

# The Coquilla Nut: A Handy 19th Century Ornamental Material

Yesterday I came across an interesting description in *Ackermann's Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions, and Politics*, April, 1812, about coquilla nuts, which a certain Mr. R. Ackermann displayed at his Repository, No 101, Strand (having purchased a considerable quantity of this fruit).

From whence the Portuguese obtained it, is so little known, that even the botanical library of Sir Joseph Banks cannot ascertain the circumstance. The probable conjecture, however, is, that it is the produce of the Portuguese possessions in Africa. It is, in a great measure, unknown in this country, nor can it be otherwise, as it is near sixty years since the custom-house entries mention an importation of it..."



Coquilla nut ink stand, late 18th- early 19th c. Image @Antiques Atlas



19th c. coquilla nut pounce pot or spice shaker. Image @Ruby Lane

The coquilla nut is in fact the fruit of the Brazilian Palm, which is closely related to the coconut palm. The nut is 3-4 inches long, and has a very hard, richly streaked brown shell that is capable of taking a fine polish. It is a source of palm oil. The tree also offers up a stiff, wiry leaf fiber that is used for making brooms and rope. Coquilla nuts were routinely converted into a variety of highly ornamental articles:

The uncommonly pleasing colour of the shell, the hardness and the native mottle which appears when it is highly polished, renders it capable of being employed, with the most agreeable effect, as it is susceptible of the most tasteful forms — on the writing-table, in wafer-

boxes and seals, pounce, sand-boxes, &c. — on the ladies' work-table, in needle-cases and thimble-cases, cotton-boxes, pincushions, &c. — or on the toilette and dressing-table, in boxes for lip-salve, rouge, scented sponges, and every kind of pomade. In the form of egg-cups, the nuts will be found to decorate the eating 'table. As bell-pulls, they are very elegant.



19th c. coquilla nut pomander and nutmeg grater. Image @Christie's.

Coquilla nuts were also made into umbrella handles, candlesticks, and dice cups. The carved product was combined with ivory, or in the case of jewelry, with jade. I could find no examples of jewelry, and wonder if the nut was widely used for such a use.

As they appear to great advantage when worked up into beads, rosaries, and crosses, they will, doubtless, give a pleasing variety to personal decoration, when shaped into necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and other trinkets. Little useful pocket articles, as nutmeg-graters, cases for smelling-bottles, and other similar portable conveniences ; in short, whatever has been formed from ivory, may be produced from the shell of the Coquilla, whose beauty will not fail to attract, while the price of the article will satisfy the purchaser."



Coquilla nutmeg grater. Image @Historic Cookery

Antique coquilla nut items are still quite reasonably priced, as this [nutmeg grater from Historic Cookery](#) attests. The Ackermann's description indicated that the item was carried in the owner's pocket, in order to season food ordered at a chopping house or club, no doubt.



19th century coquilla nut flea trap. Image @Physick.com

The most interesting coquilla nut item is this one: a flea trap.

It is easy to forget the squalor, poor hygiene, stench and infestations which our forefathers endured. In the 18th and 19th century flea traps were filled with a few drops of blood and honey or resin, depending on your financial means. Supposedly, fleas attracted by the blood would enter the trap and get stuck to the honey or resin. They were hung around the neck, worn in ladies clothes or kept in bed. – [Physick.com](#)



Coquilla nut flask. Image @Millers Antiques Guide

This coquilla nut flask seems a relatively simple item (One wonders how much liquid such a small flask would contain, unless it was whiskey or laudanum, or some other potent substance). Examining it closely, one can read inscribed on

its top:

‘In the West Indies, I did grow upon a tree so high a negro come and cut me down a soldger...did me buy.., H. Neal, 35, Royal Sussex’. – [Millers Antiques Guide](#)

Some coquilla nut items were larger and more elaborate. One surmises that a series of nut carvings were joined and glued together to create these beautiful candlesticks carved by Indian artisans in Bengal, who worked from designs supplied by locally based European tradesmen.



Late 18th C. Anglo Indian coquilla nut and ivory table candlesticks. Image@Online Galleries: The Antique Portal

...these candlesticks typical of the Murshidabad workshops delicately carved decoration, may have stood on an ivory ‘teapoy’, whose form was directly taken from a European candlestand.” – [The Antique Portal](#)



Carved 19th c. coquilla nut case thread, thimble holder. Image @WorthPoint

#### More about the featured items:

- [Candlesticks at Online Galleries: The Antique Portal](#)
- Ink stand @Antiques Atlas [http://www.antiques-](http://www.antiques-atlas.com/antique/18thcearly_19thc_finely_carved_coquilla_nut/as304a057)

[atlas.com/antique/18thcearly\\_19thc\\_finely\\_carved\\_coquilla\\_nut/as304a057](http://www.antiques-atlas.com/antique/18thcearly_19thc_finely_carved_coquilla_nut/as304a057)

- [Christie’s Coquilla Nut Pomander and Nutmeg Grater](#)