

SHELLMEN

Though its name is no indication, Swedish decorative sea art and design company Shellman is actually made up of two men. Mikael Hjärtsjö, who worked in advertising, and his stepson, Buster Eriksson, who was at Apple, both left their careers for the wonderful world of shells.

Though Mikael and Buster began making shell art just three years ago, the Shellman tradition has been alive for much longer. It started with Australian shell artist Paul Bruce, who worked side-by-side with his Dutch assistant Niels van Alphen for many years before passing away. Niels then brought his teachings and stock of shells back to Amsterdam, where he spent the next ten years as a successful shell artist.

When he decided to move on from shell art, Niels knew he needed someone to pass his skills down to. He remembered one particular Swedish client who he sold to in Amsterdam that was particularly interested and excited about the shells: Mikael.



He reached out to Mikael and Buster and asked if they'd be interested in keeping the shell tradition alive, and they agreed.

Mikael says the choice to change life courses and pursue this wholly new artistic journey didn't happen out of nowhere. When living in Stockholm, Mikael's family had a coastal summer house in the south of Sweden. Mikael collected shells and other sea-worn items on the coast and even made a few amateur pieces of shell art.

Mikael had a long and successful advertising career as a creative director running Scandinavian accounts at different agencies. Though he enjoyed the work, he really had been itching to do something tactile—he just didn't know what yet.

Similarly, Buster was pursuing a successful career at Apple, filling a number of creative positions in his ten years there, but felt he was in need of a change. He packed his essentials and started a two-and-a-half-year journey around the world. He spent his time exploring, deep sea diving, and discovering amazing beach life in different corners of the world. This time proved essential as a stepping stone for Buster. "I could never have gone straight from working at Apple to doing shell art."

After his chance encounter with Niels in May of 2018, along with the understanding that there

wasn't really a shell-art market in Scandinavia, Mikael knew he'd found his artistic calling. In that same summer, during a detour on a long hitchhiking trip from Marrakesh to India, Buster met up with Mikael at Niels' studio in Amsterdam. A few days before Buster was to set out on his journey again, he made the decision to stay. The two spent seven weeks in May and June of 2018 learning from Niels. It was an intense and rewarding experience, and eventually Niels gave them his approval to continue his tradition of shell art. Mikael and Buster were given Niels' stock of shells, and they set up a studio in Mikael's flat.

"As far as we know, we are the only professional shell artists of our kind in Scandinavia, along with skilled shell jewelers," Mikael says. "We know that this is not the end of the line. There is so much more to explore, and we're so excited at the possibilities." Their studio is open by appointment and they have a digital catalog with information and images of their nearly 100 works.

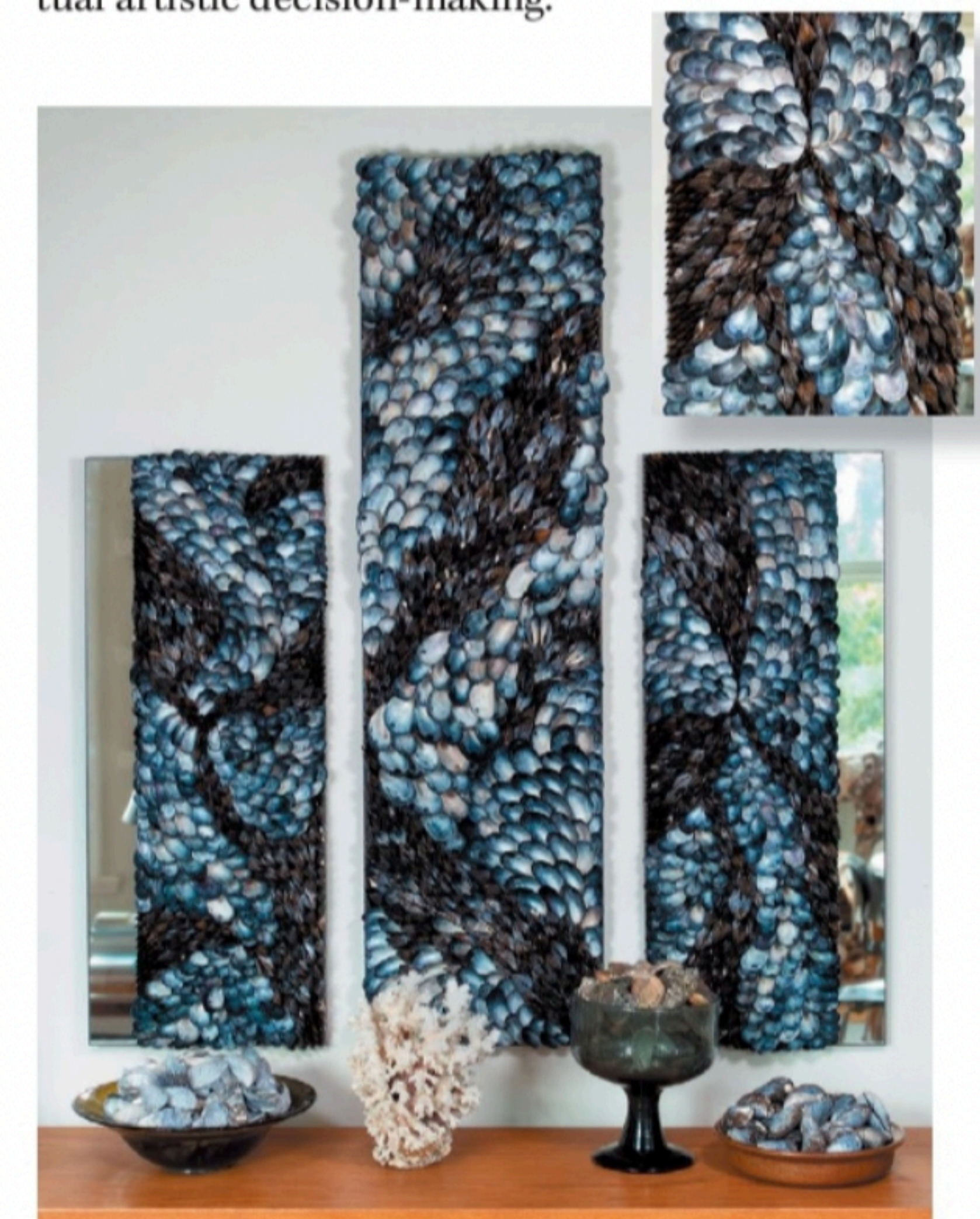
Though Buster and Mikael work as shell artists full-time now, they still make time for many hobbies. Buster is a true outdoorsman, traveling often, and currently in the process of building a camper van. He's also partway through renovating an 18th-century wooden house where their second studio is located.

Mikael is a passionate art collector, and visits galleries and museums often while traveling. He's also an avid fiction reader, movie lover, music fan, enjoys cooking delicious food and drinking great wine, and follows politics.

SHELLART

"Creating our art is a slow and often meditative process," Mikael says. "Both of us are very—some would say extremely—attentive to details. Fortunately, we both have a lot of patience. We share ideas with each other generously, and the number of ideas we have each day is far exceed the amount of time we have to realize them."

They have two separate processes on how they make art. The first is for free-form organic pieces, without constraints. After they choose a certain color nuance (white, medium, dark) and size, they'll work purely on flow, where each shell that they glue has been chosen based on their feelings. There's no sketches, no steps, nothing but instinctual artistic decision-making.



All photos courtesy of Shellman



With their patterned and planned work, they use a completely different process. This one involves more planning and preparation, and the actual assembly of the art feels more like repetitive work.

Mikael and Buster often work separately on their own pieces but are helpful to each other when one gets stuck. “Since we know each other so well we are our best supporters and worst critics,” says Mikael. Both Mikael and Buster love to keep a clean and orderly studio, and have a commitment to pushing themselves. “Good enough is not enough.” If the two ever make something they’re not particularly proud of, the hammer and chisel is in arm’s reach.

Mikael and Buster are both inspired by many different things, and always try and keep an open and positive mind about everything and anything the world presents them with. Some pieces are inspired by natural beauty, while just as many are inspired by anything from pop culture to space exploration to internet memes. Oftentimes the two will give their pieces a title that reflects a primary inspiration, which customers love. Some examples are “Black Holes,” “Dark Matter,” “Shadow Monster,” “Pink Frenzy,” “Autumn Walk,” and “Morning Glory.”

Mikael and Buster say that by the narrow sound between Sweden and Denmark where they live, lots of fascinating things wash ashore—including blue mussels, cockles, oysters, *Littorina litorea*, razor clams, and even sea stars. They’ve also found skeleton parts from birds, seals, porpoises, and cod fish. One of the more interesting items to wash ashore was a seven-million dollar shipment of cocaine, which was found not very far from the studio. “But, no, we didn’t find it,” they joke.



Close to their studio are two peninsulas, Bjäre and Kulla, tourist favorites with dramatic cliffs and sandy beaches. They’re where Ingmar Bergman’s 1957 classic *The Seventh Seal* was filmed. But the two say that they travel often across the entire Swedish west coast, which is a stretch of 250 miles with a beautiful mix of beaches, rocks, cliffs, and archipelagos.

Mikael enjoys the southern part of Sweden, with its delicious food and generous, hospitable people. There are lovely towns, amazing restaurants, gorgeous views, and a wide range of culture on display. Plus, they’re just an hour away from the Danish capital, Copenhagen.

If you visit the area, Shellman recommends the Louisiana Museum for its sheer architectural beauty, its stunning natural location on the water’s edge, and its amazing exhibitions of contemporary art. Visit Copenhagen for a big city experience, or head to the southernmost Swedish coast to see the south Baltic Sea and explore the picturesque coastline villages, old castles, and summer farmer’s markets. Though the country doesn’t play host to any “beach-related” organizations or events, Mikael says Sweden makes up for it by having incredible fresh seafood.

Mikael and Buster say there are too many restaurant and bar locations to list, but give them a call when you’re in Sweden and they’ll point you in the right direction.

SHELLTHEORY

Shellman says that of all the people who see their shell art for the first time, Scandinavian people are, almost without fail, the most impressed. Mikael and Buster initially were confused as to why their art has such a stronger impact on their countrymen, and why shell art traditions were so rich and storied in places like the UK, The Netherlands, France, Spain, and Italy.

Their theory: Sweden lacks a substantial colonial history. Many other big European countries had bustling ports with sea men and vessels constantly returning home. Many would return with collectibles and sea treasures from tropical beaches, including the well-known sailor’s valentines made in Barbados. In many ways, Shellman is in the extremely fortunate position of being the first in their country to display these incredible beautiful seashells. 🌟