

Sea Schleps

Inspired by her love of sea glass, which she began collecting as a child on beaches across Long Island and Fire Island, local artist Hayley Di Rico creates imaginative artwork out of hand-picked sea glass, pottery, rocks, driftwood, and seashells she finds on her many trips to those same beaches today. She hopes her artwork brings “the tangible and intangible essence of nature” to those who see and experience it. Di Rico spoke with the *Fire Island Tide Newspaper* about her artwork, her Sea Schleps business, and rediscovering her personal creativity in a year full of unique challenges.

You can learn more about Di Rico and her artwork at www.seaschleps.com

Fire Island Tide: What made you start collecting sea glass?

Hayley Di Rico: When I was a child, I used to go to the beach all the time with my family. My uncle and my aunt were huge sea glass collectors. We would all go to the beach as a family, and my uncle would send all the cousins out in groups to go find sea glass. For every three pieces we would find, he would take one for his collection. So, I would build my collection, and he would build his. It was a family bonding activity that we would do every summer.

As a family, we would vacation on Fire Island in the summers. I have really great memories of us all having fun at the beach collecting shells and comparing things that we’d find and building our collections. Fire Island was one of the best places to beachcomb. I’d also go to Tobay, Jones Beach, and Robert Moses. I grew up in Brooklyn, and I would go to the beach at Coney Island and Brighton Beach and look for glass or shells there, too. Recently, I started beachcombing on the North Shore of Long Island and found really interesting and different pieces compared to the South Shore.

FIT: Did you continue collecting as an adult?

Di Rico: Life happened. I took a break from going to the beach regularly with my family. I went to college, got a job, got married, had children. This past year, during the pandemic, I stopped working, and it gave me time to go with my twins to the beach and start collecting again. I didn’t think I was going to find a lot of things when I went. I remember the first time I went back to the beach in June 2020. It was the



Sea Schleps artist, Hayley Di Rico, with her artwork at the Spring into Summer exhibit at The Local Market in Port Washington, NY

first time returning to beachcombing since my uncle passed away. I came home with about 85 pieces of glass from Jones Beach, which was basically unheard of. I also found a rock with my uncle’s initial painted on it. I saw it as a sign. So that really kickstarted my desire to start collecting again.

FIT: Can you talk about the kinds of things you find on your trips to the beach?

Di Rico: On the North Shore, I find a lot of sea pottery or ceramic pieces from old plates, bottles, or jugs. Some of them you could tell are older, because the patterns are antique or vintage. I go online to the sea glass community and research, or reach out to the Long Island Beachcombing Club and ask them for help. Some pieces I have been able to date to the 1800s, some earlier, some the 1900s. I find a lot of uranium glass, which is really rare. That was produced between the 1800s and the 1930s or 1940s. The different colors of

the glass or thickness of the glass all can give you details on where they were made, how they were made, what they were for, and when they stopped being made. I’ve found beautiful color varieties of glass beyond the usual white, brown, and green pieces, such as aqua, teals, blues, lavenders, pinks, black, grays, citrine, and reds. It’s very interesting. I really enjoy finding out the history behind these pieces, and I feel like when I use them in my artwork it connects my artwork to my hometown – where I grew up. It feels like an even deeper connection for me, knowing where this piece started and where it is ending.

FIT: What made you transition from collecting to making art?

Di Rico: I started finding these really unique and beautiful pieces. By the end of last summer, my collection was so big that I had no place to put them. Being a graphic designer and being an artist – and also being that I wasn’t working – I wanted to find a new way to be creative. So, I said, ‘Okay – can I do something with the shells I found?’ I started doing oyster decoupage: designing oyster shells and making them into trinket dishes. From there, I thought, ‘Let me try to do something with the glass.’ So, I started making designs, and they looked really good. I was posting them online, just to share what I was making, and people began requesting custom pieces that they wanted to buy.

I was just doing it for fun, as a creative and therapeutic outlet during the pandemic. I started seeing the comments and feedback from family and friends saying they loved it and they wanted it in their living room, or they wanted to put it in their beach house, or to send as gifts. People saying that when they saw my artwork it made them feel good and that they connected with the artwork, it gave me the inspiration to move forward with what I was doing. Every artwork, in my opinion, kept getting better and better. I kept improving my technique through everyone’s feedback.

When I was younger, in college and post-college, I was working on a lot of my personal artwork and photography and graphics. And then once my career kicked in, and with marriage and children, everything took a step back. It was all work – working for clients and using my creativity for other people and not for myself. That’s something that I really regretted – that I lost almost a decade of

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Assorted sea glass, pottery and rocks from North Shore, LI.

that creativity. And now I feel

like I have that back. I feel fulfilled. I feel like that creativity was hiding, and I couldn't figure out a way to find the time to bring it out again and use it. And everything just came together this year. Being able to stay home with my children this year and take them with me to find the pieces and bond over finding things at the beach. And then creating art – I couldn't be happier.

FIT: Do you have something that inspires your artwork?

Di Rico: I always loved miniature art. Microcosms of real things – I always found that to be so interesting. And three-dimensional arts, I have always loved that. I prefer doing mostly nature and scenery. Taking rocks and pebbles and shells and glass from the beach and then using that to recreate the same scene that I pulled them from. I think it's awesome.

FIT: How do your pieces come together?

Di Rico: I don't always prepare the artwork before I create it. I'll paint my background first. I'll paint different shorelines and different clouds and colors – sunsets and sunrises. As I finish the background, I'll go through my collection of rocks and pebbles and shells and whatnot and see what fits and what feels right. That's how I build my scene. Alternatively, I may find a particular piece of glass at the beach and say, 'Oh, this is a bird,' or 'This is a whale,' then come home and create artwork around that individual piece.

FIT: Is there a piece you've made that you particularly love?

Di Rico: I would say the very first penguin watercolor is one of my favorites. My children are obsessed with penguins, and we went to the Riverhead aquarium and saw the penguin exhibit. My children said, 'Can you make me some sea glass penguin art?' That inspired me. Everything I've made, I've sold or offered to sell. That's the one that I refuse to sell. It's the one that my children inspired, and that's the one that I probably love the most.



Oceanview I, 2021

FIT: Are you interested in exhibiting your work?

Di Rico: Yes. I really love exhibiting on Long Island. Through exhibiting, I've met so many amazing and talented artists that I've been able to connect with and get inspiration from. I think it's a great way to connect with the community. Exhibiting is wonderful. Also, a lot of my followers on Instagram ask where they can find my art. I'm not always at pop-ups regularly, so having my artwork in an exhibit will allow people to see my art before they purchase it online.

FIT: Are you currently exhibiting anywhere?

Di Rico: I'm currently exhibiting at The Local Market in Port Washington. It's the Spring Into Sum-



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mer Exhibit, and it's going until mid-August. I am also signed up as a vendor at the New Hyde Park Street Fair on Saturday, September 18.

FIT: Where did the name Sea Schleps come from?

Di Rico: Schlep, in Yiddish, means to haul or drag. When I was thinking of a name, what should I call my artwork or this activity that I went into, that's the word that kept coming up. Before I was making art, every time I'd go out with a friend or my kids, I'd say, 'Let's go schlep back some shells.' Or 'Look at all the schleps that we brought back.' It was a word that I just kept using. So, when I was trying to think of a name, it just felt natural, and it felt like it flowed so nicely and was so different from what everyone else was using. Sea Schleps.

FIT: Can you discuss your experience starting your Sea Schleps business?

Di Rico: Working in marketing and working for an agency in the past, I saw how difficult it could be for a small business to start up. And that was something that made me a little nervous starting this venture. But I found that this year, in particular, there have been different opportunities that weren't there before.

Within this past year, I've met other artists who were in the same situation – they lost their job or had to leave their job because they had children they had to stay home with – and in that time found

a craft, artwork, hobby: some creative outlet. And I noticed that there have been a lot of stores that have been very supportive of women and vendors who are doing these things. I feel like all the stars aligned for me in a way that they wouldn't have before. The flexibility, the community support, and people who wanted to step back and shop local and support people who are trying to change their career path. It's been amazing.

FIT: Do you have any advice you can share with people who are facing a similar situation –

maybe who are interested in pursuing a new career?

Di Rico: I would say give it a shot. Look for something you love, look for something that inspires you, and try to figure out a way to turn it into a career path. What happened to me was kind of a whim. Doing this was helping me be creative. I did it for fun, and once it started picking up, I saw the opportunity to turn it into a business. Now I'm creating art and making money and feeling empowered.

As bad as last year was, for me it was a reset button. It didn't feel like an end, it felt like an opportunity – and I was able to start something positive for myself and share my art with everyone. And I couldn't be happier. It's not about the money. I just love creating and then making everyone else happy with the artwork.

FIT: Where can people find out more about your art?

Di Rico: You can go to my website www.seaschleps.com and through there you can get connected to my Etsy shop and find out more about local events that I'm going to be vending at. I also have an Instagram account ([Instagram.com/seaschleps](https://www.instagram.com/seaschleps)), Facebook account ([facebook.com/seaschleps](https://www.facebook.com/seaschleps)), and TikTok account ([tiktok.com/@seaschleps](https://www.tiktok.com/@seaschleps)), where you can see my process – me schlepping back my materials from the beach and seeing them transformed into my artwork. ■



Sea Schleps pop-up shop display at The Local Market in Port Washington, NY



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