A MAGNIFICENT COLLECTOR'S CABINET
ATTRIBUTED TO JACKSON & GRAHAM

Dimensions H: 58.5 in / 148 cm | W: 38 in / 96 cm | D: 26.5 in / 67 cm

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The chest of drawers of rectangular form, constructed in coromandel, with inlays in ebony, boxwood, honeysuckle, mother-of-pearl, abalone, and a host of specimen woods; on a plinth support, the front and sides with large fields of costly coromandel, demarcated with stringing, the pilastered corners and frieze decorated with geometric foliate motifs of lotus, palmettes, and roses taken from the designs of Owen Jones, the large door set with a marquetry still-life composition executed with extreme skill, depicting shells, seaweed, conches and coral; opening to reveal a satinwood-veneered bank of eleven graduated drawers with brass handles and drawer tags, fully mahogany lined. The Chubb patent lock bearing a serial number corresponding to roughly the years spanning 1875-1880.
English, circa 1875

Literature:

Cabinets such as these, designed with a multitude of drawers and compartments to hold personal

collections, have a long history going back several centuries to the early 17th century, when the Low Countries started creating them. Great metropolitan port cities such as Antwerp saw exotic riches for the first time, such as spices & shells from the Far East, and became enamoured with collecting examples from all over the globe. Initially designed as cabinets on stands, the form kept evolving over time, and were always made with a particular collector in mind. The present example is of unusual size and would, no doubt, have been a custom-made cabinet.

The central design feature of the cabinet is the inventive and finely executed marquetry panel of a still life composition with shells, seaweed, conches and coral all laid out on a table. Here, again, the prototype is found in the Low Countries, where this type of art emerged in the 16th & 17th centuries as a way of celebrating the riches of the world and the might of the Dutch who possess them. Artists who excelled in these works are perhaps most famously Willem Kalf and Willem Claesz Heda, and inspired later artists from France and England. It is likely the marquetry panel refers to the purpose of the cabinet, meant to house a collection of shells.

Part of the appeal of exotic and very expensive shells had to do with their status as *mirabilia* - rare objects pursued by amateurs for their collections of natural wonders. Still lifes also delighted owners for their implied moral and intellectual themes. Coral, for example, was believed to ward off the "evil eye" and, because its form recalled blood vessels, it had long been associated with Christ's Blood of Redemption. The allusion to Christ's protection against the evils of the world gave coral a spiritual significance, while shells with pearly interiors suggested luxury and sensuality.