

Those obscure objects of desire

Kunstkammers

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Every year, Georg Laue's stand at the Maastricht Art and Antiques Fair is a show-stopper: a must-see recreation of *Kunst or Wunderkammers* (Renaissance-style small rooms of art and wonder) that intrigue antiquarians and contemporary art buffs alike. Now, for those who have never had the experience or simply want to relive it, the Munich antiques dealer is coming to Colnaghi's in Old Bond Street, London in an exhibition called *The Art of the Curious* (from October 2).

The *Kunstammer* was a phenomenon of the 16th and 17th centuries, a collection of rare and fascinating natural and man-made objects from all corners of the earth, formed by royalty and aristocrats before the birth of the museum. The objects, typically arranged in glass-topped vitrines or in shelved wall cabinets, were not only sources of wonder and contemplation, but designed to impress. They conveyed the message that their owner understood and was in control of the workings of the world, at a time when all knowledge was considered finite.

Some of these *Kunstammers* and cabinets are still intact in museums. But to find one on the market that was assembled 400 years ago is almost unheard of. The last one that Laue remembers was in 1995, when Sotheby's sold the Grand Ducal collections of Baden-Baden, where the contents of a 500-year-old *Kunstammer* was broken up.

Another *Kunstammer* collection is coming up for sale at Christie's in Paris next month. Formed by the late Jacques Hollander and his wife, Galila, it comprises some 450 objects, which will be sold individually with a combined value of between €4 million (£3.4 million) and €5 million. Sotheby's is planning a Cabinet of Curiosities sale in Paris next year.



Wonders: items in Georg Laue's 'Kunstammer' at Colnaghi's are being sold individually

Laue is regarded as the king of the *Kunstammer*. Not only does he know more about them than anyone, he also makes them. Because original cabinets are rare – “So many were broken, stolen, sold or given away,” says Laue – clients ask him to construct them with the kind of objects they would have contained originally. German collector Thomas Olbricht has some in his private museum in Berlin. When Laue showed Damien Hirst around, the artist was reputedly so impressed he asked for one too.

The example he has constructed (pictured) for the London exhibition is not just a collection of random objects, but is based on one of the few known painted records of a cabinet of curiosities in the Hamburg Kunsthalle by the 17th-century artist Georg Hinz. In the top left compartment is a sprig of coral (£2,400). From the top centre hangs an amber necklace (£900). Amber recurs on the lower shelf on a 17th-century German knife handle (£14,000), and in an 18th-century eagle's head (£28,000). Laue says that amber had been forgotten about since Roman times. In Germany it was rare and very expensive.

In the upper right-hand corner is a Renaissance coconut tankard (£28,000). “Four hundred years ago, no one had heard of coconuts,” says Laue. “They were therefore considered very exotic.”

Similarly, examples of silver knives and forks were included because most people did not use cutlery then. Other items include a 17th-century horizontal sundial (£3,500). The cabinet, whose parts together amount to £245,000, is not being sold as a single work of art. It is also just one element, albeit the central one, of an exhibition conceived by Katrin Bellinger, which combines crafted Old Master paintings and drawings with contemporary drawings and ceramics that relate to the concept of the *Kunstammer*.

Expect pickled animals, giant beetles and more skulls in this well-conceived countdown to Frieze.