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“Material Afterlives: The Shell Craze in Eighteenth-Century France and the Forgotten Mollusc”

Abstract:

Recent scholarship has introduced new and important discourse surrounding the extractive and exploitative practice of eighteenth-century shell collecting. Period knowledge of the highly mediated material reality of shells, particularly those harvested by enslaved labor in “exotic” locales, was obfuscated through an emphasis on cleaning, varnishing, and polishing of shells before they were ready to be placed on display, wiping away any trace of toil and violence tied to their extraction. Shell collecting not only inflicted the burden of enforced labor on human bodies, but often required the killing and removal of the mollusc animal bodies from their shell dwelling and refused to acknowledge the shell as a space once inhabited by a fellow living creature. The cause of the shell’s animal inhabitant was radically taken up by naturalist Michel Adanson (1727-1806) and artist Marie-Thérèse Reboul Vien (1735-1806) in their collaborative 1757 volume, *Histoire naturelle du Sénégal: coquillages*. In this published study, Adanson employed an entirely original conception of malacological classification based on the anatomy of the animals who construct and dwell within the shell, rather than the morphology of the shells themselves. Reboul Vien’s determination to include the animal bodies in her illustrations overcame the practical difficulties such a task presented. This paper critically examines the material afterlives of molluscs and the significance of Reboul Vien’s illustrations within the context of eighteenth-century French shell collecting, so connected to Enlightenment cultures of natural historical decoration and display.

Bio:

Tori Champion is a third-year doctoral candidate in the School of Art History at the University of St. Andrews. Interweaving art history with gender studies and plant humanities, Tori's work seeks to reframe traditional art historical narratives around gender, attribution, and collaboration by investigating the complexities of shared authorship and women’s agency in their own self-representation. Her dissertation will form the first complete biographical study of the eighteenth-century French artist Marie-Thérèse Reboul Vien (1735-1806). Tori has held internship positions with the Seattle Asian Art Museum and the Centre for French History and Culture at St. Andrews, and her work will appear in forthcoming special issues of *Journal18* and the *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*.