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PLINTH-FREE

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CALIFORNIA COCO

CHANEL'S NEW LA STORE

TO SHELLS AND BACK

A DECORATIVE OBSESSION

FAMILY TIES

A MATTER OF LACE AND DEATH

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W. H. AUDEN WAS ON TO SOMETHING when he suggested in his poem *Sext* that there should be monuments 'to the first flaker of flints/ who forgot his dinner,/ the first collector of seashells/ to remain celibate'. He was listing the raw materials of tools and science, though he did not seem to know that he could have done it in a single entry for shells, since the seashore finds of clever apes can be as utilitarian as any silicate rock. A chunk of adamantite Giant clam makes perfect killing or chopping axes, and an oyster shell adapts as a fish lure. But as *Sext* is, as it were, about people who do the business, he's left out the other primeval hominids who deserve a much bigger monument, those who picked up the exo-skeleton of any of 100,000 species of soft-bodied molluscs and recognised in that shell the original material of decoration: arrangeable, cuttable, threadable, engraveable, polishable in itself and so satisfying in its organic three-dimensional geometry that the best craft and art in other media can only imitate the forms.

'I've got a new madness,' once enthused my favourite 18th-century skilled pair of hands, Mary Delaney, genius with a needle and scissors. 'I'm running wild for shells. The beauty of shells is as infinite as flowers.' Except shells endure: mollusc-secreted crystals of calcium carbonates, or ditto plus the proteins conchiolin and perlucin (which sea-change the calcium into something rich and strange: light refractant nacre – mother-of-pearl), as adjusted for genetics, diet, location and depth, aggregate into shells with durable patterns, textures and colours unchallenged until the invention of plastics. Although even the best plastic looks trashy beside a zebra nerite, Pacific thorny oyster or striate cone.

So they were, from around 100,000 years ago, the ur-material of wealth and status everywhere. The cowrie shell was anciently venerated because its underside opening was labial, a natural glyph for women giving birth, which led to it being a signifier for the valued and valuable (the Chinese character for 'expensive' still looks a bit like a cowry). But it's not the right shell for personal adornment – there's a fetish quality about every object I've ever seen cowered up. Think of all those terrifying items in drawers in the Pitt Rivers Museum in

Oxford, pregnant with dark seabed power, all booming 'no', not whispering an aquatic 'yes' in your shell-like ear. However almost every other shell is innately seductive. Native American women wore Dentalium, tiny hollow tubes sewn in rows on their buckskin dresses and tiered in earrings – tribal riches visible as swinging fringes: beats handbags. In European wealth-wear, the presentation and species of shells kept harmony with an era's modes: the late Renaissance, and all subsequent classical-revival periods, understood that the coloured layers of Emperor and Bullmouth Helmet shells made them the ideal substitute for sardonyx stone for cameo carving, as subtle as the original though warmer in touch and tone. While the essential faery quality of arts and crafts, Liberty and Glasgow school jewellery depended on new antipodean contributions – thin plaques of rainbow abalone, with their film-of-oil-on-water iridescence. Jewellers Jean Schlumberger and Fulco di Verdura both perceived in the 1930s the surrealist aspects of shells and played witty games. Verdura, who beachcombed his own specimens or bought them for a dollar or two, made a powder compact of a coarse Quahog clam, with gold and sapphire seaweed, and added faceted citrines to an already splendid orange Lion's Paw, as a brooch. The presence of shells could even unnaff the most difficult category of 17th century display objects – table 'jewellery' to be set against white lace and linen laid for a ceremonial meal. The Dutch and English favoured hardly-to-be-drunk-from cups made from those evolutionary masterpieces, Nautilus shells, engraved and cut away to reveal the whorl of their chambers; they conferred chasteness on their florid silver-gilt mounts.

I've always believed that baroque (which borrowed its name indirectly from the Portuguese *pérola barroco*, an irregular pearl – more dynamic nacre!) happened when the dramatic exaggeration of mannerism met cargoes of shells argosied from the world's just-navigated oceans. The transformation is visible through the later 16th and early 17th centuries. First tropical shells were brought back a few at a time for ducal wonder-chambers and cabinets of curiosity, as unrottable, exotic exhibits to be shown off among the bones and hides and croc

WHAT FRESH SHELL IS THIS?

SINCE HUMANS FIRST HIT THE BEACH, WE'VE BEEN IN LOVE THE EXO-SKELETON OF THE HUMBLE MOLLUSC. **VERONICA HORWELL** DIVES FOR PEARLS



PREVIOUS Lion's
aw encrusted with
diamonds and
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old, Fulco di Verdura,
30s OPPOSITE
White Sconce made
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shells, Black Turreted
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elinda Earle, 2001
BOVE The 'Bonnell
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arvey Bonnell, 1781
BOVE RIGHT Le
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Piédefer, Viry-
atillon, France, a
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edicated to Pan,
rly 17th century

skins. Then the voluptuousness of their volutes dawned on a wider audience. Neptune and Oceanus became gods for the emerging maritime empires, and surged up from warm waters along the venture-capital zones of the trade routes, with their scallop sea-chariots and triton retinue blasting away on conch trumpets. Shells were heaped as trophies in the foreground of portraits and still-lives, natural signifiers of masculine affluence to balance costly man-made mechanisms, the medals and clockworks. Big shells had huge heft, they were serious – this is about science, engineering and exploration, right? – yet so sexy, with the curvy appeal of racing-car bodies. That streamlining, those tawny finishes and go-faster stripes. The most baroque structures are shell-starring fountains, whether huge by Bernini for a piazza or miniature for a banquet centrepiece, and grottoes, like those at the Tuileries and Versailles, where shells were massed to add yet more bristle-chinned texture to rusticated stone: rough trade.

Around 1700, though, the shell turned from being super-blokey to being female, even girly, except in sober scallop carvings for hall chairs, desks and ships' prows and sterns. Zillions of smaller, prettier shells in pastels were imported by the ballast-load from Caribbean and African waters, not to be revered as awesome single specimens, or cemented in as harsh encrustations, just components in mosaics needing a delicate touch in arrangement. The subterranean grotto as a prideful pit-stop was transformed into the 18th-century shell room or folly with the shells lightly set in formal patterns, an interior suitable for taking tea. (The Misses Parminters' cottage, A La Ronde, in Exmouth, is the ultimate entranced example.) The rhythmic asymmetry of their spirals and arabesques: rococo is derived from 'rocaille', a technical term for the new shellwork, which influenced and was reproduced on and in every decorative material – porcelain, silver, textiles, enamels. Of course, shells were felt to be diminished once women amateurs had daintied them, even really talented women such as Mrs Delaney, and were therefore slowly downgraded to the

merely charming and domestic, arranged into bouquets under glass, glued on box-tops or inside frames as pictures – diminuendo'd to a minor aesthetic, alongside quilling and strawwork, although easily adapted to provide the 19th-century cults of sea-bathing and sea-side vacations with souvenirs. (While mother of pearl ceased to lustre gold snuffboxes and was set to work in the laundry as washable shirt and glove buttons.)

The best shell souvenirs, especially the professionally assembled West Indian valentines sold to passing sailors, did retain a Watts Towers sense of the fabulous possibilities inherent in flotsam not seen again until craftspeople began to play with shells over the past 30 years, in part because they came with baggage from the past. Peter Coke, now in his 90s, collector of old pieces and maker of very fresh pastiches (a startling pair of Olympic torches with coral flames) began by imitating trad valentines; Blott Kerr-Wilson, far less than half his age, studied sculpture at art college and kept her rockpool obsession discreet, fearful of snobbery about kitsch, even after her enriched Peckham council-estate bathroom won a design award and started her career. I love her culinary folly at Ballymaloe Cookery School, with knit-like patterns incorporating kitchen-midden shucks, detritus of the house mussel soup; she never gets over the surprise that shells are naturally complex yet so cheap – and they whoosh with energy. Thomas Boog (who first designed shoes, another sort of exo-skeleton) can do it all with shells, as evident in his Paris boutique window: mannerist collages after Arcimboldo, great chappish baroque fountains, rigorous classical frames, and magical coquillages harking back to rococo galleries – Boog uses nacreous oystershells to enhance the glow of candles and tealights, reflection and refraction together in sconce or girandole. Auden did continue in *Sext*: 'How beautiful it is/that eye-on-the-object look'. The object must have been a shell. ■■■

'The Shell: A World of Decoration and Ornament', by Ingrid Thomas, Thames & Hudson, £35.