

New England's coastlines and seafaring history inspired me to introduce my fifth-grade art students to the beauty of Sailors' Valentines, a kind of seashell art. In the 19th century, people were very interested in nature, and nature crafts and collections, and during this time, sailors brought the "valentines" home to their wives, girlfriends, mothers and sisters.

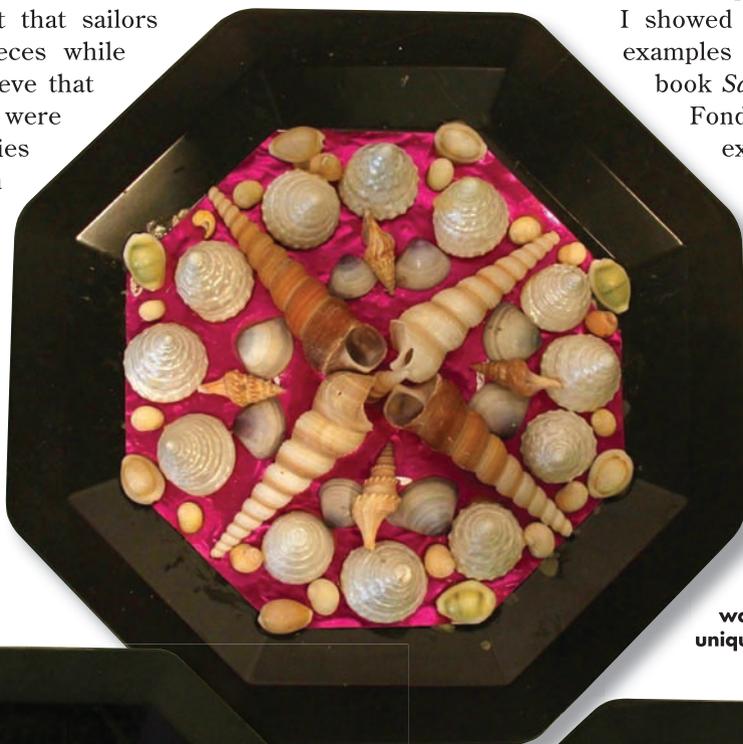
Historians once thought that sailors made these decorative pieces while aboard ships, but now believe that most Sailors' Valentines were made on the West Indies island of Barbados between 1830–80, where the native people created and sold them to American and European mariners.

**THE TRADITIONAL SHAPE OF A SAILORS' VALENTINE** is octagonal. They were often made in double-

sided wooden boxes with glass coverings. For our purposes, I purchased 7- and 10-inch octagon-shaped paper plates from an online party supply store. You could create your own octagon base out of mat board, but I discovered through the creative process that the larger shape requires more materials and time to fill the prescribed space, so you may want to consider this for planning purposes.

I showed students excellent early examples that can be found in the book *Sailors' Valentines*, by John Fondas (Rizzoli; 2002). I explained that shell designs were patterned, not randomly placed, and were often geometric or floral. Sometimes a photograph was placed in the center or messages were spelled out in tiny shells.

Sea shells can be gathered from sources



One of the things students discovered during this project was that they could make unique and meaningful designs.



# Sailors' Valentines

Exploring 19th-Century Crafts *by Emily Moll*

as varied as walks along the beach, or online catalogs, dollar stores and cast-off collections from thrift shops. Students selected a precut colored foil panel that they glued to the base of the octagon shape. This allowed for the first opportunity for student self-selection as related to a personalized shell collage. We then discussed the shape, size and color relationships of the natural sea forms, and their importance to our world's oceans. I shared the identifying names of each shell and the region of their habitat when possible.

**THE FIRST SEVERAL CLASSES EMPHASIZED** the intent to explore student designs and revisions of the creative Sailor Valentine compositions. The early shell designs were patterned, so I stressed the need for thoughtful composition that emphasized student choice as related to color relationships, texture, symmetry and placement.



This lesson is a great way to help students understand balance, contrast, earth tones and shape along with the added challenge of how to fit objects within the geometric shape. I asked that they select their favorite shells and to find others that go with that family of shells.

Students discovered that they could make unique and meaningful designs. I overheard students asking each other "Does this look good?" "Should I add more?" I encouraged students to look at their peers' designs and provide compliments as each of us has different idea of what is beautiful.

When students felt truly satisfied with their designs, I provided them with wood glue to dip each shell into and carefully place within the traditional octagon shape.

**WHEN THE SAILORS' VALENTINES WERE DISPLAYED,** our school community was intrigued and enthusiastically embraced them. One adult viewer shared that he had never heard of them before the exhibit, and was grateful to learn about Sailors' Valentines.

This is a project I will do again and increase collaboration with classroom teachers when geometry is introduced, as there are many aspects of shape and design embedded in the art lesson that relate to this math concept. ■

*Emily Moll is the visual arts specialist at Harriet Beecher Stowe Elementary School in Brunswick, Maine.*



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### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

**Upper-elementary students will ...**

- gain knowledge about a 19th-century art form with a rich history.
- create their own interpretation of a Sailors' Valentine.
- demonstrate proper care for and use of materials, tools and equipment.

### NATIONAL ART STANDARDS

- **CREATING:** Combine ideas to generate an innovative idea for art-making; demonstrate quality craftsmanship through care for and use of materials, tools and equipment.
- **RESPONDING:** Understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning. Compare one's own interpretation of a work of art with the interpretation of others.

### MATERIALS

- 7- and 9-inch octagonal paper plates (or precut matboard)
- Tacky glue and/or wood glue
- Precut colored foil octagon shapes
- Tacky glue and or wood glue
- Seashells (from beach, dollar stores, thrift shops or craft supply stores)