Art and Ocean Objects of Early Modern Eurasia

Shells, Bodies, and Materiality
Connected Histories in the Early Modern World

Connected Histories in the Early Modern World contributes to our growing understanding of the connectedness of the world during a period in history when an unprecedented number of people—Africans, Asians, Americans, and Europeans—made transoceanic or other long distance journeys. Inspired by Sanjay Subrahmanyam’s innovative approach to early modern historical scholarship, it explores topics that highlight the cultural impact of the movement of people, animals, and objects at a global scale. The series editors welcome proposals for monographs and collections of essays in English from literary critics, art historians, and cultural historians that address the changes and cross-fertilizations of cultural practices of specific societies. General topics may concern, among other possibilities: cultural confluences, objects in motion, appropriations of material cultures, cross-cultural exoticization, transcultural identities, religious practices, translations and mistranslations, cultural impacts of trade, discourses of dislocation, globalism in literary/visual arts, and cultural histories of lesser studied regions (such as the Philippines, Macau, African societies).

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Shells, Bodies, and Materiality

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Introduction

Abstract
Laying the groundwork for a study of Sino-European exchanges in art and maritime material culture between 1500 and 1700, the introduction outlines the framework in which the book positions itself. As the early modern interest in shells and pearls was rooted in material, aesthetic, artisanal, sensual and scientific interests, the introduction highlights relevant scholarship in the fields of ecology, art history, animal studies, anthropology, gender studies, political science and the history of science that engage with the conceptualization of EurAsian matter and situates the monograph within the interdisciplinary field of material culture studies.

Keywords: material culture studies, art history, history of science, gender studies, EurAsian matters, maritime material culture

In 1705, the first treatise on Asian shells and molluscs was published posthumously. Its author was a man known as Rumphius (1627–1702), who was of German origin and had worked for the Dutch East India Company and spent many years in Indonesia studying maritime material culture and marine organisms.¹ Rumphius’s work marked the beginning of the transcultural and systematic study of Asian molluscs before which the collecting and study of conches had been the preserve of emperors and merchants, artists and artisans, and naturalists and amateurs in China as well as Europe.² This book focuses mainly on Asian shells in early modern artefacts and paintings before 1705, considering them “things that talk,”³ and takes shells as a point of departure for transcultural “object lessons” in the study of art and material culture that teach us about aesthetics, craftsmanship and ecology in early modern Eurasia.

1 Rumphius, D’Amboinsche Rariteitkamer.
2 Before Rumphius, Martin Lister (1639–1712) and his daughters had also already published on molluscs but with a focus on local specimens. See Roos, Martin Lister.
3 Daston, Things That Talk.

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Research on the material culture of the early modern world has taken approaches that do justice to the period’s globalized networks of mercantile and artistic exchange. Historians have written about the “global lives of things,” adding culture as one of the defining agents in the conceptualization of an object’s “social life.” Early modern Europe has been conceptualized as a space whose object worlds were as “European” as they were “creole,” while the transcultural dimensions of Ming and Qing dynasty material culture have been widely acknowledged. Recently, historians of science have taken the idea of “material complexes” to investigate the entanglement and transfer of matter and knowledge across Eurasia, while art historians have started to think with and through transcultural things using the notion of EurAsian matters and objects. All of these approaches allow scholars to refrain from qualifying artefacts as essentially “European” or “Asian” according to their geographical origins, or in terms of historical attributes that could be read as characteristics of particular styles or representing individual “cultures.”

The study of things such as shells, whose importance during the early modern period was rooted in their commercial as well as aesthetic, sensual and scientific values, stands at the intersection of the histories of art and science, whose boundaries have become porous in the study of EurAsian objects, matter and materiality. In the interdisciplinary field of globalized material culture studies, research on the relations between aesthetic practices and the collecting of shells and pearls has been undertaken by scholars of art history, English literature, science and the history of science, as well as other disciplines. In addition, museum work has contributed significantly to the field through the online publication of object files.

4 The literature on early modern material culture in a global context is growing and includes but is by no means limited to: Jardine and Brotton, Global Interests; Findlen, Early Modern Things; Cook, Matters of Exchange; Schmidt, Inventing Exoticism; Smith and Findlen, eds. Merchants and Marvels; Bronsen and Vanhaelen, “Introduction”; Thomas, Entangled Objects; Um and Clark, “Introduction.”

5 Gerritsen and Riello, eds. The Global Lives of Things.


7 Pinney, “Creole Europe.”


9 Smith, ed. Entangled Itineraries; Smith, “Itineraries of materials and knowledge.”


12 Grasskamp and Juneja, eds. EurAsian Matters, esp. 12; Smith, ed. Entangled Itineraries.

as well as exhibitions and accompanying publications. Among all the scholarly and curatorial contributors to the field, historians of Netherlandish art and culture have played an important role through their research into objects imported by the seventeenth-century Dutch East and West India Companies, which supplied much of Europe with shells from Africa, India, Indonesia, and the Moluccas via Amsterdam.

Before Dutch domination of world trade in the seventeenth century, Asian shells had reached Europe on board Portuguese vessels. From Lisbon and later other harbour cities, most importantly Amsterdam, Asian shells were traded and exchanged as gifts across Europe and appear in a number of early modern treatises on natural history published in Italy, France and Germany and translated into a number of European languages. Asian shells have also been researched in the context of Northern European cabinets of curiosity, Kunstkamer or konstkamer, using, for example, inventories and period correspondence as source materials, and discussed in relation to collecting and gift exchange practices associated with Italian collections. In European collections, unpolished and untreated Asian shells were included for display and handling, but some, especially those of the nautilus and turbo types, were further processed by goldsmiths who transformed them into precious drinking cups. While Asian shells were considered rarities in Europe and some of them were pricey luxury objects embellished with gold mounts, in Chinese harbour cities such as Guangzhou, nautilus and turbo snail shells among others were widely available and considered “rather cheap” and Ghys, “Shells as Collector’s Items”; Kisluk-Grosheide, “Dirck van Rijswijck (1596–1679)”; Ritchie, Shell Carving.


16 Lightbown, “Oriental Art”: 240; Mette, Der Nautiluspokal, 35.

17 Early examples include Aldrovandi, De reliquis animalibus; Belon, L’histoire naturelle des estranges poissons marins; Lonitzer, Naturalis historiae opus nuvom; Gesner, Icones animalium; Guillaume Rondelet, Universae aquatilium historiae pars altera. For more examples see Leonhard, “Shell Collecting,” 188–96.


19 Mette, Der Nautiluspokal; Kehoe, “The Nautilus Cup”; Zuroski, “Nautilus Cups and Unstill Life.”
According to a source from 1388. Consequently, the majority of research on maritime material culture in early modern China does not focus on patterns of elite collecting, but investigates the attribution of meanings to marine matter through the study of treatises on materia medica, geography, marine organisms and “sea oddities.” An exception is scholarship on coral, which not only studies maritime material culture in global trade networks, but also considers aspects of elite collecting including the use of Mediterranean coral in the workshops of early modern Guangzhou and its presence in the imperial collections of Ming and Qing dynasty Beijing.

Research on the historical perception of molluscs and their ability to produce pearls has also been undertaken within transcultural frameworks. Adding to studies that mention the transcultural genesis of tales on pearls’ origins in shells, recent scholarship has contributed global stories of pearl cultivation and human exploitation in a postcolonial attempt to decentre history and do justice to the labour involved in the processes of grafting and biomineralization in shells. In addition, comparative studies can draw on extant literature in Asia and Europe, using works that discuss giant clams in Chinese treatises and studies of gastropods, univalves and bivalves in seventeenth-century Britain respectively. The growing field of animal studies has not only changed our understanding of transcultural connections in trade and gift exchanges during the early modern period, but has also transformed art history by enabling non-anthropocentric approaches, for example through the study of “animal portraits.”

Similarly, in recent years, art history has been impacted by non-anthropocentric approaches that focus on matter and its potential to have, carry or exert agency. Informed by anthropological approaches, historians have started to see paintings, sculptures and artefacts “in performative terms as systems of actions, intended to

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20 Cao, Gegu yaolun, 34b–35a, also discussed in chapter 1. Hsieh, “Yingwubei jiqi ta.” The entry on “parrot shell cups” is included in the first version of the Gegu yaolun from 1388 (and was not added by a later editor) according to a facsimile of the 1388 version in David, Chinese Connoisseurship, 311, 34b. On the dating of the treatise’s publication and a discussion of its later editions see David, Chinese Connoisseurship, xliii–lx.

21 Li, Bencao gangmu; Nie, Haicuo tu; Wu, “Haicuo tu”; Anonymous, Haiguai tu; Greenberg, “Weird Science”; Ptak, “Riesenmuscheln”; Ptak, “References to the Coral Islands.”


23 Donkin, Beyond Price; Warsh, American Baroque; Domínguez-Torres, “Pearl Fishing in the Caribbean”; Machado, Mullins, and Christensen, eds, Pearls, People and Power.

24 Ptak, “Riesenmuscheln”; Roos, Martin Lister and His Remarkable Daughters.

change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it.”\textsuperscript{26} In addition, the study of early modern craftsmanship has drawn on anthropological research that sees matter and objects as “active not because they are imbued with agency but because of ways in which they are caught up in ... currents of the lifeworld.”\textsuperscript{27} “New Materialism” and the perception that matter can be understood as “vibrant” have further informed the repositioning of the human among non-human actants in the study of art and ecology in historical and contemporary contexts.\textsuperscript{28} Of particular relevance to the understanding of the early modern period are studies on nature as a productive agent whose potential to shape matter was perceived as comparable to the agency of craftsmen.\textsuperscript{29}

Anthropological approaches have also inspired the art historical shift towards studies that do justice to the human body and its senses. Scholars have discussed the human capacity for erotic response to objects that “think materially” with the body of the early modern collector and studied the sense of touch in and through early modern art.\textsuperscript{30} The haptic encounter with shells is also central to philosophers’ reflections on shells, which conclude that in order to explain shells, we need to “remake their form in thought.”\textsuperscript{31} “Thinking through craft.”\textsuperscript{32} natural objects such as shells were studied and understood by artisans, whose bodies, especially their hands, were essential in the study, appropriation and imitation of matter.\textsuperscript{33}

This book adds to literature in the field by tracing Sino-European “shell connections,” for example, through a detailed discussion of Chinese shell cups in Germany and Italy in chapter 1 and the analysis of European shell imagery in Qing dynasty Guangzhou in chapter 4. In addition to its transcultural approach, which focuses on material entanglements and aspects of technological and artistic exchange, the chapters also use comparison as methodology, for example in discussing locally defined understandings of the relationships between matter, its natural transformation through craftsmanship and its agency in chapter 2. Drawing on artworks and artefacts, collection inventories, correspondence, and travel records, as well as natural history treatises that address aspects of oceanic and subterranean

\textsuperscript{26} van Eck, “Living Statues,” 644, which refers to Alfred Gell’s posthumously published Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory, 1998; van Kessel, The Lives of Paintings; Kuechler, Return to the Object.

\textsuperscript{27} Ingold, “Materials against Materiality”; Ajmar, “Mechanical Disegno”; Smith, “Nodes of Convergence.”

\textsuperscript{28} Benett, Vibrant Matter; Bachelard, Water and Dreams; Smith, “New Bachelards?”; Baader, Wolf and Ray, eds. Ecologies, Aesthetics and Histories of Art.


\textsuperscript{30} Hay, Sensuous Surfaces; Harvey, ed. Sensible Flesh; Pollaki and Hub, eds. Images of Sex and Desire.

\textsuperscript{31} Valéry, L’homme et la coquille; Bachelard, “Shells.”

\textsuperscript{32} Adamson, Thinking through Craft.

\textsuperscript{33} Smith, Body of the Artisan. Smith, “Giving Voice to Hands.”
exploitation, the book connects microhistory with macrohistory, for example in chapter 3, which discusses selected pictorial representations of shells as entangled with networks of European colonization and Chinese tributary systems. Defining China and Europe as spaces entangled with South and Southeast Asian sites of knowledge production and trade between 1500 and 1700, the book understands oceanic goods and networks as transcending and subverting territorial and topographical divisions. In other words, the book studies Asian mollusc products such as shells and pearls and their representations in early modern EurAsian exchange with a focus on their artistic, technological and ecological implications, linking the study of globally connected port cities to local ecologies of oceanic exploitation and art histories.

Chapter 1, titled *Shell Connections*, maps the geography of EurAsian trade connections in maritime material culture and discusses shells, in particular nautilus shells, in relation to the bodies of early modern artisans and collectors. It addresses period associations of shells with ceramics and examines how motifs from Chinese porcelain and engraved Asian shells inspired European craftsmen. The chapter argues that knowledge of shell carving technologies travelled from Asia to Europe, changed the physical manipulation of materials by craftsmen through non-verbal means, and resulted in the exoticization and eroticization of shells across Eurasia where they were fundamental to the intersection of material collecting and visual fantasies of oceans and foreign spaces in both cultures.

Chapter 2, *Shell Bodies*, considers the creative agency of those organisms that create shells – molluscs – as reflected in European and Chinese thought, art, and material cultures. It discusses shells, in particular those of sea snails, as “clever” and “difficult objects,”34 whose complex inner structures inspired the invention of games and “taught” mathematicians and artisans alike. Early modern craftsmen engaged with natural objects, not informed by the modern dichotomies between the natural and the artificial, the animate and the inanimate, but attributing them with a certain sense of agency; imitating ocean objects in clay, artisans were thinking with shells through craft. Period treatises on marine creatures presented shells and molluscs as artisan-like organisms and active participants in the shaping of matter that could even, under certain circumstances, appropriate political meanings in the context of early modern globalization. In Europe and Asia, clams were considered human-like in their abilities to design and construct proto-architectural geometric shapes. Likewise, striking images of birds hatching from shells feature prominently in sources from both cultures before 1700, evoking associations between the materiality of shells and eggshells, and between molluscs

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that can craft their own houses and birds that can build their own nests. Against the background of transcultural narratives on the generation of pearls throughout Chinese, Middle Eastern and European period sources, which attribute molluscs with female features, chapter 2 argues for a shared ecological understanding of shells throughout Eurasia that conceptualizes them as “birthplaces” and “houses” equivalent to women’s wombs and birds’ eggs and nests.

As early modern texts and images show, clams were also thought to contain parallel miniature universes inhabited by beautiful women and monstrous creatures. Accordingly, chapter 3, Shell Worlds, discusses Chinese and European visual and sculptural representations of underwater microcosms and argues that, in both cultures, shells were imagined as gateways to maritime worlds full of unknown rarities. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Asian shells were highly desired by collectors in early modern Europe, while coral from the Mediterranean was eagerly sought after in Asia. In both locations, artists and artisans created Eurasian objectscapes that placed maritime material appropriated from abroad alongside local matter. Such painted and crafted shell and coralscapes were highly ambiguous, belonging to oceanic and terrestrial, global and local, commodified and sacred realms, but they unambiguously materialized ideas on the generation and transformation of matter. Hand-sized pieces of mineral or metal ore (Handstein) found in German mines, for example, decorated with fragments of maritime material culture such as coral and shells to represent miniature landscapes, were included in early modern courtly collections. Likewise, numerous Chinese miniature landscapes (penjing) employed rocks as miniature mountains and coral pieces as trees.

These artefacts connect to early modern Chinese and European texts that feature descriptions of diving and fishing for maritime goods that hold terminological and conceptual equivalences to descriptions of digging and mining. Such texts present the ocean as a treasury and a nautical counterpart to subterranean spaces full of riches. Investigating the connections between ocean objects and mined minerals, underwaterscapes and islands, and natural and artificial landscapes from a transcultural perspective, chapter 3 compares the cosmological ideas and material constituents that underlie artistic maritime microcosms and shows how shells and coral resonated with the material mapping of foreign spaces in the frameworks of European colonialism and Chinese tributary systems. Despite the association of shells and coral with culturally specific tropes found in Greek mythology and Christian writings on the one hand and Daoist and Buddhist belief systems on the other, the chapter argues that across Eurasia maritime material culture not only formed a gateway to imaginary foreign worlds full of collectable rarities, but also to unusual creatures, including women of great beauty.

Representations of women on, in and alongside shells are at the heart of chapter 4, Woman with a Shell. While some of the works discussed, for example Sandro Botticelli's
The Birth of Venus of 1485–1486 and Jan Gossaert’s Neptune and Amphitrite/Venus of 1516, are well-known representations of the goddess of love surrounded by sexualized objectscapes, the chapter adds less familiar works such as Saint Mary inside a scallop shell carved out of ivory and an earthenware plaque of Caritas framed by shells. It also presents little-known images of women in shells painted in early modern China, for example in two Buddhist scroll paintings, each of which depicts a female figure – half woman, half animal – emerging from an enormous bivalve shell, and images of Galatea on her shell-shaped vehicle painted in eighteenth-century Guangzhou. Regardless of whether we look at representations of Venus or a shell-woman in a Buddhist underwater world, at depictions of Galatea or Bodhisattva Guan Yin, the shells that are paired with these female figures’ bodies are all of gigantic size – snail shells and giant clams native neither to Europe nor to China. In addition to aspects of materiality and corporeality, objectification and sexual agency, the subjects of intimacy and distance in both physical and geographical senses are central to the painterly negotiation of images of women with shells across Eurasia, which all link a woman’s body to an object of foreign material culture. Building on the previous chapters, chapter 4 argues that images of women with shells are visual and material reflections of foreign (underwater) spaces full of riches, paradise-like realms that not only promise material affluence but also erotic fulfilment.

Rooted in the interdisciplinary field of material culture studies, the chapters draw on art historical methods in their analysis of images and objects in a global context, but equally on the history of science as the early modern engagement with shells was rooted in aesthetic, sensual and scientific interests. Furthermore, studies on ecology have shaped this text, especially discussions on the agency of matter to which anthropologists and political scientists have contributed. Informed by work on the correlations between artificial and natural objects in early modern Europe, the book’s understanding of objects in relation to human bodies is also enabled by recent studies on art and sensuality. Within these frameworks and in line with recent volumes on the global lives of things and EurAsian matters, the chapters examine the relationships between artists, collectors, materiality, and thingness in the transculturally connected art worlds and ecologies of the early modern period, with a special focus on maritime material culture and the female body.

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