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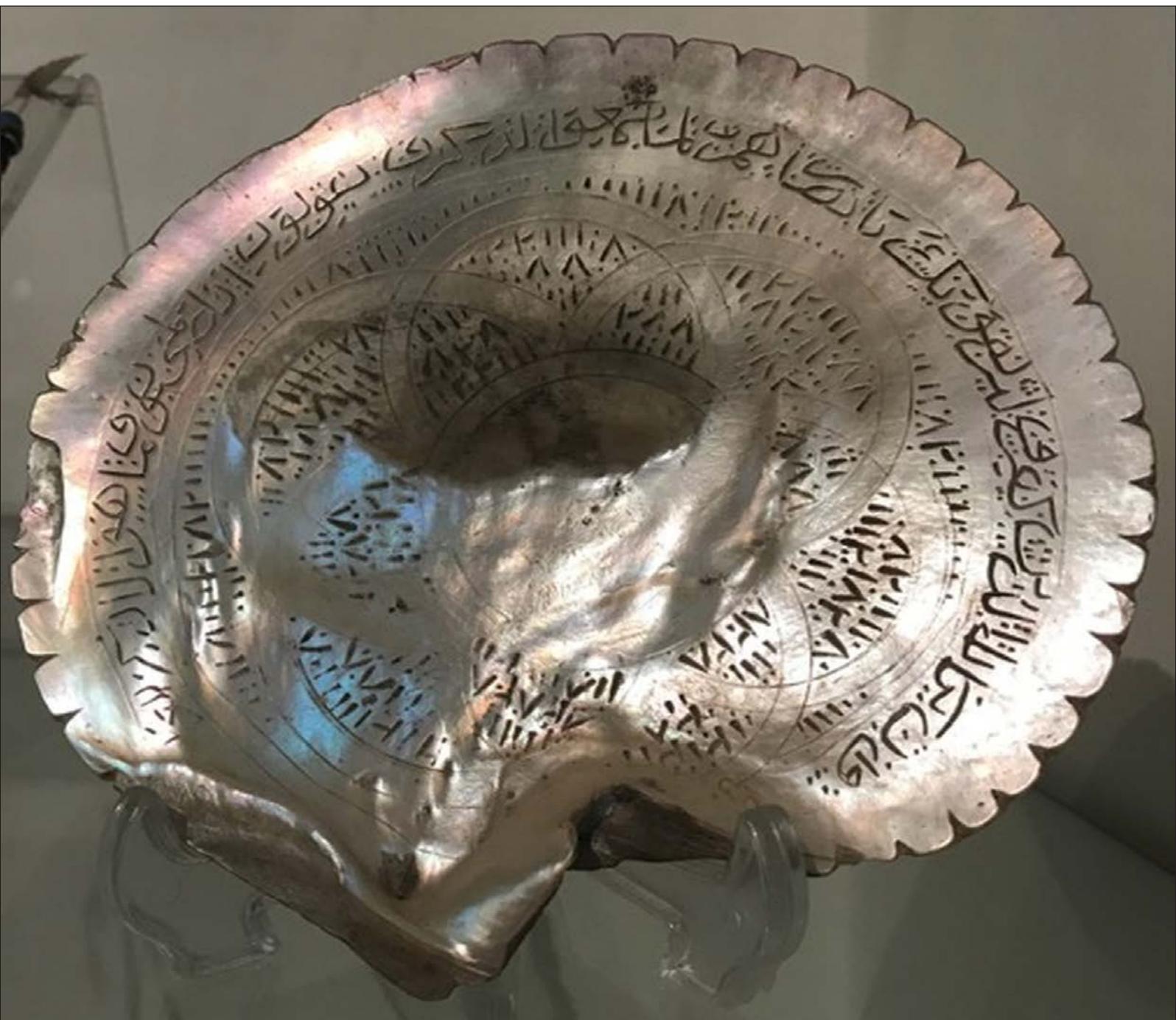
DOSSIER

TREASURES OF THE SEA: ART BEFORE CRAFT?

Edited by Avinoam Shalem

TESOROS DEL MAR: ¿EL ARTE ANTES DE LA DESTREZA?

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MOTHER-OF-PEARL INCISED WITH VERSES 51 AND 52 OF SURAT AL-QALAM ('THE PEN') AND WITH MAGICAL NUMBERS. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY OF AZERBAIJAN, BAKU. Photo: Avinoam Shalem.

TREASURES OF THE SEA: ART BEFORE CRAFT. AN INTRODUCTION

TESOROS DEL MAR: ¿EL ARTE ANTES DE LA DESTREZA? INTRODUCCIÓN

Avinoam Shalem¹

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Abstract

The sea, like an embryo or a foetus, seems to represent «a sort of first stage in the advancement of superior life forms». Its fluid character suggests an early age of our world's foundation, before fluid turns to stone. It appears as an archaic cosmos into which one descends in order to find hidden treasures in its depths. How did artisans work, shape, and integrate the varied materials of the sea into an artistic oeuvre? Which meanings were attached to these materials? When, how and why were the materials' fluid origin remembered?

The sea can be considered the great global depot of the world, which includes objects of both great and ordinary character, illustrating ambitious and innocent aspirations to an equal extent. Moreover, the particular shininess of the oceanic materials, like pearls, shells or animals' skins, was usually associated with cosmic elements and thus emphasizes the pure and primal characters of these substances. The treasures of the sea were therefore beyond national. They were global. And their aquatic identity made them universal.

Metaphorically speaking, the sea, as an object, has body, shape and even face, and is demarcated by earth and air. This amorphous entity has a solid bottom, its upper surface, namely face, touches the air, and its walls constantly struggle against solid substances such as rock and stone. In addition, its depths are unknown. There, in the heart of darkness, unconsciousness resides.

This introductory essay aims at opening the so-called 'Pandora Box' of the fluid realm of the seas. It presents this space's great potential in providing us with vast amounts of historical information, usually 'lying concealed', as if under the water.

Keywords

Under-water archaeology; Cosmological Knowledge; Sea creatures; Pearls; Shells; Corals; Tortoise shells; Rock crystals.

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Resumen

El mar, como un embrión o un feto, parece representar «una especie de primera fase en el desarrollo de formas de vida superiores». Su carácter fluido sugiere un periodo temprano del origen de nuestro mundo antes de que el fluido se petrificase. Se presenta como un cosmos arcaico al que descendemos con el fin de encontrar tesoros ocultos en sus profundidades. ¿Cómo pudieron los artesanos trabajar, dar forma e integrar los distintos materiales marinos en una obra de arte? ¿Qué significados se asociaban a estos materiales? ¿Cuándo, cómo y por qué se recordaba el origen fluido de estos materiales?

El mar puede considerarse el gran almacén global del mundo, que incluye objetos de carácter especial y ordinario, exhibiendo aspiraciones ambiciosas e inocentes a partes iguales. Es más, el brillo peculiar de los materiales marinos, como perlas, conchas o pieles de animales, se asociaba normalmente con elementos cósmicos y con ello se resaltaban las características puras y primarias de estas sustancias. Los tesoros marinos traspasaban así los límites de lo nacional. Eran globales. Y su identidad acuática los hacía universales.

Hablando metafóricamente, el mar, como objeto, tiene cuerpo, forma e incluso cara y queda enmarcado entre la tierra y el aire. Esta entidad amorfa tiene un fondo sólido, una superficie superior, es decir su cara, toca el aire y sus muros luchan constantemente contra cuerpos sólidos como rocas y piedras. Además, se desconocen sus profundidades. Ahí, en el corazón de la oscuridad, reside la inconsciencia. Este ensayo introductorio pretende abrir la llamada «Caja de Pandora» del ámbito de los mares. Nos presenta el gran potencial de este espacio al proporcionarnos grandes cantidades de información histórica, normalmente «oculta», como si estuviese cubierta por agua.

Palabras clave

Arqueología submarina; conocimientos cosmológicos; criaturas marinas; perlas; conchas; caparazones de tortuga; cristal de roca

.....

«Sea and ocean history is more novel than it sounds. It admirably exemplifies a new historiography of large areas. In one sense, the inquiry revisits a traditional historical geography. At the same time, both its scope and its methods are so distinctive as to make it an exciting –and quite unpredictable– area of reflection and research».²

I.

In 1925 the water level of the Caspian Sea began receding sharply. Less than a decade later, remnants of an elongated fortified island measuring 180 by 40 meters came to light, its outline fully discernable. What was exposed appeared as a *fata morgana*: partially hidden by water and yet exposing the fundamentals of the island's stone-built wide walls and towers to the astonished citizens of Baku. The entire landmass of the elongated island, which to some extent recalls the kidney-like shape of the Caspian Sea, was completely fortified by a defensive structure. Approximately two meters in width, the fortification's walls carefully followed the curved line of the island's borders, encircling it completely. In addition, approximately fifteen semicircular towers were located along these walls, usually set at the corners and indentations of the walled structure, and another circular tower, slightly higher than the rest, appeared at the extreme corner of the island.

Soon after, in 1938, excavations began, and between 1939 and 1968 more than seven hundred inscribed panels were slowly extracted from the sea.³ These stone panels were once set next to each other to form a monumental inscribed band that ran along the fortification's walls. A great deal of information was drawn from this inscription: the names of the patron, powerful figures of the Shirvanshah dynasty as well as that of the architect, Abdul-Majid Masud oglu, were beautifully carved on the band.⁴ The fortified island would appear to be that mentioned in historical sources as the Bayil Castle (also known as the Sabayil Fortress), which was completed in 1234–35 under Shah Fairiburz III, the son of Shirvanshah Garsasb. It was most probably built in order to secure the important medieval harbour of the city of Baku. Less than a century later, in 1306, during an earthquake, this fortress sank into the sea and totally disappeared from sight and, soon after, from memory as well.

This story of the 'Atlantis of the Caspian Sea' serves to illustrate the great potential of the sea in providing us with vast amounts of historical information lying

2. This citation is taken from the opening words of HORDEN, Peregrine and PURCELL, Nicholas: «The Mediterranean and 'the New Thalassology», *The American Historical Review*, 111, 3 (2006), 722.

3. See primarily NASIROVA, Sakina: «Mystery of the Sunken Castle Sabayil: Many Questions Still Plague Archaeologists», *Azerbaijan International*, 8, 2 (2000), 42; KVACHIDZE, Viktor: «Hidden Treasures: First Expedition Beneath the Caspian», *Azerbaijan International*, 14, 4 (2006), 58–61, 63–66.

4. The inscription reads: «In the name of the Compassionate and the Merciful God. This building was built in the era of the wise, fair and by the blessed [by] God, the victorious king Allah ad-Dunya va ad-Din Shirvanshah, king of Islam and Muslims. The crown of shahs and sultans, the heir of Jam-I-Afridun Abu-I-Muzaffar Fariburz bin Garshasb Farruhzad bin Manichohr bin Afridun bin Manuchor bin Fariburz bin Salar bin Yazid bin Ahmad bin Muhammed bin Mezyad ash-Sheybani in the six-hundredth and thirty-second year of the Hijra of Mohammed Mustafa –peace be upon him».

concealed under the water. A great deal of knowledge is held within the kingdom of the sea. The Bayil Castle in Azerbaijan forms only a small part of the plethora of sunken evidence stored on or in the seabed. In fact, the sea can be considered the great global museum of the world. Its 'collection' consists of architecture, shipwrecks, goods and even refuse, all forming the vast global collection of human histories and which includes objects of both great and ordinary character, illustrating ambitious and innocent aspirations to an equal extent (I use the adjective 'innocent' alluding to Orhan Pamuk's characterization of objects displayed in his *The Museum of Innocence*⁵). Indeed, the sea was and still is the realm of not-yet-fully-explored knowledge. What fascinates about this idea is that gaining knowledge is typically associated with horizontal movement, namely with the act of conquering new territories and travelling to distant places situated beyond one's horizon. Thus going beyond the horizons clearly refers to our ability to travel and think beyond the limit of our sight and, metaphorically speaking, beyond our immediate, experienced knowledge. Cosmography is therefore perhaps the best field to illustrate a method of the production of knowledge as related to conquest and the expansion of space. But here, in the case of the sea, vertical knowledge suggests another vein for the acquisition of knowledge.⁶ Travelling into the abyss of the sea and studying the flora and fauna of this fluid space represents another field of wisdom.

The story of Alexander the Great who moves both horizontally (beyond the lands of darkness at the very end of the world) and vertically (flying up into the sky and diving into the depths of the ocean) in order to gain full cosmological knowledge of the universe is perhaps the finest example of an early human endeavour in the vertical search for knowledge. Alexander's desire to gain knowledge of the hidden abysses of the ocean by being lowered down into the sea in a huge glass bottle is illustrated in a sixteenth-century miniature of the *Khamsa* ('Quintet') of the poet Amir Khosrau Dihlavi (1253–1325, see Figure 1). This Mughal painting depicts Alexander within a transparent diving bell, the ancient device for the acquisition of the knowledge of the sea.⁷ A similar notion of the acquisition of knowledge by moving vertically downwards is to be found in the specific structure of the cosmological book by thirteenth-century cosmographer and geographer Abū Yahyā Zakariyyā ibn Muḥammad al-Qazwīnī, *'Aja'ib al-Makhlūqat wa-Ghara'ib al-Mawjūdāt* (The Wonders of Creation). In this book, which was probably completed in 1276, al-Qazwīnī organizes his description of the entire cosmos as if travelling from heaven to the surface of the earth. Thus the planets, God's throne and the heavenly divine creatures that aid the All Mighty God are minutely described in the first section of the book. Thereafter a complete report on the earth and its substances, rivers, seas, planets and animals is given. And while describing the earth's important and

5. On 'sea trash', see YAEGER, Patricia: «Editor's Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons», *PMLA*, 125, 3 (2010), 523–545.

6. See the author's forthcoming article, SHALEM, Avinoam: «Against Gravity: Vertical Knowledge as Notion of Thinking and Attitude», *Cabinet Magazine* (forthcoming).

7. CASARI, Mario: «The King Explorer: A Cosmographic Approach to the Persian Alexander», in STONEMAN, Richard, ERICKSON, Kyle and NETTON, Ian (eds.): *The Alexander Romance in Persia and the East*. Groningen, Barkhuis Publishing and Groningen University Library, 2012, 175–203.



FIGURE 1. ALEXANDER IS LOWERED INTO THE SEA, 16TH-CENTURY MINIATURE OF THE *KHAMSA* ('QUINTET') OF THE POET AMIR KHOSRAU DIHLAVI (1253–1325), INDIA, ATTRIBUTED TO MUKUNDA, INK, WATERCOLOUR, GOLD ON PAPER, 23.8 × 15.9 CM. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF ALEXANDER SMITH COCHRAN, 1913 (3.228.27).
Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.



FIGURE 2. FANTASTIC CREATURES OF THE SEA, AL-QAZWĪNĪ, ‘AJA’IB AL-MAKHLUQAT (WONDERS OF CREATION), FO. 99V, COPIED 17TH CENTURY. Harvard Art Museum/Arthur M. Sackler Museum. (Gift of Philip Hofer in memory of Eric Schroeder, 1972.3).

famous water sources, al-Qazwīnī dives, so to speak, into the depths of the seas and rivers and provides us with the full description of the underwater creatures of this fluid sphere.⁸ For example, folio 99v of al-Qazwīnī’s *‘Aja’ib al-Makhlūqat*, which was copied in the seventeenth century and is today held at the Harvard Art Museum/Arthur M. Sackler Museum (see Figure 2), provides us with illustrations of a ‘sea-rabbit’ (*arnab al-ma’* or *arnab al-bahr*) and a ‘water man’ (*insan al-ma’*).

8. See primarily BERLEKAMP, *Persis: Wonder, Image, and Cosmos in Medieval Islam*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2011.

Around 1400, as networks of trade routes widened and connectivity between the three continents grew denser, naval power and sea hegemony became the key to success. The ‘old’ world appeared as globally connected by different seas. In fact, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries can be classified as the early era of the ‘kings of the seas’. This era witnessed the reinvention of the medieval overseas trader and the creation of a new image for the global traveller. The trader became a person who in addition to making profit by carrying goods from one place to another was also regarded as an ambassador of tangible and intangible culture. The new global traveller was likewise a diplomat and a person that conveyed knowledge about ‘other’ distant spaces. Personages such as John Mandeville (1300–1371), Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304–1368), Marco Polo (d. 1324) and even Leo Africanus (1494–1554) are certainly the heroes, if not the new men, of this era. Stories about seas, creatures of the deep and exotic islands formed a large part of the growing interest in tales associated with seas and journeys. The stories of Abdullah of the Land and Abdullah of the Sea in the famous *Arabian Nights* clearly suggest how the underwater world vis-à-vis the land captivated human curiosity at this specific juncture of time. This hero descended into the depths of the sea and provided us with a survey of all sea creatures. The world of the sea appears as a mirror image of the terrestrial world in which every animal – dogs, cows, horses, elephants, lions and even human beings, female and man alike – have their marine counterparts.⁹ This notion underscores the human desire to tame the realm of the unknown and the hidden aquatic world by adapting it according to the visible cosmos on solid ground. Similar notions can also be discerned in the adventurous accounts of the *Arabian Nights*’ Sindbad of the Sea, who tells tales about fish in the form of a cow, an ass and even an owl. Numerous metal bowls decorated with silver and gold inlay and typically datable to the Mamluk period (late 13th–15th century) feature in the interior of their bases a fantastic view, as if from above, of the fanciful aquatic creatures. The bowl in the Galleria Estense in Modena (Figure 3), for example, displays at its inner base the imaginary world of the varied creatures of the sea. As Baer suggested,¹⁰ this imagery may well have been influenced by illustrations of cosmological tractates and folk tales. At any rate, the precision with which these creatures are depicted, wild and fabulous alike, and the images’ reliance on mostly scientific manuscripts reveals a novel approach during this particular age of the ‘kings of the seas’, an approach in which the semi-scientific gaze replaced the exotic.

9. See the discussion on human-like creatures of the sea in GUEST, Grace D. and ETTINGHAUSEN, Richard: «The Iconography of a Kashan Lustre Plate», *Ars Orientalis*, 4 (1961), 25–64, esp. 48–52.

10. BAER, Eva: «‘Fish-pond’ Ornaments on Persian and Mamluk Metal Vessels», *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 31, 1 (1968), 14–27.

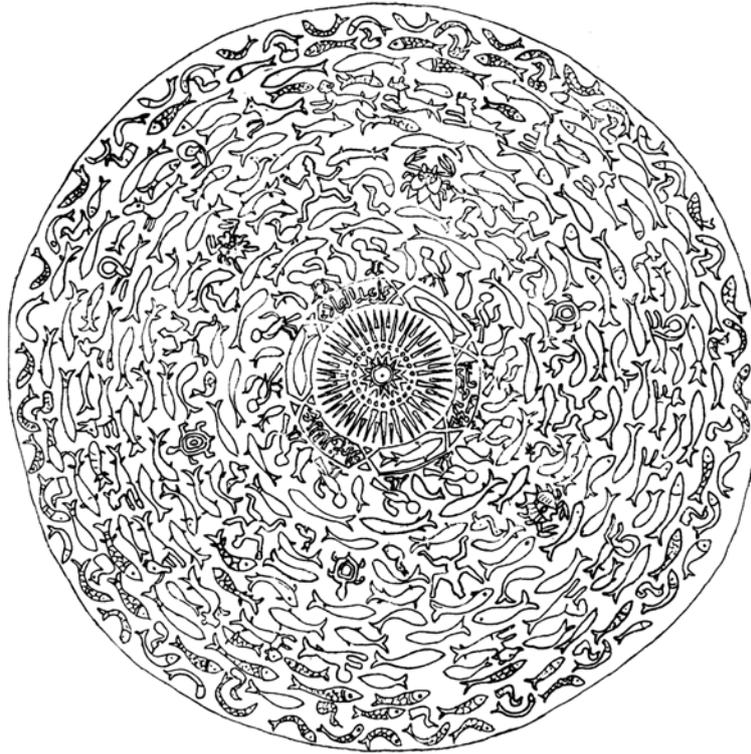


FIGURE 3. CREATURES OF THE SEA, A DRAWING OF THE INCISED DECORATION OF THE INNER BASE OF THE MAMLUK METAL BOWL FROM MODENA, AFTER EVA BAER'S *FISH POND*, 1968. Galleria Estense, Modena (inv. no. 8082).

II.

The sea, like an embryo or a foetus, seems to represent a kind of early stage in the progression of superior life forms.¹¹ Its fluid character suggests a primordial age of our world's foundation, before fluid turns to stone. The sea appears as an archaic cosmos into which one descends in order to find hidden treasures in its depths. The materials that this aquatic cosmos holds are thus archaic and primeval in the sense that they manifest these materials' prior states of existence.¹² It is thus no surprise that several legends and traditions concerning the production processes of aquatic shiny substances, particularly pearls but also specific shells and conches with glistening surfaces, claim a direct link to the four elements. In the case of pearls, it was a specific mixture of light and a drop of water that initiated the whole process of their creation.¹³ Light, air, water and even a drop of earth are said to initiate the birth

11. See the discussion of MICHELET, Jules: *The Sea*, transl. by SAINSON, Katia. Copenhagen and Los Angeles, Green Integer, 2012, esp. 99–118.

12. See primarily NERESHEIMER, Eugen: *Gaben des Meeres*. Berlin, Julius Springer, 1931.

13. SHALEM, Avinoam: «Jewels and Journeys: The Case of the Medieval Gemstone Called al-Yatima», *Muqarnas*, 14 (1997), 44. See also 'ALĪ HAZĪN, Shaikh: *The Treatise on the Nature of Pearls*, ed. and transl. by KHAN KHATAK, S. and SPIES, O. Walldorf-Hessen, Verlag für Orientkund, 1954, pp. 10–13.

of certain other of the sea's treasures. Thus the four elements of our cosmos seem to play a major role in the making of the glossy surfaces of traded substances of the sea. These fundamental elements were then translated, as if through the magic of alchemy, into material of a specific colour and shine. The association with cosmic elements emphasizes the pure and primal characters of these materials. Other substances, such as amber and coral, were usually linked to fire and blood. Nevertheless, the primeval character of these substances on the one hand and their natural quality on the other promoted these materials as either holy or talismanic, and the idea that these treasures were once hidden in the depths of the sea only later to be revealed added an extra allure to their meaning.

Pearls were, and perhaps still are, the major luxury substances offered up by the sea. They are usually associated with the foam of the sea, as if their birth from the depths of the water is announced by foam. And the fact that they were incubated within a shell adds to their purity and unblemished nature. Medieval scholar and mineralogist Al-Bīrūnī (973–1048), citing an earlier poet named Masrur, says: «My heart has been carried away by a slender-waisted damsel who has put on a flexible band around her neck. She was like a pearl in her beauty, a pearl that has been carried ashore by the sea».¹⁴ Or in another verse by the same poet: «Or she like that sheeny pearl which has smilingly stepped out of the shell after it has been brought to the shore by the foamy sea».¹⁵ Citing Abū al-Faraj bin Hind with the following verses: «The sea keeps its treasures concealed in its farthest depths and throws up a spray of foam to those who come for it. Its least gifts for its guests are pearls which it grants only to those who look for them»,¹⁶ Al-Bīrūnī further claims that «The presence of pearls at the bottom of the sea and the expulsion of foam upwards is a theme which poets have frequently resorted to».¹⁷

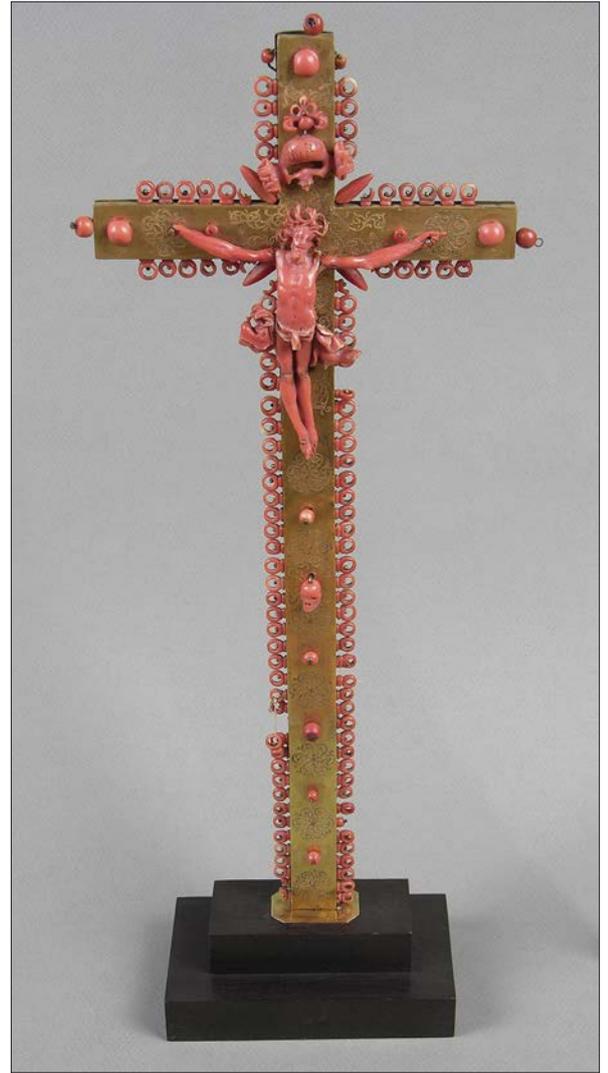


FIGURE 4. CHRIST ON THE CROSS, PROCESSIONAL CROSS (PIOTR SKARGA MEMORIAL CROSS?), FIRST HALF OF THE 17TH CENTURY, TRAPANI, SICILY, CARVED CORAL AND GILDED COPPER. Czartoryski Museum, Cracow. Photo: Laboratory Stock National Museum in Krakow.

14. AL-BĪRŪNĪ: *The Book Most Comprehensive in Knowledge on Precious Stones [Kitāb al-Jamāhir fī Ma'rīfat al-Jawāhir]* of Al-Bīrūnī, transl. by SAĪD. H.M. Islamabad, Pakistan Hijra Council, 1989, 92.

15. *Ibidem*.

16. *Idem*, 93.

17. *Ibidem*.



FIGURE 5. RELIQUARY BOX, BEFORE 1588, INDIA?, TORTOISE SHELL. Jesuit church of São Roque, Lisbon. Photo: Avinoam Shalem.

Medieval Arabic poets mention the particular mixture of small pearls (*marjān*) with coral (*bussad*). They usually compare the drop-shaped pearls to tears and the red colour of coral to blood.¹⁸ The processional cross from the treasures of the Czartoryski Museum in Cracow, on which the carved image of the suffering Christ is made out of a relatively large red coral, is in this respect undoubtedly revealing (Figure 4). The blood association is unavoidable and the assumed consolidation of this precious life fluid into a stone alludes to the eternal power of the blood of Christ and His everlasting power as the Redeemer.¹⁹ Urte Krass has recently suggested that the use of tortoise shell for the making of relic containers during the Portuguese expansion to South East Asia should not be regarded as a mere coincidence nor as the simple usage of exotic materials in a religious context but rather as bearing meanings associated with the suffering inflicted on these sea creatures during the production of this costly substance.²⁰ The transparent peach-like colour of the relic casket from the Jesuit church of São Roque in Lisbon (Figure 5) is

18. *Idem*, 113.

19. COLE, Michael: «Cellini's Blood», *The Art Bulletin*, 81, 2 (1999), 215–235.

20. KRASS, Urte: «Naked Bones, Empty Caskets, and a Faceless Bust: Christian Relics and Reliquaries Between Europe and Asia during the Early Modern Globalization» (Unpublished, n.d.). I would like to thank Urte Krass for providing me with her draft of this article.

made out of a thin and delicate tortoise shell (probably the part that protects the turtle's belly). It probably reached Lisbon before 1588 and is recorded as having been used for enshrining the relics of early Christian martyrs, Roman saints, Saint Louis King of France, parts of the eleven thousand virgins, and some earth from the Mount of Olives.²¹

Whatever meaning the substance of this superb tortoise shell casket might carry, it seems plausible that all these materials found at the depth of the sea were regarded as dear and exotic. Like all natural pigments defined as ultramarine ('over the sea') and thus referring to the distant space from which they were brought, these substances extracted from the depths of the sea (*profundo maris*) also claim their distance. But whereas the ultramarine substances allude to distance measured horizontally, namely their faraway geographies, the *profundo maris* objects refer to vertical distance, which, as mentioned above, goes beyond space and also includes the dimension of time. The *profundo maris* substances are ancient and primal and therefore indicate embryonic associations. It is tempting to suggest that the Ottoman adoration of tortoise shell and mother-of-pearl for the decoration of Holy Qur'an boxes might hint at this specific iconography, as if the box, like a shell, conceals and secures the primal word of Allah –the nascence of Islam.

And yet substances gathered from the earth are usually claimed as part of imperial, national or private property. This is particularly evident as the earth and its goods were and are controlled by authorities that secure and protect their rights at sites of natural production. As far as the goods of the sea are concerned, the question as to who owns them is much more complicated. The sea appears, at least in medieval times, as an uncontrolled (and uncontrollable) space. Thus treasures and costly substances gathered from the sea usually belonged to the one who was able to draw them from the depths. Medieval and even modern stories on goods that were either washed ashore and found by the fortunate or captured by lucky fishermen, in whose nets fish bearing costly jewels were captured, still captivate us. In the Middle Ages, treasures of the sea were beyond national; they were global, because there existed no rights on the raw materials for the goods of the globe's aquatic subsurface. And this aquatic identity thus makes them universal.

But whereas the materials discussed above originate from the sea and therefore can claim the sea as their birthplace, rock crystals offer another fascinating case study. Though found mainly in the depths of mountains, this material was traditionally believed to have aquatic origins. Ancient and medieval sources on natural histories and mineralogy related that its solid state is the result of the long petrification of water, which was congealed into solid rock. Vessels of carved rock crystals, mainly dishes and bowls, were usually decorated with sea creatures, and, moreover, small rock crystal containers were shaped into the form of fish.²² These early medieval artefacts (see, for example, Figure 6), which are mostly datable to

21. VASSALLO E SILVA, Nuno: «Cofre. Goa, meados do século XVI», in LEVENSON, Jay A. (ed.): *Encompassing the Globe: Portugal e o mundo nos séculos XVI e XVII*, exhib. cat., Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga. Lisbon, Instituto dos Museus e da Conservação, 2009, 274, no. 123. My thanks to Urte Krass who directed me to this source.

22. See primarily ALCOUFFE, Daniel: «Rock-Crystal Lamp with Marine Life» and «Rock-Crystal Lamp in the



FIGURE 6. FRAGMENT OF A ROCK CRYSTAL BOWL, 3RD–5TH CENTURY CE, ROMAN OR BYZANTINE, CARVED, 4.5 × 9.4 × 4.2 CM. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Ada Small Moore, 1955 (inv. no. 55.135.7). Photo: Museum.

the Late Antique and early Byzantine periods, might hint at the strong and popular belief in the aquatic origin of this material.²³ Al-Bīrūnī accepted early traditions about the fluid nature of rock crystals as being made from congealed water:²⁴ «All the transparent objects are, in reality, the water that has become petrified. Although this process occurs naturally, many things found in it do not bear any relationship to it, e.g., air-bubbles, water drops, leaves of grass, silvers of wood, etc».²⁵ Al-Bīrūnī adds that several remnants of plants and leaves that were seen inside two rock-crystal bowls in his possession attest to the fact that «quite obviously these things were found in the crystal when it was torrential and had greater tenuity and finer essence than pure water».²⁶ He also says that grass, wood, gravel, earth and air bubbles could be found in rock crystal and that this is the visual evidence that water transformed into crystal.²⁷ Thus, rock crystals, and to some extent glass, can be defined as substances that preserve the aquatic memory of the sea.

Shape of a Fish», in *The Treasury of San Marco, Venice*, exhib. cat., New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Milan, Olivetti, 1984, 82–87.

23. This Roman or Byzantine rock crystal bowl (measuring 4.5 × 9.4 × 4.2 cm) is datable between the 3rd and the 5th centuries. It is kept at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (inv. no. 55.137.7). For early Islamic rock crystals carved into a fish-shaped form, see SHALEM, Avinoam: *Islam Christianized: Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Treasuries of the Latin West*. Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1996, 192–194.

24. AL-BĪRŪNĪ. *Op. cit.* 160.

25. See *Idem*, 34.

26. *Idem*, 163.

27. *Ibidem*.

III.



FIGURE 7. VIEW OF THE CASPIAN SEA, BAKU, AUGUST 2017. Photo: Avinoam Shalem.

However, let us think for a moment about the sea as an object. Let us think about it as an object that has body, shape and, if fluid, as an entity that is defined and formed by the substances attached to it –its borders. The sea is demarcated by earth and air. This amorphous entity has a solid bottom and its upper surface touches the air. Its walls, so to speak, constantly struggle against solid substances such as rock and stone. This eternal fight that the sea devoutly maintains against its solid enemy, the earth, results in the production of sand –the soft line of the seashore. But this soft substance attests to the unrelenting aspiration of the sea to conquer space. Indeed, sand is, metaphorically speaking, the blood and wounds, the stuff produced when there are victims of war. Tide and ebb and the waves of the sea, once termed by Jules Michelet as the «pulse of the sea», are the testament, as the author explains, to the sea’s «connection and interactions with the great nations of heavens».²⁸ As any object, the sea has its own internal part, namely the underwater world located in its depth; but it has its outer part too. This is its big and wide surface. Shaped by the wind, this surface creates the sea’s face.²⁹ In fact, there are two visible lines which define the body of the sea. The first one is straight, the horizon which marks the sea’s uppermost limit, in other words its interaction

28. MICHELET, Jules. *Op. cit.* 52.

29. BAADER, Hannah: «Gesicht. Zu einer Geschichte des Meeres», in BAADER, Hannah and WOLF, Gerhard (eds.): *Das Meer, der Tausch und die Grenzen der Repräsentation*. Zurich and Berlin, Diaphanes, 2010, 15–40. On seascape, see also MILLER, Peter N.: «Introduction: The Sea Is the Land’s Edge Also», in MILLER, Peter N. (ed.): *The Sea: Thalassography and Historiography*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2013, 1–26.



FIGURE 8. VIEW OF THE COAST OF THE ATLANTIC OCEAN IN SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO, MARCH 2017. Photo: Avinoam Shalem.

with the sky; the second is curved and sinuous, the shoreline which defines the sea's breadth (see Figures 7 and 8). Thus, like Michelet's poetical approach to the sea, this object can be analysed and defined according to its shores, beaches, islands, the rivers that merge into it, but also the blowing wind, breeze and storm, sun and light, moon and night, etc. And then there is the ocean and the sea, the lake and the pond, the river and the brook, the beach and the esplanade, and even the bridge and the lighthouse. As Kurban Said relates in his famous novel *Ali and Nino* while describing the esplanade of Baku: «the Caspian Sea, salty and lead coloured, was licking the granite stones».³⁰

The sea's surface has many faces. And these faces change expressions, from calm and serene to angry and vindictive. On this surface people, culture and goods move. In ancient times, ships and boats slid upon the sea, and the adventurous rode its waves in search of new territories and human settlements. But beyond the faculty of transfer that its surface provides, the sea also produces a unique visual effect. Ernst Bloch, in his essay «Erstaunen am Rheinflall» («Astonishment at the Rhine Falls») first published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 7 December 1933, speaks of the specific awe that is experienced in front of the waterfalls in Schaffhausen. One can use his experience to define the surface of the sea. Bloch calls our attention to the fantastically imprecise aesthetic experience when confronted with the constantly

30. SAID, Kurban: *Ali and Nino*, transl. by GRAMAN, Jenia. New York, Anchor Books, 2000, 79.

changing forms of the waters as they fall. He writes: «The non-subjective content of the experience of awe relevant here [before the Rhine Falls] is still often imprecise, something even fantastically imprecise; yet it is certainly never empty, never meaningless. On the contrary, when this specific imprecision is sharply focused, it allows something still fermenting within the impressed to become objectively recognizable. Here, something goes with us into its own meaning, into a content that itself has not yet been determinately brought out».³¹

Bloch discovers in front of the surfaces of the mass of water the specific aesthetic experience of the not-yet-articulated-into-a-solid-and-fixed-form. Surfaces of waterfalls and of seas display to us the everlasting becoming states of this fluid substance.

IV.

On 15 May 2017, images of a «mysterious sea creature» that washed ashore in Indonesia inundated the news.³² The mysterious creature was later defined by scientists as a decomposing baleen whale. But the interest and wonder that it raised demonstrates how our imagination of the sea is linked to the unknown and to marvel. This huge sea creature embodies both fear and curiosity, and it is likely that the mixture of both makes this image appealing. The mammoth size of it confirms again our perception of the world of the sea as primeval and archaic. The whale appears as an aquatic dinosaur, like an animal that has survived Noah's flood, and is therefore a relic of the age of giants – a primitive *sui generis*. The depths of the sea are indeed unknown. There, in the heart of darkness, unconsciousness resides. This unknown realm, like any faraway land, produces monsters. Images of the abysses of the sea took the shape of a huge disembodied mask, the personification of Oceanus, which undoubtedly implies apotropaic significances. Moreover, as Fabio Barry recently suggested, this image symbolizes «a great cosmic power, the aboriginal watery mass from which the Greek world was born».³³ It is no wonder then that the sea also appears as evil and treacherous. Sea monsters in the form of medusas, snakes and octopuses, and hybrid creatures such as the sirens of the seas and the Melusine of the fresh waters deceive and lure us into the depths of darkness, bringing upon us death and misfortune. And yet the sea is not only the great graveyard on earth or the void abyss of our cosmos but also a space of purification and rebirth. Jonah was thrown into the jaws of a sea monster () but was afterwards vomited to the shore and reborn. Venus, the goddess of victory and fertility was born, like a pearl, from

31. BLOCH, Ernst: «Astonishment at the Rhine Falls», transl. by JORON, Andrew, in BLOCH, Ernst: *Literary Essays*, transl. by JORON, Andrew et al. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, 383.

32. See PLEASANCE, Chris: «Mysterious sea creature that washed up on an Indonesian beach was a decomposing baleen whale, scientists reveal», *MailOnline*, 15 May 2017, <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4507144/Sea-creature-washed-Indonesia-baleen-whale.html>>.

33. BARRY, Fabio: «Walking on Water: Cosmic Floors in Antiquity and the Middle Ages», *The Art Bulletin*, 89, 4 (2007), 632. See also BARRY, Fabio: «The Mouth of Truth and the Forum Boarium: Oceanus, Hercules, and Hadrian», *The Art Bulletin*, 93, 1 (2011), 7–37.



FIGURE 9. JONAH SARCOPHAGUS (DETAIL), JONAH THROWN INTO THE JAWS OF THE FISH, C.300 CE, PROBABLY ROME, MARBLE. Vatican Museum, Rome (inv. no. 31448). Photo: Avinoam Shalem.

the waves of the sea. Indeed, as Leonard Cohen sang about Jesus in his famous «Suzanne»: «And when He knew for certain / Only drowning men could see Him / He said, All men will be sailors then / Until the sea shall free them».

The sea is, metaphorically speaking, a temporary prison. It is a space of incubation, as if a womb. This aspect has been taken up by numerous modern scholars whose interests mainly lies in cultural studies, aesthetics and psychology.³⁴ The sea appears in a modern context as the kingdom of the unconscious, of sleep and oblivion,

34. The list of modern scholars interested in the social and cultural meanings and symbolism of the sea is too vast to be mentioned here. See primarily COOMARASWAMY, Ananda K.: «The Cult of Life: What Are the Waters?», in COOMARASWAMY, Ananda K.: *Yakṣas: Essays in the Water Cosmology*, ed. by SCHROEDER, Paul. Bombay, Yakils House, 1993, 179–206; ELIADE, Mircea: *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, transl. by Trask, Willard R. Orlando, Harcourt, Inc., 1959, 129–136 (on aquatic symbolism and baptism); see also the discussion of the symbolism of conchs and water in ELIADE, Mircea: *Ewige Bilder und Sinnbilder. Über die magisch-religiöse Symbolik*. Frankfurt am Main, Insel Verlag, 1998, 141–189; BACHELARD, Gaston: *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, transl. by FARRELL, Edith R. Dallas, The Pegasus Foundation, 1999; see also the discussion of shells in BACHELARD, Gaston: *The Poetics of Space*, transl. by JOLAS, Maria. Boston, Beacon Press, 1969, 105–135; FERENCZI, Sándor: *Thalassa: A Theory of Genitality*, transl. by BUNKER, Henry A. New York, The Norton Library, 1968; PAINE, Lincoln: *The Sea and Civilization: A Maritime History of the World*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2013; HORDEN, Peregrine and PURCELL, Nicholas: *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*. Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2000; ABULAFIA, David: «Mediterraneans», in HARRIS, W.V. (ed.): *Rethinking the Mediterranean*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, 64–93; ABULAFIA, David: «Introduction: What is the Mediterranean», in ABULAFIA, David (ed.): *The Mediterranean in History*. London, Thames and Hudson, 2003, 11–27.



FIGURE 10. SEA ANEMONES CLASSIFIED AS ACTINIAE (JELLYFISH), FROM ERNST HAECKEL, *KUNSTFORMEN DER NATUR* (LEIPZIG AND VIENNA, 1904), PLATE 49.

and stands always in contradiction to earth. Yet, as claimed in Darwin's evolutionary theory, the sea forms part of phylogenesis studies. It marks a stage in the physical (and emotional) evolution of species. Ernst Haeckel is perhaps the best example for providing us with the phylogenesis of species and the aquatic stage of living creatures (Figure 10).³⁵ Haeckel's famous volume *Kunstformen der Natur* (*Art Forms in Nature*) was vitally important for the influence of water imagery and the use of water symbolism in modern art and architecture –in Art Nouveaux, Orientalism and even in the contemporary architecture of Zaha Hadid. But this is another story to be told elsewhere.

This volume aims at fulfilling the prophetic sayings of Horden and Purcell cited at the very beginning of this article about the capacity of the sea to construct a novel area for reflection and research. And indeed the articles published in this volume pursue this potential. They aim to either reflect upon the poetic values and metaphoric significances of the sea, or to analyse, historically and culturally, issues associated with it, be it its imagery, goods extracted from its depths or the specific architecture that works to tame and mediate between water and soil.

In the Middle Ages, when nature was not fully freed from religious belief and enlightened ideas that promoted the necessary distinction between human and nature for the construction of modern individual consciousness were yet to be born, seas and lakes were all regarded as the creation of God, and their treasures manifested His Glory. For, as stated in the Qur'ān, in Sura 55: 19–20, the seas, the salty and the fresh (namely sweet water), are His creation and even the system by which they operate tell of Allah's incomparable excellence: «He released the two bodies of [fresh and salt] water. They meet, yet there is a barrier between them they do not cross».

35. HAECKEL, Ernst: *Kunstformen der Natur*. Leipzig and Vienna, Verlag des Bibliographischen Instituts, 1904.

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5 ESPACIO, TIEMPO Y FORMA

UNED

SERIE VII HISTORIA DEL ARTE
REVISTA DE LA FACULTAD DE GEOGRAFÍA E HISTORIA

Dossier by Avinoam Shalem: *Treasures of the Sea: Art before Craft? · Tesoros del mar: ¿El Arte antes de la destreza?* por Avinoam Shalem

15 AVINOAM SHALEM (GUEST EDITOR)
Introduction · Introducción

35 BARBARA BAERT
Marble and the Sea or Echo Emerging (A Ricercar) · El mármol y el mar o el surgimiento del eco (una búsqueda)

55 KAREN PINTO
In God's Eyes: The Sacrality of the Seas in the Islamic Cartographic Vision · A través de los ojos de Dios: la sacralidad de los mares en la visión cartográfica islámica

81 MATTHEW ELLIOTT GILLMAN
A Tale of Two Ivories: Elephant and Walrus · Una historia de dos marfiles: el elefante y la morsa

107 PERSIS BERLEKAMP
Reflections on a Bridge and its Waters: Fleeting Access at Jacirat b. 'Umar / Cizre / 'Ain Diwar / (Im)mobile displacements · Reflejos sobre un puente y sus aguas: un acceso rápido a Jacirat b. 'Umar / Cizre / 'Ain Diwar

141 HANNAH BAADER
Livorno, Lapis Lazuli, Geology and the Treasures of the Sea in 1604 · Livorno, lapislázuli, geología y los tesoros del mar en 1604

Miscelánea · Miscellany

171 JOAN DURAN-PORTA
Nuevos datos sobre la temprana difusión del ajedrez en los Pirineos, y una reflexión sobre las piezas de Àger · New Evidences on the Early Spread of Chess in the Pyrenees, and a Consideration about the Àger Set

189 BEGOÑA ALONSO RUIZ
La Capilla de la Anunciación en la iglesia de Santa María Magdalena de Torrelaguna (Madrid) en el contexto de la construcción de bóvedas baídas en el siglo XVI · The Chapel of the Annunciation in the Church of Santa María Magdalena in Torrelaguna (Madrid) in the Context of the Construction of Pendentives Vaults in the 16th Century

213 ESTEBAN ÁNGEL COTILLO TORREJÓN
El ciclo mariano de Francisco Caro y Andrés de Leito para la Real capilla de San Isidro en Madrid · Marian Cycle of Francisco Caro and Andrés de Leito for the Royal Chapel of San Isidro in Madrid

247 DAVID CHILLÓN RAPOSO
La sensibilidad estética siciliana en la ciudad de Sevilla a finales del siglo XVII: el origen de la devoción a Santa Rosalía · Sicilian Aesthetic Sensibility in the City Seville at the End of the 17th Century: Introduction of the Devotion to Santa Rosalía

273 DAVID SERRANO LEÓN
La relación del tiempo y la metodología en la pintura del natural. Algunos casos aislados. Euan Uglow y Antonio López · The Relationship between Time and Methodology in Naturalist Painting. Some Isolated Cases. Euan Uglow and Antonio López

289 M^a DEL PILAR GARRIDO REDONDO
Isabel Quintanilla: el realismo de lo cotidiano. ¿Hiperrealismo? · Isabel Quintanilla: The Realism of the Daily Life. Hyperrealism?

315 GUILLERMO AGUIRRE-MARTÍNEZ
La casa como puerta de entrada hacia un orden arquetípico en la obra plástica de Thomas Virnich · The House as an Entrance Door into an Archetypal Order in Thomas Virnich's Sculptural Work

333 LUCAS E. LORDUY OSÉS
Fotógrafas mexicanas: imágenes de disidencia y empoderamiento · Mexican Women Photographers: Images of Dissidence and Empowerment

353 ESTEFANÍA LÓPEZ SALAS
Durán Salgado, de la Sota, Samos: dos proyectos de una granja escuela · Durán Salgado, de la Sota, Samos: Two Projects for a Farm School

391 DANIEL LÓPEZ BRAGADO & VÍCTOR-ANTONIO LAFUENTE SÁNCHEZ
El palacio de los Condes de Alba de Aliste y su transformación en Parador Nacional de Turismo de Zamora · The Palace of the Counts of Alba de Aliste and their Transformation into Parador Nacional de Turismo of Zamora

417 PATRICIA GARCÍA-MONTÓN GONZÁLEZ
Vino cargado de materiales y proyectos. El diplomático ecuatoriano José Gabriel Navarro y el Museo del Prado · He Came with a Lot of Projects and Materials. The Ecuadorian Diplomat José Gabriel Navarro and the Prado Museum

451 PABLO ALLEPUZ GARCÍA
El impulso historiográfico y/o arqueológico en España. Génesis, recepción, posibilidades · The Historiographic and/or Archeological Impulse in Spain. Genesis, Reception, Possibilities

473 VERÓNICA CAPASSO
Sobre la construcción social del espacio: contribuciones para los estudios sociales del arte · About social Construction of Space: Contributions for Social Studies of Art

AÑO 2017
NUEVA ÉPOCA
ISSN: 1130-4715
E-ISSN 2340-1478

5



ESPACIO, TIEMPO Y FORMA

Reseñas · Book Review

493 AMPARO SERRANO DE HARO: Algunos libros recientes de arte y género
BARROSO VILLAR, Julia, *Mujeres árabes en las artes visuales*, Zaragoza,
Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2016.

MÉNDEZ BAIGES, Maite (ed.), *Arte Escrita: texto, imagen y género en el arte contemporáneo*, Granada , Comaresarte, 2017.

495 JOSÉ ANTONIO VIGARA ZAFRA
PUIG, Isidro; COMPANY, Ximo; GARRIDO, Carmen; HERRERO, Miguel
Àngel, *Francisco de Goya. Carlos IV*. Lleida, CAEM-Universitat de Lleida, 2016.

497 BORJA FRANCO LLOPIS
IRIGOYEN-GARCÍA, Javier: *Moors Dressed as Moors. Clothing, Social Distinction, and Ethnicity in Early Modern Iberia*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2017.

501 ANTONIO PERLA DE LAS PARRAS
LAGUNA PAÚL, Teresa (coord.): *Facistol de la catedral de Sevilla. Estudios y recuperación*, Sevilla, Editorial Universidad de Sevilla, Cabildo de la S.M.P.I. Catedral de Sevilla, 2016