Cup - The Frewen Cup

Object: Cup

Place of origin: England (possibly, engraved)
Netherlands (possibly, engraved)
York (repaired)

Date: ca. 1650 (engraved)
1658-1660 (repaired)

Artist/Maker: Plummer, John (goldsmith)

Materials and Techniques: Nautilus shell body, polished and engraved, with silver-gilt mounts

Museum number: M.51-1972

Gallery location: British Galleries, Room 56, The Djanogly Gallery, case 1

Public access description

Object Type
In this cup a nautilus shell forms the bowl of the standing cup. (The nautilus is a sea creature related to the squid and octopus.) The shell is set in magnificent silver-gilt mounts that transform it into a luxurious display piece.

Material & Technique
The hard outer layers of the shell have been removed, either by scraping or by using acid, to reveal the nacreous (mother-of-pearl) layer underneath, which has been polished. The decorative engraving has been blackened to provide a sharp contrast with the iridescent body.

Subjects Depicted
The design of the mounts and the engraving on the shell accentuate the marine origins of the shell itself. The accomplished engraving of the shell depicts specimens of marine life interspersed with floral and scrolling motifs. These were probably taken from a print source such as Johannes Johnstones' compilation of Historiae Naturalis de Piscibus ('Natural History of Fish', 1650-1653) by the Roman author Pliny the Elder (died 79 AD). The elaborate silver-gilt mounts incorporate marine monsters amongst waves, fish and serpents. The cover takes the form of a sea god astride a marine monster, while maidens from the Americas make up the strap mounts.

Ownership & Use
A taste for mounted nautilus cups had flourished in Northern Europe since at least the 14th century. Shells were highly prized as exotic and rare objects as well as for their talismanic (magical) properties.

Descriptive line
'The Frewen Cup'. Nautilus shell body, polished and engraved, with silver-gilt mounts. Shell engraved around 1650, mounts by John Plummer of York, 1658-1660.

Physical description

Cup, Nautilus

Dimensions
Height: 26.2 cm including finial, Width: 19 cm maximum, Depth: 11.5 cm, Diameter: 11 cm foot

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Object history note

By 1667 this cup was in the possession of Sir Stephen Frewen. Shell worked in England or The Netherlands; remounted by John Plummer in York

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O11003/the-frewen-cup-cup-plummer-john/