Shell collecting was one of the favourite pastimes of the 17th century. These treasures from the sea united all of the opposites between art and nature which had become important in the Baroque period: their maritime provenance evoked the fact that all life had its origins in the sea – one reason why Aristotle used shells as an example of his theory of spontaneous generation. According to him, shells could be generated by the sun warming up the mud on the seabed – a creatio ex nihilo which brought dead material to life. We know that in the 17th century this theory was very much discussed but in the end proven to the contrary. Nevertheless, molluscs were still regarded as primitive creatures while their patterned and shaped shells were highly sought after by collectors and could fetch incredibly high prices. The baroque curiosity about molluscs was provoked by a series of contrasts: the soft, living creature versus its hard, robust shell; rough and weathered surfaces versus surfaces that were polished as smooth as glass; the perfect geometry of cones, spirals and curves versus their natural provenance – aesthetic qualities versus manifestly primitive ones. However, for the coastal regions of England, France, Italy, Spain and the Dutch provinces, the sea was more than just the source of a powerful morphogenetic force of nature. The sea was also ruled by Poseidon, who patronized commerce, expeditions, sea wars, and conquests, and enabled the import of exotic herbs, spices, plants or animals as well as the colonization of foreign countries and archipelagos. Shells therefore became symbols of maritime and colonial power, and allegorical attributes of a national self-image [Fig. 1].

During the 16th and 17th centuries, these precious and exotic objects mainly served as diversions for members of the aristocracy, who were fascinated by their great diversity and began collecting shells in curiosity

Fig. 1 [Col. pl. II]. Still life painting with shells and birds (ca. 1640/50). Flemish, attributed to Jan Davidsz. De Heem, ca. 1640/50. Oil on canvas, 88.5 × 136 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie. These species of Halotidae, Strombidae, Muricidae, Conidae and Pectinidae mainly come from the Indo-Pacific and fascinate by their various sculpturing and shape. The ship in the background evokes the sea trade routes of the Dutch East India Company.