

WONDER WORLDS

With their exotic array of treasures, 17th-century “cabinets of curiosities” alluded to the artistry in nature and the nature in art

By Richard Lofthouse

Imagine walking into a room teeming with narwhal tusks, elephant skulls, *cocos de mer* picked up by East India Company traders for their likeness to the female bottom, ostrich eggs, coral in the shape of a human arm, serpentine curios, amber amulets, human skulls, boxwood corpses, elaborate automata, rock-crystal goblets, antique coins, fossils and pictures composed from exotic butterfly wings.

This was the Renaissance *Wunderkammer*, a “chamber of wonders” or “cabinet of curiosities”, an extraordinary passage in the history of collecting, the significance of which scholars are still trying to understand. From 1580 to 1620, collecting objects and housing them in a *Wunderkammer* (also known as *Kunstammer*, *Schatzkammer* and *Raritätenkammer*) was the private preserve of a small number of wealthy aristocrats and petty princes. “Wonders” or artefacts from the natural and artistic world were brought together, defined not just by their contents but their containment in a single cabinet, often an object of glory in itself.

The *Wunderkammer* was an early modern phenomenon that characterised the magical, pre-scientific beliefs that pervaded Britain and much of the continent. This was a time when Queen Elizabeth had her own “philosopher”, John Dee, while Elias Ashmole, a collector and a founder member of the Royal Society, himself had a lifelong preoccupation with astrology, alchemy and magic. Such interests and expertise were much in demand, drawn upon even by Charles II, despite the rapid advance at the end of the 17th century of rival, “scientific” approaches to nature from individuals such as Francis Bacon.

The *Wunderkammer* brought together artefacts both natural and artificial, and encapsulated them in a single space. Beyond the apparent riot of elements was a single intention, to allude to the artistry in nature, and the nature in art – and to frustrate traditional distinctions between them. As Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park note in their book, *Wonders and the Order*

of Nature 1150-1750, “Was a winged cat bird or animal? Was coral vegetable or mineral? Was a gilded coconut shell nature or art?”

By intentionally piling up objects, *Wunderkammer* collectors distracted and disoriented the onlooker, dazzling them with treasures, and, in the context of a court or princely realm, the resulting “wonder” was reaped as deference. Creators of the original *Kunstammern* included Ferdinand II of the Tyrol (1528-1595), who established an extraordinary collection in Ambras Castle near Innsbruck; his father, Emperor Ferdinand I (1503-1564) in Vienna; Prince Elector Augustus I of Saxony (1526-1586) in Dresden; and Emperor Rudolf II (1552-1612) in Prague.

As well as representing the wealth and worldliness of their owners, however, the deeper wonder of the cabinet resulted from its subversion of the long accepted conviction that art was inferior to nature. The results were non-utilitarian and superfluous. There was little curiosity in a natural duck that swam and quacked, but for a human to create a swimming duck “was at once a triumph of ingenuity and a dismissal of utility”. In reverse, the artist who painted a landscape was purely conventional, but to find the similitude of a tree in a slice of malachite was a marvel.

Such collections were the precursor of the museum. But it is a long way from the private *Wunderkammer* to the cool order of the modern, public, state-funded, post-Enlightenment gallery. Not all museums derived from *Wunderkammern* – and not all objects from the *Wunderkammern* ended up in the public domain.

Arthur MacGregor, curator at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, notes from the inventory of Charles I’s estate that he possessed many of the elements of a *Wunderkammer*, but not the context of one. “His main interest lay in fine art and sculpture,” he says. “Coins, ethnographica and various ‘curiosities’ were scattered between the Cabinet Room in Whitehall, the Indian Chamber at St James’s Palace and a vault inside the Tower of London.”

Wunderkammern existed across Europe but tended to be private. However, John



Tradesant, a gentleman collector whose artefacts passed to Elias Ashmole in 1659 and henceforth to Oxford University, took a different approach to his continental counterparts. “He opened his South Lambeth ‘museum’ (in his house) to the public in 1634, charging them an entry fee into the bargain,” says Jim Bennett, director of the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford. Bennett points to the utility and educational purpose of the display, in contrast to the *Wunderkammern* which were largely non-utilitarian and “ornamental to the collector”.

Despite the supposedly useful artefacts that Tradesant collected, he was familiar with many continental *Wunderkammern* and apparently wanted to import the idea to Britain. As Bennett notes, some elements of Tradesant’s collection that found their way into Oxford’s History of Science Museum include objects that have more to do with magic than science. Despite the rational classification of today’s institution, therefore, “leaving them out would impose distinctions on the past that didn’t exist at the time”.

Tradesant toured the continent in search of rare and exotic plants for wealthy patrons. In 1625, he sent a letter to the Secretary to the Navy in the name of his



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greatest patron, the Duke of Buckingham, exhorting all sea captains and ambassadors to furnish the Duke with “all manner of natural and artificial curiosities”.

Continental *Wunderkammern* were diversely comprised and geographically scattered between Italy, Germany and Austria. The most famous was the Green Vault (*Grüne Gewölbe*) begun in Dresden at the end of the 16th century by Augustus I of Saxony. Despite their variety, *Wunderkammern* coalesced around “all manner of natural and artificial curiosities” united in a reaction against medieval, scholastic views of nature based on Aristotle. “Nature does nothing in vain,” was the scholastic refrain, referring to the Aristotelian principle that function was written into every form in nature as a final cause. Accordingly, art could do no more than imperfectly imitate nature.

The *Wunderkammer* smashed that assumption, not only by mixing up *naturalia* and *artificialia* – a provocative move – but also by deliberately marrying art and nature in a single object. For example, in 1632 the elders of the city of Augsburg, Bavaria, gave the king of Sweden a cabinet containing an anamorphic painting, an Italian spinet that played tunes by an automatic mechanism, a jug made out of a nautilus shell worked with gilded silver, mathematical instruments and a mummified monkey’s claw. The cabinet itself, known as the *Uppsala Kunstschränk*, was constructed of oak and ebony and inlaid with medallions of Limoges enamel, marble, agate and lapis lazuli; it was crowned with crystals, corals and shells surrounding a goblet made of a Seychelles nut coated in gold.

The *Wunderkammern* were princely, intricate, spectacular and useless. They were not so much a microcosm of the universe as, at best, an attempt to capture nature at its “peak”, an elitist conception that reflected the high station of the collector. At worst, it expressed the whimsical opulence of bored princes.

What then is the significance of the *Wunderkammer* today? A clue lies in Michel Foucault’s note in *The Masked Philosopher*, quoted by Daston and Park in their book, that curiosity is to be championed because it was formerly treated as “a vice that has been stigmatised in turn by Christianity, by philosophy, and even by a certain conception of science”.

The philosophers who embodied the 18th-century Enlightenment condemned curiosity, depicting it as worthless sentiment. This attitude was embodied by the Royal Society of London, whose first curator of experiments, Robert Hooke, attacked “divertisement and wonder and gazing”, insisting instead on “the most serious and diligent study of the most able proficient in natural philosophy”. But there has since been a revival of interest in earlier attitudes to the natural world. As Daston and Park note: “Wonder and wonders have risen to prominence on a wave of suspicion and self-doubt concerning the standards and sensibilities that had long excluded them...”

A well-known German dealer in Renaissance objects, Georg Laue, is attempting to recreate and publicise the concept to a wider public, and also to buy and sell original *Wunderkammer* objects to collectors. Located in Munich, Laue’s gallery resembles the great *Wunderkammer* built by Albrecht V. From

the ceiling hangs a full-size alligator, an image recalling Shakespeare’s apothecary in *Romeo and Juliet*, “...in his needy shop a tortoise hung / An alligator stuffed, and other skins / Of ill-shaped fishes.”

Laue opened the gallery in 1997 in rooms designed in 1873 by Blerch, the royal Bavarian court stucco master. “We were given *carte blanche* to restore the entire gallery to its original state and I have tried to recreate the *Kunstzimmer* itself,” he says. The result is a columnar interior with a grand stucco ceiling decorated with frescoes, with every available surface covered by artefacts.

Laue believes the field is returning to prominence. Recently, he joined up with art historian and modern-art dealer Peter Freeman to recreate a *Wunderkammer* in New York, while an exhibition of Dresden’s Green Vault at the Metropolitan Museum of Art ended last month.

Instead of appealing merely to Renaissance historians and other antiquarians, Laue and Freeman deliberately sought to confuse and dazzle their audience by piling up the objects, as was the wont of the historic collectors – a rude shock for regulars used to seeing contemporary minimalism.

Laue’s *Wunderkammer* subverts our Enlightenment instinct to classify, working as historical enigma and as aesthetic marvel. Our own obsessively scientific age rarely admits the role of the curious, and yet still has as many questions about science as it has answers. Laue’s project is a constant reminder of that: “Even now many natural phenomena are unexplained, let alone the ability to reproduce the skilled craftsmanship that can be seen in the objects here. In this respect they are simply miraculous, *mirabilia*.”

The resolution of this 400-year conflict, which still filters down to the present, is unlikely. Yet the possibility is glimpsed in the late 16th century, a period that did not have the luxury of knowing that it would be deemed “unscientific” by posterity. If we are to believe Daston and Park, it was the *Wunderkammer* that helped to inspire Bacon and Descartes to surmount Aristotelian categories. Once they had, it was all too easy to reject the unanswerable mystery posed by winged mammals and coral, settling for a utilitarian approach and sounding the death knell for a fashion that, by the mid-17th century, was already in the process of advanced decay.

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