



Small Worlds Around Us

By Lynn W. Watkins

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The Beauty of the Lace Murex Shell Seldom Seen

One can hardly examine a specimen of the lace murex shell without thinking of the similarity between these aquatic animals and the flower the poet spoke about—that "blossomed unseen, wasting its beauty where there was no one to admire."

Unseen, too, is the architectural beauty of this mollusk, buried as it is in the depths of the sea. A deep sea diver or a bottom-dredge often brings to the surface one or many of these shells, and we marvel at the handiwork of the Master Sculptor who fashioned this exquisite design, and the appropriateness of the common name, lace murex.

Common Shell

The murex is a common shell, found in just about every ocean of the world. It is ornamented with nodules, projections, spires and varices which cross one another. It is interlaced with whorls, and the exterior often is extended out a greater distance than such a small shell would seem to support.

Some have knobby horns delicately branched. The projections are in the shape of a comb, and called in Japanese waters the "Venus-comb." This one is a solidified filigree of limestone.

The murex shells are the ones gathered in great quantities by the ancient Phoenicians, who crushed the shells, soaked the little animals in salted water for several days, then boiled the resultant solution in lead kettles. By this method a dye was secured that, applied to wool fabric, imparted a rich, ruby color known as "royal purple."

Spirally Tapered

The murex shell, seldom over three inches in overall length, is spirally tapered at both ends. It is a univalve shell, usually with a highly colored opening, and with a satiny lining of deep pink.

The murex is carnivorous, and in some areas a menace to oyster beds. The murex has a long, slender tongue, called a radula, that can rasp a hole in the thickest oyster shell in a very short time. The body juices of the bivalve then become food for the murex.

In the spring, when the sea water warms sufficiently, a friendly group of female murex shells get together and lay their eggs, usually in a large yellow mass that resembles a large plateful of scrambled eggs.

The eggs are deposited in a tough, parchment-like material, the mass being several times larger than the combined weight of the several murex females that produce them.

Limestone Embroidery
The eggs, protected by the tough case, hatch into tiny little murex animals. Soon after birth each and every tiny mollusk will begin building about itself a limestone embroidery, a filigreed network of stony material like solidified lacework.

The lace murex shell is about the most sculptural of the mollusks. And, of course, it is destined ever to remain unseen in the depths of the sea.

Home of Travis Cross Entered by Burglars

Salem, Ore.—Thieves broke into the home of Travis Cross, Gov. Mark Hatfield's news secretary, over the week end, while the family was away. The only thing taken was a piggy bank containing \$1.30.

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