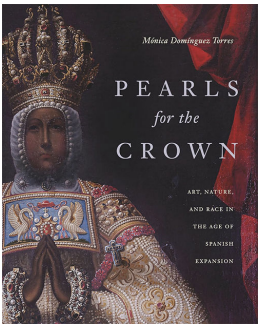
MÓNICA DOMÍNGUEZ TORRES, *PEARLS FOR THE CROWN. ART, NATURE, AND RACE IN THE AGE OF SPANISH EXPANSION*

University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2024, 218 pages with 50 color and 40 b/w ill., ISBN: 978-0-271-09681-0 (Hardback).



Reviewed by
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Pearls for the Crown provides a welcome challenge, and to some perhaps a provocation, to the field of art history. First, through the applaudable attempt to write the histories of labour and exploitation into art history and the book's ecological approach; second, as it is free from reliance on the methods that have been brought to bear by art historians in previous interpretative work on its main objects of study: sculptures, textile works, jewellery pieces, and other artefacts crafted from and with pearls as well as painted and printed representations of pearl fishing.

Mónica Domínguez Torres presents the reader with five chapters organized around key objects in a select number of places, which on the one hand are sites of pearl extraction in Venezuela – its north-east coast and the island of Cubagua, and on the other hand European sites of image and artefact production, consumption, and display that are all, to different degrees, connected to Habsburg Empire networks, namely Toledo in Spain, Florence in Italy, as well as Nuremberg and Dresden in Germany. A few discussed pieces link the two cultures of craftsmanship, for example when Torres briefly addresses Indigenous works in the Americas as

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related to European crafts through the example of South American frog-shaped artefacts (p. 62) or touches upon the Indigenous use of metal from European ships (p. 146). Yet, this is neither a book on transcultural connections in art nor on the European perception of Indigenous ingenuity, but a volume dedicated to the political instrumentalization of South American pearls in European craftmanship and the visual representation of pearl fishing practices in paintings and prints.

Chapter 1 unravels pearls' theopolitical implications via the densely pearl-embroidered vestments of a wooden image of St Mary at Toledo. Torres thoughtfully analyses representations of the pieces, which disappeared from public view in 1939. Referring to Toledo as "one of the main textile centers of Castile" (p. 29) the chapter is neither invested in the agency of the artisans in the workshops and the embroiderer Felipe de Corral nor in goldsmiths like Julián Honrado, Alejo de Montoya, or Hernando de Carrión, who made jewels for the sculpture. Instead, Torres focuses on the commissioning and gift giving of the Virgin's costly attire. She insightfully analyses how Spanish monarchs positioned themselves as chosen by God to "administer the abundant resources of the 'New World' to the glory of the Catholic Church" as pearls were presented unworthy of Indigenous people because, according to European period sources, they did not "observe the natural law" using materials found in their lands for "sacrilegious ends" (p. 42). In this way, as Torres convincingly shows, pearls became a "tool" (p. 44) in the expansion of Christendom as the Habsburg exploitation of American resources put an end to the Islamic rulers' exclusive access to pearling grounds in the Persian Gulf. They also performed "important functions in the depiction of what was considered the divine political order" in the Habsburg Empire (and beyond) playing a role in the confrontation between Catholics and Protestants (p. 42). The chapter presents the reader with the precious insight that due to "her luxurious casing giving material substance to the abstract notion of Mary's lifelong virginity" the pearl-clad figure of "the Virgin of the Sagrario [at Toledo] thus produced the visual effect of a pearl herself" (p. 34). Accordingly, Torres reads the Virgin of Sagrario at Toledo, who herself was presented pearl-like, as one of many Habsburg articulations of their God-given right to rule, an example of the Spanish Crown's "distinct piety and religious policies" (p. 19) as articulated through its conceptualization of the Immaculate Conception in the cult of St Mary, at Toledo, a place with a relatively recent Islamic past whose traces were radically eradicated.

Chapter 2 moves on to discuss jewellery. Using a frog-shaped pendant made of pearl as a key example, it unfolds a network of connections between small amphibians that traditionally carried sexual connotations and ideas on pearls in natural history treatises. Both – frogs as well as pearls – were thought to share not only medicinal powers but also "wondrous origins" (p. 56) as frogs were believed to spring to life from sun-heated mud, a process that,

according to Aristotle, also applied to the (spontaneous) generation of shells, while much discussion evolved around the origin of pearls, for example that they stemmed from dew. The chapter mentions that "pearls and frogs especially were often found together in princely collections" (p. 74), a claim that raises the question whether this pairing was indeed higher in significance and/or quantity than, say, pairings of pearls, shells, and porcelain or jewellery pieces that employ pearls as human body parts hereby engaging with the potential of the material to resemble flesh and skin meditating on the human body's as well as a shell's and a pearl's potential for metamorphosis. It is not clear why Marcia Pointon's book on the cultural history of gem stones and jewellery of 2009 remains unmentioned,[1] and why scholarship on the reception of objects with pearly surfaces, for example polished nautilus and turbo shells or artefacts covered with mother-of-pearl, is not brought into conversation with discussions of pearl artefacts in this and other chapters throughout the book. It could be speculated that this is the case because much of this literature is neither sufficiently postcolonial nor ecologically informed, but then again, work such as Marsely Kehoe's discussion of nautilus cups "between the foreign and domestic" seem to address topics related to those at the heart of *Pearls for the Crown*, namely questions of how global networks of trade and exploitation changed collective identities in Europe through the craftsmanship and display of objects with pearly surfaces.[2] This does not, of course, negate Torres' main premise but could perhaps one day be subject to closer cross-examination.

Chapter 3 compares historical records by eyewitnesses to representations of pearl fishing by Theodor De Bry. He created "a novel narrative" (p. 94) of places situated in contemporary Venezuela, most prominently the "island of pearls" Cubagua, as sites of extraction by providing a highly idealized visual validation of Spanish presence in the Americas which "served over the years as a screen for the genocide and brutal exploitation that prevailed in the Atlantic pearl trade" (p. 99). The historic contextualization directs the reader's attention to important ecological aspects such as the depletion of pearls which led to a turn to slave trafficking and was fought by the introduction of overfishing decrees.

Chapter 4 brings the reader to late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Italy, more precisely to the palaces of Medici-ruled Florence. Here, Torres' focus lies again on representations of pearl fishing, adding paintings to further examples of printed imagery. These paintings have been interpreted before (also in one of Torres' own earlier publications). Torres' neglect of Graeco-Roman references (which would have been easily discernible to Ovid-literate

1
Marcia Pointon, *Brilliant Effects. A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery*, New Haven, CT 2009.

2
Marsely Kehoe, The Nautilus Cup between Foreign and Domestic in the Dutch Golden Age, in: *Dutch Crossing* 35/3, 2013, 275–285.

European audiences) is on the one hand to be applauded as it is about time for postcolonial and ecocritical approaches to overwrite Eurocentric pathways of interpretation in art history. Yet, neglecting such pathways of interpretation completely may perhaps create fundamental problems of interpretation, too? Although mythological content in imagery is acknowledged, references to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are not explored, neither in relation to paintings in Chapter 4 nor to *Kunstkammer* collectibles in Chapter 5. Taking Allori's *Pearl Fishers* interpreted in Chapter 4 as example: isn't it the case that the depicted figures, who gesture toward a strange light behind the mountains in the backdrop, are turning their attention toward the fire caused by Phaeton, who tried to travel the skies in his father Helios' sun chariot? After all, Allori's painting was positioned between Santi di Tito's *Sisters of Phaeton* (depicting the generation of amber) and Vasari's *Perseus and Andromeda* (evoking the creation of coral), both paintings with obvious references to the *Metamorphoses* and Phaeton. As Ovid narrates, Phaeton's downfall was observed by Luna, the divine embodiment of the moon. As moon, she is arguably represented in Allori's painting above the Moon Mountains that burned before the fire caused by Phaeton reached other places, among them "Ethiopia". Apart from signalling foreign spaces such as "Ethiopia", the appearance of Luna in her planet manifestation simultaneously embodies the biggest pearl of all, namely the moon itself, which forms the vanishing point of the pearl fishers' gazes. Iconographically, imagery inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a text in which geographically accurate specifications blend with mythological realms, is the foil against which depictions of the foreign came into being before and simultaneously with imagery from foreign lands based on eyewitness accounts. How involuntarily patchy or consciously mutilated such representations of the foreign – for example of pearl fishing practices – were, was an ambivalent area manoeuvred by artists, artisans, and commissioners, but one defined as much by information trickling in from abroad as by the pre-defined moulds of representation provided by classical texts and centuries of mythologically inspired imagery. While Lia Markey writes that Francesco de Medici "may not even have been aware of the brutality involved in mining or pearl fishing, nor would it have been a concern of his",[3] Torres takes it as given that members of the European elite were well-read and informed on the matter of forced labour and slavery. Regardless of what applies in individual cases, what we can safely assume is that the early modern elite commissioners of artworks and, more importantly, the artists and artisans themselves were familiar with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Locally defined facts and figures (that go beyond the identification of commissioners and their lovers) also play a role revealing implications for early modern understandings of ecology. While it is, for example, true that Jacopo Zucchi's *The Treasures of the Sea*

[3] Lia Markey, *Imagining the Americas in Medici Florence*, University Park, PA 2015, 76.

features an abundance of references to pearl fishing practices in the Caribbean all identified in applaudable ways by Torres' painstaking and detailed research, it is equally true that this painting shows coral specimen and references to coral fishing, a practice to be situated in the Mediterranean Sea, not too far from the Persian Gulf which, in addition to the Caribbean that the book focuses on, was the major alternative source of salt water pearls during the early modern period. The "apparent geographic incongruence – presenting pearl traders from the Americas and the Persian Gulf in the same space" that Torres observes in a painting by Antonio Tempesta – may "be explained by the fact that [...] in 1580, the main pearling centers of the world were nominally under Spanish Habsburg control" as she tentatively suggests (p. 120). Yet, is it not also relevant that "the Indies" – a period term that would have benefitted from further unpacking – were a complex and ambivalent site and that images such as those by Allori, Zucchi, and Tempesta are not about geographic and/or historic accuracy (and do not aim at them as their main goal), but instead celebrate ambivalence and the potential for metamorphoses in objects (e.g. coral that changes from soft to hard) and people (e.g. identifiable Italian men and women customized as "Indians") as well as mythological figures? Similarly, the "political meanings" of scenes of hunting and fishing for "resources" that Torres reveals as underlying images of pearl fishing (p. 114) do not explain away the sexual implications of the activity of hunting, which in much Ovid-inspired art is a hunt for bodies and sexual encounters. As Rebecca Zorach has pointed out, "the naming function of allegory" and the potential identification of historical people as superimposed upon sculpted and painted figures can "explain away the suggestion of sexual availability".[4] The erotic aspects are, however, crucial to some of Torres' examples which display "resources" like pearls side by side with pictorial objectifications of foreign bodies. As Peter Mason and others have shown, the objectification of foreign people through strategies of sexualization formed part of the commodification of the foreign.[5] The ways in which such strategies informed European art and visual culture therefore seem constitutive for a better understanding of what defined "resources" – material as well as human ones – throughout the early modern period. Chapter 4 seems to most clearly showcase some challenges of Torres' non-Eurocentric fresh look at European art, whose general importance can, of course, not be overstated.

Chapter 5 turns to the courtly collections of August the Strong in Dresden and the works by Balthasar Permoser, the Dinglinger

[4] Rebecca Zorach, Desiring Things, in: *Art History* 24/2, 2001, 195–212, here 200.

[5] Peter Mason, *Deconstructing America. Representations of the Other*, London 1990, 173. Scott Manning Stevens, New World Contacts and the Trope of the 'Naked Savage', in: Elizabeth D. Harvey (ed.), *Sensible Flesh. On Touch in Early Modern Culture*, Philadelphia, 2003, 125–40.

brothers, Elias Lencker, and Johann Heinrich Köhler which employ pearls and, in some cases, display them alongside representations of Black men. Torres insightfully explains the position of Black men in German lands. She addresses court performances, for example the one in which August the Strong himself appeared blackfaced as an incarnation of a "Moorish king" (p. 155), and compares some of the sculptures to performers referring to them as "amusing figures, not unlike the grotesque characters created from baroque pearls" (p. 160) such as the sculpture of a "dancing dwarf" with a pearl body (p. 140). Potentially, a deeper engagement with early modern cultures of wit and a discussion of pearl bodies in relation to anthropomorphic shapes associated with "dwarves" and other non-normative figures could have been fruitful here for an even deeper understanding of race-making processes through art. Especially the *mundus inversus* ("world upside down") tradition of sixteenth-century engravings and costume books collected at German courts stood in close connection to the carnivalesque aspects of theatrical court performances; consistent with role reversals that are common throughout early modern cultures of visual wit, this imagery reversed objectification strategies defined by power relationships, heterosexually defined and other types of normativity, as well as racial stereotyping. In this way, early modern artistic imagination arguably created an alternative realm dominated by reverse objectification strategies that could overrule aspects of politically invested race making and the colonial commodification of people and their bodies.

Taken together, Chapters 4 and 5 present missed opportunities to enter into ongoing scholarly conversations on techne and early modern understandings of materiality in goldsmith workshops as well as research on European resources presented in collections, e.g. through elaborate displays of *Handsteine*. Hopefully, in the future, an unpacking of what exactly constitutes a "resource" to whom in the different early modern contexts Torres touches upon could further complicate the divergences between commissioners' political incentives and the creative agendas of artists and artisans as gem-cutters and goldsmiths who had a certain degree of liberty vis-à-vis the commissioners (last but not least also due to the fact that they were the authoritative voices when it came to the potential of the natural objects they were working with, aspects of whose material properties they often knew better than their commissioners). Courtly demands of what precisely should be made out of the "resource" of a jewel or a pearl could therefore be nuanced and, in few cases, even countered by the artisans' expertise in service of their own creative visions. Without trying to diminish the importance of Torres' highly insightful and new lines of interpretation to the Dresden works, the aspects addressed above could perhaps one day be brought into fruitful conversation with her findings.

Yet, one book can certainly not do it all, and the above does not mean to detract from the very real service *Pearls for the Crown* does to early modern art history. Understanding this beautifully

illustrated book as a fine piece of scholarship as well as a challenge to the field, it is an important contribution to our understanding of pearls in the early modern period and a highly recommended read for everyone interested in questions of art and ecology during the early modern period as well as those invested in the decolonizing of art history.