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THE DUCHESS, THE BRAHMIN, AND THE CHANK SHELL

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Serious shell collecting began during the Renaissance, first among general scholars or naturalists such as the humanist scholar, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, (1467-1536); the Swiss Father of Zoology, Conrad Gesner, (1516-65); and the encyclopedist, Ulisse Aldrovandi of Bologna, (1552-1605). These generalists were succeeded by physicians, such as Martin Lister (1639-1712), and apothecaries, such as Albert Seba (1665-1736). Then there were the nobility who could have their shell collections described and figured in elegant volumes such as that by Niccolo Gualtieri (1688-1744) on the collection of Cosimo de'Medici of Florence (Coomans, 1985).

By the late 18th century shell collections and curio collections had become the rage among royalty and the nobility. On April 24, 1786 began the sale of the "Genuine

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collection of the late Noble Possessor, Margaret Cavendish Bentinck (1714-1785), Duchess Dowager of Portland" which lasted for thirty-seven days. The preface to the auction catalogue claimed that this shell collection was the finest in Europe, that one fourth of the species had not been named by Linnaeus. Her Grace that had wished to have these described by the latter's pupil, Dr. David Solander (1736-1782), who died before finishing the task. When she died three years later, it was discovered she was heavily in debt, hence the auction. During her lifetime the Duchess became the leader of the British dilettanti. She entertained many visitors at both her mansion in Whitehall and at her great house at Bulstrode in Buckinghamshire. It is said that she was equally at home serving breakfast to King George III or botanising with Jean Jacques Rousseau (Dance, 1986: 73).

Solander and Sir Joseph Banks (1744-1820) had accompanied Captain James Cook (1728-1779) on his first voyage of discovery (1768-1771), and the friendly relations of the Duchess with them made it possible for her to acquire many rare shells that had been brought back on the *Endeavour* from the "South Sea." Wilkins (1955) gives a vivid account of both Solander and Banks, as well as details on the subsequent dispersal of the Portland Museum.

The anonymously printed catalogue, usually referred to as *The Portland Catalogue*, contains a number of new molluscan names based on figures from pre-Linnaean works that are regarded as having been validly introduced. A number of them are followed by an "S." Dance (1962) showed that all these molluscan names should be attributed to the Rev. John Lightfoot (1732-1788), chaplain, librarian, and mentor to Her Grace, and himself a student of botany and conchology, since it was he who produced the auction

catalogue. Copies of *The Catalogue* were numbered, 1224 being the highest I have seen.

In the world of Art, the most famous piece in the collection was the so-called Portland Vase. It is illustrated in an engraving, present in some copies of the *Catalogue*, which, with the aid of an imaginary mirror, shows it from both sides (Figure 1). The vase, in the Greek style, was probably made in Rome during the reign of the first emperor Augustus (27BC-14AD), and had been in the Barberini Palace, Rome in 1642. It was purchased by Sir William Hamilton and sold in 1784 to the Duchess of Portland just a year before her death (Keynes, 1998). It was the penultimate lot auctioned, 4155, and *The Catalogue* reveals "It is the identical urn which contained the ashes of the Roman emperor Alexander Severus and his mother Mammea, which was deposited in the earth about the year 235 after Christ, and was dug up by order of Pope Barberini named Urban VIII between the years 1623 and 1644." It was purchased at the auction by the third Duke of Portland for 980 guineas, loaned to the British Museum in 1810, and was finally purchased by the Museum's trustees during 1945. It had been smashed by a crazy scene-painter in 1845 and rather poorly repaired. It was later more carefully restored as reported in *The Illustrated London News* (Anonymous, 1946), and even more so in 1988-89 (Williams, 1989). A recent exhibit of *The Art of the Victoria and Albert Museum* (Poulet, 1998) at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, included one of the thirty-one original reproductions of this celebrated vase (ca. 1790) by

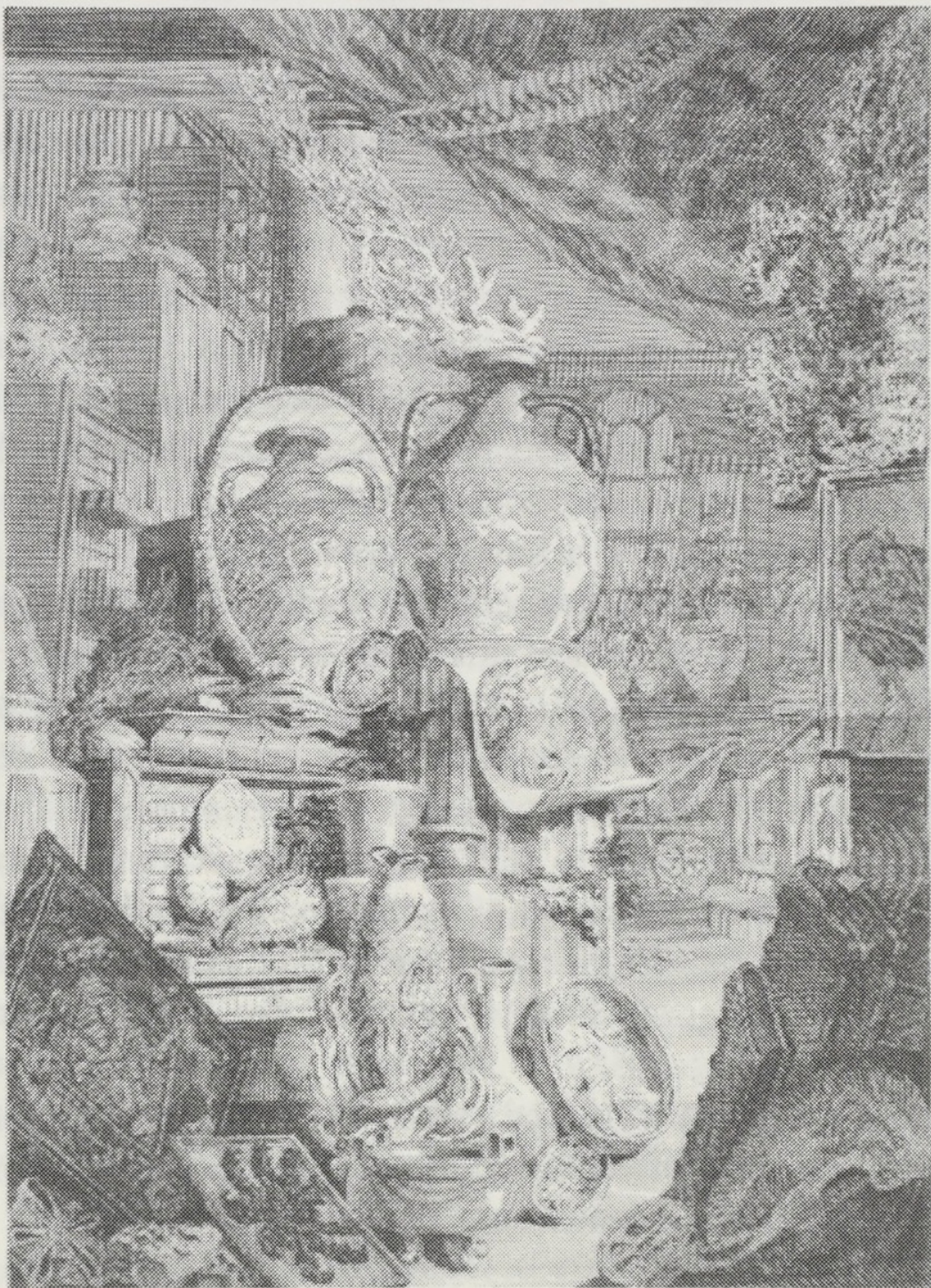


Figure 1. Frontispiece to "*The Portland Catalogue*"
(Reduced in size)

the famous potter Josiah Wedgwood, (Baker and Richardson 1998: 309, fig. 140) who was the grandfather of Charles Darwin's wife, Emma. Viewing the vase brought to mind the Boston collector, Gretchen Osgood Warren who like de'Medici and the Duchess, had both position and money which she used to enhance her shell collection.

Mrs. Warren was the eldest child of Boston Brahmins, Hamilton Osgood and Margaret Cushing Pearmain. Osgood was a well-known doctor who had studied in Europe with Rudolf L.C. Virchow (1821-1902), probably the most prominent nineteenth century, German physician and later with Louis Pasteur (1822-1905) in Paris. Osgood brought Pasteur's rabies antitoxin back to the United States, which made him famous. His daughter Gretchen was both beautiful and talented. She studied singing as a mezzo-soprano under Gabriel Fauré. Later, in 1907, when she and her husband were studying at Oxford, she won a Double First in Philosophy. Returning to the United States, she was offered a lectureship at Wellesley College and a deanship at Radcliffe, both declined. On the recommendation of William James, her article, *A Philosophical Aspect of Science*, was published in 1910. It was rather critically dealt with by the anonymous editor of *The Monist* (Anonymous, 1910).

Gretchen married Frederick Fiske Warren in 1891, and their daughter, Rachel, was born in 1892. At the age of twenty-nine, Fiske was the youngest of the five children of Samuel Dennis Warren (1817-1888) and Susan Cornelia Clarke Warren (1825-1901). Beginning with nothing, the elder Warren made a fortune in the paper mills of the Cumberland Manufacturing Company, and left a trust which allowed his children to do as they wished. The eldest, Samuel II (1852-1910), a lawyer, businessman, and

sometime President of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, committed suicide. Henry Clarke Warren (1854-99) was a scholar at Harvard University in Sanskrit and Pali. Cornelia Lyman Warren (1857-1921) never married, but was active in philanthropy, and a major supporter of Denison House, the third college settlement house in the United States. Edward Perry Warren (1860-1928) became an expatriate collector of classical antiquities, many of which are in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, including the so-called Boston Throne, now regarded as fake by Hoving (1996). He also published *A Defense of Uranian Love* (1928) a lengthy praise of homoeroticism.

According to Green (1989: 153), the most eccentric of all the Warrens was the youngest, Frederick Fiske Warren (1862-1938). A Harvard graduate, Fiske freely expressed his opinions in his Class Reports. Even before the treaty ending the Spanish-American War was ratified by the Senate, leading opponents of America's global reach formed an Anti-Imperialist League; among them were Charles Francis Adams, Andrew Carnegie, Grover Cleveland, Charles W. Eliot, William James, Mark Twain, and Frederick Fiske Warren. Warren fell under the spell of the Philippine nationalist leader, Sixto Lopez and did not gain popularity by noting that the American presence was not welcomed by the Filipinos, or by his prescient suggestion that the occupation would cause the Japanese to increase the size of their army. He became a crank over the Single Tax movement, derived from Henry George's, *Progress and Poverty* (1879) which he had read in 1909. He owned a farm, Thanto, in Harvard, Massachusetts, where it is reported that he designed the two buildings himself, the one in which the food was prepared connected by a bridge to the one in which it was served. The house had small doors

throughout to save on materials. In addition to Thanto, the Fiske Warren's also went to Pride's Crossing north of Boston during the season and kept a winter residence at 8 Mt. Vernon Place in Boston.

Fiske and Gretchen entertained widely including guests such as Sun Yat-Sen, Booker T. Washington, William James, Clarence Darrow and Robert Frost, as well as the Single Taxers and Filipino nationalists at dinner. A copy of a letter from 1941 to her from Curator of Mollusks William J. Clench, indicates that he also was once invited to Mt. Vernon Place, where he met her daughter Rachel. John Singer Sargent had done a portrait of mother and daughter in the Gothic Room at Mrs. Gardner's Fenway Court in 1903. The painting is considered one of Sargent's best. Prose (1999: A20) has written, "Despite their tender pose [they] seem so chilly that the daughter's head resting on her mother's shoulder, could be an epaulet." It is now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It is not known when Mrs. Warren first became interested in conchology, but she began a lengthy correspondence with Hugh C. Fulton in 1938 and with Clench in the early 40's. Her primary interest in shells was their beauty of shape and color, and among her books was Thompson's, *On Growth and Form* (1942). She seems to have purchased most of her shells from Hugh C. Fulton (Late Sowerby & Fulton) of London, though some came from Ward's Natural Science Establishment, Rochester, New York.

The shells were once exhibited as art objects at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum. A letter to Mr. Clench of February 17, 1943 seems to indicate that he had shown some reluctance toward giving credence to the exhibit:

How I wish you would encourage me by seeing this small exhibition. There are hundreds of shells, and many enchanting shell-sections showing the organic and universal spiral; also several hundred photographs from nature and from nearly every art and age. These are all chosen to show spiral-influence, and to hold before eye and mind nature's faithfulness to order and beauty. I hope education will be interested and will accept the intended symbol. A brief essay on education goes with the exhibit: please be patient if I venture to send you a copy. It will come soon. Do forgive the typed letter.

Green (1989: 137) rather kindly sums up the essay *Art, Nature, Education* (1943), which accompanied the exhibit, by noting that, "she sees everything from the angle of the creative mind like a latter day Transcendentalist." Mrs. Warren also published poetry and succeeded Amy Lowell, the Imagist poet, as president of the New England Poetry Society. She only recognized poets who had written for recognized magazines or book publishers. No vanity press types were invited to join. This Brahmin lady is described in her old age by Cleveland Amory in *The Proper Bostonians* (1947: 125) as "a women of rare charm, she dedicates herself conscientiously to her salons and her writing...seldom leaves her antique-studded Beacon Hill home at all -- never, if she can help it, for purely social engagements." Guests, according to Amory, distributed themselves around a large dining room, among fragile seashells and almost equally fragile chairs, sipped tea or sherry, and discussed poetry or philosophy.

When she died in 1961 at the age of 90, most of her shells were presented to the Boston Museum of Science, where some are still on display. The shells "of scientific value" had been promised to the Museum of Comparative Zoology. In 1962, Clench, S.L.H. Fuller and I went to 8 Mount Vernon Place to pick them up. Her daughter Rachel, then herself old, explained that her husband Robert

C. Barton had been a professional Irish Revolutionary, spent a lot of time in prison, and that she was short of funds, so I gave her \$200 for the few books and shells. In addition to some attractive displays her mother had created showing the variation of the Cuban land snail, *Polymita picta* (Born), and various other gastropods, there was from the collection of the Duchess of Portland:

"Lot 4023. A very fine reversed *Voluta ponderosa*, S: or heavy Volute, *extremely scarce*, from the East-Indies. A direct one is figured in Favanne, [1780] pl. 35 fig. 1." Since *A Marked Catalogue* (see under: Lightfoot, J., 1786) was published after the sale, we know that this shell was purchased by Dillon for 4 pounds and 8 shillings. An old label indicates that it was subsequently purchased by Charles Alexandre de Calonne, sometime Contrôleur général de Finances of France, who escaped to England with head and collection before the Revolution. His collection was sold in England and the label indicates that it was lot 691a in the sales catalogue prepared by Humphrey (1797). Whether it became part of the stock of the Sowerbys is moot, but it was eventually sold by Hugh C. Fulton, Conchologist to Mrs. Warren.

The first citation of *Voluta ponderosa* was for lot 566 (sold to Sykes for 5 shillings and 6 pence). Dall (1921: 98) pointed out that the printer of *The Portland Catalogue* made a typographical error in the names of Martini and Martyn, "but the references made it clear in every case, which is meant." This had been previously obvious to Dillwyn (1817), but not to Clench (1964) or Rehder (1967: 8) who was unaware that the references to Martyn 916 is actually to Martini (1777, pl. 95, fig. 916). This specimen from Martini's collection is extant. It is the type specimen of *Voluta ponderosa* and is now on display in the

Zoological Museum in Copenhagen (Abbott, 1972: 166).

Pfeiffer (1840: v) claimed that he had examined Martini's collection, then in the possession of his brother-in-law, Hermann Englebard von Nathusius (1809-1879) of Hundisburg [Hundborg, Denmark], and he (1840: 25) declared the specimen to be *Turbinella rapa* Lamarck, 1822 which Dodge (1955: 132) said is related [to *Xancus pyrum* (Linnaeus, 1767)] but is a distinct species. *Voluta ponderosa* Lightfoot, 1786 is a senior synonym of *Turbinella rapa* Lamarck, 1822, as recognized by both Pfeiffer (1840: v) and Dall (1912: 132). The second use of the taxon *Voluta ponderosa*, for lot 4023 (Figure 2) refers to a specimen of *Xancus pyrum* (Linnaeus, 1767) figured by Favanne (1780, pl. 35 fig. 1). What, if any, is the importance of this Portland specimen, MCZ 249020, without any locality data, which was enthusiastically, but mistakenly, labelled as the holotype of *V. ponderosa* by Clench? Well, it is a sinistral specimen of the sacred chank shell, which is said to occur in about one out of every hundred thousand normally dextral ones.

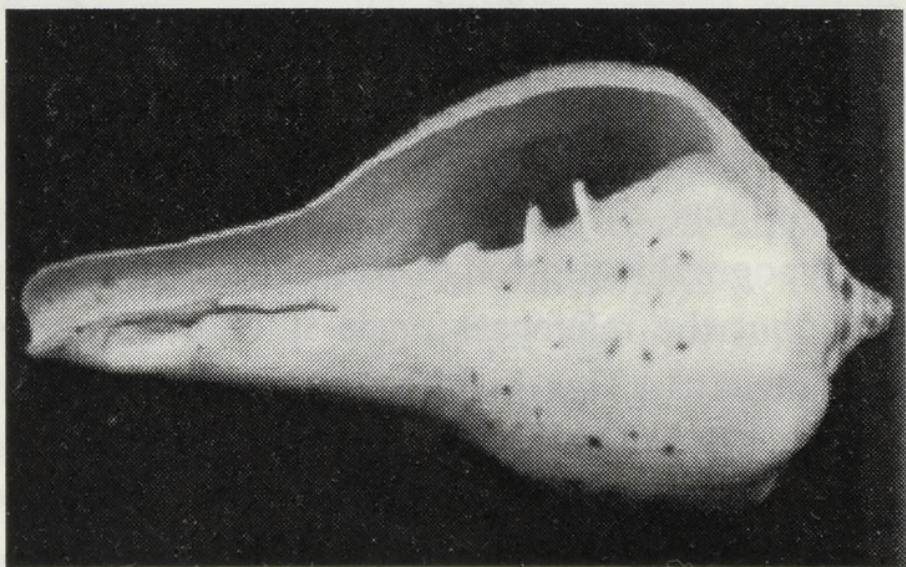


Figure 2. *Xancus pyrum* (Linnaeus, 1767) [Trincomali Coast of India] MCZ 249020. Length 83 mm, width 44 mm (approx. nat. size) = Portland Catalogue, "lot 4023. A very fine reversed *Voluta ponderosa* S. or heavy *Volute*. *extremely scarce*, from the *East-Indies*."

These are held in high religious esteem by both Indian Hindus and Buddhists. The shell is one of the symbols of Vishnu, the second god of the Hindu triad. As Tryon mentioned (1882: 69), these reversed chanks are so highly prized that they sometimes sell in Calcutta for their weight in gold or for forty to fifty pounds sterling. Clench claimed that one enterprising Yankee collected a large number of the common *Busycon sinistrum* of the Atlantic Coast and unloaded this naturally sinistral shell in India and, wisely, never returned there. A very detailed account of the sacred chank fisheries and the superstitions connected with the shell is afforded by Hornell (1914), whose taxonomy is discussed by Delsaerdt (1978). The religious use of the chank is further delineated by Rose (1974) who also first figured the Portland specimen. Jackson (1916) had earlier called the attention to the Aztec moon-cult and its relation to the chank-cult of India. Later Heine-Geldern and Exholm (1951) suggested significant parallels in the symbolic arts of southern Asia and Middle America, and subsequently Esholm (1953) wrote even more strongly, on the evidence of transpacific influences on prehistoric Mexican culture. The veneration of the Chank shells in two removed cultures may be simple coincidence, but as mentioned by Vose (1962) combined with Hindu designs such as the lotus plant and rhizome the "celestial tree" add other evidence, it should not be overlooked. While there may still be uncompromising isolationists among us, the largely overlooked works of Cohane (1969) on linguistics and Hapgood (1979) whose work on early maps indicate evidence of earlier advanced, civilized people, in the Ice Age, able to compute longitude and make maps of some lands not rediscovered until the Sixteenth Century, indicate former diffusion. While the Portland chank shell may be of

slight scientific significance, it makes a salient story.

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