

SÃO ROQUE

Antiques & Art Gallery

A Wine Cup — Gujarat, India, 16th century



A WINE CUP

Mother-of-pearl and silver
Gujarat, India, 16th century
Dim.: 7.0 × 17.0 × 8.0 cm
F767

Assimilated by diverse peoples, these objects were used in the sixteenth century, particularly by the Safavid emperors, in Mughal India and later by the sultans of the Deccan, as wine cups. Boat-shaped vessels were also used by beggars, large bowls known as *kashkul*, larger in size and made of metal, and used for begging for food on the streets. Although several examples of these vessels from metal and jade are known, mother-of-pearl wine cups are extremely rare: there are some references in the literature of their existence, but from all the research made by São Roque, no other example could be found in the most important collections all over the world.

The huge appreciation for these artefacts in Europe at that time, objects made from rare and exotic materials such as coconut shell, coral, mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell, resulted in their integration into large royal collections and European courts, mirroring the high status, power and the personality of its possessor. Fulfilling the eagerness to collect precious and exotic rarities, these objects were avidly sought after and highly coveted, giving form to well-known Chambers of Wonders by great European collectors. Not only did these objects illustrate the natural wonders of the Universe, they were also believed to possess medicinal properties and magical virtues. Renaissance Humanism allegorically associated the spiral of the green turban snail with the forces of nature and as an element of growth and to the dimension of time.

Turbo marmoratus, or green turban snail is a large species of marine gastropod which lives in large tropical reefs in the Indian

and Pacific Oceans. Its mysterious origins, unusual shape, symbolism, aphrodisiac powers, and hollow shape, have all made it into the quintessential vessel for drinking wine, at a time when the variety of shapes of cups and goblets was yet to be assimilated, vessels which were implements solely used by the aristocracy, either for display and ceremonial, and for hosting special guests.

This boat-shaped mother-of-pearl wine cup made from two hemispherical-shaped green turban snail conch plaques joined by square plaques. The rim is decorated with a pearl-like frieze terminating in elephant heads. The cup rest on oval base.

The charm of these precious object lies not only in the natural beauty of their material, but also in the ingenious craftsmanship. Featuring an exotic boat-shaped, the cup terminal are shaped as two elephant heads with their trunks upwards, which symbolises good luck for to those who drink from such a cup.

The boat-shaped profile is highly symbolic and entails a deep respect for an ancestral group of people of Chinese origin. According to the famous poet Tao Yuanming, who lived during the Jin Dynasty (265 – 420), the origin of boat-shaped vessels lies within the culture of a long-lost people from the mountains of Wuling in the north of China, a region crossed by dense rivers, the source of their survival (...) who lived in the water and died on board their boats (...)¹. ↗

¹ See: CALVÃO, João; CURVELO Alexandra; [et al], *Presença Portuguesa na Ásia, Fundação Oriente*, 2008, p. 71; ROGERS, J. M.; ABRAHAM, Rudolf; [et al], *The arts of Islam: treasures from the Khalili Collection*, Overlook Press, New York, 2010, p. 35.





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