

**SMALL CORALL BOX, TRAPANI**



ITALY, TRAPANI

17TH CENTURY

GILDED COPPER, CORAL

DIMENSIONS: H. 3 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> IN – L. 3 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> IN – P. 2 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> IN

**27, Quai Voltaire, 75007 Paris**

The small oval-shaped box with is closed by a lid with a finely chiseled outer edge. The entire box is brilliantly decorated with the so-called "retro-incastro" technique: polished coral elements are fixed in the surface of the gilded copper structure. In the body of the box, in the center of each face a small flower is surrounded by a drop-shaped petals, while the intermediate spaces are filled by four-leafed clovers surrounded by commas and hemispheres. A small coral grenade is placed at the top of the lid and is surrounded by a network of pods and comma-shaped corals. The box rests on four lion-shaped legs in gilded copper.



This piece of art incorporates the classic decorative pattern typical of ovoid shaped objects in which daisies alternate with pea-shaped pieces and commas as in the objects shown here-below.



Hexagonal powder-caster with lid  
 Goldsmith of Trapani  
 Late 16th - early 17th century

Perforated and gilded brass plate,  
 shaped and polished coral, enamels

7 x 10 x 7.5 cm  
 2 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 3 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 2 <sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in

Collezione Banca Popolare di Novara



Small oval box (inkwell?)  
 Goldsmith of Trapani  
 Late 16th - early 17th century

Perforated and gilded brass plate,  
 shaped and polished coral, enamels

7 x 9 x 6 cm  
 2 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 3 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 2 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in

Collezione Banca Popolare di Novara

## *Trapani – the coral cradle*

Our small box decorated with coral was made in the city of Trapani. It is a Mediterranean coral, called *Corallium Rubrum*, of red color of different shades, up to pale pink colorations.

For more than six centuries, the use of coral was a common factor in the great Mediterranean, Muslim, Jewish and Christian cultures, mixing the sacred and the profane aspects. The symbiosis between coral and faith, between paganism and Christianity, takes place in Trapani. Following the Sicilian Vespers in 1282, the sovereigns of Catalonia settled in Sicily, landing in the nearest port of Barcelona, in Trapani, a coastal city whose economy is based on trade and piracy.

Between the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth century, the inhabitants of Trapani intensified the coral fishing thanks to the concessions granted by the Catalans, in thanks for their help during the conquest of Sicily.



Jacopo Zucchi

*Coral fishing*

1580

25 <sup>3/16</sup> x 17 <sup>5/16</sup> in

Borghese Gallery, Rome

The technique of realization is the result of many experiences acquired over the centuries, inspired by Islamic and Judaic works in the Middle Ages. The piece of coral is firmly glued on hot wood supports mixed with suifé paper to lubricate the blade. The size is then in the mass by sawing with a bocfil. Incisions can be made using small pincers and files. The piece is modeled with a millstone, and then roughened, sketched, it passes in the hands of the engraver who specifies and finishes its decoration with chisels of different shapes and dimensions. Polishing is the last phase during which the coral is detached from its wooden support, then immersed in a bath of hydrogen peroxide, before being smoothed with pumice and oil, brushed with a preparation acid-based, then washed in running water. The shaped pieces thus obtained are then integrated into the decoration of the objects which requires the intervention of several trades, including carpenters, cabinetmakers, foundry carvers, goldsmiths, enamellers, marble makers or mirrors.



The objects made in Trapani but also in Naples or Torre del Greco - large Coral sculpture workshops in the Trapani style from which they draw the technique by importing coins, and the emigration of artists in the seventeenth century - were often offered as diplomatic gifts to kings, princes, cardinals, and popes, and adorned the aristocratic houses and churches of all Europe. The greatest families from Italy, Spain, but also from all over Europe and the Middle East, order devotional pieces, but also majestic decorative pieces to adorn their interior.

Today we can admire these objects in prestigious collections such as the Museum of Pepoli in Trapani, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, the National Museum of the Renaissance in Ecoen, the Museum of decorative arts in Paris but also the museum of the castle of Beloeil or the collections of the kings of Spain where are preserved very beautiful objects mounted in coral.

### **Bibliography :**

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