

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

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The ruling elites and upper classes in the Early Modern world admired and collected rare objects. Ming and Qing scholars and their European contemporaries analysed these items and instrumentalized them for various purposes. Precious things became symbols in literary, religious, philosophical, and other contexts. Not infrequently, influential people considered them as exotic matter, as bridges to new spheres. At the same time, the investigation of rarities served to perpetuate existing images of the past, to revive old legends and myths, and to confirm or put in doubt traditional views related to the flora and fauna of distant lands or one's own environment. This applies to both China and Europe. It is equally true that certain motifs travelled from East to West, or in the opposite direction, while some remained isolated phenomena restricted to one region. Moreover, in several cases, one observes gradual changes, or "transformations", in the perception and uses of precious things and motifs. Grasskamp's exquisitely illustrated study addresses all these points, not in a general way, but with respect to a specialized area of research, namely marine objects, i.e. especially shells and corals.

The book opens with an introduction that outlines important concepts and research methods. There then follow four chapters dedicated to different themes. A tightly packed conclusion, a long bibliography, and a very reliable index round off this work. Each part – that also includes the introduction and conclusion – carries an abstract and a special bibliography. We may consider the individual segments as a series of quasi-independent articles, but they are tied together by many laces and through cross-references, thus forming a finely woven ensemble of things. I may add, the book is virtually free of printing errors, wrong names, and unsuitable transcriptions; searching for formal shortcomings would lead to very little.

Of course, one may discuss each chapter separately. However, I prefer to look at the entire set from the bird's-eye view. There is a simple reason for that: all parts of the book follow the rules of a complex matrix that differs substantially from traditional conventions. It looks at objects that travelled from one end of Eurasia to the other. It makes abundant use of classical and modern Chinese accounts, as well as of works in various European languages. Its approach is transnational and transcultural; it combines pictorial evidence and data drawn from old texts; it considers "materiality" and spiritual dimensions; it moves back and forth between the arts, archaeology, literature, religion, zoology, sociology, etc.; it engages with the so-called Silk Roads and global history; it throws light on specialized collectors, philosophers, craftsmanship, and other human dimensions; it tells us how objects came to be exoticized and at times eroticized, in China and the "Far West". Given all that, it weighs them in their own light: they contain messages, tell stories, promote knowledge, set standards, openly or in "clandestine" ways. Such studies, needless to say, require an open mind and the talent to survey a vast terrain of research activities. It is my impression that Grasskamp is quite successful in doing so. She offers interpretations of individual objects and the Chinese and/or Occidental

symbolism associated with them, while at the same time, she tries to embed her findings in larger cultural patterns, variegated forms of local belief, and neglected traditions.

As was said, the book is mainly about seashells and coral. Conchophiles who wish to find out why and how the well-to-do adored nautilus shells and similar specimens will discover many fascinating details in Grasskamp's account. Chinese poets used shells as drinking cups. They appeared in court banquets for entertainment. They were framed. Artisans used tri-dacna material to carve beautiful objects. Shells were "clever" items: they inspired scientists to think about mathematical functions. One finds them in Tang tombs, they can be related to cosmology, in later periods one encounters "clam-castles" and different "shell-scapes". Shells produce pearls, they give birth, they are like houses, they are reminiscent of a bird's nest and a female womb. Perceptions of molluscs went along with notions of the moon and the Yin element. Aldrovandi linked shells to birds, some old Chinese texts suggest that birds transformed into shells. There is a kind of "Wolpertinger" with shell elements on Johann Walther's illustration of the *Idstein Grotto*; it reminds us of cave creatures and other beasts in old China. All this is meticulously explained by Grasskamp.

A recurrent motif is women with or in a shell. That involves Venus, Galatea, and Chinese art and lore. Women not only transform into were-tigers and foxes, but also into water creatures. Witchcraft and seduction, carnality and prurience, manifest in subtle ways – there are many pictorial examples, which Grasskamp mostly took from European sources. Clearly, this is a very special panorama. Indeed, some illustrations are full of "small" elements that one may wish to explore in greater detail, as for example, the presence of halcyons.

Regarding corals, J. Malcolm Shick published a wonderful monograph on their natural and cultural history. This is mostly based on European material and came out in 2018 (London: Reaktion Books). Grasskamp also explores the Chinese side. Her studies, notably her *Objects in Frames* (Berlin: Reimer, 2019), provide fresh information. Reading her works, one is tempted to look for more: Chinese medical compendia discuss coral, artisans carved "coral-scapes", figures showing Chinese deities are made of coral, Qing texts mention blue/green and black coral, besides the red varieties, etc. Without doubt, an economic history of Euro-Asian trade in coral would be helpful as well. However, that is a different matter. To conclude, *Art and Ocean Objects* is a pleasant item. It will inspire scholars to explore the story of marine products in new ways; it is a lively contribution to the field of Euro-Asian (art) history and cultural exchange.

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**Jérôme Ducor and Henry W. Isler (ed. and trans.):
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l'étude du Mādhyamika dans le bouddhisme
d'Extrême-Orient**

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