

Materializing a New Kingdom: Piqué Objects at the Court of Naples in the Eighteenth Century

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Only in the past two decades have a number of scholars started paying serious attention to the central role of colonialism, with its disastrous human and environmental costs, in the making of luxury European decorative arts during the early modern period. It is with the hope of building on these recent efforts that this paper provides a close analysis of the different steps and implications involved in the making of piqué objects at the court of Naples

between 1725 and 1765. The term ‘piqué’ refers to a specific technique that Neapolitan artisans applied with a mastery that was unmatched in Europe. Their achievement’s particularity was in their combination of tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl and gold to create spectacularly ornate and dazzlingly luxurious pieces that ranged from boxes and ewers to inkstands and spinning wheels. This paper makes use of the method outlined by Sarah Cohen, Cynthia Kok, Brittany Luberdá and Sophie Tunney to look at the extraction and refinement methods of tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl in the making of piqué objects for the court of Naples. We provide a discussion of the meticulous artisanal processes through which three of the most precious colonial materials were transformed and rearranged, resulting in an obliteration of the trauma their materiality carries. We then turn to the design and iconography of piqué objects and argue that these obscured their disturbingly violent origins through the ubiquitous practice in early modern European decorative arts that Madeleine Dobbie has identified as the “aesthetics of diversion.” Finally, we draw upon Mari-Tere Alvarez and Charlene Villaseñor Black’s approach to argue that the transformation of tortoiseshell,

mother-of-pearl and gold in making piqué objects with chinoiserie motifs highlights Naples' specific position as a newly autonomous kingdom part of the wider Spanish empire.