

**Minneapolis Institute of Arts  
Accessions Proposal**

---

Curator: Eike D. Schmidt

Department: DATS

Date: 6/2/2011

---



**1. Description and Summary of Object or Group of Objects:**

Loan Number: L2011.52

Artist/Maker: Unknown (Northern Germany, c. 1660-1680)

Title/Object: *Nautilus Cup*

Date: circa 1660-1680

Medium: nautilus shell; silver, parcel-gilt

Dimensions: 15 x 7 ¼ x 4 ¼ in. (38 x 18.5 x 11 cm)

Signed, marked or inscribed: Unmarked.

Country of manufacture: Germany

Vendor/Donor: Galerie J. Kugel, Paris

Credit Line: Gift of funds from Mary Agnes and Al McQuinn

Present Location: With the dealer in Maastricht, The Netherlands

**2. Artist, Style, and explanation of the proposed object:**

From the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Nautilus shells from the Indo-Pacific Ocean were imported into Europe on a regular basis, where they were admired for their exotic origins and geometric perfection. The fact that their interior chambers follow a logarithmic spiral was interpreted in early modern thought as evidence for the theory that nature from its greatest manifestations (*macrocosm*) to its smallest details (*microcosm*) follows a thorough plan. They were seen as proof of the convergence of the bodily and spiritual worlds (here: invertebrate zoology and mathematics), and often ultimately of the existence of God. Whereas a few nautilus shells were made into liturgical objects (incense burners), the vast majority were mounted as secular drinking vessels by, generally, outfitting them with mounts of silver, gilt silver and gold figures alluding to the Sea or the element of water (as the nautilus's original habitat). Silver-mounted nautilus shells were among the most characteristic products of the famous gold- and silversmithing workshops of Augsburg and Nuremberg in Southern Germany and were sought after by collector all over Europe.

The present *Nautilus cup* is particularly remarkable for its rare iconography, which blends biblical history (Jonah being ejected from the whale's mouth) with *all'antica* elements such as the naked putto riding upon the fish's back. Moreover, the stem is formed by the ancient sea god Neptune riding on a fanciful sea horse, while the silver overlay around the shell is decorated with mermaids, garlands bearing sea creatures such as a turtle and a crab, and masks, perfectly blending the diverse traditions of zoology, ancient mythology and biblical narrative. Stylistically the figures allow to localize the workshop responsible for this cup to Northern Germany, where the abundance of references to the sea would have resonated particularly well, considering that the Northern German towns of the Hanseatic League (such as Hamburg, Bremen, Lübeck) received most of their wealth from maritime trade.

Nautilus cups were (and continue to be) among the most prestigious trophy objects within silver collections, and as such they were frequently represented in still life paintings, such as those by Willem Claesz. Heda (Dutch, 1594 – c. 1670). But they are particularly representative of the objects collected in the Renaissance 'cabinets of curiosities,' a type of collection, which is an important forerunner of the modern museum as an institution. Striving to put together the rarest and most exotic, wondrous products of nature with the most astonishing accomplishments of human inventiveness and dexterity, that is of *naturalia* and *artificialia* as they were called at the time, princes and the richest merchants of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries put together the first large collections of zoological, botanical, and mineralogical specimens blended with the most exquisite works of art. These "cabinets of curiosities" were also known as *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* ("chambers of art and wonder"). They first emerged in the territory of the Holy Roman Empire and in central Europe, before spreading throughout the remainder of the continent. By combining *natura* and *artificium* in a single work, Nautilus cups can be seen as *pars pro toto* embodiments of the very concept of collecting that informed the "cabinets of curiosities" at large.

**3. Condition:** Very good.

**4. Provenance:** By c.1910, private collection, Sweden; hence by descent; c. 2010, Galerie Kugel, Paris.

**5. Related Objects:**

Nautilus cups are frequently represented in collections of historical metalwork and within 'cabinet of curiosities' installations in American museums and overseas. Internationally, the largest collections of historical silver – such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Green Vaults in Dresden and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna – also own the greatest number of Nautilus cups. One of the most elaborately mounted and precious nautilus cups (with parcel-gilt silver mounts by Nikolaus Schmidt, carried out in Nuremberg, c. 1600-1610) is in the collection of Queen Elizabeth II.

**6. Complements the existing collection:**

In accordance with the needs identified in the Collections Development Plan, the *Nautilus cup* under consideration would represent an entirely new object type and stylistic/geographical area that is otherwise absent from the MIA's collection. For the cup's incorporation of a rarity of nature, it would find its most immediate counterpart in the pair of late 16<sup>th</sup>-century coral cutlery from Venice, which was acquired last year (2010.29.1-2). In terms of its geographical and chronological origins, the *Nautilus cup* would be closest to the small and much less important *Agate cup* with mounts by the Nuremberg silversmith Joerg Ruel, c. 1600 (53.5), which includes some later replacements and therefore has been in storage for many years. (Recently the Ruel cup's authenticity has been questioned altogether.) The acquisition of the *Nautilus cup* would also make amends to the loss of the *Ostrich Egg Cup* (53.4), which was acquired as a masterpiece by the most famous Nuremberg goldsmith of his generation, Hans Petzold, and had been among the museum's greatest prides for many decades, until it was unmasked as a fake by several specialists in 1985. At any rate, the acquisition of the Ruel (or Pseudo-Ruel) and the Pseudo-Petzold pieces in 1953 demonstrates that already at that point in the museum's history the need for an important German 17<sup>th</sup>-century *naturalium* cup was evident.

Together with the *Eucharistic Chalice, Paten and Fitted Leather Case* accessioned in the April meeting (L2011.49.1-3), the *Nautilus Cup* herewith proposed would be the second German silver work of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the MIA's collection – one from Southern, the other from Northern Germany, and one from the century's first half, the other from its second half. Moreover, both for its chronological and geographical origin, and for its iconography related to the Sea, it would nicely dovetail with the *Tankard* with the scene of *Moses Crossing the Red Sea* (61.25), crafted around 1690 by Polish silversmith Nathaniel Schlaubitz (1662-1726) in Gdansk, an important Baltic seaport with strong trade relations with the Northern German *Hanse* freeports.

#### **7. Plans for exhibiting:**

If acquired, the *Nautilus Cup* shall be shown prominently in a freestanding case near the wall case dedicated to earlier silver in the Mary Agnes and Al McQuinn Gallery (G350). For its integration of a precious specimen of nature, it would find its natural place next to the rare Venetian set of *Coral Cutlery* (2010.29.1-2).

#### **8. Why do you recommend the object?**

Given the paucity of continental silver objects from the Renaissance and the Baroque in the MIA's collection (that is, from the area that has traditionally been regarded as the most desirable field of silver collecting, next to English silver of the Georgian period), the *Nautilus cup* would substantially strengthen the museum's holdings. Stylistically, it documents a region and moment of silversmithing which is regarded as being among the greatest flourishing of the medium, but which is otherwise completely missing from the museum's collection. In addition to its intrinsic quality, rarity and beauty, and its unbroken provenance from a family collection in Sweden, where it had been kept for three and a half centuries, the *Nautilus cup* will also be an excellent focus object to prompt the museum visitor to learn about the globalization of trade in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; the perception of nature in the Renaissance and Baroque; the amalgamation of diverse sources of knowledge such as ancient mythology, biblical history and natural philosophy

in early modern thought. In addition, the *Nautilus cup* also hints at the common pre-history of modern art and natural history museums, and the theoretical underpinnings that lead to the emergence of secular decorative arts collections and ultimately to the concept of the encyclopedic art museum, of which the Minneapolis Institute of Arts is the foremost representative in the Upper Midwest.

