Snuffbox - Venus mourning the death of Adonis

Metalwork Collection

Accession Nr.:	54.585.1
Place of production:	Dresden (presumably);
Materials:	tortoiseshell
Techniques:	engraved decoration; repoussé/punched; with gold plate and rivet inlays (piqué)
Dimensions:	height: 5,8 cm length: 12,7 cm width: 9,2 cm

This large table casket, probably used as a jewel box, is made from the shell of a giant turtle from Aldabra in the Seychelle Islands. In transmitted light, yellow cloud-like patches show up in the wine-red panels. Procedures to soften and render pliable various organic materials (turtleshell, ivory, horn) for use as art materials are described in essays by some ancient writers, like Pausanias, Plutarch and Dioskorides. These materials were rediscovered in Europe only in the 18th century, when the rise in sea trade, especially through the East Indian Companies, made them available in large quantities. Turtleshell was cut into slices of appropriate size and dipped in boiling water to soften it, laid in a copper mould, and then rubbed with olive oil. The eight-sided casket has rich decoration on a mythological theme in the central area of its lid. The scene of Venus grieving for the dying Adonis was well known from Ovid's Metamorphoses. At the bottom of the image field, one flower tendril branches out in each direction to the sides, as if evoking the flower germinating in the blood of youth: the fast-withering anemone, symbol of death. On the long sides of the box are images of heroic tales of self-sacrificing love: Aeneas saves his father Anchises and his son Ascanius from burning Troy, and Marcus Curtius saves Rome. On the shorter sides there are single allegorical figures in cartouches and female figures embodying the Christian virtues.

Literature

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