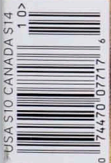


JULIE MEHRETU | ITALY'S MARKET RENAISSANCE | CABINETS OF CURIOSITIES

ART + AUCTION

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Mujeres con flores, circa 1938, by Alfredo Ramos Martínez

Curiouser and Curiouser

Once a fad among the learned and wealthy during the Renaissance, cabinets of curiosities are finding favor with cutting-edge collectors today By Angus Wilkie

HUMAN BEINGS ARE NATURALLY INTRIGUED by the unfamiliar. In the early 16th century, European maritime exploration ushered in a period of cultural exchange that gave rise to a fashion for collecting peculiar artifacts from distant shores. Aristocratic collectors, as well as educated doctors and scientists, devoted entire rooms to displaying exotica from the New World. Known as cabinets of curiosities—or in German as *Wunderkammern* (wonder chambers) or *Kunstkammern* (art chambers)—they were stocked with rare flora, insects and animals, ethnological artifacts, antiquities, paintings, ivories, corals, volcanic rocks and scientific inventions. In these household museums, the grotesque coexisted with the beautiful.

But as the universe grew more familiar during the early 19th century, the sense of wonder waned among the general public. Professional scientists—botanists, mineralogists, zoologists, entomologists and paleontologists—soon overshadowed the quirky cult of virtuoso collectors.

At the beginning of the 21st century, however, the *Wunderkammer* is being rediscovered, and some collectors are even creating their own versions. In fact, the interest in cabinets of curiosities dovetails with the current trend of juxtaposing recognizable works of art with intriguing curios. The traditional endeavor to classify *artificialia*, *mirabilia* and *naturalia* is now only part of the equation; today's aficionados typically incorporate contemporary art into their cabinet schemes.

"Present-day *Kunstammer* collectors have inquiring minds and challenging attitudes," says Craig Finch of Finch & Company, a London dealer in antiquities and African and Oceanic art. His wife and business partner, Jan, adds, "Contemporary art collectors really like cabinets of curiosities—especially memento mori such as skulls sculpted in wood, ivory, silver and stone, reminders of the transience of human existence. In one of our recent catalogues, we featured pickled Siamese pigs preserved in a glass jar, and the telephone rang off the hook. When Damien Hirst called, we knew we were onto something." Indeed, Hirst's embalmed shark, his glass cases of pharmaceutical paraphernalia, and Jeff Koons's vacuum cleaners and basketballs in Lucite cubes do evoke the *Kunstammern* by removing objects from their original context and placing them in display cases for scrutiny.

Another pioneering *Kunstammer* dealer, Georg Laue of Munich, observes that today's serious collectors are often artists. "In addition to museums and established collectors, many new clients in our field have parallel interests in modern and contemporary art," he says. Laue cultivates a scholarly approach to the objects and has published several distinguished volumes on memento mori, turned ivory objects and amber.

Prices for *Kunstammer* objects vary dramatically, depending on availability and condition. One of the most desirable items in any cabinet of curiosities is the elusive narwhal tusk; Finch & Company recently sold a superb eight-foot-long example for \$23,500. Among the more intriguing rarities in the current Finch catalogue are a fine English 12th-century Romanesque carved limestone corbel head (\$83,250); an ancient Egyptian mummified sacred falcon, circa 713–332 B.C. (\$3,250); a rare 19th-century Northwest Coast Haida carved-stone argillite panel pipe (\$23,250); and the pelt of an Antarctic emperor penguin, mounted by the noted 19th-century London taxidermist Rowland Ward (\$3,350). To date there is no formal auction market for the objects, though tribal sales are held regularly at Christie's and Sotheby's in Paris; both auction houses organize two antiquities sales a year in New York; and Bonham's has introduced natural-history sales in New York and London. >>

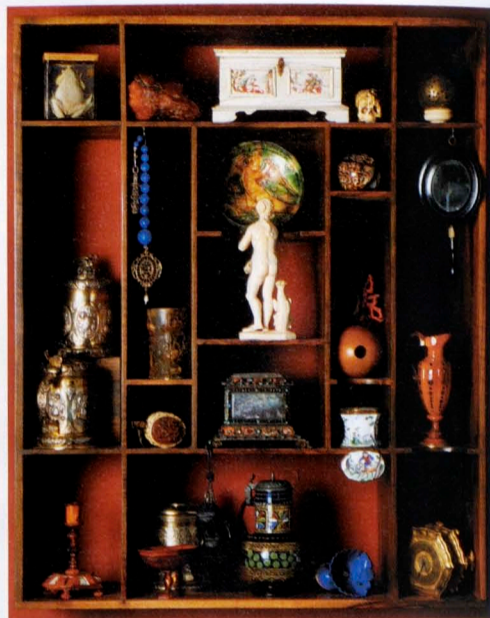


Pigeonholing the universe: Minerals and fossils from Hans Sloane's pharmaceutical collection, in their original drawer, which is owned by the British Museum

THE CONNOISSEUR

"When our first encounter with some object surprises us and we find it novel," wrote René Descartes, "this causes us to wonder and to be astonished at it. Since all this may happen before we know whether or not the object is beneficial to us, I regard wonder as the first of all passions." In Descartes's day, the 17th century, very few Europeans had been to America, and encounters with phenomena from the Far East were almost as scarce. Such travelers' finds as a toucan's beak, an albino tortoiseshell, an ostrich egg or even a pineapple were astonishing and bewildering, and therefore coveted as prized possessions. To classify the natural world, to re-create a macrocosm of it under one's own roof—these were challenges that enriched the mind. First encounters with narwhal tusks, stuffed dodo birds, Eskimo snowshoes, Egyptian surgical instruments, geodes and kidney stones became a means to understand creation, past and present.

The exploration of the Americas coincided with the invention of the microscope and telescope; the parallel development of the printing press facilitated the dissemination of knowledge among cognoscenti. Many early collectors were monarchs who had the means to obtain anything they desired. One early cabinet containing preserved animals, horns, tusks and skeletons was formed by the scholar Ole Worm, who compiled the catalogue of the Museum Wormianum; after Worm's death in 1654, King Frederick III of Denmark added the renowned collection to his own holdings. Peter the Great of Russia and the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II intrigued courtiers with their single-minded madness for assembling rarities, and Catherine the Great was so preoccupied by mineralogy that she referred to it as a disease. The *Kunstammer* craze proliferated into the 18th century, the period of the Enlightenment, as amateurs and entrepreneurs avidly began to participate. In England aristocrats returning from the Grand Tour devoted similar attention to rooms that combined



106



Top: A cabinet of curiosities, circa 16th–18th centuries. Center, from left: a 16th-century German amber Communion jug, a 17th-century Italian coral tree, an Antarctic emperor penguin pelt,

a 12th-century English limestone head, two preserved Siamese pigs, an Egyptian mummified sacred falcon, a Paraguayan blond turtle carapace, a Javanese walking-leaf insect and a green

swallowtail from Papua New Guinea. Bottom: *The Archduke Albert and Isabella Visiting a Collector's Cabinet*, circa 1621–23, an oil painting by Hieronymus Francken II and Jan Brueghel

sculpture, antiquities, paintings, marble specimens and man-made contraptions. A collector's cabinet was a status symbol for the gentleman scholar, reinforcing the notions of knowledge as virtue and connoisseurship as power.

Today's *Wunderkammer* creators have drawn some of their inspiration from recent museum shows. In 2003 a permanent exhibition titled "Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century" was inaugurated in the King's Library at the British Museum in London. The Greek Revival interior was designed by the architect Sir Robert Smirke in 1823–27 to hold the royal library of George III. A contemporary version of a collector's cabinet, and a reminder of how intellectual queries pertaining to the universe were once addressed, the installation features glazed bookcases housing scholarly volumes, antiquities from the Grand Tour, tribal art collected by Captain James Cook and natural-history fragments accumulated by the 18th-century botanist Sir Joseph Banks.

"The British Museum exhibition has encouraged a resurgence of interest among collectors, sparking a whole new fad in the *Kunstammer* concept," says Jan Finch. "It seems to justify the notion as a legitimate hobby, and as a result people feel secure spending money on curiosities." Other institutions with curiosity collections open to the public include Lord Rothschild's Natural History Museum in Tring, England; the Hunterian Museum at Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, which has a quirky group of medical apparatuses; the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford; the Museum Gustavianum in Uppsala, Sweden; and the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore.

Collector Peter-Ayers Tarantino, a *Kunstammer* enthusiast living in New York, has always been fascinated by the origins of collecting and has a comprehensive library devoted to the pursuit. "*Wunderkammer* material enriches my life and is liberating," he says. "It offers an enchanting distance, in time and place, that underscores a sense of wonder and discovery. I've realized it's still possible to be in awe of the world." ▣



TOP: KUNSTAMMER GEORGE LAURE, MUNICH; CENTER, FROM LEFT: KUNSTAMMER GEORGE LAURE, FINCH & CO., LONDON; THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM; BOTTOM: THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM

EXHIBITORS

A La Vieille Russie, France, USA, UK
 Didier Aaron & Cie, France, USA, UK
 Agnews, UK
 John Alexander Ltd, UK
 Apter-Fredericks, UK
 Carswell Rush Berlin, Germany & UK
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