Small Objects for Intimate Spaces: Touch and Stimulation in the Renaissance Studiolo

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Consider the Renaissance studiolo. Born out of a desire to learn, know, and collect, studiolos became homes to eclectic assemblages of man-made art objects and natural artifacts. They became intimate spaces for mental meditations and intellectual ponderings. Although it is certain these rooms and their wondrous objects were valued for their visual beauty, I argue that Renaissance collectors found tactile arousal equally stimulating. Arousal, the context of the studiolo, is not purely erotic. It is a stimulation of the mind and body that, in one aspect certainly has sexual connotations, but also, more broadly, is a holistic, all encompassing feeling encouraged by erudite meditations. Arousal is sensual in that it is an intimate experience, in this case shared between object and person. Thus the studiolo serves not merely as a place for intellectual advancement, but also, and perhaps more deeply, became understood as a place for sensual self-discovery, arousing feelings that are best satisfied through touch. And it is the objects held within the studiolo that served as mediums for such sensuous exploration, demanding the use of touch to fully comprehend the totality of their being.

Small bronze statuettes, medals, plaquettes, and utilitarian objects such as inkwells were produced in great amounts and prized by a wide variety of patrons. They ornamented tables and decorated desks, particularly in the studiolo, fostering intellectual conversations and meditations on mythology and craftsmanship.[1] Ancient sculpture in particular became a favorite subject for

[1] Joy Kenseth, "The Virtue of Littleness: Small-Scale Sculptures of the Italian Renaissance," in *Looking at Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, ed. Sarah Blake McHam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

miniatures, and collectors from Piero de Medici to Isabella d'Este held prized numbers of small bronze replicas of famous works from antiquity. With this, I turn to the sculpture of *Hercules and Antaeus,* created by Antico (Pier Jacopo Alari-Bonacolsi) in 1519 (Fig. 1), which is known to have been a part of Isabella d'Este's collection, as an example of the potential tactile arousal of small bronze sculptures.[2] Although this sculpture is heavy and would most likely not have been held for long periods of time, there is possible evidence that it was touched. Geraldine Johnson has argued that the fact that Isabella d'Este's name is engraved on the underneath of the base, which would only be visible if the statue was picked up and examined, hints to the tactile nature of the statue.[3]

Regardless of how long Isabella d'Este's *Hercules and Antaeus* was held, and despite its weight, its smooth, shiny metallic surface and undulating nude bodies would have provided a pleasurable tactile experience. Artists understood that these small bronzes would be handled and thus paid special attention to making their surfaces sensuously appealing to the touch.[4] These small works also contain complex amounts of detail that seem to encourage the graze of a finger, such as tufts of hair on the head, or even more sensuous, on the body. It is important that these sculptures are of nude figures. Their fingers became intertwined with the nude bodies, digesting the smoothness of the surface and the intensity of the detail. Hands therefore became tools for examination and exploration.

Such an act creates an intimate moment between object and possessor. By touching, the desire that the figures arouse in us is satisfied, providing tactile stimulation while also allowing for pensive reflection. Pleasure comes not purely from viewing alone, and part of the joy of miniature bronzes is their ability to be held in our hands. The proliferation of studiolos during the Renaissance came from an obsessive desire to understand all aspects of the physical, and by extension, the metaphysical world.[5] It is partially through touch that we understand our surroundings, and it is perhaps the most intimate of the senses. It requires that we come close to the object, that we allow it into our sphere. Touching bronzes is pleasurable because it feeds a desire to know.

It is touch that is perhaps most linked to sensual pleasure. The desire to touch, and the sensation we feel when we touch something, reminds us of our bodies, and more broadly, reminds us that we are alive.[6] When a Renaissance patron touched the bronze body, in this case Isabella touching Hercules, satisfaction came from the smooth bronze surface. In a philosophical sense, not only did she

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[2] Geraldine A. Johnson, "In the Hand of the Beholder: Isabella d'Este and the Sensual Allure of Sculpture," in *Sense and the Senses in Early Modern Art and Cultural Practice*, ed. Alice E. Sanger and Siv Tove Kulbrandstad Walker (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2017), 186, https://www.academia.edu/1462339/In_the_Hand_of_the_Beholder_Isabella_dEste_and_the_Sensual_Allure_of_Sculpture.

[3] Johnson, "In the Hand of the Beholder."

[4] Kenseth, "The Virtue of Littleness."

[5] Kenseth, "The Virtue of Littleness."

[6] Richard Kearney, "Coming to Our Senses," in *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.

touch the bronze, but these nude bodies, lustrous and muscular, touched her. Small bronzes, particularly of nude figures, thus became incredibly provocative objects, feeding the human desire to touch and be felt. The sensual nature of these objects cannot be ignored, with nude figures adorning not just figural sculpture, but also utilitarian objects such as inkwells and goblets.

In Isabella's Grota, a small, studiolo-like room that was filled with Greco-Roman philia, inkwells, candlesticks, and oil lamps were displayed along with the *Hercules and Antaeus* bronze. These objects, by design, are meant to be touched.[7] One example is an inkwell by Severo da Ravenna made c.1500 in Padua called *Boy Supporting a Shell*, currently held at the Victoria and Albert Museum (Fig. 2). It features a boy dressed in a rippling tunic, supporting a shell whose cavity would have been filled with ink. Because objects like this inkwell were most likely stored on shelves at eye level or higher, it would have required the user to pick it up and place it wherever they wanted it to go. One could hold it at the base, but I believe it is more plausible that the boy's waist was grabbed to transport the object, as this proves a more stable support for the shell inkwell and more leverage in lifting the heavy bronze off the shelf. It is an incredibly suggestive idea, but one that is not impossible. Figural bronzes became not just literal tools of intellectual activities, but through their intimate interactions with hands, became a medium of sensual meditation.

The shell inkwell is also wrought with evocative symbolism. While studiolos were most certainly spaces for man-made objects, they were also home to large collections of natural artifacts from bones and plant specimens, to shells. These natural objects were collected and cherished for their rarity and further fed the Renaissance curiosity to understand every detail about the natural world.[8] On one occasion, Isabella d'Este was sent a string of amber beads with small animals from Lorenzo da Pavia for her to admire.[9] Objects made of natural materials, and the natural materials themselves, thus came in dialogue with the "artistic" bronze works and paintings kept in the studiolo space, and served as decorations and collectors items. Shells in particular were prized for their dynamic surfaces and mathematical precision, a topic that continues to engage collectors.[10]

Anna Grasskamp, Professor of art at St. Andrews University whose research focuses on material cultures in Europe and Asia, argues that shells induced a sensual, and sometimes even sexual, excitement aroused by the smoothness, shape, and shine of the specimens.[11] Again, the studiolo became not just a place for intellectual reflection, but also the location to explore human arousal

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[7] Johnson, "In the Hand of the Beholder," 192.

[8] Anne Goldgar, "For the Love of Shells," in *Conchophilia: Shells, Art, and Curiosity in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Marisa Anne Bass, Anne Goldgar, Hanneke Grootenboer, and Claudia Swan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 1.

[9] Leah R. Clark, "Collecting, Exchange, and Sociability in the Renaissance Studiolo," *Journal of the History of Collections* 25, no. 2 (2012): 171–84, https://doi.org/10.1093/jhc/fhs022.

[10] Goldgar, "For the Love of Shells," 10.

[11] Goldgar, "For the Love of Shells," 14.

through sensual stimulation and erotic curiosity. Goldsmiths, like artists, understood the tactile and erotic implications of the early modern collectors' engagement with surfaces, and thus mounted shells on elaborate golden stands. These vessels crafted out of shells were commonly displayed in Italian studioli and later German *Kunstkammern*.[12]

These shell vessels share a striking resemblance to the *Boy Supporting a Shell* inkwell. In particular the *Nautilus Shell Cup* from the Fitzwilliam Museum from c. 1585–86 (Fig. 3) shares the same motif of a shell (in this case a real one) being supported by a figure.[13] In order to pick up the cup, one must grab the mostly nude man by his waist. Furthermore, shells were often regarded as symbols of human body parts, particularly due to their shape and closeness to human skin tones.[14] Such an idea was widespread, and certainly would have been known by well-versed collectors such as Isabella d'Este. It becomes even more provocative when considering the intended actions of each object. With the vessel, one would put their lips to the shell's rim, playing with physical touch and arousing the user not just with the liquid inside, but also with the pleasure of the smooth shell surface. Due to the shell's cultural connection with human genitalia, such an association turns a simple action into a graphic play of human sexuality. Similarly, because it is the shell that holds the ink in the inkwell, inserting the pen into the well of the shell creates a similarly suggestive image.

Such intimate explorations of human sexual tendencies, even if they are playful symbols, demonstrates how studiolos were more than just a space for scholarly knowledge. These spaces were small, intimate, personally created rooms, and would thus have been the stage for private explorations of one's deepest arousals. It is through touch, and therefore physical stimulation, that the most personal connections can be made. Arousal is most aptly satisfied through touch, and humans naturally feel the desire to touch. Unlike the modern museum, studiolos encouraged the handling, examining, fondling, and dissecting of objects.

This desire to touch, to examine, was indeed fed through this obsession with shells. But not only did shells provide tactile arousal in their full forms, they also served as a valuable artistic medium, becoming art objects that were similarly valued for their tactility. Ancient cameos became highly prized during the Renaissance and collectors such as Isabella d'Este and Lorenzo de' Medici had renowned collections. Although shell cameos existed,[15] most were crafted from colorful stones such as agate and

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[12] Anna Grasskamp, "Shells, Bodies, and the Collectors Cabinet," in *Conchophilia: Shells, Art, and Curiosity in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Marisa Anne Bass, Anne Goldgar, Hanneke Grootenboer, and Claudia Swan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 49.

[13] Although this object dates to about a century later than the time period of this class, it is interesting to see how these motifs continued into the next centuries, certainly based on ideas that came from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

[14] Grasskamp, "Shells, Bodies, and the Collectors Cabinet," 52, 64

[15] See *Badge of the Order of Saint Michael* in the Met's Collection for a seventeenth-century example of a shell cameo.

sardonyx, with these small decorative mementos being valued for both their beauty and classical motifs. A particularly tactile object, cameos had to be turned in the hand to be properly appreciated, their smooth surfaces and delicate details demanding to be touched. Cameos and other small works like medals were collected with vigor, and their value was so great that they were used as important diplomatic gifts. Such objects were easy to transport and would easily mesmerize the receiver.[16]

Cameos also deeply inspired Renaissance collectors and artists to create works like the miniature bronzes as they began to equate miniatures with classical ingenuity.[17] Giorgio Vasari recounts that the artist Matteo dal Nassaro obtained a piece of green and red spotted jasper into which he then carved a scene of the Deposition of Christ, calling particular praise to the way the artist exploited the red speckles of the tone to show Christ's bleeding wounds.[18] Because of the small size of these objects, religious scenes would have allowed for personal and intimate devotional reflection. One can imagine the collector's desire to trace their fingers over Christ's wounds, the tactility of the miniature carved relief guiding their devotion. In the Quattrocento, the motif of Saint Thomas touching Christ's side wound became quite prominent, as seen in small terracotta sculptures by Luca della Robbia. Saint Thomas reaches out and touches Christ's bleeding side with two fingers, an intimate show of devotion and an exploration of the so-called divine touch.[19]

Highly learned patrons would have been aware of the story of Saint Thomas and Nassaro's cameo would have served to initiate religious contemplation through tactile imagery. Thus, the Renaissance obsession with cameos emphasizes how knowledge was sought not just through cerebral contemplation, but that objects encouraged both religious and secular intellectual understandings through touching and engaging with surfaces. Touch allowed for a sensual exploration of one's objects, as the physicality of small sculpture became just as important to the studiolo experience as visual appeal. Furthermore, it is the visual appeal that aroused them to touch. Christ's nearly nude, bleeding body is presented for private examination, allowing the viewer to touch his body. And it is through this sacred touch that the viewer transcends into knowing, coming closer in contact to the eucharistic body of Christ.

It is with this obsession with collecting small objects that patrons began commissioning commemorative medals, another tradition that calls back to ancient times. Portrait and commemorative medals were commissioned to memorialize individuals and serve as mediums of diplomatic or friendly exchange. They are often generated in both recto and verso, both the front and

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[16] Kenseth, "The Virtue of Littleness."

[17] Kenseth, "The Virtue of Littleness."

[18] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects*, vol. 6, referenced by Kenseth, "The Virtue of Littleness."

[19] Christina Neilson, "Bridging Dimensions: Verrocchio's Christ and Saint Thomas as Absent Presence," in *Practice and Theory in the Italian Renaissance Workshop: Verrocchio and the Epistemology of Making Art*, 118–51 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), doi:10.1017/9781316779408.004.

the back carefully designed and detailed. But unlike small bronze figural sculptures, as described by Aimee Ng, they were distinguished by their portability and were crafted with touch in mind, intended to be seen and felt. Because they were decorated on both sides, one was expected to turn the medal in their hands, scrutinizing it from every angle.[20]

A medal's tactility is further emphasized by its weight and size, often no larger than the palm of a hand. One can easily hold a medal in one hand and trace the complex reliefs with their fingers, taking in the profile portraits and symbols that commonly decorated their surfaces. They are perhaps one of the most tactile objects to come out of the Renaissance and their multiplicity within studiolo collections points directly to the tactile nature of collecting. Certainly displayed next to other objects such as figure sculpture and naturalia, their invitations to touch would have, by proxy, encouraged a similar treatment to the objects around them.

Bronze was also thought to have important alchemical properties and was believed to possess life, particularly due to biblical associations with Moses during the Middle Ages and the sensuousness of its reflective surfaces.[21] Because of this belief, bronze medals thus become living representations of the figures depicted, and by touching them, its possessor forms not just a tactile bond with an object, but a living representation. The medal would have, if cast and finished well, been smooth and cool to the touch, invigorating hands as one dissected every small detail. If the medal was of a friend or family member, the act of touching thus becomes even more intimate, as our bodies come in contact with a "living" image of their likeness. In *Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo the Elder* executed by Botticelli c. 1474–75 (Fig. 4), a man holds up a medal of Cosimo de' Medici for the viewer to examine. It is assumed that this portrait is meant to show a political alliance between the unknown sitter and the Medici family, but what makes this work even more fascinating is that the medal is rendered in stucco, making it three-dimensional.

Touch is thus not only being shown in the composition, but the rendering of the medal in the third dimension puts an even greater emphasis on the tactility of these objects. He proudly shows the medal to the viewer, a ritual that would have occurred within the small, confined space of the studiolo. Geraldine Johnson describes a scene similar to this where a Gonzagan envoy showed a Neapolitan court a medal of Isabella d'Este (Fig. 5) and after "looking at it for a long time, said a thousand times that they wanted to kiss [it]."[22] This small aside demonstrates how these small Renaissance objects, through their visual and tactile appeal, fostered feelings of arousal and a desire for stimulation. I doubt

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[20] Aimee Ng, *The Pursuit of Immortality: Masterpieces from the Scher Collection of Portrait Medals* (New York: The Frick Collection in association with D Giles Limited, 2017), 11–16.

[21] Ittai Weinryb, "The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages," in *Bronze*, ed. David Ekserdjian (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2012), 72–73.

[22] Leah R. Clark, "Collecting, Exchange, and Sociability in the Renaissance Studiolo," *Journal of the History of Collections* 25, no. 2 (2012): 171–84, https://doi.org/10.1093/jhc/fhs022.

that it was purely the figural representation, but also the sensuous appeal of the metallic surface and intimacy of the small size that further encouraged this bodily reaction.

Leah Clark argues that portrait medals alluded to friendships, alliances, or sought-after acquaintances of the owner and thus became a visual manifestation of the political and familial networks of their possessor.[23] However, I argue that touch too played an essential part in demonstrating the intimacy of these relationships, especially as the man in Botticelli's portrait holds the medal not just in his hands, but against his heart. Medals, with their small size and tactility, demonstrate the social and personal cultures of collecting, and how such multiplicity of tactile objects further emphasizes how the Renaissance studiolo became a place for personal pleasure.[24] Effigies of one's friends and allies surely aroused passion and pride, and though touching them, again remembering that bronze was believed to be a "living ore," collectors connected themselves to each other on an extremely personal level.

Thus it is medals and their explicit tactility that demonstrate how Renaissance studiolos were not purely for erudite contemplation but fostered unique, pleasurable experiences for exploring one's innermost desires. Ludovico Foscarini in describing the studiolo of Isotta Nogarola, wrote that her "little cell...brought me a kind of foretaste of paradise."[25] This connection to "paradise" is particularly telling, as in the Renaissance, the biblical paradise is often depicted as being filled with wonders of the natural world. It is also the place of humans before sin, and where good Christians will rise to in Heaven. But it is also in this "paradise" that humans first discovered the sin of pleasure. Studiolos, and their small tactile objects, thus feed one's desires, arousing feelings of childlike fascination and personal pleasure.

It is not hard to find elements of sensual curiosity in Renaissance studiolos. I believe that it is not a coincidence that humanist collections feature such a prominent emphasis on the nude human body. I see the studiolo as an extension of this exploration of the body, for it is not only the mind that needs stimulation. Studiolos are intimate, small, and idealized. They encourage us to touch and feel and explore ourselves and every aspect of our desires. The Renaissance desire to collect becomes also a desire to explore one's self. As one sat in the studiolo, they too, became an object under examination.

[23] Leah R. Clark, "Collecting, Exchange, and Sociability in the Renaissance Studiolo," *Journal of the History of Collections* 25, no. 2 (2012): 171–84, https://doi.org/10.1093/jhc/fhs022.
[24] Ng, *The Pursuit of Immortality*, 11–16.
[25] M. L. King, "The religious retreat of Isotta Nogarola (1418–1466): sexism and its consequences in the fifteenth century," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3 no. 4 (1978), 812, quoted in Clark, "Collecting, Exchange, and Sociability in the Renaissance Studiolo," 171–84.

Figures

Fig. 1. Antico (Pier Jacopo Alari de Bonacolsi), *Hercules and Antaeus,* c. 1519, Bronze, h. 43.2 cm with pedestal (17 in), Kunsthistorisches, Vienna.

Fig. 2. Severo da Ravenna, *Boy Supporting a Shell,* c. 1500–25, Bronze, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig. 3. *Nautilus Shell Cup,* c. 1585–86, nautilus shell and silver, Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Fig. 4. Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo the Elder,* c. 1474–75, tempera on panel, Uffizi, Florence.

Fig. 5. Gian Cristoforo Romano, *Portrait Medal of Isabella d'Este*, c. 1495–98, gold with diamonds and enamel, Kunsthistorisches, Vienna.

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