

# Gems from the Sea

WELLESLEY JEWELRY DESIGNER CREATES UNIQUE PIECES FROM SEA GLASS

STORY & PHOTOS | BARBARA RIZZA MELLIN

Valerie Gates



Like pieces of the ocean frozen in time, shards of sea glass reflect all the colors of a day at the beach—

The clear, pale blue of a summer sky, deep blue-green of rising waves, frosted white of sea foam, golden browns of beach sand, and the subtle, soft grays, lavenders and turquoise of sea mist and ocean air.

Like slices of colored ice that never melt, these faded fragments, shaped by wind and water and worn smooth by years of tidal tumbling, are nature's gems: colorful, translucent and mysterious.

For forty years, Betty Gates of Woods Hole, walked along her Cape Cod beach and collected pieces of sea glass, perhaps holding them up to the light, fascinated by their subtle beauty. Her niece, Valerie Gates of Wellesley, inherited both her aunt's vast collection of beach glass and her appreciation of nature's splendor in simple things.

When Valerie received the five 8-gallon containers full of beach glass, —she estimates over 25000 pieces— she wasn't exactly sure what she would do with them. Her family was confident that Valerie, being the artistic one, would do something creative. And they were right.

Valerie has turned her aunt's collection into a line of exquisite jewelry, simple and sophisticated, called SeaGlassWare.

She combines the sand-etched glass with sterling silver to create earrings, bracelets, rings, necklaces and cufflinks. In just the few years since 2002, when she started her new career as a jewelry maker,

Valerie has introduced three distinct lines, which can now be found online, in galleries, and in museum gift shops, including Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, The Phoenix Art Museum, The Art Institute of Chicago, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Smithsonian Institute and numerous others.

The Nauset Collection was her first line and consists of beach glass wrapped in silver wire. Delicate threads of silver compliment the glass

without obscuring it, so that light can pass through the pieces providing that wonderful translucent quality one associates with sea glass. A popular item from this line is the charm bracelet that features five multicolored, silver-wrapped pieces attached to a chain-link bracelet that allows the owner or gallery to add personal charms. The most difficult items to make, says Gates, are earrings since she needs two pieces of glass that match both in color tone and shape.

Gates uses only naturally formed shards, never cutting or manipulating the integrity of the glass. The irregularity of the shapes is part of their allure and marks the jewelry as original, hand-crafted, ocean-made works of art. Gates notes that because of modern anti-pollution laws on beaches and out at sea, very little beach glass is available today. Some jewelry makers are using "man-made" glass, cut and tumbled for the market. Gates' sea glass, on the other hand, has been formed by decades of natural ocean washing. Each of her sea-tossed pieces is the real thing: organic and unique.

Gates' second line of jewelry is called SeaStoneWear and is made from the smooth, flat beach stones washed up along the shore. Like the beach glass, the stones conjure images of the ocean. Smooth to the touch, gently rounded by the sea and sand, and flattened by the continuous push and pull of the tides, the stones offer a quiet, meditative quality to the jewelry.



Her most recent line, the third, introduced in 2005 is called The Nobska Collection after the lighthouse she grew up next to at Woods Hole. In this line, Gates sets the sea glass in a silver bezel that serves to anchor each piece to its backing, outline its distinctive shape, and showoff its rich color. Gates admits the rings from this collection are her favorite pieces. For each ring, a glass shard is bezel-set on a wide wrap of silver band that can be adjusted to fit any size. A former fashion photographer, Gates has an eye for style. She believes every woman should have a "statement piece." It's not necessary to wear a lot of jewelry, she says, "but one piece should stand out." She thinks her "chunky, glass rings" fit that bill.

A rectangular necklace from The Nobska Collection is particularly

distinctive. Three harmonious pieces of glass are bezel-set—as if wrapped in a silver ribbon—on a sterling rectangle about two inches long. The pendant hangs from a 16-inch chain. Gate offers this piece in Spring colors—soft greens, ivory and pale blues, Autumn colors—browns and golds, and in sea stones, the flat, gray, irregular stones resting on the silver ground resembling a personal Zen garden.

There's a sense of mystery, says Gates, that permeates each piece of sea glass. She wonders where they all originated. Did they come from a shipwreck or something tossed into the sea ages ago? The unanswered questions further add to their appeal. Each piece is one of kind. Some are rounded; others have squared, worn edges.

Sifting through the mounds of glass fragments looking for similar shapes and colors is a time-consuming but necessary and pleasurable process, and Gates has grouped many of the shards by color for her reference. She has also begun a collection of heart-shapes. These naturally formed pieces come in all colors and sizes and may eventually end up in a special Valentine line of jewelry.

It's interesting, too, to trace the colors to their origins. Gates explains that the blue-greens are most likely old Coca Cola bottles and fairly rare. The browns and Kelly greens are probably beer bottles, while the olive greens come mostly from wine bottles. The deep, rich cobalt blues started out as old medicine bottles and are quite rare, as is the color red. White, of course, comes from a variety of bottles and glass, once clear and now frosted by time. Lavender, says Gates, is extremely

distinctive. Three harmonious pieces of glass are bezel-set—as if wrapped in a silver ribbon—on a sterling rectangle about two inches long. The pendant hangs from a 16-inch chain. Gate offers this piece in Spring colors—soft greens, ivory and pale blues, Autumn colors—browns and golds, and in sea stones, the flat, gray, irregular stones resting on the silver ground resembling a personal Zen garden.

There's a sense of mystery, says Gates, that permeates each piece of sea glass. She wonders where they all originated. Did they come from a shipwreck or something tossed into the sea ages ago? The unanswered questions further add to their appeal. Each piece is one of kind. Some are rounded; others have squared, worn edges.

Sifting through the mounds of glass fragments looking for similar shapes and colors is a time-consuming but necessary and pleasurable process, and Gates has grouped many of the shards by color for her reference. She has also begun a collection of heart-shapes. These naturally formed pieces come in all colors and sizes and may eventually end up in a special Valentine line of jewelry.

It's interesting, too, to trace the colors to their origins. Gates explains that the blue-greens are most likely old Coca Cola bottles and fairly rare. The browns and Kelly greens are probably beer bottles, while the olive greens come mostly from wine bottles. The deep, rich cobalt blues started out as old medicine bottles and are quite rare, as is the color red. White, of course, comes from a variety of bottles and glass, once clear and now frosted by time. Lavender, says Gates, is extremely

and usually comes from WWII glass with a chemical compound no longer used that turned pale purple in the sun.

Gates journey to jewelry maker has taken a few turns along the way. After graduating from Brown University, she was a professional photographer for years, shooting fashion spreads in Milan and celebrities in Los Angeles. She then turned to directing music videos and later became an Art Director for Channel 4 (CBS/WBZ Boston.) Seven years ago, she left the corporate world to spend more time with her two children and to concentrate on her own design studio, which she runs with her husband Barry Friedman from their home in Wellesley.

The Gates Studio focuses on branding, websites, and packaging for both profit and non-profit clients. While her interests have always been in the visual arts, Gates had no idea, five years ago, that she would become a successful, art jewelry maker. She likes the idea that she and nature are recycling something that was once discarded and converting it into something desirable.

Her aunt's legacy has left her with an unexpected creative outlet and a redirected career. "This jewelry line is my way," says Gates, "of honoring my aunt and her connection to the sea." With SeaGlassWear, we have the opportunity to keep a little part of that sea with us at all times, to actually wear a sample of the ocean's awesome power—to hold a day at the beach in the palm of our hands.

You can find Valerie Gates' jewelry creations on her website: [www.seaglasswear.com](http://www.seaglasswear.com).



WWW.SEAGLASSWEAR.COM