NOTES

A Set of Knife, Fork, and Spoon with Coral Handles

YVONNE HACKENBROCH

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

THE EXHIBITION "The Splendor of Dresden" included a set of knife, fork, and spoon with large coral-branch handles; the lower ends of the blade and prongs are enriched with a design in damascened gold and the ferrules are set with turquoises (Figure 1). There is no indication in the catalogue of the fact that this set is only one, representative example of the largest-known collection of coral-handled cutlery, which was purchased by Elector Augustus of Saxony (1553–86) about 1579.[1] Admittedly, such sets must be rather uncomfortable to use, but practical considerations were unlikely to deter a passionate collector bent upon assembling rarities of nature, to be complemented with highly original and often precious settings. This attitude was typical of the founders of Kunstkammern—the Wittelsbachs in Munich and Landshut, the Hapsburgs in Ambras and Prague, and the Wettins in Dresden. A network of agents in foreign countries, usually in diplomatic or military service, assisted them in proposing purchases ranging from excavation pieces to precious stones from the New World; they conducted complicated negotiations in several languages and conveyed confidential papers and valuable acquisitions by diplomatic pouch.

1. Knife, fork, and spoon with coral handles, ca. 1579. L. 31, 27.5, 24.5 cm. Dresden, Grünes Gewölbe, inv. no. III 174d–f (photo: Deutsche Fotothek Dresden)

The first of these collectors was Albrecht V of Wittelsbach, duke of Bavaria (1550–79), whose wife, Anna, was a Hapsburg. In 1568, a certain Prunmeyer from Marseilles offered him carved and uncarved corals, including knives, spoons, and a shaving set in its case, all decorated with damascene work.[2] We learn more about the duke's purchases of coral from 1572 onward, after Adrian von Sittinghausen, commander of the Austrian army of occupation in the republic of Genoa, who acted as the Hapsburg agent,

1. *The Splendor of Dresden: Five Centuries of Art Collecting*, exh. cat. (Washington/New York/San Francisco, 1978–79) no. 248; Jean Louis Sponsel, *Das Grüne Gewölbe:* III. *Kleinodien der Goldschmiedekunst* (Leipzig, 1929) p. 78.

2. J. Stockbauer, *Die Kunstbestrebungen am bayerischen Hofe* (Vienna, 1874) p. 110.

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introduced the Genoese coral carver and dealer, Battista de Negrone Viale.[3] Most of the coral in the Munich Schatzkammer seems to have also been acquired from him. Among the carved corals were a *Laocoön*, a *Triumph of Neptune*, and an *Adam and Eve* beneath the fruiting tree. Coral branches, or *Korallenzincken*, of the kind used for knife handles are repeatedly mentioned. From one of the last offers, a large selection of corals, received on May 2, 1578, near the end of his reign, Albrecht V merely acquired a chessboard, passing up a set of Turkish table knives, spoons, and forks all with coral ("Item ein Messerbesteck mit türkischen Messern, Löffeln und Peronen von lauter Corallen"). The duke considered the price too high; moreover, on October 8 of the same year he stated that as he already owned too many pieces of this kind, he was unable to find room for them and buy them ("habe er des Dings hiervon so viel, dass er schier nicht weiss, wohin er alles setzen soll. Er will es also nicht kaufen"). As an alternative, he suggested that Viale, represented by Battista Semino, approach the elector of Saxony, whose taste in collecting was known to be similar ("Jedenfalls aber wäre es besser, wenn der Korallenmann seine Waare dem Churfürsten von Sachsen anböte, welcher zu dergleichen Dingen auch Lust hat").[4]

These, then, are the circumstances surrounding the purchase of some or most of the coral-handled sets in the Dresden collections. But we still do not know where they were made. The trade in Sicilian coral went via Genoa, where it was polished, carved, or mounted for export.[5] In this cosmopolitan port and city-state, artists and dealers knew how to cater to international taste and demand. They had traded in Sicilian coral since medieval times, especially in coral charms for children, thought to guarantee good health, stimulate the growth of first teeth, and protect against the evil eye.[6] When in 1449 Petrus Christus painted the patron saint of goldsmiths, St. Eligius, in his workshop, he included a branch of coral.[7]

After the middle of the sixteenth century, Genoese coral dealers must have become aware of the anti-classical trends in German Mannerist art. Few natural shapes could manifest the dissolution of Renaissance form more strikingly than coral branches in the hands of an imaginative goldsmith. In Nuremberg, goldsmiths used coral for the antlers of silver or silver-gilt stag-shaped drinking vessels. An example by Andrea Rosa was included in the Dresden exhibition.[8] Another, by Jeremias Ritter, took the shape of the unfortunate hunter Actaeon; his transformation is highlighted by the large coral antlers above his stag's head.[9] Abraham Jamnitzer resorted to a similar device in his superb figure of Daphne, also in Dresden.[10] Her metamorphosis into a laurel tree is dramatized by the large coral branch growing from her head, and by smaller branches that replace her already transformed hands. These figures, however, with their original use of *Korallenzincken*, shed no light upon the origins of the coral-handled table sets with damascene work.

The Genoese dealers who sent appropriate selections for sale to Germany may have secured the cooperation of Spanish artists conversant with the technique of damascening as practiced by the Moors in Spain, from whom the Christian conquerors had learned it. These sought-after Spanish specialists traveled widely: some settled in Spanish-occupied Antwerp, others might well have been attracted to the Genoese export trade.[11] The mention of "türkischen Messern" by the Bavarian documents, perhaps meaning damascened or Turkish ware, is more probably a reference to the turquoise stones set in the ferrules. Turquoises were imported from India and Turkey where they were used in combination with coral beads or cabochons, never with branches of coral. Moreover, the metal parts of the sets follow European shapes, as do the salts that were occasionally made to match.[12] Lastly, the fact that such sets are repeatedly mentioned among the Italian wares offered in Munich supports our belief that they were indeed made in Genoa for export to Germany.

3. Ibid., pp. 111–114; Berndt Ph. Baader, *Der bayerische Renaissancehof Herzog Wilhelm V (1568–1579)* (Leipzig/Strasbourg, 1943) pp. 101, 249–250, 300.

4. Stockbauer, *Die Kunstbestrebungen*, p. 113.

5. *Storia di Genova dalle origini al tempo nostro* (Milan, 1941).

6. E. Hoffman-Krayer, ed., *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* (Berlin/Leipzig, 1927–38) V, p. 239, *Koralle*; L. Hansmann and L. Kriss Rettenbeck, *Amulett und Talisman* (Munich, 1966).

7. New York, MMA, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975.1.110.

8. *Splendor of Dresden*, no. 266, ill.

9. Ibid., no. 263, ill.

10. Sponsel, *Das Grüne Gewölbe:* II. *Gefässe, Figuren und Uhren*, (Leipzig, 1928) p. 218, pl. 34.

11. Claude Blair, "A Royal Swordsmith and Damascener: Diego de Çaias," *MMJ* 3 (1970) pp. 149–198.

12. *Splendor of Dresden*, no. 249.