Tortoiseshell tea caddy [Object 1969.1651]

Culture: British
Date: circa 1800
Medium: Wood and tortoiseshell
Classification: Decorative Art
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Teaching guide by Abigail Greenfied '25

This early nineteenth-century British tea caddy is veneered in tortoiseshell, a highly sought-after luxury material for goods such as combs, furniture, dishes, and jewelry. From the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, tortoiseshell was such a popular material in Europe and the Americas that the sea turtles whose shells were considered the highest quality, such as the hawksbill, were hunted nearly to extinction. In the mid to late twentieth century, synthetic plastics designed to mimic the distinct pattern of tortoiseshell largely overtook the market. This innovation is credited with preventing the complete extinction of the hawksbill and other species of sea turtle, and likely paved the way for the outlawing of the international tortoiseshell trade in 1973.

Teaching Guide
Tortoiseshell Tea Caddy

Historical Background

The use of tortoiseshell dates to pre-dynastic Egypt (3500-3100 BCE), where it adorned "period dishes, combs, bracelets, and the like" (Hainschwang and Leggio). It was popular among wealthy citizens of ancient Greece and Rome as well, but the large-scale international trade in tortoiseshell began in the fifteenth century in Spain. The trade rapidly expanded in the seventeenth century due to several factors: growing European awareness of the Japanese tradition of tortoiseshell carving as well as of east Asian commercial sea turtle fishing, and the expansion of European colonies and trade networks in sea turtle habitats, including the Caribbean. This increased the availability of tortoiseshell in Europe, creating a demand for it as a 'new world' commodity (Victoria and Albert Museum). In Britain specifically, Jamaica became a major source of tortoiseshell, as it was located near three major hunting grounds for hawksbill turtles. The difficulty of harvesting tortoiseshell, combined with the 'exotic' origins of the material, increased its value in European markets; for Europeans, acquiring objects made with tortoiseshell underscored one's wealth. In addition to its use in European luxury goods, tortoiseshell objects were made in European colonies, including seventeenth-century Jamaica, Mexico, and Peru.

Tortoiseshell's luxury status made it an ideal candidate for embellishing British tea chests or caddies, which began to be manufactured in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Tea-drinking was introduced in England in the late seventeenth century with the arrival of imported tea from China (Indian tea was not present in Britain until the nineteenth century). Due to import restrictions, tea was highly valuable and thus had to be stored in locked containers to prevent guests or servants from absconding with it. Tea chests and caddies were a means of simultaneously securing one's tea and demonstrating one's wealth; they would be placed on the table as tea was being served, usually under the supervision of the mistress of the house, who held the key. The two compartments seen in this tea caddy would have been used to separate green and black tea leaves, which would be blended during the process of tea-making. Since these containers would be on display for guests, they were highly decorative, and, if the owner could afford it, made out of highly valued materials, such as tortoiseshell. The combination of the colonially sourced and culturally valued materials of tea and tortoiseshell are thus key to English notions of colonial power and social prestige.

It was not until the late eighteenth or the early nineteenth century that 'caddy' gained currency in England to denote a container used for tea storage. The word is thought to derive from a Malay word, *kati*, "a measure of weight equivalent to about half a kilogram"; *kati* was the weight of a standard eighteenth century packet of tea, and caddy is thought to be an Anglicized variation of this term (Victoria and Albert Museum).

Recent research has indicated that the historic tortoiseshell trade's fishing and export patterns, especially in east Asia, may have contributed to the rise of modern-day illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. Although the international trade was outlawed in 1973, illegal markets and fishing operations for tortoiseshell still exist, and researchers have found a link between historic locations with major tortoiseshell exports and locations of modern-day tortoiseshell harvesting operations.

Discussion Questions

- Consider the artist's decision to use tortoiseshell, rather than other materials (such as silver, fine woods, papier mâché, or porcelain), to decorate this object. How does the materiality of the object impact your reading of it? Consider other contemporary examples of tea caddies (such as those in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection). How are they different from or similar to this one?

- Neither tortoiseshell nor tea is native to Britain. How does this fact impact our understanding of both products' cultural significance? What type of person can we imagine might have owned this tea caddy?

- Many tea caddies from this period have not survived. Why do you think this one has? What does that tell us about its cultural significance, then and now?

- How do you think readings of this object have changed over time? Can you think of a modern example of a luxury household object that we currently see in a certain way but that people in a few centuries may understand differently?

- The creation of synthetic plastics that mimic tortoiseshell patterns is largely credited with saving sea turtles from extinction. How does this complicate our modern association of synthetic materials with environmental "unfriendliness"? Can you think of other examples of synthetic materials that are more sustainable than their natural counterparts? Would you still say that synthetic plastic tortoiseshell is more sustainable in our modern era? Why or why not?

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