

Get to Know Artist Sharon Nowlan

Pictou is a charming, old seaside town in Nova Scotia, Canada; home to people who fish, farm, sing, dance and hang their clothes outside to dry. It's a friendly place centered around community and family.

This is where artist Sharon Nowlan grew up drawing, painting and creating in a variety of media. The spirit of Pictou's diverse landscapes and welcoming residents flows through her serene work — a mix of items found in nature and other materials carefully arranged into uplifting designs that celebrate meaningful relationships and special places.

In October 2017, DEMDACO introduced the [Sharon Nowlan Collection](#) of distinctive pebble artwork. Those early creations began as a handful of small, smooth rocks Sharon's son found on a beach. Inspired by their unique natural beauty and texture, they were soon given new life as sea-softened, emotional depictions of grandparents and children. Her exploration of this distinctive style has evolved over time to portray a wide-range of subjects, and incorporate different materials.

Now widely available in highly-detailed artisan reproductions, Sharon's artwork is a DEMDACO top-seller and her Collection was recently expanded to include new pieces that use soft hues of blue and green sea glass for added touches of color. Here's some insight into Sharon's creative process, her inspirations, what it's like to see her artwork in stores, and other thoughts.

When your son gave you those first pebbles, did you know it would lead to something special?

That day long ago when Isaac gathered those pebbles is a very special memory. I recall he was afraid of the big waves, so he stayed on the dry sand. He picked up these little flat pebbles, brought them to me, and I put them in my pocket. I didn't know at the time what to do with them, but it was this special moment with him that inspired me to create my first pebble pieces the next day.

How long after you created that first pebble piece did you start showing and selling these works?

I was fortunate as a young artist to have my own studio/gallery/frame shop. It was a family business that I had recently taken over from my Mom and Dad. As soon as the glue dried the next day, I had my first pebble pieces framed and on my gallery wall. I only had a small handful of pebbles, but managed to make two pictures that day. A grandmother and a child baking cookies, and a grandfather and a child reading a book. These were inspired by things my parents, excited new grandparents, liked to do with my children. I was excited for them to see my new art, but they sold so quickly, they never had a chance. That's when I knew I had to make more.

Do you hear from people who say your art played a role in a meaningful moment?

I receive feedback on a pretty constant basis, and it's so meaningful to me that people take the time to do that. I hear from people who gave my pieces as gifts and from the people who received them for wedding gifts, birthdays, anniversaries, births and retirements.

Is there one particular story that comes to mind?

There are so many it's hard to pick just one! One of my favorites was made for a gentleman who commissioned a piece for his wife on their 25 th wedding anniversary. I recreated a scene from their first date, where they had written their names on balloons and released them. It was a lovely piece and they both ended up thanking me for helping to make their day very special. I love hear stories like that and share in little glimpses of their lives.

What do you strive to achieve through your artwork?

My main objective is to say as much as possible with as little as possible. It's not always an easy thing to do when you work with tiny pebbles. I try to look at life from afar and scrub away the clutter to create a quiet, peaceful and minimal reflection of life and nature. I strive to achieve warmth and lightness from cold, hard pebbles and sea glass.

Why do you make and create?

There is something very satisfying about turning odd little nothings into lovely little somethings. I've dabbled in wood carving, quilting, rug hooking, crochet, knitting, pottery, twig furniture, as well as painting and drawing in all forms. It's simply a deep-rooted passion for me; something I couldn't not do.

The sea obviously plays a big role in your work, but what else inspires you?

My friends, family, and people I pass randomly on the street are favorite sources of inspiration. A couple sitting together on a bench. A family sharing a moment at a park or beach. A bumblebee buzzing through my garden. I cherish these simple moments.

How often do you experiment with new media?

For the first year or so I only used pebbles and space in my designs. After a while I began to experiment with the use of line, as well as shell pieces. After that I introduced bits of driftwood and then sea glass. I've also played with twigs, sand, moss, paper, metal, wire and other random things. Some materials I only use once for a specific design, and sometimes the material itself inspires many new designs.

What drew you to sea glass as the focus for your new series?

Once Upon a Pebble Wall Art

Sea glass is a wonderful complement to the pebbles. It was one of those things that I picked up along with the pebbles for many years, even before I knew what to do with it. The small pops of color help draw attention to the important parts of the designs. I love the contrast between the lovely bright sea glass and the deep colors in the pebbles.

Do you challenge yourself to try new things, or does your work naturally evolve?

It's a bit of a natural evolution. I'm constantly speaking with new people as they come to me with designs they'd like. Sometimes in my head I'm saying, "oh, I don't

think that's possible..." at the same time I hear myself saying, "I'll see what I can do." That's when the fun begins.

How did you and DEMDACO become acquainted?

A member of the DEMDACO team purchased a piece online and tried to contact me. I was skeptical that they could reproduce my work, and wasn't at first convinced they were serious. I'm glad I finally called them back, and gave it a try.

How closely do you work with DEMDACO on the reproduction process and outcome?

It's definitely an ongoing conversation. I know that my main role in this partnership is as the designer. Once the DEMDACO team takes over, it feels like I'm a passenger, which can be strange when you're used to driving — but I give input along the way.

What is it like to see your artwork hand-reproduced by others?

I was in a Halifax mall last week and passed a gift shop with a Sharon Nowlan Collection display front and center. I felt like stopping strangers in the aisle to say "hey, that's me!" As an artist, there's no greater feeling than stumbling upon yourself. Most painters can make prints of their work, and while I've attempted to make flat reproductions, they didn't have the same feeling or dimension. When DEMDACO came along and thought they could tackle that problem I was really excited. It's been a lot of work and some scary leaps of faith, but ultimately it feels great to reach more people.

When creating new work, do you now think about the reproductions and how details will translate?

I make art the same as always. When I'm making a piece for DEMDACO, it feels the same as if I'm making a piece for my neighbor up the road. Some pieces have been a bit more of a challenge, but we've managed to tackle those and make what we were striving for. I'll make it the way I feel it should be and we'll figure out the logistics along the way.

What are you working on now?

I'm working on a new series that's very delicate and spring-like, with lots of blossoms and florals. I'll introduce more work with shell pieces and a little more of the sea glass. There will also be a larger piece that I'm excited about.

Anything you'd like to tell DEMDACO customers?

I would like to say how much I appreciate everyone! I've been so well-received by DEMDACO customers, and it's amazing how many shop owners have taken a chance on this new product. I can't wait to share more of my work with you!