



ABOVE: Joseph Minton, ASID, created a tablescape of coral, orchids, sand and whimsical figures outdoors on his terrace balcony.

OPPOSITE: This chandelier isn't really coral, of course, but the iron creation from John Gregory Studios imparts a classic-modern flair.

SEA AND BE SEEN

Coral's timeless allure

BY LISA MARTIN
PHOTOS BY JOHN SMITH



It is a gift from the sea that has insinuated itself into fine homes for more than two centuries. Coral, alone as an eye-catching sculptural piece and in combination with seashells, makes a stirring statement in myriad interiors, from French to Asian to contemporary. "Coral and shells were popular motifs in 18th century Europe, then there was a resurgence of them in the 1940s, when

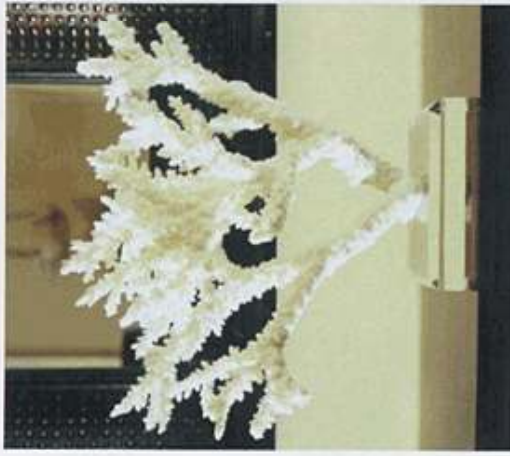
French decorators really started using a lot of marine themes," says John Gregory, owner of John Gregory Studios on Slocum Street. "And now it's back again." But just what is coral anyway? According to Heather Finlayson, a fossil expert at the Dallas Museum of Natural History, "A lot of people think corals are a plant because of the branches. But basically coral are multicellular animals that build an outer structure of calcium carbonate."



The creature's skeletal remains are what we know as coral, and researchers say some coral may be more than 500 million years old. Most are found in tropical waters. Today, many types of coral are all the more dear because they are classified as endangered. To satisfy consumer demand, for jewelry in particular, numerous reefs in the Caribbean, in Southeast Asia and throughout the Pacific have been pillaged. To decelerate the destruction of such fragile and essential ecosystems, the U.S. government placed restrictions on certain types of coral imports, including some of the red corals that come from China. As a result, "faux" coral, made of anything from foam to resin to painted wood, has become more popular.

Because of the purchasing bans on the real thing, all matter of antique coral (which is exempt) likewise has become pricier; rare, pristine pieces can cost hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars. Fortunately, they can pack a lot of style punch as well. Large pieces of coral can make a dramatic focal point on a tabletop or mantel or can sit on a bookshelf, as would a sumptuous piece of sculpture. "The freestanding coral is extremely popular right now," says Natalie Garza, manager of Ceylon et Cie on Market Center Boulevard. "We place them on acrylic bases for presentation; it

really makes the piece stand out." The acrylic bases lend the coral, which is rather delicate and fragile, stability as well. Corals come in myriad colors, from red and pink and soft orange to lavender, blue, black and white. The shapes vary significantly as well. The so-called "brain corals" resembles the outline of our gray matter. Mushroom corals look like an oversized version of their namesake. And the popular branch corals appear as if they came straight off of a cedar or an elm. "White and red are the most popular colors," says Gregory, who carries several antique corals in his shop. "I like the white because it looks so airy, light and ethereal." Part of their enduring appeal, Garza adds, is the way they look appropriate in a variety of settings: "Corals are so unique that they blend with any kind of décor. They can go with a Swedish piece, or something country French. A more modern setting is ideal as well. There's no limit to how you can use them." Increasingly, bits of coral are used in everything from flower arrangements (fresh or dried) to shell-encrusted boxes and mirror frames to accents on lampshades. Furthermore, coral candlesticks, real or faux, are a perfect embellishment for a spring- or summertime table.




Classic displays of coral, as shown in the John Gregory Studios showroom, are treasured for their timeless appeal.

Says Joseph Minton, ASID, of Fort Worth: "I love to use coral on a table, either the big pieces or piling together smaller pieces with seashells and placing orchids in with them."

Minton has collected coral for years. He's also been known to "invent" it. "I've taken twisted branches and painted them to look like coral," the designer explains. "It's wonderful for a centerpiece."

At Ceylon et Cie, Garza sells 75-year-old man-eating clam shells that measure from 23 to 26 inches, which are particularly enticing when filled with bits of coral and other shells. "It's a great look on a buffet or sideboard," she says.

Earlier this year, John Gregory created four faux-coral chandeliers for a charity ball at Longue Vue House and Gardens, a Classical Revival mansion in New Orleans. Each of the four chandeliers hung in a tent, a perfect reflection of the theme: Sentimental Journeys.

"Coral always look so fresh, however it's used," Gregory says. "And it really has for 200 years of decorating." 

Resources

John Gregory Studios: 214-741-9858
Joseph Minton, ASID: 817-332-3111
Thistles & Tumbleweed: 817-882-9700

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