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Galatea's Realm: The Art of Coral, Shells, and Marine Fossils in Early Modern Sicily, Naples, and the Maltese Islands

Thriving port cities in the western Mediterranean produced and exported a wealth of art objects made of coral, shells, and fossils—three marine substances that spoke to early modern notions of the transformative power of nature. Coral, when hardened above water, was viewed as apotropaic and became a metaphor for sacrificial blood; shells, whose spiral forms facilitated spiritual enlightenment, demonstrated the variety of divine creativity; and petrified fossils translated the ancient remains of once-living sea plants and creatures into rock. Artists exploited these metamorphic properties to convert treasures drawn from the sea into fantastic decorative objects and pictorial works. Sea materials over time fell victim to the Spanish Habsburgs, whose fight for spiritual and political dominance in the Mediterranean contributed to the depletion of aquatic resources.

Coral, shells, and fossils shaped the artistic cultures of early modern Sicily, Naples, and Malta. More than just commodities, these materials—worked or translated into a variety of media—advanced theories in natural philosophy, strengthened civic identities, heightened the power of devotional objects, and reinforced connections between water and the marvelous. My object-based, contextual study views marine materials as agentic and emblematic of an increasingly interconnected Mediterranean world, one shaped by the Habsburg theo-political agenda. While appreciating that ecology is a modern science, I employ methods in eco-materialism to understand the historical ties between natural resource extraction and colonialism in the western Mediterranean. My dissertation foregrounds the materiality of maritime art objects to understand how these works bridged local and global histories, served as cultural mediators, and enabled the expansion of knowledge about the sea.

Chapters explore the sea's influence on the early modern imagination, Mediterranean coral's adoption as a symbol of empire for Habsburg Spain, the relation between Neapolitan still life and maritime legends, and how the artistic practice of painter-naturalist Agostino Scilla helped him understand the organic nature of marine fossils.