. See Tom August, "The West Indies Play Wembley", *New West Indian Guide* 66, nos. 3/4 (1992): 197.
88. Mark Nesbit, "Botany in Victorian Jamaica", in *Victorian Jamaica*, ed. Barringer and Modest, 221–24.
89. Macmillan, *The Red Book*, 383.
90. Marshall, *Understanding the Eastern Caribbean*, 12.
91. Stark, *Stark's History and Guide*, 56.
92. See, for example, N. Currier's *The Sailor's Return*, 1847, hand-coloured lithograph, Library of Congress; and the ongoing exhibition *Sailor Made: Folk Art of the Sea* at Mystic Seaport Museum.
93. Pamela Boynton, *Contemporary Sailors' Valentines: Romance Revisited* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer, 2016).
94. Sterlin L. Blackman, *Riri and Kiki: The Story of Barbados and the Sailors' Valentines* (Blackman, 2020).
95. National Cultural Foundation, "Sailor's Valentine: A Barbadian Innovation", episodes 1–4, 21 August 2022.
96. See, for instance, Maria Nugent, "Displaying the Decorative: An Exhibition History of La Perouse Aboriginal Women's Shellwork", *reCollections* 7, no. 2
(2012), https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/volume_7_number_2/papers/displaying_the
97. Johnson, *Exquisite Shells*.

98. Hatsue Iimuro, *Sailors' Valentines: Japanese Sailors' Valentine World*, trans. Yumiko Sato (Tokyo: Seizando-Shoten, 2016), 8–26. These artisanal practices include *Hakone* parquetry; *Koshu-Inden*, or lacquered deerskin leather; *urushi* lacquer; *maki-e*, a form of lacquer sprinkled with gold or silver powder; and *tatami-beri*, a cloth used for binding the edge of tatami grass mats.
99. Pierre Ramond, *Masters of Marquetry* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001), 83.
100. McLellan, *Some Phases of Barbados Life*, 8; Marshall, *Understanding the Eastern Caribbean*, 59.
101. The SS *Murex*—named in reference to Samuel's beginnings as a shell merchant—embarked on its maiden voyage from Batumi to Bangkok in 1892. The success of this venture led to the establishment in 1897 of Shell Transport and Trading Company.
102. Duke Riley, "*Death to the Living: Long Live Trash!*", 2022, Brooklyn Museum of Art, video, 7:01, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/duke_riley.
103. Melena Ryzik, "Duke Riley: Grand Master Trash", *New York Times*, 16 June 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/16/arts/design/duke-riley-artist-brooklyn-museum-trash.html.

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