

Jewels of Renaissance and Baroque: Pearls and Corals in the European Art of Painting

Geliş Tarihi/Received: 26.02.2020
Kabul Tarihi/Accepted: 15.05.2020

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ABSTRACT

It can be seen that, especially pearls and corals, among the precious stones that the nature present to humans as gifts, are frequently depicted in the European painting. These stones which are attractive with their beauty and luminosity, are adorning the canvases for various reasons. The aim of this study is to look at the history of European painting through the elegant world of jewelry and gemstones. It is interesting to see that pearls and corals have rich mythological and biblical connotations as well as being symbols of status and power. The time scope of the research is between 15th and 17. centuries because of the intensity of the pictures showing pearls and corals in the art historical periods of Renaissance and Baroque. Pearls are among the symbols of the love and beauty goddess Venus. It is possible to see pearls in the pictures that show the birth of Venüs in an oyster or Venus in front of a mirror. Egyptian queen Cleopatra, dropped a bead of pearl in her glass, in the banquet that she organized for Antonius. Painters who depicted the queens and royal ladies of Europe, showed them in rich jewellery decorated with pearls. In some works of art, pearls are interpreted as the sign of worldly pleasures and ambitions. Corals, believed to be protecting against the evil eye, can be seen in the paintings of young women and little children. Corals, with its strong color of red, are depicted in the compositions of Virgin Mary and Christ Child. In the Greek mythology, it is believed that Perseus created corals. Some artists, presented scenes of pearl or coral fishing on their canvases.

Keywords: European painting, Renaissance, Baroque, Jewelry, Pearl, Coral.

Almelek İşman, S. (2020). Jewels of Renaissance and Baroque: Pearls and Corals in the European Art of Painting. *ARTS: Artuklu Sanat ve Beşeri Bilimler Dergisi*, 4, ss. 10-28.

Rönesans ve Barok Dönemlerinin Değerli Taşları: Avrupa Resim Sanatında İnci ve Mercan

ÖZ

Avrupa resminde, doğanın insana armağan ettiği değerli taşlar arasında, özellikle inci ve mercanın, sıklıkla betimlendiği görülebilir. Güzellikleri ve ışıklarıyla dikkat çeken bu taşlar, çeşitli sebeplerle tuvalleri süslemektedirler. Bu çalışmanın amacı Avrupa resim tarihine, mücevher ve değerli taşların zarif dünyasından bakmaktır. İnci ve mercanın zengin mitolojik ve dinsel çağrışımlar sunmaları ve aynı zamanda statü ve güç sembolleri olduklarını izlemek ilginçtir. Araştırmanın zamansal kapsamı, inci ve mercanları gösteren resimlerin, sanat tarihsel devreler bağlamında Rönesans ve Barok dönemlerinde yoğun olması nedeniyle, 15. ve 17. yüzyıllar arasındadır. İnci, aşk ve güzellik tanrıçası Venüs'ün simgelerinden biridir. Venüs'ün bir istiridye kabuğu içinde doğuşunu anlatan ya da onu aynanın karşısında betimleyen resimlerde, incilere rastlamak mümkündür. Mısır Kraliçesi Kleopatra'nın Antonius için verdiği ziyafette, kadehine bir inci tanesi attığı anlatılır. Avrupa'nın kraliçelerinin ve soylu kadınlarının portrelerini yapan ressamalar, onları incilerle bezenmiş zengin takılarla göstermişlerdir. İnci, kimi eserlerde, dünyevi zevklerin ve hırsların sembolü olarak değerlendirilir. Kötü gözlere karşı koruduğuna inanılan mercan ise, genç kadın ve küçük çocuk resimlerinde karşımıza çıkar. Hz. Meryem ve Çocuk İsa kompozisyonlarında da mercan, güçlü kırmızı rengiyle dikkat çekmektedir. Yunan mitolojisinde Perseus'un mercanı yarattığına inanılır. Kimi ressamalar, denizden inci ya da mercan çıkarma sahnelerini tuvallerine taşımışlardır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Avrupa resmi, Rönesans, Barok, Takı, İnci, Mercan.

INTRODUCTION¹

Humans have always adorned themselves with jewelry. Beginning in the Old Stone Age over 25,000 years ago, men and women took objects that they found, drilled holes in them and wore them. Humans have used jewelry for several reasons. Jewelry offered protection against hardship. A second reason to wear jewelry was to prove status. Finally, jewelry was adornment to enhance sexual attractiveness (Salisbury, 2001, p. 171).

Jewelry is a universal form of adornment. Jewelry made from shells, stone and bones survives from prehistoric times. In the ancient world the discovery of how to work metals was an important stage in the development of the art of jewelry. Over time, metalworking techniques became more sophisticated and decoration more intricate. Renaissance jewelry shared the age's passion for splendour. By the mid 17th century, changes in fashion had introduced new styles of jewelry. While dark fabrics required elaborate gold jewelry, the new softer pastel shades became graceful backdrops for gemstones and pearls. Expanding global trade made gemstones even more available (www.vam.ac.uk).

This study aims to discover the beauty of pearls and corals appreciated by the European painters. Since both pearls and corals have mythological and biblical stories attached to them, a wide collection of art works offer the sparkle of these gemstones. Renaissance and Baroque periods, in other words, European art between the 15th and 17th centuries are emphasized because these two eras are filled with mythological and religious subjects, portraits of queens and noble ladies and allegorical depictions of nature.

PEARL

Pearls, perfected by nature and requiring no art to improve their fineness, were naturally the earliest gems known to prehistoric man (Kunz and Hugh, 2001, p. 3).

¹ This paper is a revised and extended version of the study presented at the Othello's Island: The Annual Conference on Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Nicosia, March 25-28, 2018.

Pearl is a common symbol of the moon and of women. It is associated with the moon, water and thus with the yin and yang principle in China. Because of its spherical shape and its unmatched glitter, the pearl is also regarded as a symbol of perfection. Among the Greeks, it was a symbol of love, probably due primarily due to its beauty (Becker, 2000, p. 229).

Pearl is also considered as the symbol of light and femininity among jewels. Its pale iridescence is associated with the luminous moon, its watery origins with fertility and its secret life in the shell with miraculous birth or rebirth. The pearl is an emblem both of fecundity and of purity, virginity and perfection. It is also a metaphor for Christ in the womb of Virgin Mary. In classical tradition, it was worn by the foam-born love goddess Venus. Yet it is also a symbol of purity and innocence. In the ancient world, pearls were also, straightforward symbols of wealth (the richest of all merchandise) according to the Latin writer Pliny (c. 24-79 CE), fished from the Persian Gulf centuries before the birth of Christ (Tressider, 2012, p. 186-187).

The pearl, as the 'most precious jewel' is used as a symbol of salvation, which is worth more than all the treasures of earth. "*The Kingdom of Heaven*" said Christ, according to Matthew 13:45, is like "*is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls; who when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, bought it.*" Elsewhere in Matthew the pearl represents the word of God: "*Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample under their feet...*" (Matthew 7:6) (Ferguson, 1989, p. 43).

In picturing the glories of the Heavenly City, St. John made the twelve gates of pearls (Revelation 21: 21): "*The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl.*" (Kunz and Hugh, 2001, p. 7).

Pearl is the attribute of the Saint Margaret of Antioch. Cleopatra, at her banquet, dropped a large pearl into her wine glass. Fillet and necklace of pearls are typical adornments of the richly attired earthly Venus or profane love (Hall, 1974, p. 238).

Depictions of Pearl

In the *Birth of Venus* scene (Figure 1) depicted by the Flemish Baroque artist

Cornelis de Vos (1584-1651), the presence of an elegant pearl necklace is salient. According to one of the earliest Greek poets, Hesiod (c. 700 BC), Venus was born of the sea, from the foam produced by the genitals of the castrated Uranus when they were cast upon the waters². She floated ashore on a sea shell forwarded by gentle breezes, and finally landed in Cyprus. Her Greek name, Aphrodite may be derived from aphros (foam). The type of Venus Anadyomene (rising from the sea), presenting her standing and wringing the water from her hair was originally found in classical sculpture (Hall, 1974, p. 320).

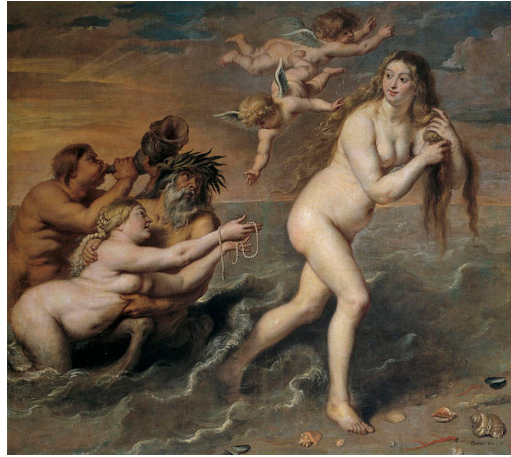


Figure 1. Cornelis de Vos, *The Birth of Venus*, 1636-38, oil on canvas, 187 x 208 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Italian Baroque painter Domenico Feti (1589-1624) was inspired by the gospel of Mathew in his picture *The Parable of the Precious Pearl* dated 1621 (Figure 2). A group of merchants are shown looking for the finest pearl which is the most precious jewel as underlined in the Bible.

² The genitals, cut off with adamant and thrown from land into the stormy sea, were carried for a long time on the waves. White foam surrounded the immortal flesh, and in it grew a girl. At first it touched on holy Cythera, from there it came to Cyprus, circled by the waves. And there the goddess came forth, lovely much revered, and grass grew up beneath her delicate feet. Her name is Aphrodite among men and gods, because she grew up in the foam (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 190-197).



Figure 2. Domenico Feti, *The Parable of the Precious Pearl*, 1621, oil on poplar wood, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Spanish Baroque painter Francisco de Zurbarán (1598-1664) depicted Saint Margaret of Antioch as a shepherdess (Figure 3). Looking closely at the picture, the necklace with white and black pearls as a reference to the meaning of her name can be seen. Margaret is a Latin name derived from Greek meaning "pearl". One of the most popular saints in the late Middle Ages, she is the patron saint of farmers, pregnant women, teachers and soldiers. It was thought that historically she was a young woman from Antioch, Turkey who lived in the fourth century (Giorgi, 2003, p. 236).

She was believed to have overcome a dragon and is shown with a shepherd's crook in reference to the legend that she was responsible for grazing the sheep of her nurse. In Zurbarán's painting she is shown in a traditional costume with a saddle bag (alforjas) over her arm, a book in her hand, and unaware of the dragon at her side (www.nationalgallery.org.uk).



Figure 3. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Saint Margaret of Antioch*, 1630-34, oil on canvas, 105 x 163 cm, National Gallery, London.

Italian Mannerist painter Alessandro Allori (1535-1607) depicted pearl fishers (Figure 4) for Palazzo Vecchio in Florence. The studiolo of Duke Francesco I de Medici is located on the second story of the Palazzo Vecchio and was used for two of the duke's main interests: geology and alchemy. The program was devised by the learned Vincenzo Borghibi, a Benedictine abbot, who had close ties to the Medici family. Thirty four paintings were commissioned in all (Zirpolo, 2016, p. 418).

Allori's contributions to the decoration of the Studiolo included the *Pearl Fishers*. Nudes, male and female, human and mythological, play about on rocks, dive off boats, and bring up shells gushing with pearls (www.wga.hu).



Figure 4. Alessandro Allori, *Pearl Fishers*, 1570-72, oil on slate, 86 x 116 cm, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.

Flemish Baroque artist Jacop Jordaens (1593-1678) depicted a significant and exciting moment in the banquet of Kleopatra (Figure 5). Pliny's *Natural History* is the source for the subject of this painting. Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, was famed not only for her intelligence and her beauty, but also for her extreme manners. Once, seeking to amaze her darling Roman commander Mark Antony with her wealth, she dissolved a large pearl in a glass of vinegar, and then drank it down to the very last drop. Jordaens pictured the moment when Cleopatra drops the pearl earring into the vessel, while Mark Antony, his companion and a servant freeze in bewilderment. The allegorical composition was seen as a judgment on pride or vanity, and this type of didactic messages were typical of the Flemish school of painting (www.arthermitage.org).



Figure 5. Jacop Jordaens, *Cleopatra's Feast*, 1653, oil on canvas, 149.3 x 156.4 cm, Hermitage Museum, Leningrad.

The Armada Portrait (c.1588) attributed to George Gower (c.1546-1596) (Figure 6) is an impressive picture of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603). It is a statement of power and authority with Queen Elizabeth I as Empress of the world and commander of the seas. It is known as *The Armada Portrait* because it commemorates the great sea battle of 1588 when the English fleet defeated the invading Spanish Armada sent to overthrow Elizabeth. The view of the battle in the two windows, recalls Elizabeth's victory. Her hand is firmly on the globe and the mermaid hints at her dominance on the seas. Her dress, in her preferred colours of black and white, also proclaims her rank and is covered with precious pearls (www.woburnabbey.co.uk).



Figure 6. George Gower, *Portrait of Elizabeth I of England, The Armada Portrait*, c. 1588, oil on panel, 105 x 133 cm, Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire.

French Baroque painter Pierre Mignard (1612-1695) depicted the recently widowed Catherine-Thérèse, Marquise de Seignelay (1662–1699) and two of her five sons as characters from Greek and Roman mythology (Figure 7). The Marquise is probably meant to represent the sea goddess Thetis, but could also be interpreted as Venus, the goddess of love, with her attributes: a scallop shell and strings of pearls. Her sons are painted as Cupid, god of love, and Achilles, a Greek hero of the Trojan war. The children gaze towards a small portrait cameo, which could be of their father, alluding to his death. The figures are surrounded by sea and different kinds of shells, references to her husband's profession in the French royal navy (www.nationalgallery.org.uk).



Figure 7. Pierre Mignard, *The Marquise de Seignelay and Two of Her Sons*, 1691, oil on canvas, 154 x 194 cm, The National Gallery, London.

Dutch Baroque artist Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675) combined vanity with portrait of a woman in an interior scene (Figure 8). The painting of the Day of Judgement on the wall takes on the role of a criticism on the woman weighing pearls. On the Day of Judgement Christ will weigh the souls of the blessed and the damned. In the face of that, this fondness of earthly riches appears empty and vain. In the commentary of a vanitas composition, pearls or pearl necklaces carry a negative symbolic value. The woman is carefully holding the scales to balance

them. Vermeer is portraying the sin of vanity by emphasizing the sparkle of the pearls taken from the boxes (Schneider, 2004, p. 56-59).



Figure 8. Johannes Vermeer, *Woman Weighing Pearls*, c. 1662, oil on canvas, 38 x 42,5 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

CORAL

Though it is sometimes considered a precious stone, coral is, in fact, a very tiny polyp. It lives in colonies, secreting a branching, calcereous skeleton that can be red, pink or white. In ancient Rome and during the Middle Ages, coral was believed to have curative properties. It was also thought to ward off evil spells. Pliny recounts that people would put coral around babies' necks as a charm against danger. These talismanic qualities were carried over into Christian iconography. In scenes of the Madonna and Child, one sometimes sees a twig of coral in Christ's hand or around his neck, as a sign of protection. A coral necklace and coral earrings are worn as ornaments by the personification of Africa in the representation of the four parts of the world (Impelluso, 2004, p. 354).

Coral, an aquatic tree, partakes of and blends together the symbolism on the one hand of the tree as the world axis and on the other that of the lower ocean. It may be equated with the roots of the terrestrial tree. Being red in color, it is also related with blood. According to Greek legend, coral grew out of the drops of blood of the Gorgon Medusa (Cirlot, 2002, p. 62).

According to the Latin poet Ovid, coral was kind of a petrified seaweed, formed at the instant that Perseus laid down the Gorgon's head, after rescuing Andromeda from the sea monster³ (Hall, 1974, p. 74).

Depictions of Coral

Northern Renaissance artist Petrus Christus (c.1410-1475) created a remarkable portrayal of a goldsmith in his shop (Figure 9) with great attention to detail, especially in the luminous jeweled, glass, and metallic objects, secular and ecclesiastical trade wares that are examples of the goldsmith's virtuosity. The main figure was long identified as Saint Eligius (the patron saint of goldsmiths). The panel is likely a vocational painting, which depicts the profession of goldsmithing and perhaps a specific goldsmith. It has been suggested that he is Willem van Vleuten, a Bruges goldsmith who worked for Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy. In 1449, the date of this painting, the duke commissioned from van Vlueten a gift for Mary of Guelders on the occasion of her marriage to James II, King of Scots. That couple may well be depicted in this painting, portrayed buying a wedding ring that is being weighed on a scale (www.metmuseum.org).

³ The hero washes his victorious hands in water newly taken from the sea: but lest the sand upon the shore might harm the viper-covered head, he first prepared a bed of springy leaves, on which he threw weeds of the sea, produced beneath the waves. On them he laid Medusa's awful face, daughter of Phorcys; and the living weeds, fresh taken from the boundless deep, imbibed the monster's poison in their spongy pith: they hardened at the touch, and felt in branch and leaf unwonted stiffness. Sea Nymphs, too, attempted to perform that prodigy on numerous other weeds, with like result: so pleased at their success, they raised new seeds, from plants wide-scattered on the salt expanse. Even from that day the coral has retained such wondrous nature, that exposed to air it hardens. Thus, a plant beneath the waves becomes a stone when taken from the sea (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4, p. 740-752).



Figure 9. Petrus Christus, *A Goldsmith in his Shop*, 1449, oil on oak panel, 85.8 x 100 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Northern Renaissance artist Bernard van Orley (1487-1541) delineated a religious scene with corals. Mary is holding a pear in her hand, one of the fruits of paradise, which presents her as the new Eve. The Christ Child sits on her knees and plays with a coral rosary. Saint John, as a boy, stands behind a column, pointing to the Sacred Scriptures that announce Christ's mission as savior. The scene takes place under a Renaissance architecture in the form of a gallery or observatory open to a garden (www.museodelprado.es).



Figure 10. Bernard van Orley, *The Virgin and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist*, 1515-1520, oil on panel, 71 x 98 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Italian Mannerist painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo (1527-1593) created an intriguing portrait with the elements of the sea. This picture is part of a series related to the basic elements: fire, water, air and earth. Arcimboldo developed an original naturalistic Mannerist style in his imaginative portraits and allegories. He created supernatural heads and figures as if they were still lifes, making collages out of fruit, plants, animals and even man made objects combined in fanciful ways. His art can be understood as a reaction to the end of the Renaissance and its new scientific understanding of nature (Stukenbrock and Töpper, 2005, p. 36).



Figure 11. Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *The Elements: Water*, 1566, oil on wood, 52 x 67 cm, 52 x 67 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Italian Mannerist painter Giorgio Vasari's (1511-1574) painting entitled *Perseus and Andromeda* (Figure 12) forms part of the artist's decorative scheme devoted to the four elements for the study of Francesco I de Medici of Florence. The program by the humanist Vincenzo Borghini, is devoted to the four elements. The artist has chosen to represent water with the mythological narrative of coral in which Perseus, Andromeda and Medusa have become the heroes of an enchanting fantasy. The Nereids, female spirits of the sea, are making merry over branches of coral they have discovered in the sea (Janson, 2001, p. 468).



Figure 12. Giorgio Vasari, *Perseus and Andromeda*, 1570-72, oil on slate, 100 x 117 cm, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.

The elegant *Coral Fishers* (Figure 13), also referred to as *Allegory of the Discovery of the New World*, by the Italian Mannerist painter Jacopo Zucchi (1541-1590) formerly decorated Cardinal Ferdinando's studiolo in the Villa Medici in Rome. Zucchi enriched mythological stories and allegorical pictures with an attention to naturalistic details (www.wga.hu).



Figure 13. Jacopo Zucchi, *The Coral Fishers*, c. 1585, oil on copper, 45 x 55 cm, Galleria Borghese, Rome.

German Baroque painter Georg Hainz's (1630-1700) painting offers an open cabinet filled with a valuable collection of coral and pearl jewellery, minaiaturea and an ivory goblet. The wonders of the nature are presented in a *kunstkammer* (art chamber in German). The term was first used in the mid 16th century to describe princely collections of paintings, precious goblets, games and natural history samples. By the end of the century the concept was widespread throughout the German courts. Its origins can be traced to the study collections of late 14th century French courts and religious institutions. Such all-embracing collections were perceived to encourage wisdom in kings and leaders. In the 15th century outstanding study collections were established in many Italian courts such as those at Urbino and Mantua. Such ordered and classified collections were forerunners of museums (Clarke, 2010, p. 139).



Figure 14. Georg Hainz, *Kunstkammer Cabinet with Ivory Goblet*, 1665-67, oil on canvas, 61 x 83,5 cm, National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen.

CONCLUSION

Precious stones are pleasant to see both in real life created by the gentle hands of nature and on canvas presented by the creative hands of the painters. Pearl and corals do offer rich connotations in many ways: mythological, biblical, religious, historical and even moral. The art historical periods of Renaissance and

Baroque have been searched to find the glamour of these gemstones. Pictures by painters of French, English, Italian, Spanish, German, Flemish and Dutch origins created between 15th and 17th centuries have been elaborated in relation to pearls and corals.

Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, recalls pearls because of the her story of birth. She may be depicted approaching to the shore of Cyprus on a shell or adorning herself with jewelry in front of a mirror on the canvases. Perseus, the hero who killed Medusa and liberated Andromeda, reminds of corals since this aquatic tree is born of the blood dripping from the severed head of Medusa.

Both pearls and corals are related to the sea, so it is only natural to see them in pictures related to water. Allori's pearl fishers and Zucchi's coral fishers show the adventure of how these precious stones are acquired by people. When Arcimboldo cretaed his enthusiastic series of portraits representing the four elements, he depicted pearls and corals as part of his water composition. Kunstkammer namely art chamber pictures may include pearls and corals as valuable collectibles from the great world of the sea.

Religious narratives and characters have also strong bonds with pearls and corals. Saint Margaret of Antioch, patron saint of childbirth, calls pearls to mind because of the meaning of her name while Saint Eligius, patron saint of goldsmiths, is often depicted with precious stones due to his vocation. Corals have been seen as a protection againts the evil eye. Rosaries or necklaces made of corals may be seen in the pictures of Virgin Mary and Christ Child as well as ordinary children. Although it has not been a common subject for pictures, Feti's painting depiction of "The Parable of the Precious Pearl" is a good example for the pearls' biblical associations.

Pearl, as an exquisite wordly possession, can be seen adorning many noble ladies in Renaissance and Baroque portraits. Queen Elisabeth is known for her love of pearls, her Armada Portrait may well be seen as an indication of this affection. Cleopatra dissolving a large pearl in a glass of vinegar during the banquet she was giving for the Roman commander Mark Antony has been an enthusiastic subject for several paintings including the one by Jordaens. Pearls had conveyed moral messages as well by being an important element of vanitas paintings.

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