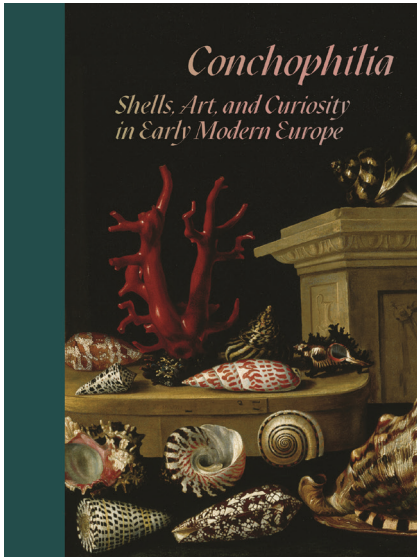


## Review

Marisa Anne Bass, Anne Goldgar, Hanneke Grootenboer, and Claudia Swan (eds.), *Conchophilia. Shells, Art and Curiosity in Early Modern Europe*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2021, 224 pp. ISBN: 9780691215761.



This richly illustrated collection of essays conceptualises the shell and how it was used in material and visual culture, philosophy, and aesthetics as a ‘vessel’ to comprehend early modern society, primarily in a Dutch and German context. More a work that draws on the methodologies of art history than those of the history of natural history, the authorial eyes are largely fixed upon the calcareous exoskeletons of sea creatures that were traded, exchanged, and displayed as part of Dutch global trade, the molluscs within kept in the periphery. Instead the animals’ casing is used to ‘think with’, much as the early modern merchants, burghers, artists, and humanists employed their shells in their own cabinets of curiosities in contemplative and aesthetic pursuits. Building on the work of authors such as Karin Leonhard, Emma Spary, and

Beth Fowkes Tobin, the ‘book aims to explore the love of shells as a cultural phenomenon, examining the culture resonances and uses of objects and images produced around shells across early modern Europe, as well as through consideration of the global networks that brought them to the continent’ (4). Within these aims, some of the authors also attempt to decolonize shell trading networks, particularly the role of enslaved collectors who hunted for specimens.

There are six essays in the collection, grouped within three themes: ‘Surface Matters’, ‘Microworlds of Thought’, and the ‘Multiple Experienced’. The first essay in ‘Surface Matters’ by Claudia Swan explores not only how ‘shells from distant locales came to the shores of Europe’, but also how shells were manipulated, polished, and transformed to both create and decorate a multiplicity of objects such as nautilus cups. In a welcome

analysis reminiscent of Joe Moshenska's landmark book *Feeling Pleasures*,<sup>1</sup> Swan considers the sensual nature of shells: the interplay of sight, touch, allusion, and fantasy that underpinned their desirability to collectors. Anna Grasskamp, in the second essay in this section, explores the analogical relationship of the shape of shells to the representation of sexual organs in early modern paintings and objects. In a sharp analysis, she convincingly argues that the turbanate shell was utilised by artists such as Jacques de Gheyn II (1565-1629) to echo the shape of the female breast in allegorical scenes; the nautilus conch shell was a reference to the female genitalia, and the elongated snail shell, to the penis. Whilst I would agree that the shape of the shell allowed such visual analogies, considering the organism as a whole and the animal inside can also reveal new connections. The hermaphroditism of snails was often associated with the Marian legend of immaculate conception, and their coiled shells symbolic of the layers of the soul.

The second section, 'Microworlds of Thought', also shows us the importance of considering the organism and its casing. In this section, the reader is moved from the corporeal to the intellectual consideration of shells, not only as tropes of luxury or *vanitas*, but as uncanny liminal objects spanning life and death which prompted spiritual reflection. Hanneke Grootenboer's striking chapter on the iconography of Petronella Oortman's famous and luxurious Amsterdam dollhouse (1686-1710) focused on its miniature *kunstkammer*. The tiny lacquered cabinet was complete with tiny shells, 'remnants of deceased baby sea creatures whose deaths were premature' (104). Grootenboer's analysis showed that the dollhouse was not only played with, but also served as a moralistic and introspective tableau. Originally, small wax dolls were placed in front of the miniature cabinet in a funeral scene to mourn the loss of an infant. Oortman herself had lost two children in infancy. Her dollhouse thus was a literal model of psychological intimacy and remembrance, mediated by tiny shells.

In a fine analysis of painted still lives, Marisa Anne Bass also argues that shells in two-dimensional representation are anything but 'still'; their connection with the living mollusc previously within them made them mediators of life and death. I found it notable that one of the paintings she analysed was by a seventeenth-century Middelburg artist Pieter van de Venne. Not only was Zeeland heavily tied to the sea (and shells) with a large fishing industry, but the impressionistic quality of van de Venne's work with its loose brushstrokes highlighting polished and luminous shells is reminiscent of the imperceptible boundaries between reflections of sea and sky in Zeeland's islands and peninsulas. It seems no coincidence that even in the eighteenth century, Zeeland cities such as Middelburg and Vlissingen featured some fourteen cabinets of natural history or *schelpenbuffets* (scallop buffets), mostly composed of shells, the owners usually doctors, merchants, or magistrates who created pieces of display, piety, and natural philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Relatedly, Róisín Watson's chapter in the final section of the book – the 'Multiple Experienced' – is an excellent analysis of shell grottos. Watson demonstrates grottos were not just garden follies or places of entertainment with grotesque faces or flowers made of shells, but also

1 Joe Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures. The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England* (Oxford 2014).

2 W.S.S. Van Benthem Jutting, 'Schelpenverzamelingen in Zeeland in de achttiende eeuw', *Basteria* 36 (1972/2) 155.

‘monuments of mourning’, of spiritual contemplation and reflection. The grottos made subtle and effective use of the themes of liminality suggested by the shell’s multiplicity of shapes and layers, a literal turning into one’s shell. A good proportion of the early modern iconography of shells was taken from emblem books, which in turn influenced the selection of shells for such contemplative spaces. It seems the microcosmic dollhouse and the macrocosmic grotto may have been specialised permutations of spiritual oratories made by women such as Lady Anne Drury, whose seventeenth-century prayer closet adjacent to her bedroom at Hawstead Palce (now at Christchurch Mansion in Ipswich) also used emblem books for its inspiration. It would be interesting to compare the English, Dutch, and German examples of such spiritual spaces.

The last chapter in the volume by Stephanie Dickey analyses the iconography of Rembrandt’s only etching of a shell – the marbled cone or *conus marmoreus* – and the multiple impressions of this rare print avidly collected by connoisseurs in the Rembrandt craze of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She argues that the artist’s reversed image of this chiral shell was a signal to the cognoscenti who knew that engraved or etched prints were mirror images, its ‘visual wit in applying the black-and-white medium of etching to an object in which nature plays so boldly with the contrast of dark and light’ (175). Whether a mistake or aesthetic choice, the print signalled to Rembrandt’s circle that he was a connoisseur of both art and nature.

*Conchophilia* is a well-produced and beautiful book, even its softly glowing endpapers reminiscent of polished shells and nacre. Of interest to art historians, historians of science, and historians of visual and material culture, the essays are also clearly written and approachable, offering many pearls of wisdom. I highly recommend it.

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