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

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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 Linne, 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 servitude 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-

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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)
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 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 Sheafer Collection, Bequest of Emma A. Sheafer, by exchange, and Rogers Fund, 1995, 1995.327

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

Figure 6. Inside view of the larger lid 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. 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. 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.” These words clearly identify the object as originally a
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. 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, and one, in the State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg (Figure 9), bears the 1768 town hallmark of Velikij Ustjug. Four other boxes are in private collections. The smaller Hillwood box (Figure 11) bears a partly legible mark, possibly that of Aleksei Ignatiev Moshnin (b. 1721), a goldsmith of Velikij Ustjug. 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. 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
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. 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
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. 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.

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 bizarre 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 prestige and openness 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.

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NOTES

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