OFF THE WRACK

The wonders of seaweed have long filtered into art and culture, with poets, folklorists, designers and artists intrigued by its shapes and stories. *Clare Gogerty* dives into the past and present to discover more

The word 'seaweed' doesn't do coastal algae justice. 'Weed' implies something slimy and unwanted, to be stepped over when encountered, washed-up, on the beach. Its scientific name, 'macroalgae', meaning algae large enough to see, is better; it gives seaweed the gravitas it deserves for, after all, this 'weed' is important. It plays a key role in oxygen production, carbon absorption and habitat creation for myriad creatures. It is also a constant in our cultural lives, having inspired artists, poets and writers for centuries. You can see why they love it: seaweed is fascinating. It floats beneath the surface of oceans, seemingly ethereal and delicate but actually tough as leather, harnessed to the seabed by a single root. When the tide recedes it appears, glistening on the strandline, occupying a liminal space, crossing the boundary between terra firma and sea. The sheer variety of species (over 650 in the UK alone) is staggering; it ranges from the thick and ribbed (kelp) to the bubbly (bladderwrack) and the frond-like (wrack). Descriptive common names reflect this breadth with poetic charm; among them you'll find Beautiful Eyelash, Oyster Thief, Dead Man's Bootlaces, Sea Whistle, Dabberlocks and Green Sea Fingers.

Poetry aside, let's acknowledge seaweed's practical uses. It has been used as fertiliser, fodder for livestock and even in the past as mattress filling. Humans have long harvested seaweed to place it on tables. Abundant and packed with iodine and vitamins, it has been a prized foodstuff. In Ireland, during the Great Famine (1845–52), it became a vital resource. Today it is having a culinary moment in smart Scandinavian restaurants. Its »

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Below: Totoya Hokkei's *The Seaweed-gathering Ritual in Nagato Province (Nagato mekari no shinji), from the series Famous Places in the Provinces (Shokoku meisho)*, c.1834–35

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Above: Paul Gauguin's *Les Pêcheuses de Goémon (The Seaweed Gatherers)*, 1888–90

Right: *Perseus and Andromeda* by Charles Napier Kennedy, 1890

nutritious health benefits have long been recognised by the Japanese, who give seaweed the recognition it deserves, calling it the more respectful '*kaisō*' derived from '*kia*', meaning 'ocean'.

KELP TO CANVAS

With such powerful properties, it's no surprise that seaweed has been celebrated in myths, art, poetry and literature. In tales of ancient Greece it appeared as accessories to various gods: a hair adornment for Nereus, a body wrap for Triton and Eros, clothing for Thalassa and a bed for Perseus on which to temporarily lay the decapitated head of Medusa. The gods and goddesses of Celtic mythology are also seen draped in swathes of the weed. Irish merrows (mermaids) have green skin and seaweed hair. Jenny Greenteeth, a spooky folk figure from Lancashire, emerges from stagnant water draped in thick algae to drag children to watery graves. And then there is the tangie, a shape-shifting water spirit of Orkney and Shetland. It is covered with seaweed while it goes about its business of alarming solitary young women, capturing then devouring them in the depths of a lake.

Back in the terrestrial world, seaweed has been gathered by hand in sites such as the coast of Brittany for centuries. Today it is farmed, in the main, as a food crop, but in the 19th century it was harvested for use as agricultural fertiliser. Artists and writers flocked to the coast from Paris, fascinated by the sight of seaweed gatherers knee-deep in cold choppy water, lugging huge quantities of kelp to shore. English novelist Anthony Trollope described the scene: 'The peasants... are in the habit of gathering the seaweed, which the ocean casts in great abundance upon the numerous rocky reefs for manure... The collecting and the stacking of it forms an important portion of the labours of the seaside population.' The first artists to arrive recorded the honest toil of those Breton seaweed gatherers in illustrative paintings. *Kelp-burning at the Pointe du Raz* (1882), by Georges Clairin, for example, shows seaweed being rigorously hauled from the beach by winches. When Paul Gauguin and his circle arrived, however, they saw things differently. Gauguin had left the artists' colony in Pont-Avon to live in the isolated ocean hamlet of Le Pouldu; there he recorded the daily activities around him, including the seaweed harvest. In his *Les Pêcheuses de Goémon* (*The Seaweed Gatherers*) (1888–90), two women in Breton clothing battle with stylised waves that threaten to overwhelm them. Later, in the 1930s, artists such as Karel Špillar were »

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Left: Seaweed pattern #377 by William Morris & Co, created between 1915 and 1917, taken from Wallpaper Sample Book 117

Above: *Oki Naganode*, a seaweed and rattan sculpture by designer Julia Lohmann, 2013

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equally drawn to these romantic (if back-breaking) scenes, capturing their coastal colour with verve. Further on, in the 1940s, when Henri Matisse became confined to bed towards the end of his life, he too was inspired by seaweed. Turning to cut paper as a medium and influenced by a trip to Tahiti he had made in 1930, he created his now-famous cut-outs, many of which referenced marine plants. These graphic shapes, snipped from sheets of a single colour, are simple and decorative in form, the fronds of seaweed creating pleasing, fluttery, repetitive patterns.

SEEK AND FIND

The reverence for seaweed in Japan, especially as part of the country's cuisine, manifests in its use as offerings and at festivals. In the early Heian period (9th to 10th centuries), in a collection of prose and poems called *The Tales of Ise*, a story tells of a woman sending her servants to collect seaweed left on the beach after a storm. She places the seaweed proudly on a tray to present to her guests along with an oak leaf, on which she has written the poem: 'For these lords / The God of the sea / Has gladly relinquished / The seaweed he treasures / To adorn his head.' It's unsurprising then, that the valued (and valuable) seaweed harvest was recorded in many ukiyo-e woodblock prints with subjects drawn from everyday life. Shūtei Tanaka's *Two Women at Water's Edge Carrying Baskets of Seaweed* (c.1860), Utagawa Kuniyoshi's *Seaweed Gatherers at Omori* (1833) and Totoya Hokkei's *The Seaweed-gathering Ritual in Nagato Province* (c.1834–35) are not just visually lovely but a piece of social history.

'THIS, THE FIRST EXAMPLE IN HISTORY OF A BOOK ENTIRELY ILLUSTRATED WITH PHOTOGRAPHS, IS A COLLECTION OF BLUE AND WHITE PRINTS OF SEAWEED'

HISTORY AND ART COLLECTION/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Below: Karel Špillar's *Breton Fisherman with Seaweed on his Back*, 1931

Right: *Algue blanche sur fond rouge et vert* by Henri Matisse

Bottom right: Anna Atkins' cyanotype *Cystoseira granulata*, 1853

ALBUM/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

In Victorian Britain, the natural history boom prompted thousands to head to the seashore in the desire to acquire seaweed specimens. Going 'seaweeding' was considered an acceptable form of amateur science for women. Amateur 'algologists' included Queen Victoria and the writer George Eliot, who wrote, somewhat enigmatically, in 1856: 'The soul of a man is of the same texture as the [seaweed] polypus.' Interesting finds were collected, pressed in scrapbooks and displayed as artwork, with individual strands of the more delicate varieties tweezered out to resemble lace filigree. Arts and Crafts Movement decorative artists were swift to respond to the trend for all things kelp, with William Morris & Co producing swirling seaweed-influenced wallpaper, fabric and tiles, many of which are still in production.

Seaweed was also to play a key role in the early days of photography. English botanist Anna Atkins (1799–1871), frustrated by the 'difficulty of making accurate drawings of minute algae' turned to 'photographical impressions' to illustrate her *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* of 1843–53. This, the first example in history of a book illustrated with photographs, is a collection of blue and white prints of seaweed accompanied by hand-written labels. The impact of Atkins' idea continues. Earlier this year it inspired award-winning photographic artist Mandy Barker, whose work involves marine debris, to recreate the book using fragments of discarded fabric found in the sea or along the coastline. Close in appearance to the seaweed examples in Atkins' book, Barker has mounted her works alongside examples of Atkins' originals to mark the resemblance and draw attention to the polluting properties of fast fashion. »

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PETR KREJCI

'WHEN THE TIDE RECEDES IT APPEARS, GLISTENING ON THE STRANDLINE, OCCUPYING A LIMINAL SPACE, CROSSING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN TERRA FIRMA AND SEA'

DESIGNS ON THE FUTURE

Today the curlicues of macroalgae continue to reach out to contemporary artists, who respond not just to its intriguing shapes and colour but to its environmental importance. German-born designer Julia Lohmann fell in love with seaweed when she was an artist-in-residence in Japan in 2007. 'Brown kelp was for sale at the fish market and with the fresh eye of a foreigner, I immediately saw it as a leather-like material,' she says. 'I took 10kg back to Europe to try and figure out what to do with it.' So convinced was she of its creative possibilities that she created 'The Department of Seaweed' at another artist residency, this time in 2011 at the V&A South Kensington in London. As she reveals: 'I wanted to elevate seaweed to the level of other departments in the museum, such as textiles, glass and silverware.' Using Japanese seaweed stretched over an aluminium and cane frame she created *Oki Naganode*, a large sculptural form with an organic, transparent shape that resembles the material it was created from. 'My work gives me the chance to talk about how seaweed can be used in the future and what can be made from it,' she explains. 'It is one of the few organisms that has a positive ecological impact as its rate of growth increases. It cleans the ocean and creates habitats for creatures as it expands.' As the essential role seaweed plays environmentally is increasingly recognised, the chances are that more artists and writers will champion it through their work.

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Top: Julia Lohmann in the Department of Seaweed Studio at the V&A, 2013

Above: Going seaweeding: an early 20th-century postcard of Dieppe

Right: *Algae*, illustration from the Botany Library Plate Collection held at the Natural History Museum, London

A REVIVED CRAFT

A recent revival of seaweed pressing has seen examples for sale in fashionable interior shops. It is an easy and satisfying craft to take up, should the inclination arise next time you are beside the sea.

How to press seaweed

- Collect your seaweed and keep it moist, for example, in a plastic bag filled with water or in a bucket. Rinse it in fresh water
- Line a shallow tray with a sheet of watercolour paper and fill halfway with clean water
- Float the seaweed over the paper until you have created a satisfying design
- Slowly lift the paper out with the seaweed on it and lay on a pile of newspaper. Cover with kitchen towel and more newspaper
- Place between heavy books or in a seaweed press
- Check regularly, every day if possible, and change the newspaper and paper towel until the seaweed is completely dry
- Once completely dry, frame the result

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