

Coral from the Unique Origin: Naples

By Miss Gioia de Simone Owner and manager of the world's coral most ancient factory in Torre del Greco, Naples

«Paul Krugman's macroeconomic theory of market space argues that each industry has a determined space in the long run, maybe 2 players in the aircraft industry or 5 players in the hardware industry, por example. That's why governments should help companies defend its market space, as the finish government did by supporting nokia, and as the portuguese government should do to protect cork, and the italian to protect coral, and so on and so forth. This is far from being a leftist vision. And Gioia, my former colleague in London, besides welcoming me with Francesco and her family at their home in Positano, strongly endorses this vision», Diogo de Mello Caiado note

When you grow up in a city that rhymes with “coral” and your family business is the most ancient coral factory, with a nearly 200 years old tradition, you can’t help undergoing the fascination of the blood-red gem. Greek mythology tells us about a bloody tale: The blood which sprang from Medusa’s terrible head, cut off by Perseus and left on the beach, petrified the soft and green twigs, turning them into coral. Since then, the Mediterranean Peoples haven’t ceased wondering about the possible origin of the mysterious gem, half-way between the vegetal, mineral and animal kingdom, until the XVIII century, when the true animal origin of coral was discovered. But I don’t think you Diogo, nor your friends, will be interested in a very technical essay on coral, I’d rather speak about the antique routes of silk, that linked China to the West, passing through the treeless steppes of Central Asia, or the routes of spices, that connected the deep Southern Arabian Peninsula to Mare Nostrum. These routes were travelled also backwards by our merchants becoming “The routes of coral”. Red coral was the main exchange goods for the most precious Eastern products, this led – during centuries of trades- to its very deep penetration in the ethnic ornament of very far countries such as China, Mongolia, India, Uzbekistan, Yemen and finally Africa, with the extraordinary love that Nigerians have for coral!

It is amazing to learn about countries and ethnic groups through their very unique use of coral, in fact nothing is casual in the realm of ethnic jewels. All symbols, shapes, colours and materials define the person who wears them. Ornaments are transformed into “identity cards”, a concentrate of visual signs, through which each member of society can understand who he is facing.

In India, for example, where coral has been purchased from Rome since the 1st century A.D., their exquisite taste fully shows through the “navaratna” amulet: a precious and beautiful jewel in which there is a triple association: gem - planet – deity. Coral is associated to the deity “Mangala” and to the planet of Mars, which is believed to determine kinship, courage, strength and sexual potency.

Once, an Indian prince came and visit my father’s collection of antique jewelry and told me that I should stare at those navaratnas at least for 10 minutes a day, and I would gain the perfect balance and interior peace and, well, I feel privileged, ’cause I am surrounded by amulets while you… can try by looking at the picture!

Apart from the unquestioned beauty of Indian jewelry, what I find absolutely astonishing is the use of coral on top of the world: Himalaya! In Tibet, Nepal, Buthan, Ladakh, those jewels are meant to resist the itinerant life of a mainly nomadic population. They are talismans that help protect them from a magnificent but also menacing landscape. In Mongolia, for example, maybe for its sanguine red colour, its indefinite origin, its durability and magic, coral has become the sign of vital energy and mysterious forces. They appreciate our coral so much that they use it to adorn their horses (more than half of Mongolia’s people still maintain nomadic lifestyles and horses are therefore the most valued animals.)

Also central Asia, although surrounded by mountains, didn’t close its boundaries to the western world, and thanks to the Euro-Asiatic trading roots came in touch with coral. In this way, the precious red coral captured the imagination of the nomadic peoples of the deserts of Central Asia who were also quite romantic, since the ideal Uzbek woman had to have “eyebrows like bird’s wings, teeth like pearls, ears like sea-shells, lips like coral”! Our modern canon of beauty will probably make us disagree about the “ears like sea-shells”, but I think all men will agree on the coral-lips!

Well, there’s so much more to say about coral in ethnic jewellery … I still have to tell you about Nigeria’s incredible passion for coral! Maybe next time I will start again my story from the picture of Erediauwa I, Emperor of Benin, who wore more than 50 Kg of coral on his coronation day ….