



## Decorative shell

Saudi Arabia

Before 1919

Mother-of-pearl



**Women in Mecca used mother-of-pearl shells as a small bowl to put makeup or trinkets in. It was also an important trade ware: in 1879, mother-of-pearl shells and Yemeni coffee were the most important export products sent from Jeddah to Europe and Jerusalem.**

The mother-of-pearl shells were gathered during the summer months on shell banks in the Red Sea, off the west coast of Saudi Arabia and the Eastern African coast. The find determined the quality of the various kinds of shells. A good quality shell was characterized by a flat, white and shiny surface and the absence of spots or a coloured edge.

The ornamental shells were decorated with floral motifs for the local market. Mother-of-pearl intended for export was sold without decorations. In Jerusalem, statuettes of saints, rosaries and crosses were made from larger shells. It was the basic material for luxury items in Paris. Flat, pure, white shells with a smaller diameter were sought after in London and Vienna for the production of small mother-of-pearl buttons.