

# WHERE WE LIVE

[oursouthbay.com/where-we-live](http://oursouthbay.com/where-we-live)

The People, Arts and Culture of the South Bay



## SHELL GAME

Artist Marjorie Stafford holds a few treasures from the sea on a walk near her home in Redondo Beach. Her incredible collages, made from shells, coral and other oceanic materials, make her one of the most in-demand home accessory designers in the South Bay.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIRI BERTING





## NATURAL TALENT

Artist Marjorie Stafford blends her interior design instincts with a love of the sea when creating her wonderful, one-of-a-kind home accessories.

WRITTEN BY CHRISTY HOBART • PHOTOGRAPHED BY SIRI BERTING

"I pick up shells nobody else picks up," says Marjorie Stafford, a Redondo Beach artist, as she dips her hand into a container filled with white treasures she found along South Bay beaches. Stafford uses those shells—however plain or imperfect—in ways nobody else could. Her one-of-a-kind wreaths, mirrors, sconces and chandeliers are works of art, embellished with

wonders from the natural world and infused with subtle and unexpected flourish. It's not surprising that top interior designers, including Michael Smith, use her pieces to add a bit of chic to their projects.

Stafford's sconces and chandeliers are created through an intricate process that begins at a flea market or an antiques mall (her favorites

are in the city of Orange). "It's a more interesting process to salvage an old piece that's been discarded or is collecting dust," she says, rather than starting with something new.

She's often drawn to pieces with fanciful or extravagant Victorian bases. "I love things in this style because they're trying to look expensive," she explains, laughing at the audacity of the ornate floral forms. She rewires the old fixtures, primes and paints them, then gives them new life by adding shells and vintage crystals. She embellishes with flourish but edits just as well. Her work strikes a balance of being eye-catching but not flashy, fabulous but never too much.

Stafford, who holds a master's degree in fine arts, spends time reflecting on the meaning of inspiration and imagination. Creativity arises, she believes, "in a fleeting moment of thought that must be trusted."

Her philosophy has guided her through the years of designing fine custom jewelry for Tiffany & Co., among others, and in her work as an interior designer. Believe in your intuition, she says, and inspiration will flow. "Coming up with ideas hasn't always been easy for me," she notes, but now inspiration floods over her. "I'm confronted with the more sophisticated struggle of deciding which idea to choose."

Like her lighting projects, Stafford's wreaths and mirrors are personal and inventive. She generally starts with a pre-made base of simple grape vine branches or an interesting vintage frame, then decorates it with precious items from the sea—some of which are found, others purchased. Iridescent abalone, puffy anemone, bold starfish, frothy sea fans and even seaweed find their way into her work. A wreath made for a bride might feature pearly white or opalescent blush-pink shells and a flowing satin ribbon. A mirror that's destined for a home's entryway may be bolder in design, relying on deep red coral for impact. A child's wreath might contain cleverly hidden objects—a green penny, perhaps, or a piece of sea glass or whimsical buttons.

Stafford's command of materials, her innate sense of elegance and hard-earned skill come together in well-proportioned and balanced works. She credits a lifetime of paying attention to the world around her for her strong design sense. She is constantly attuned to her surroundings—and always has been.

As a child, she collected acorns on family trips because she noticed they were different from the acorns that fell near her Missouri home.



Marjorie skillfully putting the pieces together at her home studio.



Something as simple and elegant as a shell washed up on the beach could collectively help transform a frame, wreath or lighting fixture into a beautiful work of art.



A clump of tumbleweed, randomly covered in tiny white lights and hanging outside a restaurant in Florence, Italy, created a memory that's stuck with her for years. "I'm a visual idea collector," Stafford explains. "If I put my mind to one timeframe or a certain country," she says, "I remember everything."

She even remembers details from more than a decade ago, when she conceptualized and produced monthly window displays for Tiffany & Co.'s Boston boutique for six years straight. "Each one had to be drop-dead, knock-your-socks-off," she remembers. "The pressure was on." Her good humor carried her through.

She laughs as she thinks back to a series inspired by the sea, in which one of the four windows showcased a dramatic shipwreck scene. Expensive South Seas pearls were strewn about—and a Barbie leg was tossed in among the driftwood. "I wanted to know if anybody was really looking," she says mischievously.

If people really look at her current work, they will see dimension created by layered elements—several sheets of sea fans at the back, heavier shells in certain spots, more delicate shells placed elsewhere. They might notice a faint overlay of fine sparkle on coral, the iridescence of abalone, the spiky spines of a sea urchin shell from England. They'll see motion in the way shells and

driftwood sweep upward. Though the onlooker may not realize it, everything is there for a reason. Though it may have a whimsical air, nothing about Stafford's work is ever haphazard.

"I go through a serious process when I design something," she says. It all starts with a well-developed concept. Once that's clear in her mind, Stafford starts laying the elements out on her work table, drawing from bins filled with shells of all types. "I spend time thinking. I play around and narrow down my choices," she explains. She files off the rough edge of a piece of coral; she mixes custom colors to brighten or darken a spot of the arrangement; she searches for a smaller or smoother or rounder or more elongated shell. The editing process can last for up to several weeks. All of this is done before Stafford ever reaches for the glue.

But when she does get that glue out, a masterpiece is created. ●

*Marjorie Stafford's wreaths, light fixtures and mirrors can be found, when available, at A Summer Place in Manhattan Beach; The Malibu Colony Company in Malibu; Cottage Furnishings in Laguna Beach; and Bliss Home & Design in Corona del Mar.*

For commissioned pieces, contact Stafford via [marjoriestafforddesign.com](http://marjoriestafforddesign.com).