

Shell of the Month

by Dr. Rick Batt

Pinna nobilis Linnaeus, 1758 (Noble Pen Shell)

Pinna nobilis, the Noble Pen Shell, an inhabitant of the Mediterranean Sea, is the largest species of pen shell. Even though specimens are usually less than 610 mm (24 inches) long, specimens as large as 1200 mm (47 inches) have been reported. The shell's outer surface is crowded with erect prickly scales. The left picture below shows a large specimen (mounted with a small *Atrina vexillum*). From Turkey, this Noble Pen is 639 mm (25 inches) in length. The picture to its right shows a much smaller specimen, only 313 mm (12.3 inches), from Malta, with a specimen of another Mediterranean species, *Pinna rudis* Linnaeus, 1758 to the right (321 mm or 12.5 inches).



The genus *Pinna* includes several species with relatively large, thin, brittle, fan-shaped or triangular shells that inhabit tropical and temperate waters. Shells of this genus can be easily distinguished from those of the related genus *Atrina* (which includes Florida's own Rigid Pen Shell and Saw-Toothed Pen Shell) by the presence of a central groove, or sulcus, that runs along the middle of the shell's interior (this feature is absent in *Atrina*).

Pen shells are sedentary suspension feeders that live partly buried (narrow end down) in soft sandy mud down to depths of more than 70 meters. Their shell surface is often rough or spiny to help anchor them in place. Also, the animal's small foot spins clumps of thin, chitinous threads (the byssus) that attach to buried stones or broken shell debris. The picture on the left below shows a specimen of *Pinna bicolor dolabriata* (Lamarck, 1819) from South Australia with its byssus intact.



The golden silk-like byssus of *Pinna nobilis*, the Noble Pen Shell, has been spun and woven into cloth by people of Mediterranean countries where this species was at one time abundant. This “marine silk” was woven to make gloves, scarves, shawls, stockings, and even robes, and was given the commercial name “taerentine”. Because an individual pen shell only provided a small amount of byssus, these woven objects were quite pricey. It’s even been suggested that the so-called “golden fleece” of Jason and the Argonauts fame was made out of Noble Pen Shell byssus. The picture on the right above (from a website) shows an example of a glove woven from Noble Pen Shell byssus.

The last two pictures show two other species of *Pinna* in my collection. On the left is a large specimen of *Pinna bicolor* Gmelin, 1791 from the Olongo Islands of the Philippines, 440 mm (just over 17 inches). On the right is the Amber Pen Shell, *Pinna carnea* Gmelin, 1791, found from the Gulf of Mexico through the Caribbean and the Bahamas. This particular specimen, 298 mm (11.7 inches), is from Panama City Beach, Florida.

