

North Carolina Shell Club Oral Auction

12 November 2022

John Timmerman / Auction Chair



North Carolina Shell Club held its annual oral auction on the evening of Saturday November 12, 2022. The inventory of material to be auction was among the most exciting and varied the club has had the pleasure to offer. We had 119 lots.

There was much anticipation for the evening to come.

Much of the material was donated to the club from estate collections. We had many of the classic species known to most collectors, amateur and advance as well as ones seldom seen in present commerce. Our bidders not only worked with a great variety of items and had opportunity to acquire really special shells.

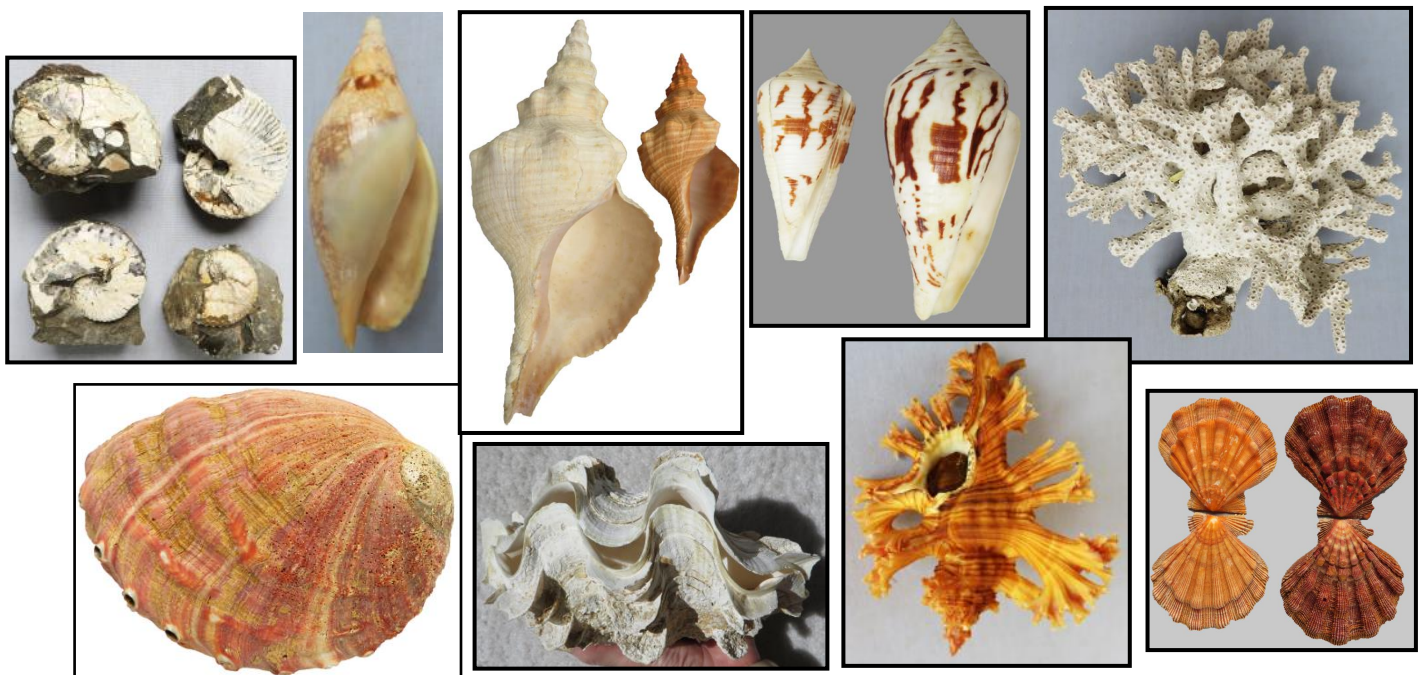
My wife Nancy and I were the auctioneers. Mark Johnson was our “Igor.” Susan O’Connor delivered the lots to the winning bidders.

The following narrative is a series of random observations the auction inspired from the handling of its content leading up to and the actual bidding.

I started the auction with a series of well-known lots starting the bidding at one dollar. All would have a chance to become accustomed to the style of the auctioneers. As the auction progressed, we started many potentially high dollar lots at well above \$1 and there were several instances where a bidder called out a higher opening bid.

This supplement functions as a compliment to the auction catalog.

John Timmerman



I started the auction with a few of the familiar standards which astute bidders were able to score for well below present retail value. Lot 1, *Turbo marmoratus*, is a fairly easy shell to find for sale but with the massive operculum included is challenging. Lot 2, *Charonia tritonis*, the Pacific Trumpet Triton is a shell most collectors want at least one example in their cabinet. Our very respectable shell went for \$40.

A bit later in the auction was Lot 47, *Cassis cornuta*, Horned Helmet or Yellow Helmet in the commercial trade. It is increasingly difficult to obtain new shells though there are many estate shells floating around the market. Many of the estate shells are commercial shells being polished to render them more attractive but resulting in shells less interesting to serious scientific collectors. Our shell was a large, fully mature scientific grade specimen with data, self-collected by the donor, in the Philippines before they were banned from export by that country. The bid price of \$140 was reasonable for one at a foot in length – large for the species.



Great Green Turban

Turbo marmoratus Linnaeus, 1758



Pacific Trumpet Triton

Charonia tritonis (Linnaeus, 1758)



Horned Helmet

Cassis cornuta (Linnaeus, 1758)

304mm

\$100+ Lots

Lot number 26 *Conus pergrandis*, was a pair of cones not frequently offered in recent years. When they sold for \$110 there was spontaneous applause from the gallery. This was the first \$100-plus auction result of the evening. Proceeds of the auction support the scholarship fund the club sponsors. Highly fought for lots are an immediate indicator of success for the club goal.



Grand Cone, 2 shells
Conus pergrandis (Iredale, 1937)
85 – 118mm



Staghorn Coral a nice complete specimen
Acropora cervicornis (Lamarck, 1816)
No data, 251mm (across largest spread of branches)

Coral

The skeletons of the animals that from coral reefs, have fascinated collectors for many generations. Modern, responsible collectors not disturb or remove corals and in many places doing so is now against the law. The appreciation of coral has not diminished. Pre-ban coral may enhance displays without harming the reefs or animals that live there. The club has received stony corals though donated estate collections. Though being heavily restricted in commercial trade, it remains legal for the club to sell these old specimens within USA. Coral offered at this auction generated keen interest. The top selling coral at \$220, Lot 57 was a large Elkhorn specimen mounted in a Razor Coral, creating a striking statement. It will decorate a medical office. Early in the evening an especially complete colony of Staghorn Coral set the tone for corals. Lot 6 went for \$80 and is headed to the same use as the Elk Horn Coral.



Elkhorn Coral
Acropora palmata (Lamarck, 1816)
~ 435mm largest span of branches
(soda can is for scale, it was not included in the lot)

Scotch Bonnet Lamp

The North Carolina State Shell, the Scotch Bonnet is arguably the most sought after mollusk species on the State's beaches. Large coastal storms can yield hundreds if not thousands of the prized shell particularly washed ashore on the Outer Banks. To find one of the often elusive shells makes one's day. In 1985 I had the pleasure of visiting North Core Banks soon after Hurricane "Gloria" to see for myself that the stories of abundance of Scotch Bonnet and other shells were not exaggerated. There must have thousands. Harold Brown donated a lamp (Lot 32) filled with 314 specimens of the North Carolina prized shell. Bidding started with a shout of \$100, then soared. Several bidders worked hard to gain the prize. \$375 garnered the lamp for the top bidder. The lamp will be a fixture in the winner's shell room, a use several competing bidders eyed it for. Much applause from the gallery resulted!



Lot 58, from Venezuela, a Mouse Cowrie is today, virtually unobtainable in USA due to political reason. For \$50 this shell now graces a well known shell club member.

Nautilus / Ammonite

With addition of Pearly Nautilus (Lot 7, \$65), as a species of concern by CITES a well-known shell that was once easy to obtain is now rapidly disappearing from the market. Pre CITES II listed specimens command ever increasing prices. Ammonites, an extinct lineage of animals closely related to Nautilus are not governed by CITES but due to their beautiful form often garner similar interest in bidding. Lot 80, a group of 4 Ammonites, sold for \$50.



Chambered Nautilus, 2 shells
Nautilus pompilius Linnaeus, 1758
No data, SW Pacific 103 – 176mm
Note: the smaller shell had a crack in it

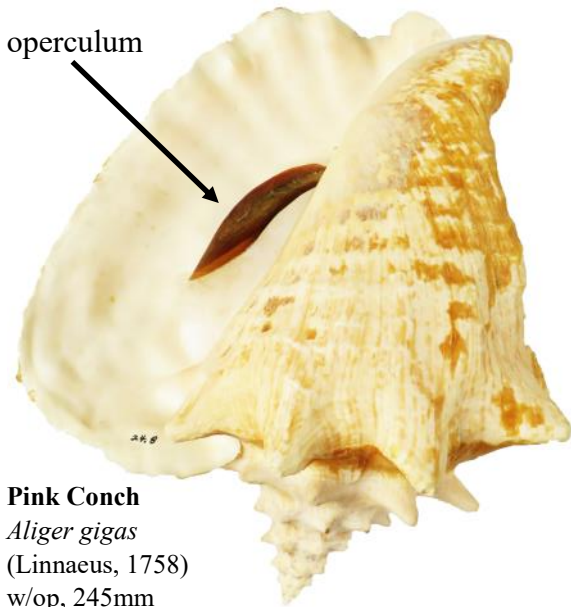
Ammonite Fossils
4 specimens
28 – 49mm



Mouse Cowrie
Muracypraea mus (bicornis) (Lamarck, 1816)
47mm

Operculum

Lot 30 Pink Conch (\$35) was live taken from the Florida Keys many decades ago. The shell was quite faded as all old collection specimens are, but opportunity to get that crazy, huge operculum was reason enough for interest in this offering.



Pink Conch
Aliger gigas
(Linnaeus, 1758)
w/op, 245mm



Baler Shell

One the largest shells of the auction was Lot 119, a huge and gerontic *Melo amphora* which went for \$80 to a junior member of the club. When I was a young collector I had only to see the picture of huge *Melo amphora* next to John duPont in the March 1969 "National Geographic" magazine to know I had to have at least one of these monster shells in my collection. It was many more years as a young adult before I had that opportunity.

Giant Shells

Extra-large shells, even within common species are always scarce by virtue of attaining immense size compared to their typically sized counterparts. The visual impact of having one of these standout shells is unbeatable in a display.

Angel Wing

Speaking of large shells, Lot 81 featured a gigantic Angel Wing, measuring 173mm. A few times I have seen long dead singles of this magnitude on beaches and marveled at what they must look like as a specimen shell. This was that shell. \$50 moved this shell to a collection where it will be hard to top per size and needless to say in a quality far superior to the long dead beach samples.



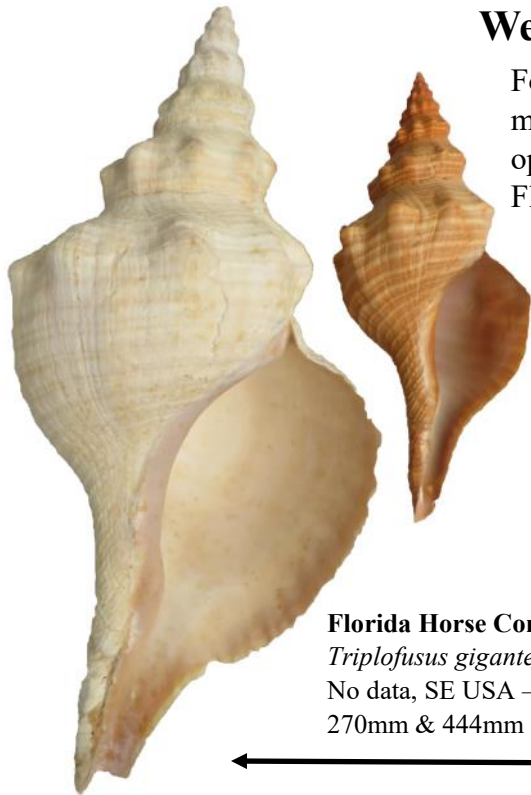
Angel Wing
Cyrtopleura costata (Linnaeus, 1758)
173mm



Baler Shell
Melo amphora ([Lightfoot, 1786])
365mm (~14.5")

Western Atlantic Giant Shells

For the collector of giant shells there were many opportunities to meet the quest. Lot 99 (\$40) a *Cassi madagascariensis* with operculum, and Lot 65 (\$80) including a large 17.5" Florida Horse Conch, were two fine examples of big shells.



Cameo Helmet
Cassis madagascariensis
Lamarck, 1822
w/op, 255mm

Florida Horse Conch, 2 shells
Triplofusus giganteus (Kiener, 1840)
No data, SE USA – Mexico
270mm & 444mm (17.5")



Abalone

Abalones include combinations of color unbelievable if not seen for oneself.

Lots 28 (\$25) and 29 (\$37) provided their lucky winners opportunity to appreciate these unique and stunning shells.



Threaded Abalone, 5 shells
Haliotis kamtschatkama Jonas, 1845
86 – 124mm



Red Abalone
Haliotis rufescens Swainson, 1822
No data, Baja to Oregon, 215mm

Onion Shell

Lot 52 presented a brace of shells not often offered, *Melapium lineatum*. They are not easy to find figured in reference works. In building auction catalogs I attempt to include a popular name. Abbott is an excellent resource for popular names but on occasion I cannot find a shell in one of his books. For lack of finding a popular name I fell back to using the scientific classification and left it at that. Lot 52 was an example of the question not being answered. Another interested collector subsequently told me they are popularly known as “Onion Shell.” Makes sense as they do bear a resemblance to the vegetable. Both specimens were of very fine condition and went for \$75 to a rapidly growing, important collection.



Melapium lineatum (Lamarck, 1822)

2 shells

26 – 28mm

Building a Series

Sometimes having one example of a shell is not enough. All shells are different and there are species that compel the collector to want more than just one. Lot 4, Rose-branch Murex (\$40) sourced from Sri Lanka, was a fine example of this factor in collecting. Some of the shells from this locality have among the most beautiful well developed varix of the species. The shell we offered was one. The degree of varix development varies at this locality as shown in the photograph. A series is instructional to the variability in a species not to mention a beautiful display.

Left– the shell we auctioned

Right - another shell from Sri Lanka

Collections

We offered several lots that included multiple shells. Though the bid of \$120 required to win Lot 50, Olive collection may feel high, the result was a very good price for the bidder as it included 24 species, many of which were represented by more than one specimen. There were many collections that netted the lucky bidders instant, significant additions to their collections without a large outlay of funds. Lot 66 a large collection of fossils sold for \$55. Lot 86, a worldwide collection of Wentletraps including several fine examples of large and desirable species, sold for \$60.



Olive Collection



Wentletrap
Worldwide Collection,
14 species
(not all shown)



In memory of Everett Long

The top bid item for the evening was a non-mollusk lot. Everett Long designed a North Carolina Shell Club license tag which he sold to club members at cost. The first tag he made for himself and assigned it as Number 1. Anticipation for Lot 104 was high. Potential bidders spoke of and strategizing how they would win the auction. A long time club member who could not attend the meeting asked another member to proxy bid for it. Everett's wife Nancy donated his #1 tag to the club after his recent, untimely passing. Bidding immediately started at \$100 with a shouted offer and took off. Several bidders worked hard to prevail in the quest. The plate will grace the wall of the winning bidder's shell room. The largest applause of the evening was accorded to the deserving winner at \$550.



Getting Used to High Dollar Auctions

Earlier on many lots easily exceed \$100. Telling for the amounts that became routine was Lot 83, 6 *Polymita picta*. When the bidding concluded at \$130 one could have heard "crickets." No spontaneous applause for a \$100 plus auction. This is a very recognizable and gorgeous shell, now very difficult to obtain. Interestingly this is a shell in my childhood I could purchase one for a few pennies at seaside curio shops. They are only found in Cuba and are now CITES listed so the days of abundance and inexpensive are gone. Perhaps the resulting silence at the amount of the bidding was due to the shock of the transformation of formerly very common shell into one of high and deserved value.

(Cuban) **Painted Polymita**, 6 shells
Polymita picta (Born, 1778)
26 – 33mm





Megalodon Shark Tooth, 2 teeth
Carcharocles megalodon (Agassiz, 1843)



Megalodon

In the fossil collecting world few fossils garner more universal lust than shark teeth. Few collectors consider giving a specimen of the prized Megalodon away. This natural history specimen is so universally recognized and desired even a casual beach walker with no prior interest in natural history will not pass up the opportunity to pick up a stumbled over tooth. The discovery of one of the teeth provides fodder for many boastful stories of how it appeared when found as well as the luck and or skill of the finder. The universal appeal of this fossil is far greater than even the Scotch Bonnet. The club was lucky to receive two of these desirable fossils in a donation, including one very fine and complete tooth. Though Lot 68, *Carcharocles megalodon* Shark Teeth were a bit off topic for a mollusk-oriented auction, the bidders were educated and worked hard to take them home. \$340, a price that makes some gasp, was a good deal for the lot considering the robust market for these very desirable fossils.

Paws From the Past

Another bidding force is coupled with changing availability for shells of yesterday combined with eye pleasing characteristics. Several lots of Lion's Paw Scallop, which used to be much more available as bi-catch from scallop trawlers, yielded energetic bidding. Lot 75 included a spectacular orange specimen and went for \$75. The result was easily anticipated due to striking orange shell (the photo did not do this shell justice) complimenting the reddish-brown specimen. Orange is a very infrequent in occurrence adding to their desirability.

Lion's Paw, 2 shells
Nodipecten fragosus (Conrad, 1849)
Orange – 86mm; red – 92mm



Pleasing to the Eye

All shells are beautiful. We had a large selection of the always popular Thorny Oysters including several *Spondylus americanus*. Lot 36 selling for \$65, featured an especially aesthetic specimen presented beautifully on the stone to which it had fixed itself.

American Thorny Oyster

Spondylus americanus Hermann, 1781
83mm (not including the stones)



Giant Clams

Many of the lots mentioned thus far including coral, *Polymita picta*, *Cassis cornuta* and *Charonia tritonis*, one needs to be knowledgeable of regulations and exercise caution at purchases as buying them from overseas is very limited or outright banned. A Genera of mollusk offered at auction were a nice selection of *Tridacna* and *Hippopus* clams now banned for import to USA. Lot 17 featured two pairs of Fluted Giant Clam, finishing at \$75. The larger of the two had been left completely natural on the exterior making it a standout as most were cleaned of marine growth before being marketed.



Fluted Giant Clam, 2 pairs
Tridacna squamosa Lamarck, 1819
No data, Indo-Pacific 116 – 229mm



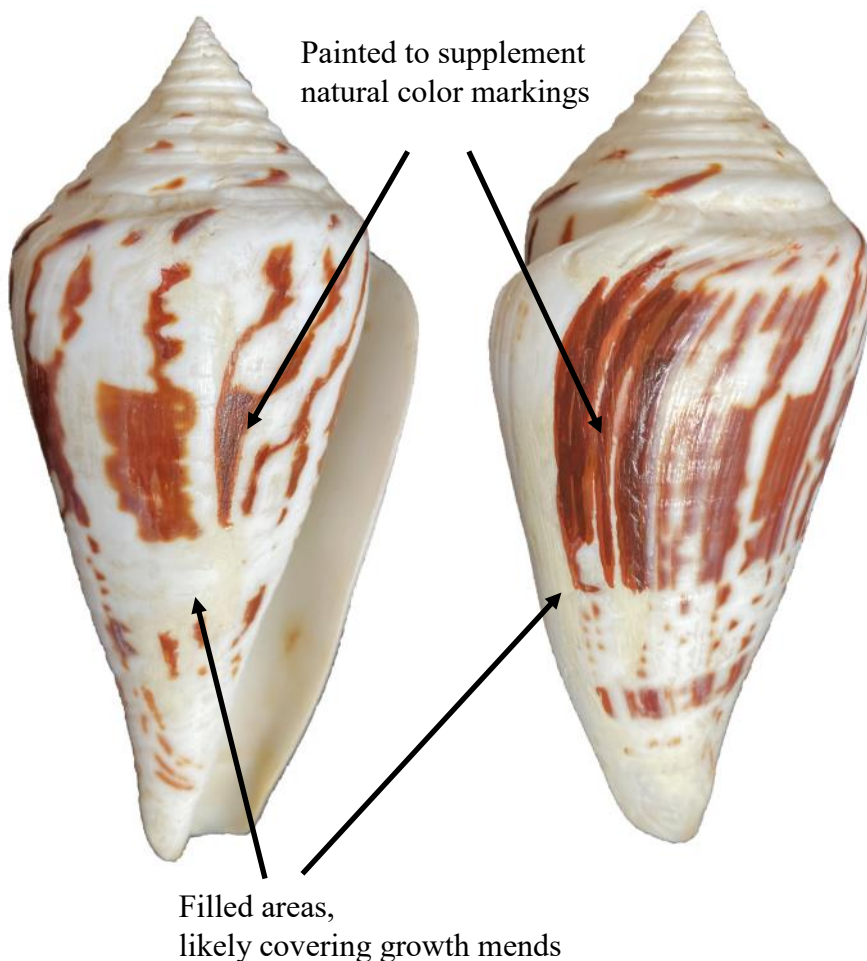
Bear Paw Clam, 1 large single, 1 small pair
Hippopus hippopus (Linnaeus, 1758)
No data, SW Pacific, 97 & 226mm

Lot 15 sold for \$25, a good deal for a species very difficult to obtain anymore!

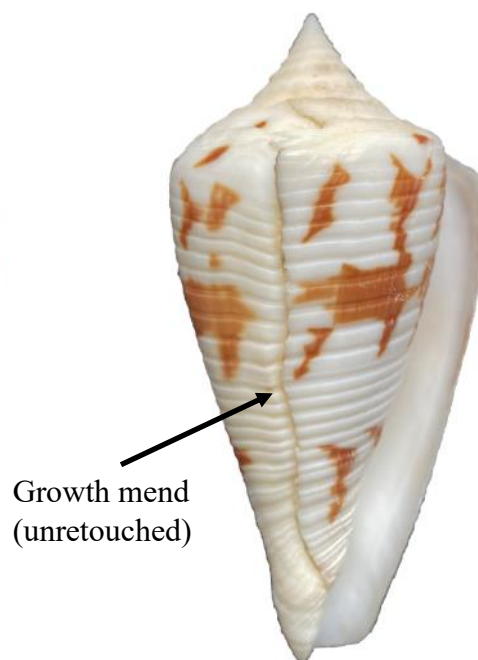
A Final Note on Quality

How perfect any collectable object is has bearing on value. Shells are no different. Where scarce species are concerned, enterprising fishermen have mastered the art of “doctoring” shells so that a damaged shell appears to be a “perfect,” much more scarce and valuable shell. Lot 26. *Conus pergrandis* at one time were very scarce. Shells of the species often bear large scars, evidence of injuries the mollusk survived. The larger of the two shells was a “doctored” shell. Growth mends were first filled. Several of the brown markings were painted, supplementing the natural color. An experiment at neutralizing a different doctored cone shell involved removing the paint and filling with the goal to yield a shell with all its flaws, a more desirable scientific specimen compared to one verging on being a counterfeit. Before filling growth mends the shell doctor had smoothed the sharp edges. In conclusion, removing the filling and paint still yielded a modified shell. The smaller of the two *Conus pergrandis* with a large, obvious growth mend, untouched by the shell doctors, is a more desirable scientific specimen. As Auction Chair I initially missed the doctoring of this shell. I had previously held few of this species and never saw or suspected the application. Such works are common to better known species such as Glory-of-the-seas Cone where the potential to increase a sales value makes the time investment in the doctoring worth the effort. *Conus pergrandis* was at one time a very valuable shell. This shell came for an old collection thus may be evidence of that time when spending time with one to increase value bore good return. Yikes! Fortunately I was the “lucky” winner of this lot. My goal in documenting auctions is to identify any flaws and make them known before bidding begins. The viewing enables bidders to check on my assessment.

“Doctored” Shell



Natural Shell



Grand Cone, 2 shells
Conus pergrandis (Iredale, 1937)
 85 – 118mm