

first of all mentions that today amber is mainly used in its natural shape, its forms remain almost untouched or the artist's intervention is utterly minimal. In his opinion, the great majority of jewelers admires a natural rough surface of amber finds and only sometimes contrasts it with the polished or differently processed details. "Amber is a very ancient material and is therefore often expressly used to express time and time-related topics".*

Indeed, a tendency followed by the present-day international amber art seems to contradict the dominant opinion in the 60s-70s that amber can become an effective material only thanks to the artist's special efforts to bring it out through specific technical means. The oeuvre of the contemporary amber jewelry classics (e.g. Polish artists M. and P. Fietkiewicz, M. Lewicka-Wala, Lithuanians – F. Daukantas, K. Simanonis, etc.) can be definitely called modernist in the sense that it has rejected all the previously observed traditions in the sphere of amber art: both ethnographic, showing amber as a found object, and that of historical handicraft, treating amber as a decorative material. Having included amber into the circulation of contemporary jewelry the mentioned and other artists had an ambition to turn amber articles into exclusive art works and to kindle in them a glimmer of spirituality through their mastership.

The recent amber works, particularly created in the latest decade, witness the loss of interest in the very modernist style. The original works demonstrate the rebirth of fascination with the simplicity and objecthood of amber. Jewelers came to more often combine amber with more everyday materials: wood, ropes, plastics, steel, etc. (B. Stulgaitė, S. Virpilaitis, W. Friedrich), to again employ it for inlay work and sculptural forms (Ž. Bautrėnas, A. Matulionis, H. Stegemann), and particularly play with amber finds, reminding those collected by people on a sea shore (B. Jungrichter, P. Süzert, U. Scheer, C. Kurth, A. Wippermann, K. Gorzareck, L. Visy, etc.). This tendency of contemporary amber artworks also stimulates to differently approach the sources of modern amber art – the works created in the early 60s, which were pushed away to the margins of the craft by the judgments established in the context of modernist attitudes. The mass-produced amber jewelry and the statuettes composed of nearly unprocessed samples of material (e.g. F. Daukantas' early works), can be measured by the criteria of object-like attitude to amber too, and should occupy their proper place in the history of the 20th c. history of amber art.

George Kubler, an American art historian, as early as 1962 proposed a different outlook on the history of art**. In his opinion, the history of art should unite

all man-made objects: both those which are usually attributed to material culture and those – specifically artistic. G. Kubler's history of art is the history of things. Quite a few attempts to analyze a non-monosemantic relationship between a thing and an art object have been also made by exhibitions, like "What if Anything, Is an Object" (1994 in the Fogg Museum of Art, Cambridge, US), "Useless Things" (1997 in the Applied Art Museum, Tallinn) or "Unchained Things" (1998 in the Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius). The two outlooks on amber in contemporary amber jewelry join this polemic too. A modernist stand, as properly expected, is anti-traditional in respect of form, however, it protects the positions of exclusive high art. Contemporary art combines traditional and non-traditional expression. Its characteristic feature is manipulation with the perceptions of "high" and "low" art. Today amber art witnesses its rebirth time – the reason seems to be the reflexive understanding of both historical and modernist dogmas.

* Moderne Bernstein Kunst / Modern Amber Art. Ribnitz-Damgarten, 1999, p. 9

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AMBER IN DENMARK

Mariann Ploug

THE DANISH AMBER MUSEUM (DENMARK)

It should be possible to find amber almost anywhere in Denmark, if you dig deep enough, but most people are under the impression that amber is only found by the coast. Most of the Danish amber is succinite as Baltic amber, but amber from the Cretaceous Period has been found under the earth too.

The largest amounts of amber are found near Blåvandshuk and on Fanø, but amber is washed up in large quantities along the whole of the west coast of Jutland up to Thyborøn. Around Skagen, on the other hand, the current is so strong that the sea carries off the amber to quieter shores as the Kattegat coast from Frederikshavn southwards to below Limfjorden, as well as in Limfjorden itself. Actually amber has been found as far south as Århus Bight.

The north coasts of Læsø and Zealand are acknowledged to be good places for finding amber, and some can be found on Øresund. A certain quantity of amber is also washed up on the beaches of the smaller, southern islands.

Coastal amber

Amber, sometimes in large quantities, is often discovered in connection with the dredging of channels, the building of harbours and other coastal works. Amber has even been found in Copenhagen. In 1681, a lump weighing more than 1,400 grams was dug up at Kalveboderne, and later, at the northern entrance to the moat, a piece weighing about 1,200 grams was discovered. Both these pieces were presented to King Frederik III.



Fig. 1. Amber gatherers at Blåvandshuk, about 1980.

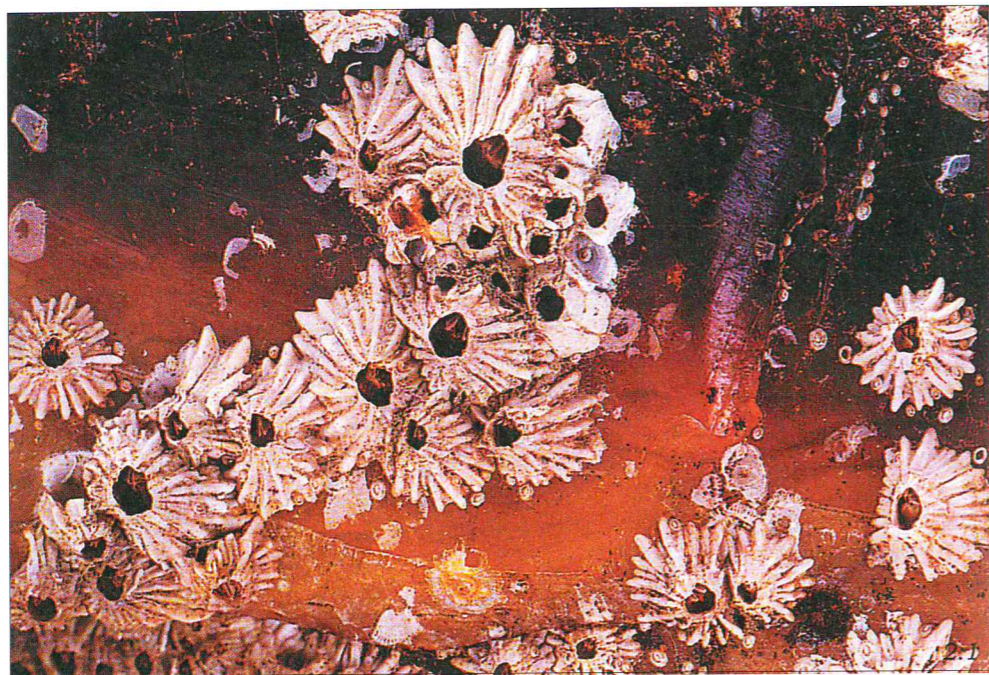


Fig. 2. Piece of amber, 1978.
Picked up in a Danish seine thirty nautical miles WNW of Hvide Sande
by the skipper of a local fishing boat. Weight: 2,470 grams.

The largest piece of amber found in Denmark weighs 4.5 kilos, and it is at the Geological Museum in Copenhagen.

Amber is always revealed in Limfjorden when the channel at Hals Bar is deepened, and the building of the Limfjord Tunnel in 1960th as well as the Greenland Harbour at Ålborg turned up a lot of amber, including pieces weighing as much as 700 grams. In some cases workers were able to earn more collecting amber than they did by working. In the same way, the recent construction projects at the Great Belt and in the Sound in the late 1990th have experienced 'amber rushes' in connection with work at the coastlines.

In the cold months, at any time of the day or night, you will find people combing the beach for amber at the water's edge - not every day, but when it is 'amber weather', which all serious amber collectors know about. When the sea begins to calm down after a storm, there is a good chance of finding some of the amber which natural forces have released from the seabed.

Currents and wind direction determine where the amber is washed ashore, but the salt content of the sea may also be of importance. At all events, the water north of Fanø up towards Blåvandshuk is a half percent more saline than the water south of the island. Amber floats more easily in salty water, and this is supposed to be one reason why more amber is washed ashore north of the island. Experienced collectors know where the amber is washed up, but others may find it useful to keep an eye on the gulls, which often forage among the washed-up material that may contain amber.

Quite extraordinary amounts of such material were washed up in connection with the great storm flood of 1911 on the west coast of Jutland, when the banks of the newly-dug Hvide Sande Canal collapsed and the sea made the opening ten times wider. South at Gjødlen near Nymindegab there was a heap some 500m long, and in some places 25m wide and 2m high. A few young men collected about 6 kilos of amber from these deposits. All the pieces were big enough to work with, but all weighed under 250 grams. On this same day, considerable quantities of amber were found along the coast from Bovbjerg to Blåvand.

Normally, only the smallest pieces are washed up onto the beach; the larger pieces are to be found out in the shallows. In some cases a small net is used, designed to pick up the larger pieces. In other cases the deposits are scooped up in larger nets, which are then taken ashore, where a colleague picks through them looking for amber. There are times when it is best to

look for amber before it is light, and at these times it can be an idea to go barefoot, as amber is warmer to the touch than sand and stone. Amber also reflects light better, and searching with a torch can be very productive.

Mostly collecting amber is a leisure time activity, but in earlier times especially it was for some people a second job, like making black pots or knitting stockings. As a rule, amber collectors were people of modest income, according to the sources often women, retired seamen or children. In 1833, the Prefect of the County of Ringkøbing mentioned amber collecting in a report as one of the secondary occupations outside agriculture. It is listed as no. 10, after salt rendering and before the collecting of flotsam and jetsam. He wrote that it would be an advantage „if coastal dwellers could be given some directions as to the best way to find amber by digging“. He had probably heard of the way people dug for amber on the coast of Samland in the eastern Baltic, and imagined that similar methods could be used in Denmark, but the method never caught on here.

Amber collectors are never very specific about their finds, and as a rule details of place and size are well-kept secrets. On the other hand, most people find it hard to keep quiet if they have found a very large piece or unusually large quantities of amber, so the word gets around....

Underground amber

Those who dig wells or are concerned with other major projects involving digging can confirm that amber is found at many places below the surface of Denmark. The largest quantities, however, are to be found in the salt meadows along the east coast of Jutland from Strandby to Dokkedal, where there are even signs prohibiting the collection of amber in the meadows.

Field amber can be found all year round, though conditions are best in the autumn when the fields have been newly ploughed, and especially just after rain. Amber from the sea and amber found on land are basically of the same type, but superficially they appear to be very different. The surface of field amber is heavily weathered from exposure to the oxygen in the air, whereas sea amber has been protected from this by the water. Field amber looks more or less like any other clump of earth, but when the top layer is scraped off the amber is just as clear and warm as that found on the beach.

Road works inland in Vendsyssel turn up a lot of amber in the underground layers of blue clay - when digging an underpass in connection with a main road, for example, or digging a tunnel for a cycle track in

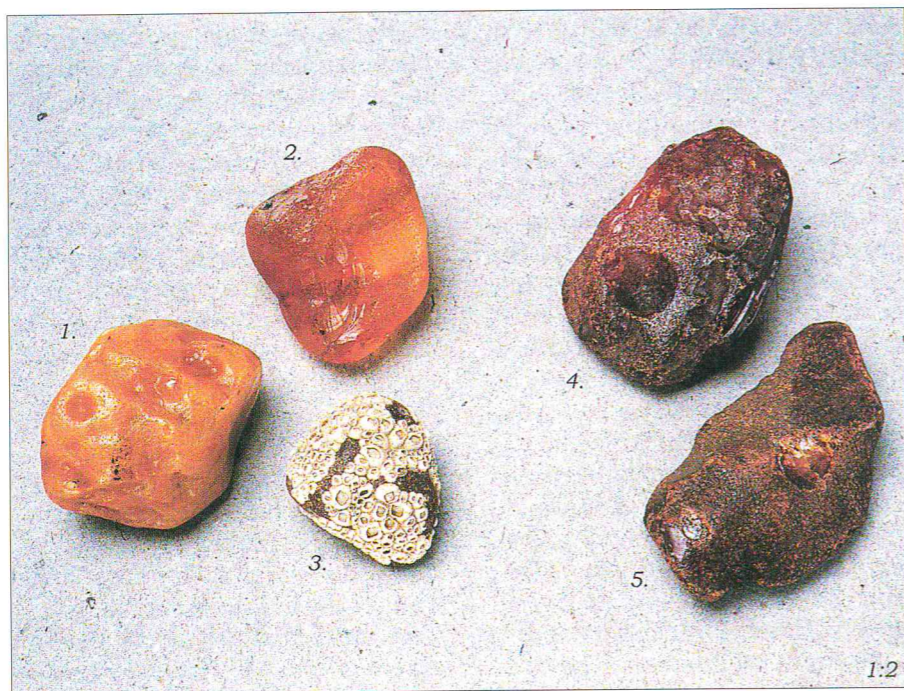


Fig. 3. Danish amber.
1. – 3. Amber found by the
North Sea between
Skallingen and Nymindegab.
4. – 5. Amber found in
the earth in the salt meadows
near the Kattegat south of Sæby.

1984. The large lignite mines in Central and West Jutland have often thrown up pieces of amber as an extra reward for the hard work, and amber is not infrequently found by those working in quarries and gravel pits.

The King's amber

The principle that what belongs to nobody belongs to the king has its roots way back in history, and according to this, wreckage or anything else washed up onto the beach belonged to the Crown if no one else had foreshore rights. In other words, amber did not belong to the finder, but should be delivered to the king's representative in the area. However, this rule does not seem to have been followed, since in 1555 the Lord Lieutenant at Riberhus was ordered by the king to send to the court two barrels of oysters and as much amber as he could buy.

Not until 1626, when Christian IV awarded Jacob Hansen (an amber turner in Copenhagen) the sole right to buy up all amber found along the coasts of Denmark, were all others, natives and foreigners, forbidden to collect or buy amber in these places. Jacob Hansen had to pay an annual fee of 50 rix-dollars to the king. He sent his men to buy up amber at several places along the west coast of Jutland, and the king's Lord Lieutenants were enjoined to help him find amber at a reasonable price.

From 1682 onwards, the king leased out his fore-

shore rights to noblemen or leading citizens in the Royal Boroughs. These concessionaires do not seem to have deterred the coastal populations, since on 24 November 1687 15-20 children were accused of having collected amber on the beach in the previous year without handing it over.

The incomes from such foreshore concessions were unreliable, as the amounts of wreckage, amber and so on varied greatly from year to year. Even so, the amounts cannot have been negligible, since the Prefect of the Diocese of Ribe himself took out the leases on all the beaches in the diocese from 1 April 1700 for a period of six years at an annual fee of 900 rix-dollars. The incomes must also have lived up to expectations, since he later extended the leasing agreement until 1712. As a protection against the local population, as soon as he had taken over the concessions he closed the beaches to everybody except those employed by him as beach wardens or amber collectors.

Other concessionaires followed, but the regulations were changed after the inhabitants of Fanø bought their own island in 1741. When the foreshore rights were up for auction in 1764, prospective beach concessionaires were presented with certain conditions, among others that 16-24 of the poorest people should be taken on as amber collectors, and that each of them should keep half the amber they gathered or its value.

Even so, the beach concessionaire on Fanø complained in 1767 that many people were collecting am-

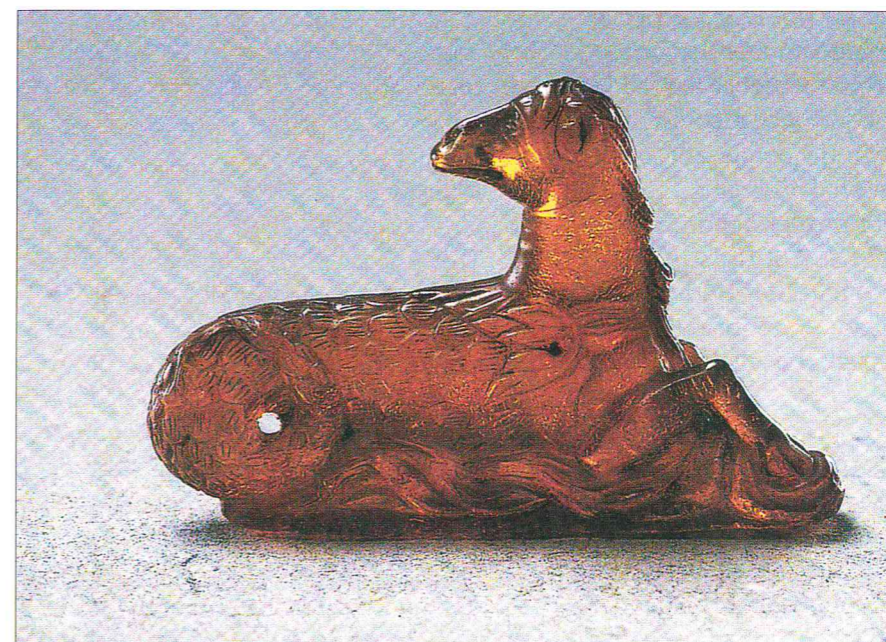


Fig. 4. Sea-horse, 17th century.
From the cabinet of curiosities
at a Danish stately home.

ber and selling it for their own advantage. The County Prefect came to his aid by forbidding access to the beach to anyone who was not a beach warden or employed as an amber collector. The punishment would be 2 rix-dollars the first time, and after that double the amount for each transgression.

In 1786, a new set of general regulations was published. The old leasing agreements disappeared, and the beach wardens were made responsible for jetsam and amber on Danish beaches. They might employ people to collect amber, and these collectors were entitled to one third of the price fetched by the amber at beach auctions. Incomes from the beaches went to the king or to those who owned the foreshore rights. This right was made ineffective when 1843, when the High Court ruled that the royal accountants were not justified in demanding that amber found on the beaches, or its value, should be handed over.

The High Court was also responsible for giving the finder the full rights to amber found. In 1868, three boys from Vorupør in Thy found a large piece of amber, which the local police chief sold for 51 rix-dollars and 32 shillings. The Ministry of Finance were only prepared to give the boys one third as a finder's reward, but in 1871 the High Court ruled that the Ministry should pay the boys the whole amount. This decision meant that anyone was free to collect amber along the Danish coast.

Working with amber

For most of the 17th and 18th centuries, artists in amber were attached to the Danish Court, and also to several country houses. One of them, Gottfried Wolffram who was employed at the Court for many years, was in 1701 recommended to Friedrich I of Prussia by the Danish King Frederick IV in connection with the creation of an amber room in Charlottenborg Castle in Berlin. He worked on The Amber Room for seven years, but then moved back to Denmark after a series of disagreements.

Interest in amber fell off at the end of the 18th century, and in 1836 E. C. Werlauff wrote concerning the situation in Denmark that whereas earlier there had been professional artists and clever amateurs working in amber, this was now the province of Jutland peasants. This statement notwithstanding, however, many of the amber turners were very good craftsmen like Niels Jørgen Møller of Fanø of whom it is said that he sent his works to Hanover, Copenhagen, Bremen, Holland and Norway. In 1834 he exhibited a short necklace as well as a longer one with an amber cross at the exhibition held in Copenhagen by the Society for Domestic Industries. Both works were described as being of very high workmanship.

Most of the articles made around 1900 reveal the characteristic style of the period. This style has many names: Jugendstil, Art Nouveau, Skønvirke (Danish), but they all express more or less the same phenomenon.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON AMBER

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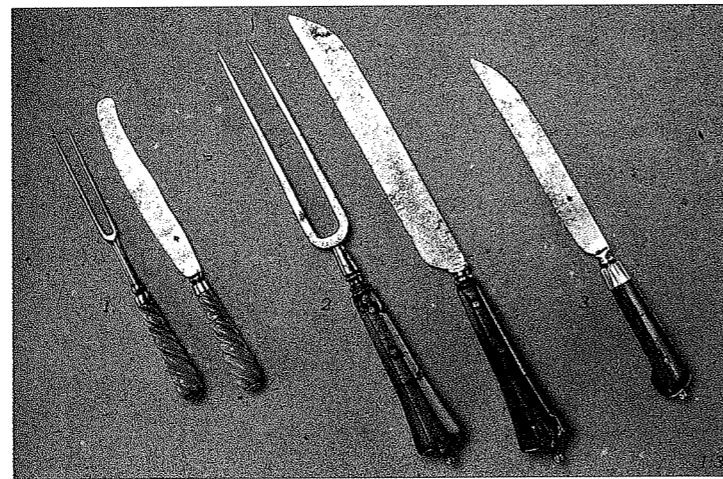


Fig. 5. Iron cutlery with
amber handles. 17th century.
From the cabinet of curiosities
at a Danish stately home.

1. Fruit cutlery 2. Table cutlery set 3. Knife



Fig. 6. Box with tumulus. About 1920.
Silver and amber. Hallmark: KBS (Kay Bojesen)
and a buoy on the waves. Copenhagen.

Danish silver hollow ware of this period was often decorated with amber, and leading Danish designers such as Th. Bindesbøll, Kai Bojesen and Holger Kyster liked to use this combination of materials. Amber could be used in an elegant and restrained manner, stylistically suited to the shape of the work, or the silversmith might choose to play around, as when Kai Bojesen used four pieces of amber to form a stone barrow on the lid of a box.

Many Danish artists and designers worked closely together as well as with colleagues from abroad. In general, they all worked with the same long, curving shapes which developed into patterns that often were organic in nature.

In terms of the goldsmith's art in Denmark, around

1900 jewellers developed a preference for using amber as ornamental stones in the silverware typical of the era. In tune with the spirit of the times, designers stressed national characteristics, and regarded amber as well-suited to this purpose. It may therefore be said that the combination of silver and amber in Danish jewelry has a long tradition behind it.

All the copious literature on amber, including the oldest myths and legends born in ancient times, reflects an ages-long process of its investigation, leading from mystery to knowledge.

Amber is one of the rare creations of nature. As far back as hoary antiquity it used to amaze the people's mind and to stimulate their imagination by its mysterious specific properties. Though as hard as stone, amber can be easily polished and it would gleam in the rays of the sun with its marvellous inner radiance. The things that caused the greatest wonder were various insects and fragments of vegetation found in amber, completely the same as met with in everyday environment. This might have been the reason why amber was cloaked in a shroud of mystery and mysticism from time immemorial.

Throughout ages investigators made efforts to unveil that halo of mystery. The first attempts are witnessed by ancient myths and legends. Later on, amber drew the attention of prominent ancient authors and poets. Thales of Miletus was the first to describe electric properties of amber, comparing them to magnet's tractive force, and the famous Aristotle was the first who explicitly highlighted a resinous origin of amber. The Greek traveller Pytheus of Massilia after the greatest travel in ancient times from the Mediterranean Sea to the Scandinavian coast was the first to see and describe the washed-ashore amber, which was found in the sea grass by the natives and sold to their neighbours *Teutons*. The latter used to deliver it

to Gallia, the final destination being Massilia. It was Plinius Maior, a Roman historian, who gathered and systematized the most exhaustive information on amber, its origin, deposits and trade routes. When generalizing the elucidations presented by a great number of authors and the travellers' fantastic stories, he was the first to expressly state that amber had originated from the resin of pine trees.

Since the survived written texts by ancient and early medieval authors have not been consistently systematized up to the present time, it is expedient to survey them in a more consistent way.

Amber in Ancient and Early Medieval Written Sources

'The Assyrian ruler Ashur-nasir-apal sent his people to the Land of Amber, where the seas wash amber ashore like copper...' (Assyrian inscription on an obelisk (the British Museum). Early 883, AD).

The earliest information on amber can be found in various legends and tales, which are usually referred to myths. The myths, which emerged from folklore, reflect the efforts of the people in primitive and tribal epochs to solve the mystery of the origin of amber. In the epoch, when people worshipped the phenomena of nature, amber was also imbued with some supernatural properties. Its articles were mainly used for worship purposes.

With the transition from tribal to a slave-owning system, amber articles as the symbol of nature worship