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Jewelry from the sea by valerie gates

THE CAPE CODDER ARTS & LIFESTYLE



A sea glass bracelet designed by Valerie Gates

SEA GLASS COMBINES FROSTED BEAUTY WITH HISTORY

By Stephanie Foster / sfoster@cnc.com

Friday, August 29, 2003

If you go...

What: Sea Glass Saturday: Book signing, jewelry trunk show, sea glass identification and slide talk

Where: Cape Cod Museum of Natural History, 869 Route 6A, Brewster

When: Saturday, Aug. 30

Information: Debra Davies, 508-896-3867, ext. 122.

Who hasn't stopped in their tracks on the beach when they've spotted a piece of sea glass? Finding a piece of smoky cobalt blue glass is like discovering a sapphire from the sea. Misty turquoise glass seems to be spun out of the ocean itself. These are treasures to be collected and cherished, whether they are scattered on a coffee table by the ocean or enshrined in a glass jar on a mantel.

Two women have gone beyond collecting sea glass. Carole Lambert of Camden, Maine, has written a book called "The Sea Glass Chronicles," which examines sea glass and explores its historical origin. Woods Hole resident Valerie Gates has created SeaGlassWear jewelry.

Both women will be at the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History on Saturday, Aug. 30, when the museum presents "Sea Glass Saturday." Lambert will host a booksigning and Gates will present a jewelry

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trunk show, both followed by a lecture and slide presentation.

"Fragments of glass and ceramic wash up on beaches everywhere, offering clues about natural history as well as documenting events throughout civilization," notes Lambert, who once lived in Wellfleet. She has been able to trace shards of glass back to their origin and has collected sea glass from beaches all over the world. Her discoveries include Worcestershire Sauce bottle stoppers that have survived decades of abrasive sand and rolling seas and an early 1900s Lalique crystal perfume stopper. Her research also includes shipwrecks. For her it brings together history, archaeology, science and adventure. To say nothing of romance, pirates and storms.

Gates designs one-of-a-kind sea glass jewelry combined with sterling silver as a tribute to an aunt who left Gates her life-long collection of sea glass. The five 8-gallon buckets of sea glass collected in the Woods Hole area over 40 years will last her a few years but she's worried about what she will do after that. Sea glass has been disappearing with the advent of litter laws, and aluminum and plastic have become more popular.

To shore up her supply, Gates wrote to the local newspaper and asked for collectors to contact her. She then traded her jewelry for more raw material. A story in the Boston Globe also put her in touch with collectors. When she tried to find sea glass at the beach this summer, she found none. So she relies on old collections that people bring to her. "I have a network of people who like to collect it. A lot of people have visited me from as far away as Maine. My supply is pretty good now."

Gates is hard-pressed to say which is her most prized color. "They're all pretty for different reasons. The dark blue is hard to find. But I like the blue green. It comes from old Coca Cola bottles. Lavender is an old color. It dates back to World War II. It's white that turns lavender in the sun."

Gates wears different colors of sea glass for different seasons but says people don't think of that when they buy it. "Everyone has their own favorite color, depending on their own coloring." The museum carries her jewelry in their gift shop and it can also be found at the Kendall Art Gallery in Wellfleet.

Much of the sea glass on the market today comes from North Carolina factories and for aficionados it's easy to tell the difference. Just feel it. If it's smooth, it's a man-made fake. True sea glass is made from pitted bits of drinking glasses, containers and beer bottles lost or tossed at sea.

Some sea glass lovers have tried to create more sea glass by dumping bottles overboard to seed the sea. Glass is a combination of lime, soda and sand so it doesn't pollute. But it will take decades for glass to lose its jagged edges and wash ashore. Unfortunately, no one can predict where.

Meanwhile, Gates is looking forward to Sea Glass Saturday. "It's even more poignant after reading about the museum closing for the winter. It will be one of their last hurrah events and I hope a lot of people show up to support them."