



19th century Chinese Straits silver mounted coco-de-mer in the form of an ewer or teapot.

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An exceptional and possibly unique, 19th century Chinese Straits silver mounted coco-de-mer in the form of an ewer or teapot. The silver mounts intricately detailed with pierced and engraved decoration, with decorated spout, rope formed handle and base supported on six stylised leg and paw feet.

This remarkable object is constructed around one of the most sought after and intriguing items of the natural world. The coco-de-mer has a long and legendary history that spans many cultures which has caused it to have been one of the most sought-after items for collectors.

Before the Seychelles were discovered and settled, nuts of this species were sometimes carried by the ocean currents to distant shores. Malay seamen had seen coco-de-mer nuts "falling upwards" from the seabed, and so they had reasoned that these nuts must grow on underwater trees, in a forest at the bottom of the Indian Ocean. Malay people believed that the tree was also the home of the huge bird or bird-like creature Garuda (or Rukh in the Arabian legends). African priests believed that the Garuda was capable of hunting elephants and tigers and that sometimes the coco-de-mer trees rose up above the ocean surface, and when this happened, the waves that the trees created did not allow any ship nearby to sail away and the helpless sailors were eaten by the Garuda.

In the Maldives, any coco-de-mer nuts that were found in the ocean or on the beaches were supposed to be given to the king, and keeping a nut for yourself or selling it could have resulted in the death penalty. However, this did not prevent the nuts from appearing in Europe and indeed Rudolph II was able to purchase one of these nuts for 4,000 gold florins. The Dutch Admiral Wolfert Hermanssen also received a nut as a gift for his services, from the Sultan of Bantam in 1602, for fighting the Portuguese and protecting the capital of Bantam. However, the nut that the admiral was given was missing the top part; apparently the Sultan had ordered the top of the nut to be cut off, in order not to upset the noble admiral's modesty. João de Barros believed that coco-de-mer possessed amazing healing powers, superior even to those of "the precious stone Bezoar". In one of his books, Dr. Berthold Carl Seemann mentioned that many believed the nuts to be an antidote to all poisons.

Even after the discovery of the Seychelles and the real trees, the nut held a fascination to such a degree that General Gordon, after visiting the islands, believed the Vallée de Mai on the island of Praslin was the original Garden of Eden as described in the Bible, and that the coco-de-mer was the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The magical powers associated with the nut, its rarity, and the expense in acquiring them has naturally resulted in them being incorporated into objects associated with the European tradition of the *Kunstkammer*. Silver, gold, and precious stones were applied liberally to create artistic masterpieces that adorned the European courts. This practice is also to be found in India, the Arab nations, and the Malay Archipelago.

Much thought has been given as to how the nut was to be mounted, its intrinsic value as well as the associations that legend has attached to it and the cultural traditions of the Peranakan Chinese have clearly influenced the form and decoration that has been applied. The nut has been hollowed out and the top cut to create a double lid decorated with silver bands decorated with an intricate floral motif which extends to the silver hinges. The knobs above are raised on silver disks again with engraved floral decoration.

Silver bands extend from the lid at front and back from which the finely twisted handle is applied with stylised bud finials. At the front the silver band is finely pierced with engraved decoration of pomegranates in flower, this decoration continues and extends along the spout. The base is

similarly conceived, with a lush floral frieze punctuated by applied multi petaled flower heads and the legs echoing the spout with pomegranates and foliage.

The pomegranate is an important symbol in Chinese culture and is found in different media but most especially on ceramics. It represents fertility, abundance, posterity, numerous and virtuous offspring, and a blessed future. Interestingly the Chinese symbol for seed (zi) is the same as that for son, the pomegranate with its many seeds is therefore a symbol for having multiple sons and is also appropriate given the fertility symbolism of the coco-de-mer seed itself. Indeed, it is possible that this object was commissioned to celebrate the birth of a son and heir.

While the scale of the pot makes it rather impractical for usage its symbolism within the very rarified Chinese culture of the tea ceremonies would make it a visual focal point. Incorporating a rare natural wonder and embellished with the finest silver mounts decorated to an exceptional quality expressing