



# **Spirals from the Sea: An Anthropological Look at Shells**

*Jane Fearer Safer, Frances McLaughlin Gill*

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**Spirals from the Sea: An Anthropological Look at Shells** Jane Fearer Safer, Frances McLaughlin Gill  
Shells have always held a mysterious fascination for people throughout the world. Since time immemorial, societies have perceived and used the protective coverings of the soft-bodied mollusk in many unique and mystical ways, transforming them into ritual objects, symbols, metaphors. *Spirals from the Sea*, based on research done for the American Museum of Natural History's Hall of Mollusks and Mankind, is an original and fascinating exploration of the ways mankind has used shells and what they have meant to various cultures, including Australian aborigines, Indians of the Americas, hill tribes of Southeast Asia, the Melanesians of the South Pacific, and numerous tribes of Africa. Anthropologist Jane Safer has established the significance of these objects within their specific cultures and discovered that, regardless of time and place, man has made use of shells in four distinct ways. As elements of daily life, they are naturally adaptable as containers, spoons, fishhooks, tools, shields, and decorative elements. As symbols of wealth, shells are second only to metal as the most common standard of value ever used. Cowrie shells have been used as money by more people in more parts of the world than any coin. As emblems of status, shells form a visual language that communicates something about its wearer and his place in society. Even today many Hindu women wear Chank shell bracelets as a symbol of marriage. As objects of ritual and myth, shells constitute an even stronger language, which gives form to the intangible. More than sixty full-color photographs of shell artifacts have been made especially for this volume by Frances McLaughlin Gill. These dramatic visual images of the objects made with shells relay as never before the magic and beauty created for thousands of years by unknown craftsmen. In addition, 45 black-and-white ethnographic photos showing how people actually used and wore the shells have been gathered from many sources.

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