

Wednesday 13th July, Natural History Museum

Shells, shell cabinets and their illustration

Breakout leaders: Kathie Way and Glenn Adamson

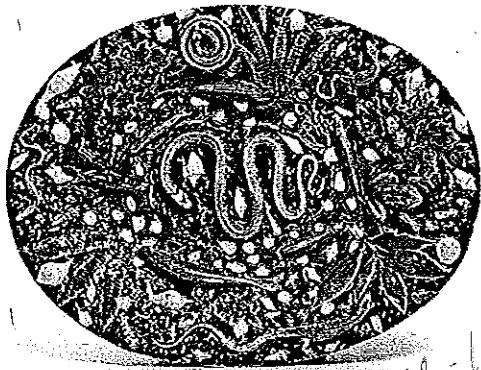
This session began with an introduction by Kathie Way of the illustrated texts she had selected for the session. There were six texts on display, details of which are provided in the handout provided by Kathie and enclosed with this report. The texts demonstrated the work of prominent shell collectors and natural historians of molluscs up to Linnaeus. Linnaeus was, of course, the inventor of the binomial system of classification which has been used ever since for the identification of species of living things.

Also on display were a small number of shells, selected because of their attractive appearance, and a drawer full of shells collected by Sir Joseph Banks during his time with Captain Cook aboard the *Endeavour*. This drawer was one of the original drawers of the wooden cabinet taken to sea by Banks in order to keep his specimens. It and its contents have been preserved in the condition in which they were donated to the Museum, labelled by nineteenth-century hands and then left untouched.

Glenn Adamson then gave a short address on the prevalence of shell motifs in made objects. Shell-shapes, especially a stylised scallop, have featured in both European and American furniture and porcelain for centuries. Glenn suggested a direct link between the appearance of shell motifs in furniture in sixteenth-century Europe, in particular Italy, and the activities of amateur natural historians at the same period. Perhaps because the symmetrical scallop shell lends itself well to decoration of the regular structure of furniture, but also because it provides an opportunity for the exhibition of virtuoso craftsmanship, the motif is of long duration, later decorating objects like a late Baroque dressing table from Newport (shown on the bottom right of the attached sheet). Shells and porcelain may be linked etymologically, the word porcelain being possibly derived from the Italian for pig's ears, which cowrie shells were said to resemble. For Palissy, in Huguenot France, shells were also a metaphor for the persecuted Protestant community: the Huguenots were, like soft-bodied molluscs, vulnerable and weak, requiring the defensive outer shell of their constructed fortifications. The link between shells and porcelain therefore arises not only out of the visible similarities of the two substances but also because Huguenot craftsmen were very involved in porcelain manufacture both in France and in diaspora. An example of this motif can be seen, for example in a Philadelphian porcelain serving dish from the early 1770s (see bottom left picture on sheet). This particular piece demonstrates not only the commonly-found, abstracted scallop motif in the three dishes at the base, but also the

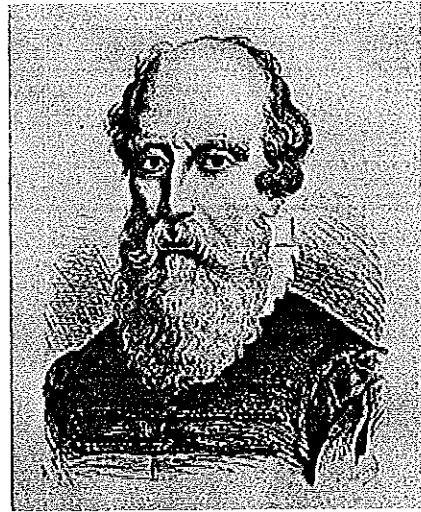
incorporation of what might be called more biological shell motifs in the shells, cast from life, which decorate the central part of the piece.

The general discussion touched upon other appearances of shells in art, for example in still-life painting and portraiture from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where shells have often been interpreted as emblematic of the fragility of life, a caution against *vanitas*. Another, more prosaic, significance, however, can be found in the great trade in shells which was carried out by the East India companies: their presence might only signify wealth and contact with the exotic. The discussion also returned to the books on display, discussing the artistry of the illustrations, which are intrinsically beautiful. These engravings are evidence of the devoted life-times of the collectors and naturalists who created them. They reflect the desire, too, of the readers and owners of these texts to profit from the knowledge of other "shell-men" in furtherance of their Enlightenment project of worshipping the beauty and ingenuity of God's grand design by cataloguing, describing and knowing nature.

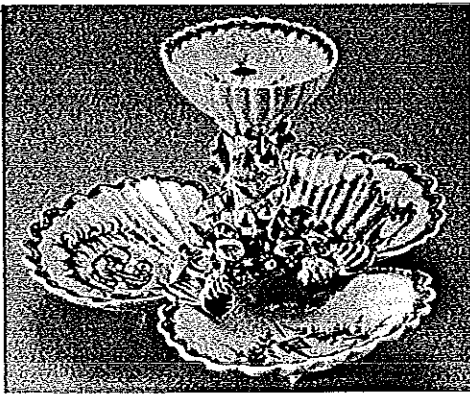


Pelissy

mid-16th C.



PA
1740-70
late
18th C.



cast
from
shell



late Baroque
Newport
Gilded &
painted
dressing table

scallop
Shell motifs = 18th C / Renaissance

abstract / 'mathematical' motif rather than 'biological' / specific motifs

motifs like this argente = 15th / 16th C Italian hierarchy

(porcelain etc. - rel. to carved shell - looked like pig ear?)

links - shell, porcelain, alchemy
scientist/alchemy & artisan (inseparable at
its use)
eg. Patissier adopted shell as metaphor for his chemical alchemy
Huguenot France - snail & turtle shell producing animal
analogised to Huguenots - weak inner self,
strong, defensive outer shell
Huguenot wallow v. involved in porcelain manufacturing in France
& then beyond (in diaspora)

Sexuality & shell in art (Rococo)

↓
Botany & gender (Gentlemen's ~~science~~ botanists / artists
botanic artists)

(vanitas)
Shells = art as emblematic of fragility? or statement
of wealth / relation to trade w/ Dutch E. India

Inspiration - andrew's scientific pursuit?
in Italy.

PRE-LINNEAN LITERATURE

Lecturing in 1752, Linnaeus said that the authors whose books were most useful for the study of shells were Buonanni, Lister, Rumphius, d'Argenville and Gualtieri "Whoever possesses these may dispense with the rest".

Aristotle

Active in the 4th century B.C., Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) , in his Natural History of Animals was the first to attempt to classify the animal kingdom, coining the term Mollusca, still used today. Pliny, some four centuries later, made another attempt with his Natural History but actually appears to have been more interested in the intrinsic value of shells and their products than in their natural history.

1681. Ricreatione dell'Occhio e della Mente... by the Italian Jesuit, Filippo Buonanni (1638-1725), was published in Rome - the first illustrated compendium to be devoted entirely to the study of shells. Although Buonanni occasionally falls into the common trap (it's still happening in the 21st century!) of not making the engraving a mirror image and thus producing sinistral shells where they should be dextral, the illustrations are in the main accurate. The drawing of a common garden snail shows that Buonanni was well acquainted with the live animal, his attempt to depict the creature that might inhabit a marine shell - which he had probably never seen alive - is a delightful flight of fancy.

1685-1692 Historia Conchyliorum by Martin Lister (1639-1712), physician to Queen Anne, was published in parts over eight years; there are over 1000 engravings of shells superbly executed by his wife Anna and daughter Susannah from specimens in the collection of Sir Hans Sloane and others. Many of the original water-colours from which the engravings were made are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

1694-6 Exercitatio anatomica also by Lister, was the first serious attempt to illustrate molluscan anatomy and to propose a systematic arrangement for the phylum.

1705 The German George Eberhard Rumpf (**Rumphius**) (1627-2702), an employee of the Dutch East India Company, spent most of his life on the island of Amboina, publishing his Amboinische Rariteitkamer in Amsterdam in 1705. All of Rumphius' original drawings were destroyed by fire in 1687, by which time he was totally blind; the published drawings were made by a number of unknown collaborators and although the extant originals show that they were competent enough, they do appear to have been poorly engraved. Although, as in nearly all pre-Linnean works, Rumphius' nomenclature was not consistently binomial, many of his names from this work survive almost unchanged to this day.

1742 Antoine Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville, published L'histoire naturelle...la Lithologie et la Conchyliologie... in Paris. D'Argenville was secretary to Louis XV, Master of the Accounts and a connoisseur of fine arts; the latter influence is evident in his treatment of shells as objects of artistic rather than scientific merit and although the engravings are beautiful, the text is virtually useless from a taxonomic point of view.

1742 Nicoló Gualtieri, physician to Cosimo III de Medici, Grand-Duke of Tuscany, completed his Index Testarum Conchyliorum in the same year that saw the publication of d'Argenville's *magnum opus*. Some of the specimens from which the excellent illustrations were made were sent to Cosimo by Rumphius in 1682, during his time on Amboina. It is possible that some of these specimens may still be extant in the Pisa Museum, which houses the collections of the University of Pisa, founded in 1591. *Medici had shell and ...*

1758 Carolus Linnaeus (1707-1778) published the 10th edition of the Systema Naturae in Stockholm; Linnaeus' valiant attempt to describe every animal known to him suffered from having no illustrations, only references to depictions in other works, mainly those mentioned above. However the Systema remains a seminal work by virtue of having provided, for the first time, a uniform system of zoological nomenclature, the binomial system, used without modification to the present day.

refers to all of these previous works

groundwork for previous

Later books with colored illustrations - tiny colored drawings

pmw

SOME CONCHOLOGICAL LANDMARKS, LOCAL AND OTHERWISE

17TH Century. The earliest recorded auctions of shells and associated "curiosities" took place in Holland. The Dutch, whose trade with the East and West Indies provided exotic specimens, were at the centre of the shell trade until their monopoly was undermined by the expansion of the market resulting from Cook's three circumnavigations.

1753 The shell collection of Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753) forms part of the nucleus of the British Museum at its inception. J.E.Gray (1904) in his account of the B.M(N.H) molluscan collections stated that "....no record of any such specimens has been traced" but since then almost 1,000 specimens have been identified by matching the 4-digit numbers written on the shells to the entries in Sloane's catalogues.

1786 The hugely important museum of the Duchess of Portland (1714-1785) was auctioned by Skinner at a house sale between April 24 and July 03. The current whereabouts of most of the shells listed in the sale catalogue are unknown.

1799 The shell collection of the Reverend Mordaunt Cracherode (1730-1799) is left to the British Museum; at 794 specimens, a substantial addition to the molluscan holdings.

1806 The "Leverian Museum", the massive collection of Sir Ashton Lever (1729-1788), containing many specimens originating with both Captain Cook and the Duchess of Portland, was auctioned by King and Lochée in eight sales between May 05 and July 18.



1827 Donation of specimens collected by Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) during his time with Captain Cook. The specimens are preserved in their original condition in seven drawers from the wooden cabinet taken to sea by Banks on the Endeavour voyages.

recorded for portentry, other shells were made into ornaments etc

1836 John Edward Gray (1800-1875), Assistant Keeper at the time, estimated that the mollusca collections contained c.15,000 specimens

1837 The British Museum purchased (for £1,575) 4089 specimens from the collection of William John Broderip (1789-1859); these were the first real "gem" collectors' items in the museum's collection and quickly replaced the old boards bearing Sloane and other specimens on display in the "Index Museum" which had suffered both from the London smog and the museum's gas lighting. It is likely that as a result of this reorganisation some of the harder to clean items, such as the sponges, were simply thrown away after being removed from the galleries.

1851 The collections were augmented by a series of Australasian shells collected on the voyage of the *Rattlesnake*, 1846-50 and described by John MacGillivray (1822-1867) and Edward Forbes (1814-1854).

1842 (& 1866) The collection of Hugh Cuming (1791-1865), comprising almost 83,000 specimens, was purchased for £6,000. Probably the most significant addition ever made to the B.M.'s molluscan holdings the collections contains an enormous amount of primary type material described by Reeve, Sowerby, A. Adams and others.

1856 J.E. Gray estimates the size of the collection to be more than 50,000 specimens.

1857 Over 8,000 shells, forming the "Mazatlan" collection of Philip Pearsall Carpenter (1819-1877) were added.

1859 (& 1865) Two collections of land and freshwater shells from Africa were presented by Captain John Hanning Speke (1827-1864), material amassed during his explorations to locate the source of the Nile.

1862 John Kirk (1832-1922), presented 41 specimens from Lake Nyassa, collected during one of Dr. Livingstone's expeditions and the first shells ever received from this location.

1871-1876 Type material of Hawaiian species collected and named by William Harper Pease (1824-1871) were presented by the author..

1876 The Royal Society donated 1,300 specimens collected during the "Transit of Venus" expedition of 1875.

1877 Material collected by the naturalists of the *Alert* and *Discovery* during the Arctic Expedition of 1875 was donated by the Lords of the Treasury.

1881 An important series of non-marine shells from the Indian sub-continent was presented by Henry Haversham Godwin-Austen (1834-1923). Godwin-Austen was the surveyor of Mount Godwin-Austen, now known as K2.

1882 The molluscan collections are moved to South Kensington

1886 The Shell Gallery is opened to the public

1940 The Shell Gallery is destroyed by a firebomb on October 16

2005 The number of specimens in the collection is estimated at 9 million.