

CABANA





*Let's begin our conversation with the old masters market...*

There's definitely a big change at the moment and we can see this not only from new collectors approaching the market but also from the tastes of existing collectors. In a way, they're getting younger. We do have lots of collectors who also collect contemporary art and are looking for old masters, sculptures, Kunstkammer objects and paintings.

*How important, in your view, is the way these masterpieces are presented and displayed, in order to engage a new audience and a younger crowd?*

It's crucial, and it's interesting that you ask me that, since I have focused a lot on the display of the objects I present. Old Masters galleries used to have walls full of paintings, in old black frames, you know, very old school. There is a big change now, because people like to look at, for example, one spectacular painting: high quality, great provenance, super conditions. And maybe it is shown next to a contemporary artwork, something outstanding that could have an unusual subject, so there is a theme that connects the old and the new, the antique and the contemporary. But you cannot compromise on quality, everything has to be at the highest level. It can't just be a situation of name dropping, like sometimes in the contemporary market.

*I have been literally drawn to your stands at Frieze Masters and Maastricht because of the quality of the objects, but also because of the way you display them, which makes a huge difference. You basically recreate the context: the Cabinets of Curiosities or Kunstkammern. In the assemblage of the objects, every single one of them shines. Have you ever tried, as you say, to mix the antique and the contemporary?*

Now there are quite a lot of dealers who try to do this, but my first exhibition with that approach happened back in 2004, more than twelve years ago. It was with Peter Freeman in New York, when I brought my Renaissance objects and made a mix with contemporary art. It was then voted as the best exhibition of the year! In 2006 I worked with Michael Werner gallery too: we curated an



A Kunstkammer Cabinet with artworks from Renaissance and Baroque by Georg Laue

exhibition where great Sigmar Polke paintings were displayed next to Renaissance amber objects. I remember looking at the people coming into the gallery, and seeing that look on their faces: "what's going on in here?" I feel it is really important to surprise and engage the audience. And this is why I will present again Kunstkammer objects from the Renaissance with contemporary artworks from the 20th - 21st Centuries in collaboration with Peter Freeman at Frieze Masters in October.

*I would be very interested to know how you build up your exhibitions and your cabinets, ultimately. How does the sourcing work and how long does it take you to find the items?*

It's not easy to find these objects. What used to be part of a single private collection has most probably been scattered around—the collections fell apart. These Kunst or Wunderkammern were mainly built in the late Renaissance and then disappeared in the 19th Century, because with the Enlightenment we had a huge cultural shift, and then the courts started to have specialized museums. One museum exclusively for technical things, another only for historical objects, a museum for ethnological items, etc... These things were originally altogether in one big room in small cabinets or standing on the tables. I would say the late 18th Century marked the end of the Kunstkammer. So it is a real quest. I have to travel a lot, read, do my research. Sometimes it takes me 10 years or even more to put together an exhibition, like "The White Gold of Venice," for instance, where we showed many different glass objects, along the lines of what was the amazing the Rosenberg Glass Cabinet in Copenhagen, put together in the 18th Century. It all started with five glasses that were part of my father's collection. I admired them for a long, long time, ever since I was a child. Then, years later, the quest for the other glass items began. I would find one, maybe two per year, so it took me more than 12 years to have a group of forty-five works in glass!

*Once you have found the items, how do you decide on the display? Is it a faithful historical reproduction of the original cabinets, or is it more your eye?*

It's more my eye, in a way. You know, sometimes we have a famous painting that can be used as historical documentation of how that cabinet was organized in the Renaissance. But most of the time, I'm trying to build up collections and then organize them by theme or by material, which is what attracts attention nowadays, from collectors or just visitors. People are intrigued by a whole collection of Renaissance amber objects, and the story behind every single item. Every cabinet is rich in narrative, which is why I like to publish a book for every exhibition I curate.



Tortoise Flask, 16th Century, Germany



Still Life with Kunstkammer objects and amber treasures  
from the 16th and 17th Centuries



Now let's talk about your collectors... Do they normally buy single items, or has it ever happened that one person bought an entire exhibition? And do you find that people nowadays would like you to curate and establish new Cabinets of Curiosities for them?

I always thought that it might happen, that someone might buy a whole collection. And it did happen, once! Then there is also Thomas Olbricht. He is one of the biggest German collectors of contemporary art, and he has made his own museum in Berlin. I'm his curator for the

Wunderkammer. I met him in 2002 and he said: "Hold on, what's going on here, Renaissance?! Who are you?" We became friends, and one day he said, "I want a Kunstkammer, I want a cabinet of curiosities, I want a studiolo..." So, I helped him build his own private collection, and then five years ago he opened his museum in Berlin. It is now the ME Collectors Room, and includes the Wunderkammer Olbricht, a reconstruction of a Renaissance cabinet of curiosities that we have created together.

#### Who would have been your ideal client from the past?

I would dare say Rudolf II, from Prague. He was probably just my cup of tea, because he was really focused on the arts, he loved objects so much. Many artists lived and worked in his castle in Prague, and he was totally away from politics for days and weeks at a time.

#### Tell us more about him and his passion for Wunderkammern...

Rudolf II was Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia, and nephew of Philip II of Spain on his mum's side. He was born in Vienna and moved later on to Prague: he had a real passion for the arts, and for alchemy and astrology. Much more than he had for politics, which in fact he neglected throughout his life. To give you an idea of his involvement with the arts, he had his own turning machine, next to his bedroom, and he would make marvellous ivory cups and covers at night. His devotion to the arts and to the occult might have been the cause for the political shortcomings of his rule, but he definitely was one of history's greatest patrons of the arts. He collected works by Dürer and Brueghel and commissioned very famous portraits by Arcimboldo. He also had a strong interest in scientific research and instruments, and in fact he filled his Wunderkammer with scientific objects.

#### And are there any collectors of such objects in the contemporary art world?

Oh yes! One above all: Damien Hirst. He once came to Berlin to look at the Thomas Olbricht collection, to the museum: he arrived, opened the cabinet of curiosities and said, "Oh fuck, Georg, I need a Wunderkammer too!" This was his expression. And, in a way, he is a Wunderkammer artist, he's combining nature and art, which Rudolf II also did extensively.

All images courtesy of Kunstkammer Georg Laue, Munich

## **Georg Laue's Grand Tour of European Cabinets of Curiosities**

