Oyster Shell Ornaments

I was mystified by a large-ish wrapped box I found inside the Christmas parcel sent by my friend. When moved, it rattled like a box of broken china, and it was tagged "To Jen from Shelly". Problem is, I don't know anyone named Shelly . . . so what could this mysterious present be?

Oyster shells! Of course. I had completely forgotten asking my friend to save some for me so I could try my hand at making ornaments out of them. As it turned out, he'd saved and sent along nearly 200 of the things!

After Christmas, I bleached and scrubbed the shells, but I haven't had a chance to experiment with them until this past week.

Oyster shells have a black spot on the inside where the oyster muscle attached to the shell. I was planning to decoupage images to the inside of the shells and didn't want the spot to show through, so I covered it with white acrylic paint.

Next, I used my drill to make a hole at the top of the shell for hanging the ornament. The drill is actually safer for this than my rotary tool: it has greater torque and less speed, and there's less friction to heat up the shell. (When I tried the rotary tool, the shell actually got red hot around the hole).

Many people use paper napkins or scrapbooking paper as a source of images, but for my first attempts I selected some pretty gift wrap that I had in my stash. This image of beach stones is perfect.

I cut a piece of the paper slightly larger than the shell, and trimmed it roughly to shape, leaving a good sized border. The shell is concave, and I'll need enough paper to reach to the edges once it's fitted into the recess.

Next, I spritzed the paper with a little water to dampen it. This relaxes the fibres so the paper will be easier to shape to the inside of the shell. The paper should be just damp, not wet, or it may tear as you work.

With the paper dampened, I gave the inside of the shell a coating of Mod Podge and began working the damp paper into the shell.

Smooth the paper into place with your fingers, trimming and snipping as necessary to get a good fit. Go gently; practice and patience will eventually yield a good result.

Once the paper was glued down and trimmed, I added a couple of coats of gloss Mod Podge, making sure each coat was dry before adding the next one.

To finish the ornament, I added a line of metallic paint around the outer edge of the image.

As for the back of the shell, you can take advantage of the natural colours and leave it plain with just a coat of acrylic varnish or glossy Mod Podge. I like to add a dusting of iridescent glitter. Or if you prefer, you can lightly paint the back to coordinate with the paper image and add the varnish over the paint. Here are a few of the ornaments I've completed so far.

The browns and tans of the beach rock image go nicely with the natural colour of the shell, so I left this one plain. I just gave it a light coating of acrylic varnish and dusted on a bit of iridescent glitter.

I also added a bit of bead-and-star trim to the inside of this ornament – I thought the stones were too plain.

The paper I used for the second ornament was a design of fantasy maps. I especially like the compass motif, so I incorporated that. The back of the shell was given a light brushing of gold paint, then finished with some copper toned glitter glue. As with all the ornaments, I've added a beaded component to the top for interest.

I ended up making four ornaments from the fantasy map paper, in a range of sizes; it's going to be difficult to decide which one to keep for our own tree!

I added one of my teeny embroidered lobsters to this Cape Breton tartan ornament. I like the pop of red.

On the back of the ornament, a hint of coordinating colour and a touch of iridescent or silvery glitter make a lovely finish.

Because the paper I used on this ornament shows various animals, I incorporated a rhino bead from my stash. The back of the shell was varnished and touched with some gold glitter.

I painted the back of the Santa ornament in solid gold, and brushed it with gold glitter glue. The red bead echoes the colouring of Santa's suit. This is one of the first ones I made.

This sailboat paper had several boats, quite close together. I wanted to isolate a single one, so I painted the inside of the shell and then decoupaged the fussy-cut sail-boat in place. I used silver paint for trimming, and pale blue for the back, finishing with with some iridescent glitter glue.

I did the same with the Christmas tree; it's fussy-cut and then decoupaged to the painted shell front. The back was given a coat of gold paint and then varnished, and finished with a dusting of gold glitter while the varnish was still wet.

I'm still experimenting. I liked the idea of matching the shells with seashore and nautical images, so printed some pictures of beaches and shorelines. The one at right is the beach near where my friends used to live. I think next time I'll size the phrase a little smaller.

At left is a stretch of Atlantic shore-line.

To make these ornaments, I cropped the images at the computer, then sized them to 4" high and laser-printed them on lightweight paper. An image about 3x4" will fit the average sized shell, but it's a good idea to pick out the shell you intend to use and measure it first before you print, especially if you're adding a phrase.

Some notes:
1. Drilling through the hard shells can be tricky, so you may prefer to use bails. If you do decide to drill the shells, do that first, before you've done the decoupage.
2. If you're using giftwrap, choose a good-quality version. The cheap ones will tear or even disintegrate when you dampen them. (If you're using paper napkins, you won't need to dampen those.)
3. Some of the shells are deeply concave, and pose a challenge for decoupage. Work slowly and trim as needed. It may be helpful to start with some flatter shells (like Santa and the animals, above) until you get the feel of the technique.
4. When painting the shell backs, I found that I preferred a light wash of colour so that the texture of the shell still shows through. To achieve this translucent effect, I thinned the paint with water.