

Fire Island Arts
by Cheryl Dunbar Kahlke

Vanessa F. Holden
Creative Designer, Entrepreneur, Importer, Snuff Bottle Dealer, Writer

Vanessa F. Holden says, in jest, that she is a “different species.” She certainly is an exceptional member of our species: extremely intelligent and interesting, and full of vision – in color and design, in ideas and innovations. She has lived an international life. In her mind, though, Fire Island is home.

“My father traveled a lot for his work, so it was one place where the whole family would be together... and I have happy memories of us... just spending quality time. I also am happiest around water, since, from the time I was a month old, I was literally on the beach [living in Seagate, a private beach community in Brooklyn], so being in that environment is an association with happy times. [They moved to Manhattan when she was six years old, and for one summer, there was no beach in her life. The following year her parents discovered Fair Harbor and bought their house.] It was similar to where I grew up and I could have the freedom I had before, riding my bike and playing with friends and not worrying about city traffic.” Even as a child, Vanessa recalled that “the Fire Island ferry always symbolized leaving civilization behind,” and the little red wagon symbolized Fire Island’s simpler lifestyle.

Vanessa recently was taking items for sale to *Corliss on the Bay*, an eclectic shop in Fair Harbor, and utilized the family wagon. It brought back memories “of all those years ago sitting out and peddling my wares... like most Fire Island kids.” Nowadays, instead of selling shells she collected and painted, Vanessa is offering sterling silver shells, some of which open as boxes, and are one to three inches long, “individually made by hand with painstakingly tooled intricate designs.” Vanessa is not the silversmith; rather she drafts up an idea, a Cambodian silversmith prepares a mock up (sample) for Vanessa to approve for quality and design, and the actual merchandise is then made in that country. With this system, she has found a way “to take a Western concept and blend it with an Eastern influence, like the seashells, to bring out the best of both cultures.”

Early this month the little red wagon came into play again when Vanessa was in the Saltaire Art Fair. “They didn’t have enough tables so again my wagon became part of the display: this time filled with pillows. Fire Island wagons are very versatile...”

The pillows are another of her innovations; she combines antique insets with modern silks to create one-of-a-kind art pieces of breathtaking beauty and history. That history for each inset is enclosed within the pillow’s zippered interior. Many have silver centerpieces from Sumatra from the early 1900s, “traditionally used to adorn the wedding bolster, which was piled high on the ceremonial wedding bed to show the wealth and lineage of the bride’s family.” Other pillows have antique embroidered fabric insets from the same time period.

The weaving of the silk itself is an art. She literally finds sources for her silks. Vanessa has become enamored of a wide assortment of silk scarves, which “are made using all natural vegetable dyes. This means that the colours [Vanessa uses Anglo-style spelling, due to her background] may vary with the seasons as there are different flowers at different times of year.” While she was involved with one project, other people began to contact her and she is now working with weavers in several countries. One group is comprised of older women teaching the younger generation the crafts so they don’t die out, which she finds “quite heartening.”

Among the most popular items at this year's Fire Island art fairs have been her raw silk two-tone scarves from Thailand, which are available in nearly every color imaginable. She displays them with another beach prop; they are attached along the edges of a beach umbrella.

Vanessa delights in color; she has a fine eye and a wonderful sense of color and how various colors are put together. Her earliest efforts were at about 2½ years old, using *Craypas* [oil pastels, a cross between the oiliness of crayons and the blendability of pastels]. "I would get up early, hop out of my crib, draw pictures and slip them under my parents' door. My mother could tell how early I got up by how many pictures had stacked up. She still has many of them as markers in cookbooks 'til this day."

Perhaps a dozen years ago Vanessa designed a line of t-shirts, including beach cover-ups and hand-painted shirts for babies and children, which she sold at Fair Harbor's Pine Walk and the Ocean Beach art fairs. Next, at a textile design company in New York City, she designed sportswear and swimwear prints. Currently this entrepreneur is involved in designing and importing items from eight Asian countries: Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, India, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Sometimes she re-invents the usage of Asian articles, such as the Indonesian boxed fabric sets which contain two parts of a sarong: the sarong itself, and the portion worn over the shoulder; they are now merchandised as a pair of vertical and horizontal table runners or, at holiday time, a table runner and a Christmas tree skirt.

From Indonesia, she imports harmony balls, so called because they make a melodious sound when shaken. Each approximately one-inch sterling orb has a stem adorned with a semi-precious stone, such as garnet, onyx, amethyst, or moonstone; each pendant comes with a silk cord so that it can be worn as necklace. As usual, the history of the piece accompanies each style: "Harmony or dream ball pendants are also known as Tibetan harmony spheres. Once meditation devices, they're now primarily used for therapeutic, relaxation or decorative purposes. Harmony balls are said to [have been] created by the Druids to bring one into communion with Nature, relieve stress and lower blood pressure. Others say Mexicans created them to soothe a crying baby." Vanessa has expanded the purpose by marketing them for "dogs, cats and people too." A New York City high-end dog and cat grooming and accessory shop called *Doggie Do and Pussy Cats Too!* has been selling a large quantity of harmony balls for pet collars.

Many of Vanessa F. Holden's items are available via email at vfholden@vfholden.com. They are also for sale in the United Nations Gift Shop. This is not surprising since this gifted woman attended UNIS (United Nations International School) from age ten, quickly becoming bilingual in English and French. She began Chinese at age twelve and is quite fluent. Her BA from Brown University was in Chinese Language and Literature, with a minor in Asian history, and her MBA from NYU was in marketing/international business.

With such a background, and the fact that her mother, Shelli Holden, is the only woman who ever formed a world-class collection of antique snuff bottles, Vanessa became involved in research for Shelli's beautifully made book, *Rivers and Mountains Far from the World: The Rachele R. Holden Collection, a Personal Commentary*, which was published in 1994. "My mother had long since wanted to write a book about her collection. It took two full years and the approach she took was to describe the myths and legends on the bottles, as well as the rebus, or play on words. I helped with the research and was subsequently hired by Sotheby's as their snuff bottle expert traveling between New York, Hong Kong and London for a year. I became intrigued because the bottles weren't just pretty items sitting on a shelf but rather the various design elements had a meaning I could relate to—they were given by the emperor as wedding

gifts, birthday gifts, births of children, for passing the imperial exams, promotions etc.” One example of a rebus is a magpie on a prunus (plum blossom) branch, symbolizing *happiness up to one’s eyebrow*.

In Vanessa F. Holden’s essay, “Chinese Snuff Bottles: A Microcosm of Chinese Art,” she explains the origin of snuff and snuff bottles, and there is a striking similarity to present-day New York. Perhaps snuff will become popular here because when tobacco and cigarette smoking were banned in China in the 17th century, the use of snuff began. “Snuff is comprised of finely ground tobacco combined with herbs, aromatics and spices... It was believed to add to one’s overall sense of well being.” Due to China’s humidity, snuff was stored in medicine bottles with removable stoppers of cork and an attached small ivory spoon. The process was to sniff, sneeze, and then smell the aromas. The artistic creation of snuff bottles began in that era.

Vanessa F. Holden is now also a snuff bottle dealer. “I deal with the private sector so I have represented global clients at auction both buying and selling.” Thus, worldwide, she has sourced, marketed, exhibited and cataloged snuff bottles, given and conducted seminars, and written articles in international art publications and trade journals.

All this fame, and still, on Fire Island, as Vanessa did as a child, *she sells seashells by the seashore*.