



Art and Ocean Objects of Early Modern Eurasia: Shells, Bodies and Materiality.
Anna Grasskamp.

Connected Histories in the Early Modern World. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 220 pp. €109.

Conchophilia: Shells, Art, and Curiosity in Early Modern Europe.

Marisa Anne Bass, Anne Goldgar, Hanneke Grootenboer, and Claudia Swan, eds. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. 214 pp. \$49.95.

In his influential emblem book *Zinnepoppen* (1614), the Amsterdam poet Roemer Visscher cast a critical eye on collectors of *naturalia* like shells, which were “only remarkable for their rarity.” In acquiring these maritime specimens, he argued, collectors only tried to mimic princes who “seek out these monstrosities and pay dearly for them.” The moral lesson that Roemer Visscher’s readers should take away from this, and that is still echoed sometimes in the art market of today, seems obvious: prices for collectables are determined by what a “madman is willing to spend.”

Shells, it appears from *Conchophilia*, a thought-provoking and beautifully produced book, were indeed everywhere in the early modern European world: they were collected, cleaned, crafted, carved, and celebrated. After a mollusk had been removed in the foreign regions, shells were harvested, its exoskeleton became a highly sought-after and tradeable commodity. The early modern European passion for shells—particularly in the Dutch Republic and the German states—underpins the introduction and six essays of this book, which consider it “a cultural phenomenon, examining the cultural resonances and uses of objects and images produced around shells” (4).

This *conchophilia* (a nonexistent word that ought to exist, as Anne Goldgar aptly states in her enriching introduction) is explored in three sections. In “Surface Matters,” Claudia Swan and Anna Grasskamp discuss, among many other things, the trade, collecting, manufacturing, and understanding of shells. Marisa Anne Bass and Hanneke Grootenboer in “Microworlds of Thought” look closely at shells as objects one can “think with” and which, even depicted in a still-life painting, seem to speak volumes about former and even future lives. In the last section, “The Multiple Experienced,” Roisín Watson and Stephanie Dickey consider the multifarious character of shells: lining the walls of grottoes, their varied patterns copied in and through engravings, even marketed and collected together with prints.

Of course, this fierce interest in shells as multifaceted objects, used for ornamentation, ritual, or currency, was not limited to the early modern period and Europe: it was something of all times and places. Yet as all authors convincingly show in their chapters, a case can be made for the particular poignant love of shells from the early sixteenth century onward. Both as literal and metaphorical vessels, it is argued, shells prompted reflection, contemplation, and discussion, as material manifestations of exoticness, (natural and divine) craftsmanship, and aesthetics.

Sensuality played a major role in this appreciation. Shells were admired for their sheen, luster, fragility, and architecture, and these characteristics were emphasized in the way they were enframed by precious metals, or in the way painters represented them as luminous objects strewn on a tablecloth. In her inspiring essay on the nature of shells, Swan argues that it was precisely this sensuality that invited collectors to hold, fondle, smell, and examine their marine specimens and even be portrayed in doing so. Yet this all came at terrible cost. The global trade networks along which shells were transported and distributed were dependent on colonized people and places to provide, clean, and polish these objects first. These men, women, and children (as Swan shows) were conveniently left out of the accounts of the proud collectors showing off their *Turbo marmoratus* or *Nautilus pompilius*.

Shells not only invited aesthetic observation but also intellectual and spiritual reflection from the beholder. Shells resembled each other and were thus thought of as multiples, yet their tiny variations would stimulate discussion (and competition) among collectors, specifically on the infinite wonders of divine creation. Similarly, as Watson argues, spaces lined with shells, such as grottoes, often functioned as sites of introspection, for the “material emphasis of the space on its interiority made it a place for solitude and withdrawal” (149). Indeed, the miniscule shell cabinet in the seventeenth-century dollhouse discussed by Grootenboer, especially the very rare *Epitonium scalare* or wentletrap (spiral staircase), likewise urged its owner to descend into herself and the world of the shell, pondering allusions to home, shelter, the self, and the soul.

In short, shells were emblematic things, containing many meanings and allusions: to the trajectories of life and death, to remarkable surfaces and hidden interiors, to exotic cultures and countries. To cite Martin Kemp’s *Wrought by No Artist’s Hand*, they “are ‘cultural migrators’ of the most peripatetic kind,” in which classificatory ambitions did dissolve. Indeed, Anna Grasskamp shows how exotic shells became equated with erotic fantasies, how the form and provenance of these natural specimens conjured up sensual images of foreign bodies. She argues for a reevaluation of the *Kunstkammer* as a space in which wonder was not only at work as a method to come to terms with the unknown and unfamiliar, but in which “erotic dimensions of the encounters between object and collector” were played out as well (52). Craftsmen like Wenzel Jamnitzer alluded to male and female body parts in their handling of shells and crafting of cups, with shells positioned as female breasts or male genitalia. Paintings featuring marine gods and goddesses similarly exploited these sexual associations and, through imagery in travel accounts, a visual connection was forged between naked “Indians” and seductive mythological marine creatures like mermaids.

Grasskamp explores these associations much more deeply in her richly illustrated new book, *Art and Ocean Objects*, on the multicultural complexity of marine objects in early modern Eurasia. Through her expertise in both Asian and European art history (and languages) she is able to situate shells at the crossroads of China and Europe as natural objects and material entanglements. This allows for a truly transcultural

approach, in which Chinese traditions of shell-carving craftsmanship traveled to Europe, and where eroticized European depictions alongside these natural objects in turn influenced Chinese iconography in the eighteenth century (173–74). Grasskamp's close examination of engraved nautilus shells in European museum collections reveals how conches engraved in the Guangzhou region with birds and jungle imagery reminiscent of their South-East Asian provenance, were then framed by gold and silver mounts executed in German and Dutch workshops in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Typically Chinese motifs, such as wave patterns or mascarons, were appropriated by European craftsmen in their own shell engravings and encasings. Artistic representations of underwater worlds in both Europe and China combined foreign and local maritime materials to reveal an oceanic realm filled with treasures, rarities, and (sexual) danger. This "non-verbal communication on visual and material matters" (59) underpins the deep transcultural movement and meaning of shells, and of other related collectables like porcelain.

Both *Conchophilia* and *Art and Ocean Objects* are wonderful books that dive deep into the complex relationship between shells and people, and that offer fascinating and original accounts of the cultural, artistic, and sensual early modern (water) worlds they inhabited.

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Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain. C. D. Dickerson III and Mark McDonald.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019. xiv + 230 pp. \$55.

Alonso Berruguete (ca. 1488–1561) transformed the arts of Renaissance Spain with an innovative style of drawing, painting, and sculpture that modernized the visual traditions of late medieval and early modern Iberian art. Written by leading scholars in the field, this exhibition catalogue is the first English-language publication that treats Berruguete's art and career in a systematic fashion, from his origins in Castile and formative years in Italy to his later career in Toledo. It accompanied a traveling exhibition (13 October 2019 to 17 February 2020) organized by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and the Meadows Museum, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, in collaboration with the Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid, and was awarded the 2020 Eleanor Tufts Book Award in recognition of its groundbreaking scholarship.

A preface by Jonathan Brown and an introduction authored by C. D. Dickerson III and Mark McDonald succinctly outline the catalogue's innovative approach to studying this artist. Eleven chapters trace the trajectory of Berruguete's beginnings, travels, projects, and reception. Dickerson's three essays concentrate on Berruguete's early years in