Gersaint, Edmé François
Paris 1694 – 1750 Paris

Catalogue raisonné de coquilles, et autres curiosités naturelles.

Paris, Flahault & Prault, 1736

DUODECIMO (165 × 95 mm), (90)ff. signed a²–B³ C⁴ D¹ E¹ F⁸ G¹ H¹ I¹ K¹ L¹ M¹ N¹ O⁰ and paginated 1–6 (i.e. 8) 1–167 (5), plus engraved title-frontispiece by Claude Duflos after François Boucher (the print in first state, of three).


Headband abraded, otherwise in very good state of preservation.

BINDING contemporary French calf, gilt arms of Jean-Claude Fauconnet de Vildé on covers.

The author of this work was a merchant with a boutique on the Pont Notre-Dame in Paris, who from about 1732 began to promote the vogue for collecting shells (conchyliomania), dealing in them and amassing large collections.³ In June 1734 Gersaint had organised an auction containing a ‘Cabinet de Coquilles’ imported from Holland, followed on 3 December by a sale of shells from collections in Holland, Flanders, and Paris (both auctions were held without printed catalogues). The Catalogue raisonné de coquilles et autres curiosités naturelles was printed for Gersaint’s third sale of shells, his first grande vente publique, commenced on 30 January 1736, in which 450 lots of shells and 132 of Surinamese insects and reptiles


Bound for Jean-Claude Fauconnet de Vildé. Height of binding 170 mm
were offered. According to a contemporary note in another copy, all these curiosities were the property of ‘M. Guichard, militaire, et au sieur Gersaint son ami’.4

To recruit connoisseurs to the collecting of marine naturalia, Gersaint prefaces the catalogue with ‘Observations sur les Coquillages’ (pp.1–29), in which shells are elevated to the status of works of art, and described as a source of inspiration for architects, sculptors, and painters; by a ‘Liste des Principaux Cabinets’ (pp.30–45); and by a list of the authors who have described shells (pp.46–61). His tactic seems to have worked: among buyers of shells in the sale were the aristocratic collectors Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d’Argenville, Jean de Jullienne, Antoine de La Roque, and Louis Quentin de Lorangère, and two enthusiastic amateurs, Gaillard (purchaser of thirty-five lots, including four of insects) and Sévin (thirty-nine lots). The sale realised more than 6600 livres, with each shell selling on average for 15 livres (the top lot 67 ‘une grande huître extrêmement baroque et presque noire en dehors et en dedans’ fetched 75 livres).5

The engraved title-frontispiece is a still-life of shells and coral, designed by François Boucher, and engraved by Claude Duflos.6 ‘Placed at the head of the catalogue, the frontispiece provides a condensed illustration of the collection and its decorative potential, while identifying Gersaint as the source of Rococo chic’.7 Boucher himself became a leading collector of shells (he purchased at least three lots of shells in Gersaint’s auction of La Roque’s collection in 1745) and his own catalogue contains a eulogy by the auctioneer, Gersaint’s colleague Pierre Rémy, celebrating him as a man of taste.8 The interconnections of collectors of shells, patrons, and designers of Rococo architecture and decoration, and their role in gaining acceptance of the Rococo as a style, deserve investigation.9

8 Spary, op. cit., p.262.


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Left Engraving by Claude Duflos after a design by François Boucher
Gersaint, Edmé François
Paris 1694 – 1750 Paris

Catalogue raisonné d’une collection considérable de diverses Curiosités en tous Genres, contenues dans les Cabinets de feu Monsieur Bonnier de la Mosson.

Paris, Jacques Barrois & Pierre-Guillaume Simon, 1744

DUODECIMO (165 × 95 mm), (128)ff. signed π2 a8 b2 A–T6 V4 and paginated (4) 1–13 (3) 1–234 (2).

The second work in this volume is Gersaint’s sale catalogue of the collections gathered by Joseph Bonnier de la Mosson (d. 26 July 1744), divided for sale in nine sections, comprising shells, insects, and animals stuffed or in preserving fluids; scientific instruments, pharmaceutical apparatus, and machinery; ornamental turning, bronzes, porcelain, clocks, and other works of art; pictures and prints; and furniture. The 966 lots were removed from the owner’s townhouse, the Hôtel de Lude, fabulously decorated by Jacques de Lajoue, with painted depictions of the cabinets, and were offered in March and April 1745 (furniture and objects ‘de moindre conséquence’ had been sold in December 1744 and January 1745 without a catalogue).10

One of the highest prices in the sale (1100 livres) was paid by Madame de Pompadour for a pot-pourri in porcelain which Bonnier de la Mosson had acquired from the prince de Condé.11 George-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, bought many shells and insects (thirty-one lots and twenty-eight lots respectively); other persistent buyers were Michel-Ferdinand d’Albert d’Ailly, duc de Chaules; Crozat de Thiers; Crozat de Tugny; Carl-Gustav Tessin; the amateurs Dupin, Foissac, Hénin; and the dealer Joseph-Gabriel Agard. Gersaint himself purchased fifty-four lots, including a marble table with a sculpted base (lot 939: 1060 livres) and a unicorn’s horn (lot 369: 72 livres), for a total of 7813 livres.12

Some copies of the catalogue are illustrated by the Boucher-Duflos frontispiece for the Catalogue raisonné de coquilles of 1736, with its text appropriately modified.

References

10 The cabinet of Bonnier de la Mosson is the subject of a large literature; see Glorieux, op. cit., especially pp.367–370, 558–561 (schedule of the sale).
11 Glorieux, op. cit., p.318