

Chinese Shells, French Prints, and Russian Goldsmithing: A Curious Group of Eighteenth-Century Russian Table Snuffboxes

WOLFRAM KOEPPE

Assistant Curator, European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

SINCE ANTIQUITY the mounting of exotic shells with precious materials has been part of a very interesting tradition throughout Europe. Pliny the Elder is one of the first recorded collectors of bizarrely formed shells. Numerous shells littered the shores of the Mediterranean and some were imported from faraway ocean beds. The important role of exotic shells in feudal luxury displays can be documented in northern Europe as early as the eleventh century, although the citations are not specific enough to identify particular shell species.¹

The focus of this essay is on just one of those numerous fantastic creatures: the green turban snail, or *Turbo marmoratus* Linné, the largest species of the family *Turbinidae* living in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The common name is derived from its not-so-fanciful resemblance to a turban. When the brownish incrustation and greenish outer layer have been removed, the much-appreciated iridescent nacreous surface is revealed (Figure 1).² In contrast to the more popular *Nautilus pompilius* (Figure 2), with which the *Turbo* shell is often confused, the shell of the latter has a rounded aperture and one-sided body whorl.

The allegorical imagery of Vanity in Renaissance humanism associated the shell's spiral development with the element of growth in nature and the dimension of time. Placed under the motto *Sic transit gloria mundi*, this physically superb living organism was but an empty shell after death, as its spirit had crossed into another world. The emblematic interpretation characterized the creature as a pitiful animal that was unable to leave its shell and compared it with human serfdom or slavery, disregarding the protective natural purpose of the shell. Pierio Valeriano wrote in his *Hieroglyphica* of 1567: "Snail means the soul, caught in the passion and the animalistic lust of this world. Hesiod explained this slavery to worldly behavior as some-

thing from which the human soul cannot detach itself, just as the snail's back is firmly bound to its house."³

Its mysterious origin, fantastic form, and the symbolism attached to it made the turban snail's shell a much sought-after rarity for encyclopedic curiosity cabinets in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe.⁴ Until the nineteenth century, when larger quantities became available, such shells, and that of the turban snail in particular, were most valuable. The polishing and mounting of the fragile body were entrusted only to extremely skillful craftsmen. The hollow form of such shells and the belief in their aphrodisiac power made them most suitable for adaptation into drinking vessels (Figure 3) in a period when a variety of oddly formed cups and beakers were part of every aristocratic household. Such objects were intended for display, ceremonial use, and welcoming distinguished guests.⁵

In the eighteenth century shells were still mounted as cups, but changing fashions and the appearance of new habits, such as the increasing use of snuff, led to fresh adaptations. Smaller shell varieties were perfect for mounting as snuffboxes, as many surviving examples from England, Continental Europe, and North America attest.⁶ In the case of the Metropolitan's table snuffbox (Figure 4), the shell of the green turban snail was cut down to mount the now-exposed natural openings in gilded silver with hinged covers, revealing two compartments for tobacco formed by the body of the shell. Three little square-shaped areas of the former greenish outer surface are preserved on the polished bottom side (Figure 5) to serve as feet. The covers, or lids (Figure 10), are decorated with niello on a matte gilded ground showing a still-life arrangement of exuberant waves and shell-like *rocaille* formations: on one side marsh plants are ruled by Neptune's trident and on the other side is a maritime scene. In the latter a sinking ship is watched by a triton on a hippocamp accompanied by a nereid and a little water snake ready to attack any survivor. A narrow *rocaille* leafy border

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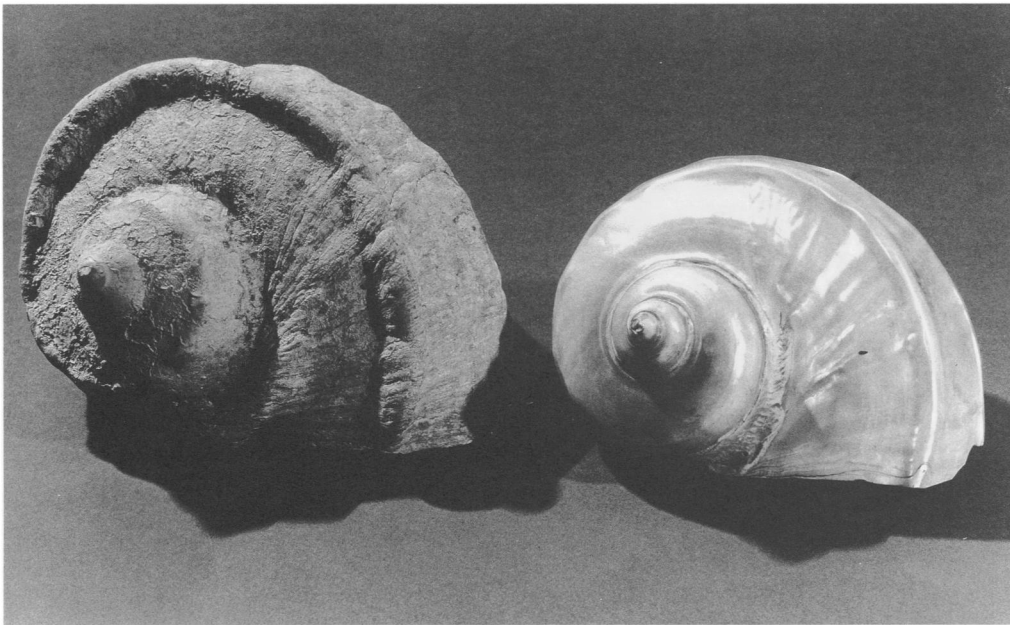


Figure 1. Shell of green turban snail (*Turbo marmoratus* Linné), before and after polishing. Frankfurt, Senckenbergische Naturforschende Gesellschaft, Naturkundemuseum (photo: Naturkundemuseum)



Figure 2. Nautilus cup. Unidentified maker, Dutch (Utrecht, 1602). Gilded silver with the polished shell of *Nautilus pompilius*, H. 27.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.190.604

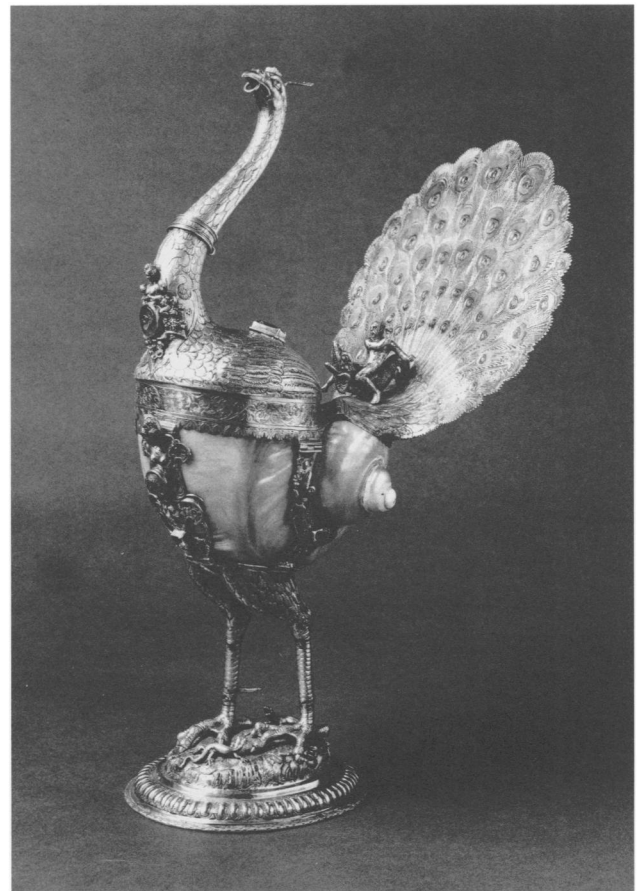


Figure 3. Turban shell cup in the form of an ostrich. Gilded silver with polished green turban snail shell, H. 40 cm. Maker: Georg Hoffmann, German (Breslau, ca. 1600). Cracow, Museum Narodowe (photo: Museum Narodowe)



Figure 4. Table snuffbox. Russian (probably Velikij Ustyug, ca. 1745–50). Gilded silver, niello, and partly polished green turban snail shell, H. 5.5 cm, L. 10.5 cm, Diam. 6.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, The Lesley and Emma Sheaffer Collection, Bequest of Emma A. Sheaffer, by exchange, and Rogers Fund, 1995, 1995.327

frames the composition. The larger lid closes over an undulating inner rim and is engraved on the inside with the monogram DW, which most likely refers to an unidentified former owner (Figure 6).⁷

The style and execution of the niello are characteristic of Russian goldsmiths' work of the eighteenth century, but the precious object is puzzling otherwise: Where did the shell come from? Was the

Figure 6. Inside view of the larger lid in Figure 4

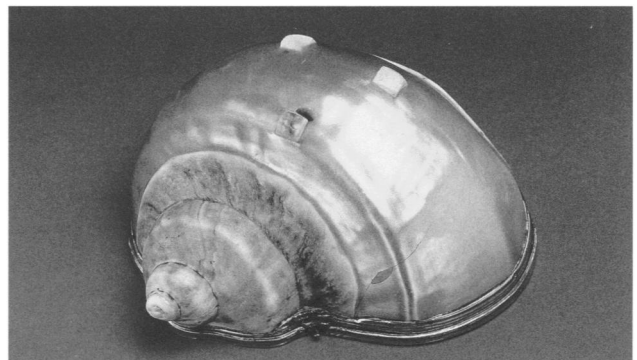


Figure 5. View of the underside of snuffbox in Figure 4



Figure 7. Table snuffbox. Russian (probably Velikij Ustyug, ca. 1750–60). Gilded silver and green turban snail shell, H. 4.4 cm, L. 8.9 cm, D. 6.8 cm. Private collection (photo: Donald Waller)

surface polished in Russia, Central Europe, or somewhere near its origin, the Indian or the Pacific Ocean? The polishing and decoration of exotic shells are documented from the fifteenth century in Nuremberg and the Netherlands, both important centers for the decorative use of mother-of-pearl.⁸ The decoration of some shells is clearly Far Eastern in style and can be attributed to Chinese craftsmen, possibly working in one of the larger seaports in southern China.⁹ The key to these puzzling questions is a related snuffbox in a private collection (Figure 7). The gilded mounts are similar in form but, instead of niello, they are decorated with a rare engraved variation of Russian chinoiserie showing stylized flowers and leaves, possibly inspired by blue-and-white Chinese porcelain. The partly polished surface is inscribed on the front, below the lip, with Chinese characters (Figure 8) and engraved with stylized lotus leaves. The inscription reads: 足下一杯酒 *Zhu xia yi bei jiu*. "An almost exact translation would be: "Your honorable, a cup of wine."¹⁰ These words clearly identify the object as originally a



Figure 8. Detail of Figure 7, showing the Chinese inscription (photo: Donald Waller)



Figure 9. Table snuffbox. Russian (town hallmark of Velikij Ustyug, 1768). Gilded silver, niello, and green turban snail shell. Saint Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum (photo: State Hermitage Museum)



Figure 10. View of the lids in Figure 4



Figure 11. Two table snuffboxes. Russian (the smaller box possibly with the mark of Aleksei Ignatiev Moshnin, b. 1721, of Velikij Ustyug, ca. 1750–70). Gilded silver, niello, and green turban snail shells; left: H. 6.3 cm, L. 11.4 cm, D. 6.1 cm; right: H. 4.8 cm, L. 8.4 cm, D. 6.2 cm. Washington, D.C., Hillwood Museum; left: acc. no. 13.6 and right: acc. no. 13.5 (photo: James R. Dunlop)

drinking vessel for ceremonial use, a purpose also suggested by the natural shape of the shell, which can be held like a tumbler. A recent examination of another example in the Hillwood Museum, Washington, D.C. (Figure 11, on the right), resulted in the detection of a similar Chinese inscription, “Your honor, wine in your cup,” which has almost the same meaning.

From time immemorial, Russia maintained modest trading links with China through the Silk Route. Moscow’s princes grew powerful owing to their respectful relations with the Mongols, whose empire spread from China to the Danube in the first half of the thirteenth century. Later Peter the Great (r. 1682–1725) strengthened those connections with mutual ambassadorial visits. Rare shells, enhanced in value by Chinese decoration and easy to pack, thanks to their size, could have been introduced to Russia in such circumstances. A powder flask in the Kremlin Museum, Moscow, combines a green turban snail shell with seventeenth-century silver mounts and is an example of the early use of such shells in Russian goldsmithing.¹¹ It is interesting to note that their earlier use as wine cups was ignored in eighteenth-century Russia. Chinese characters were interpreted as part of the exotic decoration, and the hollow body on three steady feet was adapted to serve as a container for another exotic invention: snuff.

The large size and the feet that give the boxes a secure base, although the shells themselves have a rather unsteady-looking appearance, classify the objects as table snuffboxes, a rare variant of the more common portable snuffbox. Besides the examples already mentioned, only a few comparable pieces of this

important snail-shell snuffbox type are known: two are in the collection of the Hillwood Museum,¹² and one, in the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (Figure 9), bears the 1768 town hallmark of Velikij Ustyug.¹³ Four other boxes are in private collections.¹⁴ The smaller Hillwood box (Figure 11) bears a partly legible mark, possibly that of Aleksei Ignatiev Moshnin (b. 1721), a goldsmith of Velikij Ustyug. This town, in the cultural heartland of Russia, was a center of niello production in the eighteenth century, and the mounts of most of the niello boxes were most likely made there. It may be interesting to note that Moscow and especially the Kremlin Armory, as well as other Russian towns, also favored and perfected the technique of niello in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.¹⁵ The extremely high quality and lack of any marks on the Metropolitan’s box may indicate an imperial commission. A goldsmith working for the court was exempt from having the silver’s purity tested by the assay office, a procedure normally resulting in applied hallmarks. An imperial order, which in many cases was accompanied by detailed instructions on design and execution, could also explain the use of the expensive green turban snail shells and the sophisticated theatrical and graphic sources for some of the depictions on the boxes illustrated here: these scenes are distinctly French.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Westernization of the czarist empire began to move at an astonishing pace under Peter the Great. The dynamic ruler forced the Russians to adopt Western European ways. W. Bruce Lincoln has written: “Their attempt to come to grips with a culture that they did



Figure 12. Lids of the smaller box in Figure 11 (photo: James R. Dunlop)



Figure 13. Lids of the larger box in Figure 11 (photo: James R. Dunlop)

not understand produced an imitation of Western life and culture, that, at times, seemed more like a caricature than a genuine copy. In Saint Petersburg, men and women lived in the capital of Russia, a copy of the Dutch city of Amsterdam, that was beginning to take on northern Italian overtones. There, they wandered through formal gardens built on lands recently reclaimed from swamps, sat in Chinese pagodas in the midst of Russian birch groves, and danced the minuet in tropical indoor gardens in the dead of the northern winter."¹⁶ Peter's daughter Empress Elizabeth I (r. 1741–62) inherited her father's passion for the West. This imperial obsession would culminate under Catherine the Great (r. 1762–96), the German-born Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst, who was devoted to French culture and kept up an extensive correspondence with Voltaire (1694–1778). This relationship may well have influenced the niello depiction on the Hermitage box (Figure 9), whose three lids illustrate scenes from Voltaire's tale "Jeannot et Colin" of 1764.

The inspiration for the scenes on the Metropolitan Museum's box (Figure 10) and of the two in the

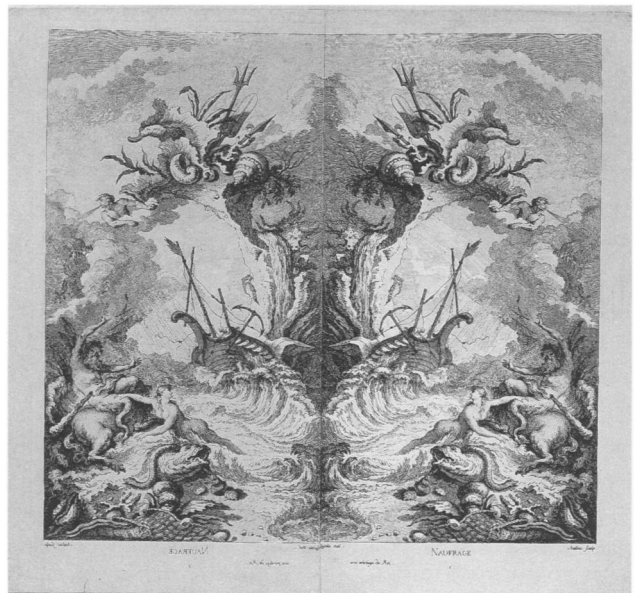


Figure 14. Jacques de Lajoüe (French, 1687–1761). *Shipwreck*, Engraving, published in Paris, 1736. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund 1954, 54.513.5

Hillwood Museum (Figures 12, 13) was a French print entitled *Naufrage* (shipwreck) by Jacques de Lajoüe (1687–1761). Published in Paris in 1736 as part of the *Livre Nouveau de Douze Morceaux de Fantaisie utile à divers usages*, this series documents a tour de force of French ornamental inventions (Figure 14). With this book Lajoüe established himself as a master of “l’art rocaille” at the first peak of the Rococo style in the third decade of the eighteenth century.¹⁷ The artist’s graphic oeuvre was highly influential, well regarded by his contemporaries, and also widely copied. Therefore it does not come as a surprise that his prints were used by craftsmen of various professions, literally throughout Europe, as proven by the print’s adaptation in Russian niello in the East and in Iberian cabinetmaking in the West, where the central scene of a triton on a hippocamp accompanied by a nereid was used to embellish one drawer of a polychrome japanned commode of about 1740.¹⁸

In an early edition of the *Douze Morceaux* preserved in the Print Department of the Metropolitan Museum the tall rectangular prints are bound together with their reverses to form almost square-shaped images. Still dominated by the strong symmetric orientation of the late Baroque period, this grotesque marriage of image and mirror reflection contradicts the leading principle of total asymmetry so characteristic of the Rococo. On the other hand, this presentation offered a welcome choice for practical use in the applied arts. The craftsman could select from a double variety of details, as shown here (Figures 10, 12, and 13), where single sections of the reverse print were rearranged to form new images. Noteworthy is the choice of the shipwreck subject with exuberant, undulating, asymmetrical *rocaille* formations referring to the origin of the bizarrely and itself asymmetrically formed green turban snail from faraway oceans. The varying quality of the niello work, all surely by different hands, serves to underscore the prestigiousness of our recently acquired example as being the most refined of all: it is a document par excellence of the highest level of Russian Rococo niello and of the early use of French ornamental inventions in eighteenth-century Russian goldsmith work.

In sum, this picturesque group of table snuffboxes unites several quite different areas of interest in a surprising conception. It documents the polishing of green turban snail shells and their use as wine cups in China; their export to and appreciation in Western culture; the eighteenth-century Russian love for exotic collectibles, chinoiserie, and French culture, and all is framed in the precious sheen of gilded-silver mounts and dark niello. The group seems a veritable melting

pot of international influences, reflecting in the decorative arts the struggle and aspirations of eighteenth-century Russian society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1. Jörg Rasmussen, “Mittelalterliche Nautilusgefäße,” in *Studien zum Europäischen Kunsthandwerk. Festschrift Yvonne Hackenbroch* (Munich, 1983) pp. 45–61.
2. William K. Emerson and Andreas Feininger, *Shells* (New York, 1972) p. 239, no. 3–22a.
3. Pierio Valeriano, *Hieroglyphica* (1567) p. 203; Sigrid Barten et al., *Die Muschel in der Kunst*, exh. cat. (Zurich, 1985) pp. 5, 13.
4. Vibeke Woldbye, “Shells and the Decorative Arts,” in *Konkylien og Mennesket*, exh. cat. (Copenhagen, 1983) pp. 138–141; “Neptune’s Cabinet: Shells and Conchs in Nature,” *Art and Symbolism* (Kulturen Lund, 1985); Joy Kenseth, ed., *The Age of the Marvelous*, exh. cat. (Hanover, N.H., 1991).
5. Julius Lessing, “Wunderliches Trinkgerät,” in *Westermanns illustrierte Monatshefte* 63 (Oct. 1887–March 1888) part 2, p. 435; Wolfram Koepppe, “. . . alles in vergült Silber gefasst. Über einen Nürnberger Turboschneckenpokal des späten Manierismus,” in *Kunst & Antiquitäten*, no. 1 (1989) pp. 34–42; idem, *Die Lemmers-Danforth-Sammlung Wetzlar* (Heidelberg, 1992) pp. 431–480; for the Breslau cup in Figure 3, see Wolfram Koepppe, “Möbel und Schaustücke,” in *Liselotte von der Pfalz. Madame am Hofe des Sonnenkönigs*, exh. cat. (Heidelberg, 1996) pp. 179–188, fig. 7.
6. Clare Le Corbeiller, *European and American Snuffboxes. 1730–1830* (New York, 1966) ills. 369, 396, 397, 402–404.
7. Sale, Christie’s, Geneva, May 14, 1991, lot 205; *Orangerie ’91. Internationaler Kunsthandel im Martin-Gropius-Bau*, exh. cat. (Berlin, 1991) p. 176; Wolfram Koepppe, “Table Snuffbox,” in *Recent Acquisitions. A Selection: 1995–1996, MMAB* (Fall 1996) p. 40.
8. I am most grateful to Ralf Schürer, Munich, and Daniëlle Kisluk-Grosheide, New York, for sharing with me their research on the use of mother-of-pearl.
9. Hanns-Ulrich Mette, *Der Nautiluspokal* (Munich / Berlin, 1996) p. 83.
10. I thank Anita Siu, Department of Asian Art, MMA, for the translation.
11. *Schatze aus dem Kreml. Peter der Grosse in Westeuropa*, exh. cat. (Munich, 1991) cat. no. 70, p. 204.

12. Katrina V. H. Tylor, *Russian Art at Hillwood* (Washington, D.C., 1987) p. 44, fig. 59. Deepest thanks to Chief Curator Anne Odom, Washington, for sharing her examination of the Hillwood boxes and the transcription of the Chinese inscription.

13. Z. A. Berniakovich, *Russian Silver Wares of the XVIIIth: The Beginning of the XXth Century in the State Hermitage Collection* (Leningrad, 1977) p. 14 (in Russian); *Catherine the Great: Treasures of Imperial Russia from the State Hermitage Museum*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles, 1990) p. 106, fig. 46.

14. Sale, Christie's, Geneva, May 1, 1974, lot 33 (lids with engraved decoration bearing Moscow marks); sale, Sotheby's, London, July 17, 1996, lots 344, 345, and unpublished privately owned examples.

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16. W. Bruce Lincoln, "Moscow: The Cultural Heartland of Russia," in *Moscow: Treasures and Traditions*, p. 38.

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18. Sale, Christie's, New York, Nov. 1, 1990, lot 163.