

SEAGLASSWEAR™ & SEASTONEWEAR™

Jewelry from the sea by valerie gates

**Brown**  
Alumni Magazine ONLINE



(Erik Gould)

## Recycled Jewels

**Two alumnae find new uses for old beads and glass shards.**

*By Emily Gold Boutilier*

To teach her daughters the basics of math, Diane Krivit Katzman '82 cut apart her grandmother's old jewelry four years ago and began stringing beads. Little did she know she was also engineering a career change. Photographer and graphic designer Valerie Gates '88 entered the jewelry business in a similarly accidental manner: having inherited her aunt's sea glass collection, she made a few bracelets and necklaces as mementos. Soon, both women say, people started asking, "Where did you buy that jewelry?"

Today Katzman's antique-beaded pieces sell in 250 stores, as far away as Korea and Brazil. Her jewelry is available at Saks Fifth Avenue, the American Craft Museum, and in the Neiman Marcus catalog. She has a full-time staff of twelve, three U.S. sales offices, and manufacturing contracts with factories in the Czech Republic and Thailand.

Gates's simple works of sea glass wrapped in sterling silver wire are now available in thirty galleries, jewelry stores, and museum shops, including the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago. She takes custom orders and makes every piece herself.

781-235-3480 [valerie@gatestudio.com](mailto:valerie@gatestudio.com) [www.gatestudio.com/seaglasswear](http://www.gatestudio.com/seaglasswear)

Katzman, who taught marketing at Washington University in St. Louis before she began stringing beads with her daughters, found herself learning fast as customer demand grew. “That month,” she says, “we started having traffic in my kitchen and dining room.” Soon after, Neiman Marcus invited her to do a trunk show, and before long Katzman had hired her kids’ Brownie troop leader, religious school teacher, and kindergarten aide. She creates five collections a year, each designed to coordinate with the hottest colors in women’s clothing. She designs all her pieces herself. “They’re quirky and they’re sentimental,” she says.

Katzman buys beads from all over—cloisonné from China, porcelain from Japan, sterling silver from Bali. Some come from antiques dealers, but she also likes to scour old bead stores for overlooked treasures. “That’s what will appeal to me—something that’s been ignored for decades,” she says. Still, she needs enough of any given bead to ensure that department stores can pick up the line. “It’s hard to get, say, fifty antique hearts from 1890 to look the same,” she says.

Stringing antique beads is a way to interpret old relics, says Katzman, something she learned to do as an American civilization concentrator at Brown: “Every bead tells a story.”

(Erik Gould)

For Gates, too, jewelry design is a way to connect with the past. “I just love the sense of time,” she says. “And I love that somebody throws this into the ocean, which is not a nice thing to do, and then the ocean returns it as a jewel.” She uses only natural sea glass, and she refuses to drill, cut, or otherwise alter it. “I keep it in the form that the ocean made,” says Gates. Her colors are mostly limited to the greens, browns, and whites of soda and beer bottles. But she has a lot of bluish-green glass, too, which she thinks comes from faded Coca Cola bottles, as well as lavender pieces, which she suspects are World War II-era white glass that reacted with sunlight.

Gates’s aunt amassed enough sea glass to fill three eight-gallon buckets during forty years of dog walks on the beach in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Gates has used about a quarter of the collection since she started making jewelry a year ago. To augment her supply, she has offered to take other people’s sea glass in exchange for jewelry. Curiously, in looking over such collections, Gates has found that Maine glass is unlike that found on Cape Cod. The pieces are chunkier, she says, and also rougher and less round.

But is there real value in jewelry made from old glass? The answer to that question may lie in the market: Gates says a mother just ordered a sea-green set to wear to her son’s wedding.

For more information, see [dianekatzman.com](http://dianekatzman.com) and [gatestudio.com/seaglasswear](http://gatestudio.com/seaglasswear).

***Emily Gold Boutilier is the BAM’s senior writer.***