

## A nostalgic shell game

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How's this for bragging rights?

Bill Jordan made Martha Stewart gasp, then coo with pleasure (and he wasn't even in the same room with her).

But his work was, and for someone as crafty as Miz Martha, that's more than enough.

Jordan's work, you see, is nothing if not gasp-inducing, with its exquisite materials, meticulous workmanship and elegantly antique aesthetic.

The fact that those materials -- mostly calcium carbonate and a little protein -- abound underfoot on Southwest Florida's beaches makes what he does with them all the more extraordinary.

Jordan's shell art -- dioramas, sailor's valentines and pocket watch pendants -- has won him prizes and trophies as well as the aforementioned chance to dazzle La Stewart.

Certainly, he's not the only person around here who's glued together some pretty shells and called it art, but in the case of his sailor's valentines, Jordan is also keeping a historical tradition alive.

Made entirely of shells arranged and fastened into elaborate shapes within octagonal hardwood boxes, the valentines became popular with seafarers in the 1800s. Sailors would buy them mostly in the Caribbean (they didn't make them themselves) to bring home to their sweethearts.

Several antique examples are on display at the Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum on Sanibel, along with contemporary examples.

"They're just so very beautiful, so well crafted, so romantic" said Monmouth, N.J. resident Meg Avery, who was on the island earlier this month for a family reunion. "How come you never gave me anything like that?" she asked her husband, Jack, with a mock pout.

Probably because Jack hasn't had a few hundred hours to spend mastering the art, as Jordan has. ("If I kept track of the time it takes to do one of these, I probably wouldn't do it again," he mutters.)

Nor is it likely Avery owns the thousands and thousands and thousands of rainbow-hued shells that line Jordan's studio walls in myriad clear plastic boxes. And for sure, he doesn't have the arsenal of handmade, custom-rigged tools -- a wood-handled pin, curved-tip soldering irons, precision sea urchin spine snips, bottle-cap glue dispensers -- that the ingenious Yankee has invented to make the process easier.

Originally from Marshfield, Mass., a coastal town south of Boston, Jordan has always loved working with wood. He literally got his start as a woodsman cutting trees in the New England forests for homes and moved through a series of jobs, most recently in the door department of the now-closed Reilly Bros. in east Fort Myers, from which he retired.

He started working with shells about 15 years ago and began handmaking the octagonal hardwood cases that house sailor's valentines using many of the same woods used in the 19th century. Then he started making tiny shell mosaics in the antique metal cases that once housed pocket watches as well as tiny dioramas encased in glass.

"It's addicting," Jordan says, leaning back in an old desk chair in his sunny studio, a room in his 1920s Edison Park home. "I'm hooked on what I do," he says, adding that his days often don't end until after midnight.

In 2002, he decided to enter some of his work in the prestigious Sanibel Shell Show and Fair and walked away with first prize ribbons as well as the trophy for best first-time exhibit.

"That was my coming-out party," Jordan says in his chowder-thick accent.

It was at a last year's shell fair that his work caught the eye of Martha Stewart's director of crafts, Hannah Milman. Jordan had won first place in a new category, traditional sailor's valentines and Milman brought examples of his work to Stewart's attention and she featured it, along with that of a few other shellcrafters, in July.

And it was then that Stewart uttered her famous Jordan-inspired gasp, when Milman handed her some of his work.

"Who made this gorgeous one?" Stewart asks. "Just look at these. And look at that," she gushed. "So charming." (Though the show will likely re-air (they often do), the segment is available online: [tinyurl.com/2kraz9](http://tinyurl.com/2kraz9).)

Following his recent successes, Jordan made a step-by-step instructional DVD about 1800's sailor's valentine that he sells from his Web site: [sailors-valentine.com](http://sailors-valentine.com).

Is he worried that showing others how to do what he does will put him out of a job? Nah. He grins, then says, "It's important to me to perpetuate the art."

For his part, Jordan seems remarkably calm and composed for someone who's dazzled Martha.

"I'm a perfectionist," he says. "I keep working at something until I get it just the way I want it.

"And I'm still working."

For more information

\*Bill Jordan's Web site, [www.sailors-valentine.com](http://www.sailors-valentine.com), includes numerous examples of his art, links to other shell Web sites, information on his DVD and more.

\*See other sailor's valentines at the Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily at 3075 Sanibel-Captiva Road, Sanibel Island. Admission is free to children 4 and younger, \$4 ages 5-16 and \$7 for 17 and older. The museum's Web site offers one-per-family free admission coupons for kids through age 10. Call 395-2233 or visit [shellmuseum.org](http://shellmuseum.org).

\*71st Annual Sanibel Shell Fair is March 6, 7, 8, 2008 at the Sanibel Community Center, 2173 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel. Call 472-2155 or online: [sanibelcommunityhouse.com/ShellFair.htm](http://sanibelcommunityhouse.com/ShellFair.htm)

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