

A story of coral and shrimps

12 APRIL

Though now endangered because of overfishing, Mediterranean red coral has been harvested and crafted since early Antiquity. It has been used in China for many centuries, since before the Tang dynasty. In the 14th century, for instance, it was harvested with grapple hooks off the Maghreb and Mosul coasts. Once out of the water it would dry up and harden, turning a dull pinkish hue. The Chinese distinguished live-fished coral, with its bright, vivid colour, from coral already dead when harvested, which was duller in tone. In the 18th century, this was the more popular kind, whereas a century later, the stronger pink shade was preferred. Under the Qing dynasty, it was used to make combs, tobacco holders, pipe-ends, trinkets and

clothing accessories; but this item, from the late 19th century, is purely ornamental. Set on a carved ivory base, it shows three women dressed in the fashion of the time, each carrying a flower basket, surrounded with peony stems. Its incredibly detailed execution makes it stand out from the other coral pieces in the Asian art collection to be sold by the Milanese auction house Il Ponte on 12 April (Italy). As well as ivory pieces, there will also be an ink painting by Qi Baishi of shrimps – a frequent subject of his work (€40,000/50,000). This self-taught artist, who died in 1957, renewed traditional literati painting by extending its thematic range to scenes of country life, as well as vegetables, birds and insects. **Agathe Albi-Gervy**