Combining rigorous historical scholarship with gorgeous coffee-table book presentation, *Conchophilia: Shells, Art, and Curiosity in Early Modern Europe* is an eye-opening exploration of a little-studied area of early modern collecting. The result of a lucky conversation between female scholars, the word “conchophilia” “[gave] a name to something that had always been there” (p. 177). This phenomenon of extracting, valuing, and collecting shells is rightly shown to be everywhere and nowhere in scholarship of early modern collecting. Anyone who works with “cabinets of curiosity” will have seen pictures of some of the shell collections referenced in this book, but very little work has been done to make sense of these as a distinct thread. Specific praise should go to Jenny Chan for the design of the book, which is visually excellent in a way that situates the essays within their artistic and cultural context. The essay collection is focused on Dutch and German source material in part because of the authors’ scholarly interests but also because of the importance of shells to these areas’ elite groups and their collecting networks. Within this, each contributor draws together a specific set of ideas and source material that builds from several directions into a wide-ranging perspective.

Claudia Swan’s opening chapter lays out the materiality of shell collecting in the period, where sought-after shells were harvested live, cleaned, and often decorated before making their way to Europe. This helps the reader get an idea of where shells were coming from as well as a sense of the abstraction of curiosity cabinets filled with items far removed from their local contexts and embedded instead in market values and common mythology. In particular, the perception of shells as natural artifacts gave them a creative mystery that never allowed them to be fully seen solely as products or materials. The complexity and diversity of shells left them connected to a primordial sense of nature, which created a tension that within early modern scientific thinking provided
their key interest to collectors, and consequently to modern scholarship.

Anna Grasskamp explores the ways these shells were brought back to symbolic life as hints of sexual organs in Dutch art within the period. She argues that the inherent connection to natural creation that shells contained, as well as the textures and shapes both natural and added by artisans, gave them an important sensual capacity. Specifically, they are used to allude to sexual contact in paintings where it would have been improper to present full nudity. Grasskamp ties shells painted to shells collected through a common thread of primordial sensuality that appears to have captivated collectors.

Marisa Anne Bass’s section explores still-life paintings to draw closer attention to shells as flexibly representing life and death. Because a shell, unlike a skeleton or other animal remains, represents a “fragment of a former life,” depictions of shells in paintings that explore life and death use shells in particularly flexible ways (p. 93). The “inherent unstillness” of shells in still life expands the idea of shell collecting as negotiating a specific feeling for natural creations that have been taken into a human material landscape but retain a sense of their origins (p. 99).

Hanneke Grootenboer takes this uncanny connection to nature and explores the significance of a collection of tiny shells in Petronella Oortman’s dollhouse, an extravagantly detailed dollhouse built in the 1680s in Amsterdam. She uses them as the entry point into analyzing “thinking with” shells in the dollhouse. Grootenboer theorizes that they anchor the story of birth, life, and death in Oortman’s thinking by reminding viewers of the life and death of nature. The shells themselves are infant specimens and reflect the death of a baby in a different portion of the house. Through this analysis we are shown a vignette of shells as powerful symbols in the most intimate spaces of seventeenth-century elite life.

From the smallest structures to some of the largest, Róisín Watson explores the placement and meanings of shells in early modern German ornamental grottoes. Much scholarship on grottoes has revolved around mechanics and showpieces, but here the decoration of shells and their varied purposes is the focus. It is shown that shells could form decoration in spaces designed for mourning equally well as those designed for pleasure. This chapter also highlights the volume of “conchophilia” in elite presentation with large grottoes covered entirely in polished shells. Importantly, shells were “the very sites where the meaning of a grotto was generated” rather than afterthought decorations, allying the artistry of nature with the taste and artistry of man (p. 140).

Finally, Stephanie Dickey explores how value was created around shells in early modern Amsterdam by comparing the sales of Rembrandt’s prints (one of which was of a shell) with those of shells themselves. Because the same kinds of people were purchasing both shells and prints, the comparison shows the processes of valuation and collecting in the period. Sales pamphlets were printed with prices and examples of items for auction, and collections passed between individuals for large sums of money based on rarity and quality. The book ends with the shell print by Rembrandt and a return to thinking about the shell within creative art as a representative of artifice and nature in conversation with the human artist.

This book is a must-read for any scholars of curiosity cabinets or seventeenth-century collecting and situates itself firmly in this scholarly landscape. It also creates further lines for inquiry about shell collection outside of this area and period. The key innovation throughout the essays is an analysis that tries to connect historical analysis of artifacts and written sources with a hypothesized sense of shells as primordial natural creations in the minds of their collectors. The writers appeal to a universal sense of mystery attributed to shells in the eyes of humans, which gives the book a depth
that is undermined a little by its narrow chronological and geographical focus. The need to catch shells live is stressed, highlighting the way European markets necessitated far-off processes of extraction, which fall outside the expertise or focus of these essays. It feels like there is a lot more research to be done with the phenomenon of “conchophilia” about the extraction and processing of shells in imperial/colonial networks and the people who worked with and bought from these pathways beyond the Netherlands and Germany. As a framework for studying shells, the book builds important theoretical tools around flexible human-shell interactions that could be transferred fruitfully to other areas.

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