

Guardian of Secrets

Art dealer Georg Laue's cabinet of curiosities

by Timo Feldhaus

At first there is a crocodile. Five meters long, it's hanging upside down from the colorful stucco ceiling. When entering Georg Laue's cabinet of curiosities on a nice spring day, one leaves behind the people of Munich, who are shining in the light, and goes on a journey in time to the obscure world of the Renaissance. A time when there were no museums yet, when there was no distinction between art and nature, and when rich rulers collected their most unusual treasures, scientific objects and memorabilia in their cabinets of curiosities and wonder, just like the one Georg Laue keeps today. Skulls, colored coral, shrunk heads, elephant skeletons, sirens, unicorns, first automats and aphrodisiacs; from this mix comes an order of things. ZOO talks to Georg Laue about the internet, modern man's death wish, and the secret powers of objects.

Timo Feldhaus: Mister Laue, how do you explain the increasing interest in the cabinet of curiosities?

Georg Laue: Everything is becoming more hectic, we are always online and active in the world of media. Rediscovering the cabinet of wonders may certainly be attributed to a sense of harking back to the past, which is palpable everywhere. You notice that, despite all the technical tools you constantly have at hand, there are things beyond our understanding even today. Questions that have arisen in a cabinet of wonders for centuries: "Why does the narwhal have such a tooth? Why does only the male whale have a tusk like that, not the female?" Today, many people believe, it needs it for orientation, but then the female would never know where to go. There are some questions regarding which we are still at the same information level as five hundred years ago.

TF: You are talking about the tusk of the narwhal, which was believed to be the horn of the mythological unicorn back then?

GL: Seafarers brought it back from Antarctica and presented it as the tusk of the unicorn. Had they told the truth, it probably wouldn't have been

worth its weight in gold. A unicorn like this belongs in every cabinet of curiosities or of wonders. Here you can find many examples of unexplainable things, beyond the reach of just a mouse click.

TF: Now, one could respond that many connections can in fact be explained these days. Everyone knows that the horn does not belong to a unicorn, because such a creature does not exist. Aside from the big, elementary questions – "where do we come from, where are we going" – the world seems to be quite enlightened these days, doesn't it?

GL: Now you are addressing a different issue that has been and will always be present in the cabinet of wonder: *memento mori* or the *vanitas* notion. Also in the Baroque there was a strong interest in death. All Austrian and southern German churches featured small skulls as symbols of transience, which said: "remember that you will die." This need is once again felt by many people these days, perhaps because environmental awareness has gained traction and because we are being swamped with more and more information. Today we are immediately confronted with the worldwide fates and miseries of the people on this planet – far away yet always present. Currently I am receiving many requests from collectors and young people who want to buy such a skull made from ivory or boxwood. Maybe there is something grim about it, but these little symbols are 300-year-old antipodes of the colorful plastic world that surrounds us everywhere these days.

TF: The longing for myth and confrontation with death takes place in pop culture and fashion as well. For years it has been present in the form of vampire movies and goth fashion. Do you think this penchant for romance may be attributed to escapism?

GL: The young generation is insecure. Considering everything that happened in the past fifty years, I am not surprised. Not only technically, but also geographically: the East-

West conflict, the Reunification, etc. I perceive my children as an entirely new generation. I had still gotten to know my grandparents, who were born before the First World War. My great-grandparents were artists; they lived in the nineteenth century. Therefore horse-drawn carriages were still present for me in a way. The quest for something traditional, down-to-earth, or grown is mirrored in the longing for true history.

TF: In this sense, the objects in the cabinet of curiosity are also symbols of timeliness. And as opposed to museums, one can touch everything in it, right?

GL: In fact we urge people to hold everything in their hands, and have the history of each object explained to them. Unlike a museum, my cabinet of curiosities looks different all the time. Every item is for sale – except for the crocodile that is hanging upside down from the ceiling. It dates back to my time in Berlin, where I studied for quite some time. There I discovered it among the books in an antiquarian bookshop. In this respect even the crocodile is a testament to a time where one would move from one antiquarian bookshop to another in search of a book. Today I order my selection with a single click.

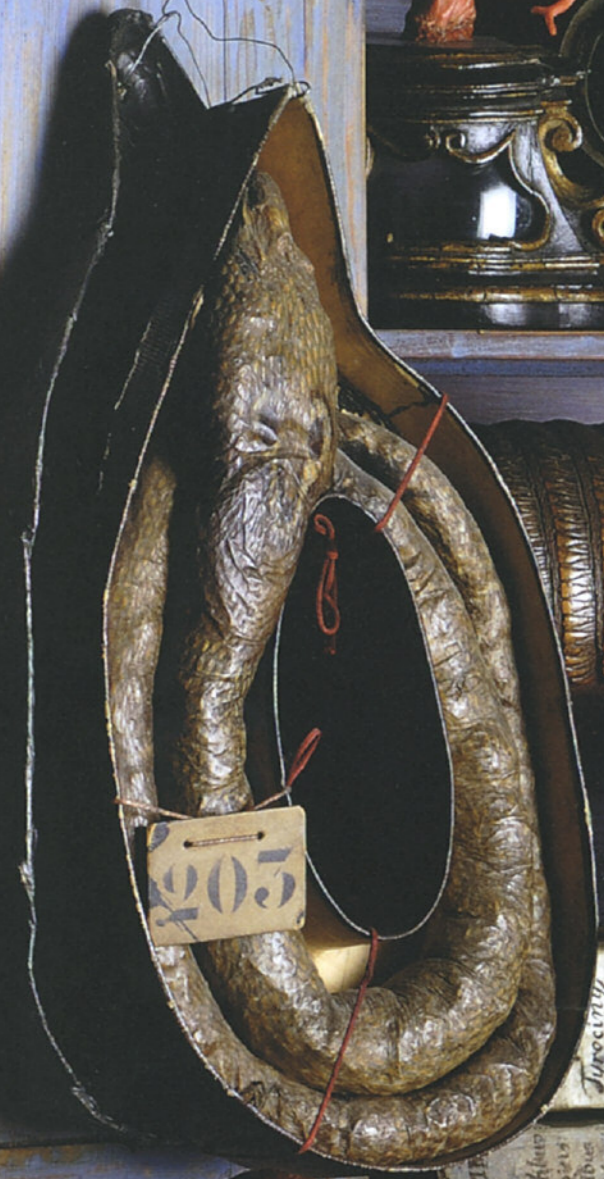
TF: One searches in the shallow world of a computer screen. Do you believe people find things too quickly and too easily?

GL: One could think that something is missing. While walking you meet crazy people; there is this older gentleman slouching with a cigar, everything filled with smoke, and somewhere in the background is this crocodile, with its long tail lying severed next to it. It is an approximately 150-year-old preserved specimen. Not an alligator, but a real five-meter-long Nile crocodile. In all the famous cabinets of curiosities, animals were always hanging from the ceiling. One, of course, had a lack of space.

TF: The cabinet of curiosities as a dark, narrow room – the name alone sounds like the counter-model to the shiny, illuminated White Cube.







Graues Episcopi De Graues



GL: I am, however, the first to free the cabinet of curiosities of its dusty image. With the gray and modern concrete walls for example, in which I present the art neutrally. But cabinets of curiosities weren't always small and narrow. In the beginning we had the studios, the small studies of scientist where they immersed themselves in their books and all kinds of instruments were at hand. Later, they had a big desk and the cabinets on the walls. These collections were already signifiers of power and influence then, and the objects in them functioned as a testament to the owner's intellectual horizon, financial means, and contacts out there in the world. The items were often also used as gifts to royal diplomats.

TF: Is there a cabinet of curiosities that you would recommend?

GL: The castle Ambras in Innsbruck for example. One can reach it very well on the way to Italy; on the hill you can already see the white Renaissance castle. Goethe also made a stop there. To this day the portrait gallery, the ammunitions chamber, and a large cabinet of wonders, in which many animals are hanging from the ceiling, have remained intact. Archduke Ferdinand of Tirol furnished it; he was the nephew of Rudolf II, the famous cabinet of curiosities treasurer from Prague, whose collection can once again be seen at Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien.

TF: When did cabinets of curiosities cease to exist?

GL: By the end of the eighteenth, beginning of the nineteenth century the cabinets of wonder were dismantled. The first museums were founded back then. At this point the art was divided up: the exotic objects went to the ethnographic museums and others went to arts and crafts museums, weapons to the military history museums. Museums have, however, been interested in their own history again for some time now, and have started to set up little cabinets of curiosities. The time span of the cabinet of curiosity collections comprises the years between 1550 and 1750. It starts in the early sixteenth century with the Renaissance.

TF: People wanted answers to previously well-kept secrets?

GL: Certainly. Furthermore the background of many objects was already known at this point in time. In the sixteenth century in Europe people didn't know what elephants were, so chairs made from elephant bones were a curiosity. The skull bones were thought to be the skeleton of a cyclops, a one-eyed giant. Even a clock, or an automat, at some point lost its status as a marvel. A machine moving was a magical process for people. But two hundred years later most people knew how they worked.

TF: Demystification through the spirit of enlightenment. And therefore the beginning of the end of all secrets?

GL: There came others. Before, people had small ivory models that could be opened, in the sixteenth century we started cutting open humans themselves, taking them apart, and understanding their insides. It was the beginning of science as we know it today. At this point cabinets of curiosities were filed away.

TF: To this day cabinets of curiosities are still keepers of secrets in a way. Superstition may still be celebrated here, right?

GL: A lot of things weren't told, even though they were known. To keep the magic and spirit of the cabinet of wonders. Why admit that it is just the tooth of the narwhal. The same goes for the carved wooden model of the turtle from 1600, whose original shell can easily be mistaken for a head, legs, and tail of fire-gilded silver. Back then, such a form, such an animal had never been seen before. And then this work also has an inherent mechanism. On the bottom is a button, so the moving figurine would stop as soon as it didn't have solid ground beneath it. Of course people found that was fantastic. I own a shrunken head of the Jivaro Indians of South America. They believed that if they carried the head of the enemy around they would absorb the warrior's strength. So they skinned him, the skin flap was "shrunken" in hot sand and then remodeled to be carried around on a thin string on the belt.

TF: What were the people like who were sent around the world by their rulers in search of wonderful things? I picture it to be very adventurous, bringing the discoveries from the New World back to Europe.

GL: These were my predecessors. They were called art agents. One of them was Philipp Hainhofer, he was one of the most illustrious people in Augsburg in the seventeenth century. They were a mix of different characters: merchant, art agent, news correspondent, and diplomat. They knew where they had to go and had information, knowledge, and the necessary contacts. That hasn't really changed to this day.

TF: Where do you get your curiosities from?

GL: I am not at liberty to disclose that, of course. One difference is that I don't go to the places where the objects are made, because they are very old. My father was already an art dealer here in Munich. I was fascinated by the topic of cabinets of curiosity from the very beginning. However, you have to garner knowledge and contacts over many years. Eventually you are old and wise, and bite the dust. Then the next one comes along and has to work for everything himself. There is no other way. You have to love the things and handle many objects. You have to know how ivory feels, how boxwood feels, how bronze feels when it is early or when it is late.

TF: What would be collected in a cabinet of curiosities today?

GL: That is a good question. Time passes so quickly, that you'd practically have to stuff things into it constantly. A turned cup had been made the same way for two hundred years; the next technique was the lathe in England, invented in the course of the development of the steam engine. From 1580 to 1900 not a whole changed there. Today we'd probably put a cell phone or an iPod in it. But they'd basically have to be replaced again after two years. Because by then we can make a call with our glasses.

TF: Theoretically, it should also be immaterial things, the internet is less object-like, it's more about codes.

GL: That is exactly why people turn more towards

the cabinet of curiosities again. Because there is so little in our world. You wake up and technology is immediately there. And it is becoming smaller and less. My objects are the opposite: you can touch them and they have long, at times quirky stories, which touch you and trigger something.

TF: "Old Masters" aren't produced anymore today. In contemporary art it is more about appropriation, deconstruction, and about generating breaks. Is the time of ingenious craftsmanship simply over?

GL: Artists like Gerhard Richter or Thomas Schütte may certainly be considered to be "Old Masters." Upon entering a cabinet of wonders like the Green Vault in Dresden though, you see people marveling at it with open mouths. The lightness of an old venetian glass, the mightiness of an elephant skull or the twist of a narwhal tooth cannot be conveyed by any cyber glove. For that you have to enter a cabinet of wonder. It's a rather comforting feeling for the future. At the me Collectors Room of the Olbricht Collection in Berlin we recently juxtaposed the old with the contemporary. This contrast is often exciting and fruitful, one gets the feeling of a shift in time.

TF: Many curiosities were also supposed to have inherent secret therapeutic powers?

GL: There is red coral, for which people dove fifty to one hundred meters deep without equipment. Coral was believed to be a poison repellent, as it was thought to be the blood of Christ. The superstition that rhino horn could be used as an aphrodisiac has prevailed. Many Chinese still pulverize and ingest it today. And yet, we actually know that it's just hair. Back then there was a terrible fear of getting poisoned. So people made things from rhino or ibex horn, because it was such a strong, mighty, armored, invincible animal. No man could slay a rhino. The consideration was quite simple: I'll make myself a vessel from the horn of this animal and thereby become invincible myself.

TF: A visit to the cabinet of wonder must have been quite frightening for many people. I read about a man with "werewolf syndrome."

GL: Yes, the person's entire body was covered with long hair. A painting was made, which is on display at castle Ambras. There was also a giant for whom body armor was specially made; he was put in it and made to walk around. To heighten the effect, children in body armor were put next to him. Back then people were 160 cm tall on average, much shorter than today. The great thing is that while such collections used to be a thing for the wealthy, today everybody can put together a small cabinet of curiosities for themselves. They bring back crazy stones from their vacation, shells, pieces of wood, things they hold dear, from their parents, grandparents. They build their own theatrum mundi, a little world theater of things that are important to them. That is what it is actually about, and then you get hooked and start collecting. Everything you know, compiling the knowledge of the world, that's what it was already about during the Renaissance.

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