

John Ruskin's Shells

Christopher Donaldson*

*Research Centre Coordinator, The Ruskin – Library, Museum and Research Centre, Lancaster University, and Lecturer in Cultural History, Department of History, Lancaster University.

Abstract

John Ruskin (1819–1900) assembled an impressive collection of shells over the course of his life. During his final years he displayed some of the fruits of his labours at Brantwood, his home overlooking Coniston Water in the northwest of England. Ruskin valued these shells for their beauty. He put them in a glass cabinet alongside geological specimens, historical artefacts and works of art. But Ruskin's interest in his shell collection was not just superficial. In this essay, I ponder the deeper meaning Ruskin discovered in the shells he collected, both marine and terrestrial, and I suggest how his shell studies reflect principles developed in his writings on art and architecture, as well as his attitude towards the natural sciences. In order to stake an approach to these issues, I begin this essay by considering the remarks of other writers who have commented on the beauty and curiosity of shells. I then proceed to contrast these aesthetic appreciations with Ruskin's more ethically informed contemplations.

Keywords

John Ruskin. Shells. Science. Natural history. Collections. Aesthetics.

[Place Fig. 1 here.]

FIG. 1: John Ruskin, "Shell study" (spiral of *belix gualteriana*), n.d.; pencil, watercolour and bodycolour, 145 x 24 cm. Inventory no. 1996P0993 © The Ruskin – Library, Museum and Research Centre, Lancaster University

I.

What can shells show us? —potentially a great deal. Their shapes and contours make them objects of wonder, but they are also enigmatic. They reveal to us worlds at once immanent and mysterious, and therein lies a part of their appeal. As the Abbé de Vallemont once observed, shells are more than just "the delights of great men"; they are also "sublime subjects of contemplation for the mind." (1705, p.648)¹

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard devotes a chapter to enumerating such contemplations, including those of Vallemont. His aim in doing so is to develop an understanding of the shell as

¹ « Qu'il nous soit permis de jeter un moment les yeux sur cette ravissante variété de Coquillages, qui sont les délices des grands hommes [. . .] de sublimes sujets de contemplation pour l'esprit. » Unless otherwise credited, all translations are my own.

a specific spatial type: one defined by the interplay of opposing ideas such as large and small, seen and unseen, soft and hard. (1961, p.111) Bachelard's approach is more poetic than systematic, but in pondering these binaries he underscores the persisting image of the shell as both a secretive space and a room secretively shaped by the body of its solitary inhabitant.

Bachelard's thoughts, in this latter respect, build on Paul Valéry's meditations in "L'Homme et la coquille". Shells, as Valéry points out in this essay, are secretive not just because they are places of concealment. They are also secretive because they were secreted by the creatures they first concealed.

Put simply, shells are exoskeletons composed of crystallised calcium that has filtered (or, as Valéry has it, "oozed") through the tissues of molluscs and other invertebrates.² (1937, p.68) The results of this process of slow, continual formation are perceptible enough. But the process itself is imperceptible to the unaided eye.

This fact goes some ways towards accounting for the wonder shells inspire in us, who grow our skeletons inside our bodies. As Valéry puts it, "[a]lthough we ourselves were formed by imperceptible growth, we do not know how to create anything in that way." (1937, p.15; trans. MANHEIM 1977, p.113)³

The implications of this assertion are plain enough. Were we to build a shell, we would do so not as a mollusc does. For starters, we would likely carve our shell. We would work from the outside in, instead of from the inside out. But this is not the only, nor even the most important difference. For whereas molluscs build their shells unreflexively, with perfect unity of purpose, we would build a shell intentionally and deliberately, and the work we would produce would be at best indirectly related to (what Valéry calls) "our underlying organic activity". (1937, p.65; trans. MANHEIM 1977, p.122)⁴

II.

This much, I think, can be said of the aesthetics of shells. But there is also an ethics of shells that both Valéry and Bachelard broach, but on which neither of them expounds. Valéry's assertion about our inability to build as molluscs build is indicative. He does not ponder the ethical implications of this claim, but it does not take much to see how his remarks accord with the moralising of early modern naturalists like Vallemont, who counted shells among the marvels that "humiliate and mortify proud minds." (1705, p.634)⁵

Such observations are noteworthy, but the ethics I have in mind relates to another marvellous property of shells: namely, the way they can pass from one life to another.

Shells may seem solid enough, but they also flake, break and dissolve, and as they decompose

² « Une coquille émane d'un mollusque. *Emaner* me semble le seul terme assez près du vrai, puisqu'il signifie proprement: *laisser suinter*. » (The italics are Valéry's.)

³ « Bien que faits ou formés nous-mêmes par voie de croissance insensible, nous ne savons rien créer par cette voie. »

⁴ « [C]'est pourquoi nos desseins *réfléchis* et nos constructions ou fabrications *voulues semblent très étrangers à notre activité organique profonde*. » (The italics are Valéry's.)

⁵ « Dans la Nature on est rarement en pays de connaissance. Il y a à chaque pas de quoi humilier, et mortifier les Esprits superbes. »

they become the minerals ingested and secreted by other organisms. In this sense, shells form part of the continuous cycle of organic exchange that has shaped the ecology of our planet.

The British artist Janet Manifold has recently explored this aspect of shells in her sculpture, *Time Unfolding*. In her description of this work, Manifold reflects on the formation of the alabaster of which her sculpture is composed.

This substance, she explains, was “part of a living ocean 23 million years ago.” It was formed from the calcium deposits left behind by “evaporated seawater”, which “flowed through” creatures “secreting their shells” over aeons. “So, [in] opening up this stone to create a sculpture [. . . w]e are looking back in time to the origin of the material itself and to the life it once sustained.” (MANIFOLD 2019)

Viewed in this way, Manifold’s *Time Unfolding* illuminates the interconnectedness of all things, past and present, animate and inanimate. As a sculpture, it is an exquisite meditation both on the nature of the material from which it is made and, by way of analogy, on nature as a whole.

[Place Fig. 2 here.]

FIG. 2: Janet Manifold, *Time Unfolding*, 2019; carved alabaster, 25 x 25 x 40 cm.
© Janet Manifold. Image courtesy of the artist.

One can, of course, find more commonplace examples of the way shells pass from one state to another and from one life to the next. Take fertiliser, for example. Humans have long made lime from shells in order to enrich manure. The practice is recorded by Pliny the Elder and in other Roman sources,⁶ as well as in more recent agricultural manuals. Thus, *The American Muck Book*, a classic mid-nineteenth-century work on the subject, advises that “the farmer will find a valuable manure in procuring the shells of oysters, clams, and other shell fish, and reducing them to a powder by burning them in kilns, or grinding them in mills.” (BROWNE 1852, p.313)

And lime is good for much more than just manure. It is also an essential component in concrete and mortar, and in making iron, steel and plate glass. So, in sum, shells not only help to feed us, they also form our built environment. In both ways, the use of decomposed shells has fundamentally shaped the modern world.

But decomposition is only one way that shells get recycled. Shells can, after all, become second homes. One thinks of the shells hermit crabs scavenge and of the way fossilised shells can provide a shelter for later lifeforms. In each case the study of shells reveals the importance of cooperation and interdependence as forces at work in nature.

This is not something that Valéry and Bachelard discuss, but it is certainly an aspect of shell studies that appealed to John Ruskin. His account of collecting shells during his summer holiday in Boulogne in 1861, to which I shall turn presently, provides a remarkable case in point.

⁶ PLINY 1962, p.77–78.

III.

Ruskin began gathering shells as a boy, and he assembled an impressive collection by the end of his life. During his final years he displayed some of the fruits of his labours in the drawing room at Brantwood, his home overlooking Coniston Water in the English Lake District.

Ruskin valued these shells for their beauty. He put them in a glass cabinet alongside geological specimens, historical artefacts and works of art. A visitor to Brantwood in 1884 described this assemblage in detail. He recorded seeing “[c]ases of shells of infinite variety, of great rarity and equal beauty, and a few minerals of various formation”, with “superb examples of cloisonné enamel”, as well as “[e]xquisite examples of Prout’s pencil drawings, of Burne-Jones (‘Fair Rosamund’), and of Ruskin’s own beautiful studies [. . .] of St. Mark’s”. (SPEILMAN 1900, p.133)

A photograph (Fig. 3) taken around the turn of the twentieth century provides a visual record of this very scene.

[Place Fig. 3 here.]

FIG. 3: Walmsley Bros., “Drawing Room – Shell Cabinet, Brantwood” (c.1900); photograph © The Ruskin – Library, Museum and Research Centre, Lancaster University

Now, this may seem less like the storeroom of a scientist than the *Wunderkammer* of a connoisseur. But it would be wrong to think that Ruskin’s interest in these shells was merely superficial. Like the other objects displayed in his drawing room, he was drawn to them because he felt they reflected moral laws.

Ruskin’s remarks on the fossil shells he collected while combing the beach in Boulogne in June 1861 are indicative. He described this find in a letter to his father the following day:

I was out a long while yesterday on the beach,—and carried a heavy block of stone five miles home—one mass of casts of shells in clear carbonate of lime, all their hinges and delicatest spirals preserved—shells of which the fish lived long before Mont Blanc existed, and while the crest of the Aiguille de Varens was soft mud at the bottom of [a] deep sea; yet the ripple mark of the sandstone that encompasses them is as fresh as that within fifty yards of it, left by the now retiring tide, and the modern living whelk and mussel hide in the hollows of shells dead these thirty thousand years. (RUSKIN 1905^a, p.xxxvii)

This passage is noteworthy for a number of reasons, not least because it gives a sense of the lengths Ruskin was willing to go to collect interesting specimens. Lumbering “five miles home” with that “block of stone” must have been a chore. Then, too, there is the way Ruskin’s reflections register an awareness of geological processes. His casual reference to the orogeny of the Aiguille de Varens is particularly striking.

But what is really notable about this passage is how Ruskin’s remarks both throw open and collapse deep time. On the one hand, the “modern living whelk and mussel” and the fossilised

“casts of shells” are eons apart. On the other hand, they coexist: the former finding a home in the remains of the latter. Like “the ripple mark” worn into “the sandstone” and the line of “the now retiring tide”, the co-presence of these ancient and modern organisms heightens our awareness of the temporal difference between them at the same time as it resolves that difference into an image of continuity.

For Ruskin, then, the wonder of that “mass of casts of shells” would seem to have lain less in its dizzying antiquity than in the way that it had created the conditions for a later world. The “hollows” made by those “fish”, “dead these thirty thousand years”, were valuable for they had provided a hiding place and a preserve for future life.

[Place Fig. 4 here.]

FIG. 4: John Ruskin, “Shell: A Spiral” (marbled cone shell), n.d.; bodycolour and white, 34.3 x 47.6 cm. Inventory no. 1996P2047 © The Ruskin – Library, Museum and Research Centre

IV.

Ruskin’s interest in shells was, as I have hinted, guided by his belief that nature reflected moral laws. Bearing this in mind helps elucidate further the import of his remarks about the fossil shells he found in Boulogne in 1861. Those shells were, after all, a striking manifestation of a principle he had elaborated just a year earlier. I refer to “The Law of Help”.

Ruskin had introduced this principle in the fifth volume of *Modern Painters* as one of the “elementary laws of arrangement” discerned in the composition of true works of art. (RUSKIN 1905^b, p.204) Such “composition”, he explains, “may be defined as the help of everything in [a] picture by everything else”. And such “help”, he continues, mirrors the cooperation found in healthy organic life:

In substance which we call “inanimate”, as of clouds, or stones, their atoms may cohere to each other, or consist with each other, but they do not help each other. The removal of one part does not injure the rest.

But in a plant, the taking away of any one part does injure the rest. Hurt or remove any portion of the sap, bark, or pith, the rest is injured. If any part enters into a state in which it no more assists the rest, and has thus become “helpless”, we call it also “dead”.

The power which causes the several portions of the plant to help each other, we call life. Much more is this so in an animal. We may take away the branch of a tree without much harm to it; but not the animal’s limb. Thus, intensity of life is also intensity of helpfulness—completeness of depending of each part on all the rest. (RUSKIN 1905^b, p.205)

The thrust of these distinctions is reasonably self-evident. They clarify that although Ruskin’s interest in “The Law of Help” in *Modern Painters* was chiefly pictorial, the principle of “help” was, in his mind, necessarily linked to an ethically informed understanding of ecology: of the way all

life forms depend on one another.

Reflecting on this passage goes some way towards explaining why those fossil shells appealed so strongly to Ruskin's imagination. They were, after all, a vivid embodiment of the way the long dead have helped to shape the world of the living.

But this is not all. For, in typifying the dependence of the living on the dead, those shells recall another significant aspect of Ruskin's thinking about cooperation: his characterisation of the power of architecture to form a bridge between the past and the present.

Ruskin had developed this idea eleven years earlier in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, where he reflected on how historic buildings are capable of connecting successive ages. The passage is one of the more often quoted portions of Ruskin's oeuvre, but it is still worth recalling here:

For, indeed, the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness [. . .] which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity. It is in their lasting witness against men, in their quiet contrast with the transitional character of all things, in the strength which, through the lapse of seasons and times [. . .] maintains its sculptured shapeliness for a time insuperable, [and] connects forgotten and following ages with each other[.] (RUSKIN 1903, p.233–34)

The “sculpted shapeliness” of such buildings may, at first, seem a far cry from the hollows left by the shells whose fossils Ruskin found in Boulogne. But the two are analogous. Each connects “forgotten and following ages with each other.” Each illustrates the importance of “help” as a principle of inheritance. Each demonstrates the enduring dependence of the present upon the past and, implicitly, of tomorrow upon today.

V.

Recalling these passages from Ruskin's published works illuminates the moral dimension of his interest in those fossil shells, and this, in turn, reveals a good deal about his attitude towards the natural sciences. Namely, it reminds us that science for Ruskin had as much to do with the study of nature as it did with devotion.⁷

Recognising this aspect of Ruskin's thought helps explain why, though a collector of shells, he was dismissive about conchology. In an article devoted to this subject, Stanley Peter Dance has surmised that Ruskin felt that conchologists spent too much time on trivial details.

In letter 63 of *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin provided an amusing demonstration of this point by revealing the difficulty of using Jean Charles Chenu's *Manuel de conchyliologie* (1859) to answer a simple query about snails.

“Assuming my shell to be *Helix virgata*,” he writes:

I take down my magnificent French—(let me see if I can write its title without a mistake)—“Manuel de Conchyliologie et de Paléontologie

⁷ See BIRCH 1981, O'GORMANN 1999 and HEWISON 2020.

Conchyliologique,” or, in English, “Manual of Shell-talking and Old-body-talking in a Shell-talking manner”. Eight hundred largest octavo—more like folio—pages of close print, with four thousand and odd (nearly five thousand) exquisite engravings of shells; and among them I look for the creatures elegantly, but inaccurately, called by modern naturalists Gasteropods; in English, Bellyfeet (meaning, of course, to say Belly-walkers, for they haven’t got any feet); and among these I find, with much pains, one [shell] that is rather like mine, of which I am told that it belongs to the sixteenth sort in the second tribe of the second family of the first sub-order of the second order of the Belly-walkers, and that it is called “Adeorbis subcarinatus,”—Adeorbis by Mr. Wood, and subcarinatus by Mr. Montagu; but I am not told where it is found, nor what sort of creature lives in it, nor any single thing whatever about it, except that it is “sufficiently depressed” (“assez déprimée”), and “deeply enough navelled” (“assez profondément ombiliquée,”—but how on earth can I tell when a shell is navelled to a depth, in the author’s opinion, satisfactory?), and that the turns (taken by the family) are “little numerous” (“peu nombreux”). On the whole, I am not disposed to think my shell is here described, and put my splendid book in its place again. (RUSKIN 1907, p.552–53)

From here, Ruskin describes scouring the “sixteen octavo volumes” of Griffith’s translation of Cuvier’s *The Animal Kingdom* for an answer. (1907, p.553) Again, however, his search proves in vain.

This sort of buffoonery about the babel of science is part and parcel of Ruskin’s engagement with the sciences during the latter half of his career. But with respect to the study of shells in particular, these comments help clarify why he later cautioned Henrietta Carey that conchology was “no good whatever as a study”.⁸ (qt. Dance 2004, p.43)

Ruskin may have had copies of Chenu and Cuvier in his study, but he was evidently most interested in the ‘exquisite engravings’ these books contained. He considered their delineations of specific classes, orders, genera and species to be of secondary interest, and he treated their discussions of anatomy with disdain.

One of Ruskin’s letters to Carey, dated 11 February 1883, makes these facts plain. Here, he describes having ‘cut’ his copy of Cuvier into pieces:

The first thing I’ve found for you are the main part of the plates of mollusca, starfish, medusae, and corals, given in the last edition of Cuvier’s *Regne Animal*. The shrimps and crabs follow[. . .]. I cut the whole book up in order to burn its disgusting anatomical plates[. . .]. Some of the [other] plates were framed for my Oxford schools, but I can’t think where the rest of the shells have got to. However, these plates, kept in nicely pinched bundles of the different sorts, might admirably be used for drawing copies, which when good

⁸ Carey (c.1844–1920) was an early Companion of the Guild of St George with whom Ruskin shared a considerable portion of his shell collection, along with other materials, during the early 1880s. See Dance (2004) for an account of their correspondence.

enough, should be kept in accumulation for service at the seaside or in museums. (qt. Dance 2004, p.43)

A few days later, Ruskin also sent Carey his copy of Chenu's manual with a letter informing her that the book, 'though wretchedly dry in the text, has lovely plates'. (qt. Dance 2004, p.43)

In his discussion of this correspondence, Dance has surmised that Ruskin's interest in shells was more artistic than scientific. Ruskin collected shells, he writes, in order to sketch them, and "[h]e sketched them partly because he liked them and partly because he wanted to prove that he was equal to the task." (2004, p.37)

[Place Fig. 5 here.]

FIG. 5: John Ruskin, 'Cockle shell' (1876); pencil, watercolour and bodycolour, 14.5 x 24 cm. Inventory no. 1996P1510 © The Ruskin – Library, Museum and Research Centre

VI.

There is certainly merit in these claims. Ruskin, as Dance points out, regularly exercised his eye and hand by drawing shells, and he repeatedly stressed how challenging it was to draw shells well. He commented on this difficulty in both his published works and his private letters.

Notably, in *The Laws of Fésole* he described the "cockle-shell" as being "in reality quite hopelessly difficult, and in its ultimate condition, inimitable by art". (RUSKIN 1904, p.410) Similarly, in a letter thanking Sydney Carlyle Cockerel for sending him a box of shells in 1886, Ruskin remarked that "there are few things I care more for [. . .], or vex myself more with trying vainly to paint." (qt. MEYNELL 1940, p.20)

Despite, or perhaps because of, this difficulty, Ruskin persevered. In all, he is known to have completed around two dozen shell studies, and he used many of these drawings as models for his students. He clearly regarded the ability to portray a shell well as a marker of virtuosity.

For proof, one need look no farther than a letter Ruskin sent to his father in March 1859. "Shells", writes Ruskin:

are [. . .] easy up to a certain point [and] they look pretty as soon as you have rounded & patterned them. But to paint them in quite true perspective—and with their exact pearly lustre or grain, is beyond all skill but the highest—and I believe it is generally [as] a Tour-de-force rather than a mere entertaining object in his foregrounds, that Titian so often introduces a snail shell. In the Entombment there are two—perhaps to mark the dampness of the rock. (qt. BURD 1969, p.108)

Ruskin refers here to Titian's *Entombment of Christ*, a painting which he admired on his visits to the Louvre in 1844 and 1849. There is in fact only one snail shell in that painting (in the lower right-hand foreground), and Ruskin had noted as much in 1844. Presumably, his intuitions about the importance of this detail multiplied its presence in his memory.

[Place Fig. 6 here.]

FIG. 6: Tiziano Vecellio (Titian), 'The Entombment of Christ' (c. 1520); oil on canvas; 148 x 212 cm. Musée de Louvre, Collection de Louis XIV, inv. 749. CC-PD-Mark. Digitised by The Yorck Project (2002)

Symbolically, of course, the appearance of this solitary shell in Titian's painting does much more than suggest the "dampness" of the ground. Notably, the shell is upturned, and it is empty. It plainly serves as a prefiguration of the tomb from which Christ will rise, and as such it invites us to reflect on the promise of the resurrection.

[Place Fig. 7 here.]

FIG. 7: detail from Titian's 'The Entombment of Christ' (Fig. 6)

For Ruskin though that shell was also a sign of Titian's excellence as an artist. —And this was an excellence Ruskin sought to emulate. He copied that snail shell repeatedly, including in a sketch in his letter to William Ward on 15 February 1863.⁹

In Dance's interpretation, this sketch affirms that Ruskin viewed the 'shell motif' as a marker 'of genius', and I would agree. But, in conclusion, I would also like to propose that we can connect this artistic appreciation of the form of the shell with the moral implicit in Ruskin's observations about the mass of fossil shells he found in Boulogne.

If we do, then I think we can see how shells, for Ruskin, could be much more than just a motif. They could be a sign of a type of cooperation that—like the covenant of the resurrection—held out the promise of enduring life.

References

- BACHELARD, Gaston. **La poétique de l'espace**, 3rd edn. Paris : Les Presses universitaires de France, 1961.
- BIRCH, Dinah. Ruskin and the science of *Proserpina*. In **New approaches to Ruskin**. Robert Hewison, ed. London: Routledge, 1981, p.142–56.
- BROWNE, Daniel Jay. **The field book of manures: or, the American muck book**. New York: Saxton, Barker & Co., 1852.
- BURD, Van Akin. **The Winnington letters**. Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press, 1969.
- DANCE, S. Peter. Ruskin the reluctant conchologist'. **Journal of the history of collections**,

⁹ See Dance 2004, p.44.

Oxford Journals. n.16.1, p.35–46, 2004.

FREEMAN, Michael. **Victorians and the prehistoric: tracks to a lost world**. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004.

HEWISON, Robert. The Mind Revolts: Ruskin and Darwin. **The Ruskin review**, n.14.2, p.72–85, 2020.

MANHEIM, Ralph. Man and the Sea Shell. In **Paul Valéry: an anthology**. James R. Lawler, ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.108–135. Collected Works of Paul Valéry, Bollingen Series n.45.

MANIFOLD, Janet. **Time Unfolding: Ruskin to Rovelli** (2019)
<<https://www.janetmanifold.co.uk/writing-category/5d26fb00509d1/Essays>> [accessed 12.2.2019].

MEYNELL, Viola, ed. **Friends of a lifetime: letters to Sydney Carlyle Cockerel**. London: Jonathan Cape, 1940.

O’GORMANN, Francis. Ruskin’s Science of the 1870s. In **John Ruskin and the dawn of the modern**. Dinah Birch, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 35–55.

PLINY. **Naturalis historiae: libri XXXVII**. Vol. 3. Karl Mayhoff, eds. Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1967.

RUSKIN, John. **The Library edition of the works of John Ruskin**. Vol. 8. London: George Allen, 1903.

RUSKIN, John. **The Library edition of the works of John Ruskin**. Vol. 15. London: George Allen, 1904.

RUSKIN, John. **The Library edition of the works of John Ruskin**. Vol. 17. London: George Allen, 1905^a.

RUSKIN, John. **The Library edition of the works of John Ruskin**. Vol. 7. London: George Allen, 1905^b.

RUSKIN, John. Fors Clavigera, Letter 63. In **The Library edition of the works of John Ruskin**. Vol. 28. London: George Allen, 1907. p.538–60.

SPEILMANN, W.H. **John Ruskin: a sketch of his life, his work, and his opinions, with personal reminiscences**. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1900.

VALÉRY, Paul. **L’Homme et la coquille, dessins par Henri Mondor**. Paris: Gallimard, 1937.

VALLEMONT, Pierre le Lorrain de. **Curiositez de la nature et de l’art sur la vegetation**. Paris; Claude Cellier, 1705.

Figures

FIG. 1

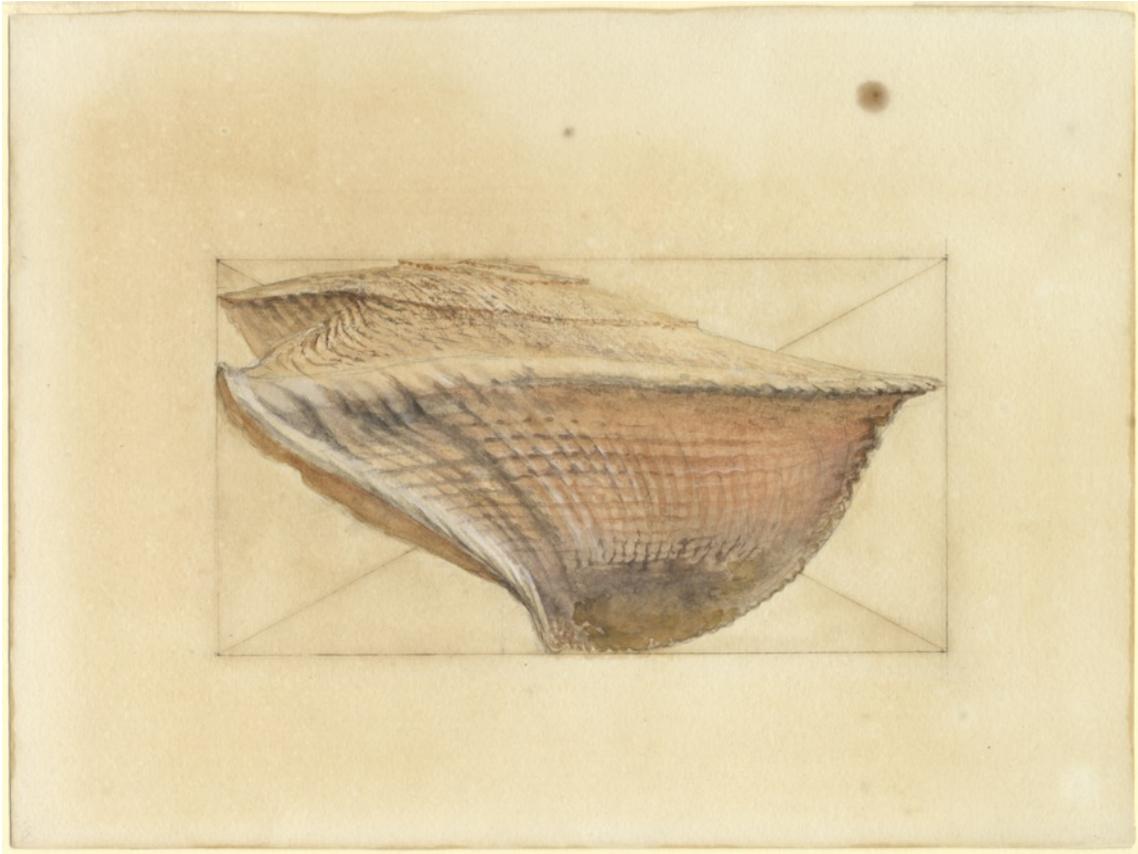


FIG. 2



FIG. 3



FIG. 4

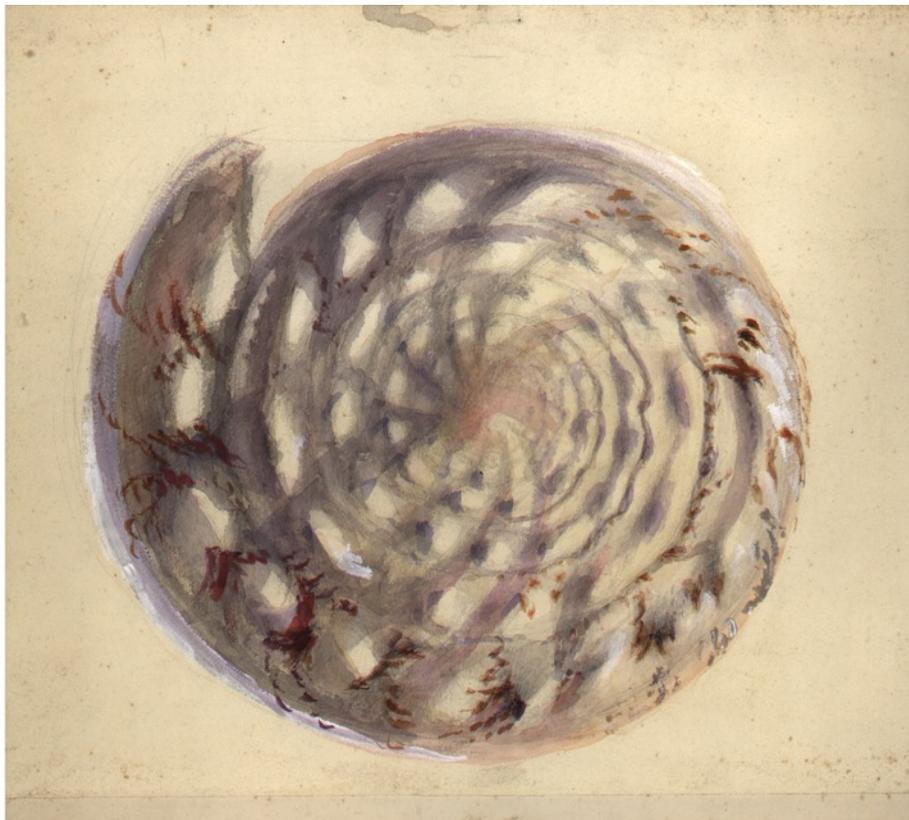


FIG. 5



FIG. 6



FIG. 7

