
Title of Object

Nautilus shell cup

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: German

Date of Object: 1660-1680

Country: Northern Germany

Accession Number: 2011.28

File Created: 1/3/2018

Material/Medium: Nautilus shell, silver, parcel-gilt

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Tour Topics

Symbolism, Mythology, Power/Status, Nature, Water, Animals, entertainment, gods/goddesses, imagination/fantasy, food and drink, fashion, beauty

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Spend a minute looking at the extraordinary details. What kind of people do you see depicted on the cup?
2. Why do you think this shell has been so elaborately decorated?
3. Is this a practical cup? What would you use it for?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

As the shells come from the sea (the word nautilus itself comes from the word for “boat” or “sailor” in Greek), it is appropriate that the figures on the [cup] relate to water, including gods from the Classical past so important during the Renaissance. (Milwaukee Art Museum)

From the end of the 16th century, Nautilus shells from the Indo-Pacific Ocean were imported into Europe on a regular basis, where they were admired for their exotic origins and geometric perfection. The fact that their interior chambers follow a logarithmic spiral was interpreted in early modern thought as evidence for the theory that nature from its greatest manifestations (macrocosm) to its smallest details (microcosm) follows a thorough plan. They were seen as proof of the convergence of the bodily and spiritual worlds (here: invertebrate zoology and mathematics), and often ultimately of the existence of God. (Eike Schmidt, Proposal)

Whereas a few nautilus shells were made into liturgical objects (incense burners), the vast majority were mounted as secular drinking vessels by, generally, outfitting them with mounts of silver, gilt silver and gold figures alluding to the Sea or the element of water (as the nautilus’s original habitat). Silver-mounted nautilus shells were among the most characteristic products of the famous gold- and silversmithing workshops of Augsburg and Nuremberg in Southern Germany and were sought after by collector all over Europe. (Eike Schmidt, Proposal)

The Mia nautilus cup has a particularly rare iconography that that blends biblical history (Jonah ejected from the whale’s mouth) with classical elements (naked putto and Neptune on a seahorse) and with mermaids and garlands bearing sea creatures such a turtle and crab. It is a perfect combination of the diverse traditions of zoology, ancient mythology and biblical narrative. Stylistically the cup has been identified as from a workshop in Northern Germany where references to the sea would have resonated with the craftsman and the collector. (Eike Schmidt, Proposal)

Nautilus have survived relatively unchanged for millions of years and are often considered living fossils. They are the sole living cephalopods whose bony body structure is externalized as a shell into which the animal can completely withdraw its body. The shell, which appealed to collectors, is composed of two layers: a matte white outer layer and a striking white iridescent inner layer. Internally, the shell divides into chambers which are created one after another in increasing size as the nautilus grows and moves into a larger protective space. The shell represents one of the finest natural examples of a logarithmic spiral. The exotic history of the animal, its natural beauty and the mathematical mystery of the shell attracted Renaissance collectors. (Wikipedia)

The Renaissance and Baroque period was the Age of Exploration in Western Europe, when things from foreign lands held great fascination and spurred the imagination. Shells from the chambered nautilus are a perfect example, since they come from a sea creature that lives in the Pacific and Indian oceans. (The people of the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean use nautilus shells as every day drinking cups.) When the outer skin is removed, the shell shines magically, and when cut in half, the construction is mysteriously mathematical. The shells, in fact, were believed to have special powers and reflect the order of the universe. To enhance a prized shell, a goldsmith would add stunning and protective mounts of gilt bronze, copper, silver, and precious and semiprecious gems. (Milwaukee Art Museum)

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

A luxurious drinking vessel for court feasts, [these cups would] underscores the host's magnificence and power over nature. Goldsmiths designing the mounts for these shells gave free rein to their imaginations. (Walters Art Museum)

Nautilus cups were (and continue to be) among the most prestigious trophy objects within silver collections. But they are particularly representative of the objects collected in Renaissance 'cabinets of curiosities', a type of collection that was an important forerunner of the modern museum. These Wunderkammern first emerged in the territory of the Holy Roman Empire and in central Europe, before spreading through the remainder of the continent. These cabinets (originally meaning "room") strove to put together the rarest and most exotic, wondrous products of nature with most the astonishing accomplishments of human inventiveness and dexterity (naturalia and artificialia). Having the wealth and education, princes and the richest merchants of the 16th and 17th centuries sought to combine collections of zoological, botanical and mineralogical specimens with the most exquisite works of art. (Eike Schmidt, Proposal)

Nautilus cups were often used in still life paintings because they were exotic and beautiful. The 17th-century Dutch artist Willem Kalf (1622-193) used a nautilus cup in a number of his still life paintings. In his 1662 Still-Life with a Nautilus Cup in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum of Art, Kalf depicted a nautilus cup with other highly esteemed objects such as a Chinese Ming bowl, a wine glass, and a Persian carpet. The combination of metal and shell allowed the artist to experiment with light and shadow, challenging him with metallic reflections and translucent materials. (Milwaukee Art Museum)

In directly combining man's art with God's nature, a nautilus cup was the type of treasure that would have been housed in a Renaissance Wunderkammer. Wunderkammer were privately-owned collections that are considered the predecessor of the modern museum. German for "room of wonder" or "cabinet of curiosities," Wunderkammer developed in mid-16th-century Europe and celebrated man-made arts and also natural arts, with minerals, ivory, ostrich eggs, coconut shells, nautilus shells, and other exotic objects. (Milwaukee Art Museum)

Over the course of the sixteenth century, rulers ... increasingly supplemented treasuries of precious metals with natural wonders, or naturalia. These collections were assembled in suites of rooms called Kunstkammern, or curiosity cabinets [also known as Wunderkammer]. Set in fantastical mounts, lustrous nautilus shells ...brought the distant Indian Ocean to the North. Building on the belief that owning a universe in microcosm indicated actual dominancy, [these rulers] opened up their Kunstkammern for the admiration and erudition of their guests. (Nautilus Cup, Met Museum)

One of the earliest and best examples of the Kunstkammer was the collection housed in the Hradschin in Prague assembled by Rudolf II, Holy Roman Emperor (ruled 1576-1612). His collection provided a solace and retreat for contemplation but also served to demonstrate his imperial magnificence and power in symbolic displays that were ceremoniously presented to visiting diplomats and magnates. Besides princely cabinets such as that of Rudolf, there also existed more modest collections of humanistic scholars that served more practical and scientific purposes. (Wikipedia)

The curator's purchase recommendation stated (paraphrased): "In addition to being a significant contribution to Mia's collection of Renaissance and Baroque silver it is also an excellent focus object for understanding the globalization of trade in the 17th century; the perception of nature in the

Renaissance and Baroque; the amalgamation of diverse sources of knowledge in early modern thought; and its role in the prehistory in the development of natural history and art museums.” (Eike Schmidt, Mia Accessions Proposal)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

Nautilus shells, which came to Europe from the Indo-Pacific Ocean, were often mounted with precious silver ornaments in the 1500s and 1600s. Mathematicians were fascinated by the fact that their interior chambers follow a regular logarithm. A rare and exotic specimen of nature combined with outstanding craftsmanship in precious metal is emblematic of the works that were collected in the early modern ‘chambers of art and wonder’, the common predecessor of museums of natural history and art. The Nautilus Cup combines the Biblical narrative of Jonah (being spit out of the fish’s mouth) with figures of ancient mythology such as the cupid (who rides on top of the fish) and Neptune, the god of the Sea (who forms the stem). Combining these diverse fields of knowledge, the artist celebrates the element of water, which is the Nautilus shell’s natural environment.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

1. Cabinet of Curiosities: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cabinet_of_curiosities
2. Chambered nautilus: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chambered_nautilus
3. Nautilus: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nautilus>
4. Eike D. Schmidt, Mia Accessions Proposal, 6/2/2011: <http://www.artsjournal.com/realcleararts/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Nautilus-Cup.pdf>
5. Object file: Nautilus Shell Cup
6. Nautilus Cup: <https://metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/193582>
7. From the Collection: Nautilus Cup, Milwaukee Art Museum: <https://blog.mam.org/2012/06/12/from-the-collection-nautilus-cup/>
8. Nautilus Cup, Walters Art Museum: <http://art.thewalters.org/detail/16751/nautilus-cup/>

Willem Kalf, *Still-Life with a Nautilus Cup* in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum of Art, from Wikipedia (notice the figures of Jonah and Neptune are also present on this cup; you can expand picture):

