



# KUNSTKAMMER GEORG LAUE

The Kunst- and Wunderkammer  
in the Renaissance and Baroque



The typical collections of the Renaissance and Baroque are not called *Kunst* – and *Wunderkammer* for no reason. Indeed, they contain many marvels of nature and examples of high-quality craftsmanship. Rare *naturalia*, precious automatons, exports from far away lands, and exquisite artworks leave the visitor starrng in wonder and amazement. Whether a prince, a rich merchant, or a scholar, the collector appears to aspire to only one goal: to collect wonders. Thus a *Kunstkammer* boasts a variety of fantastic exhibits: a crocodile, a porcupine fish, and a bird of paradise that float underneath the roof (**Fig. 1**); paintings covering the walls that interchange with shelves that exhibit statues and other gems; large tables that display goblets, *naturalia*, and ethnographical artefacts; and cabinets that conceal scientific instruments and other valuables. The variety of precious materials used for the artworks is also overwhelming: the viewer can admire objects made of silver, ivory, ebony, mother-of-pearl, agate, coral, amber, and serpentine. These materials have been fashioned into goblets, cutlery, boxes, caskets, and small statuettes among other splendid creations (**Fig. 2**). Yet



**Fig. 1: Kunstkammer of the Neapolitan apothecary Ferrante Imperato, copperplate from Imperato's *Dell'Historia natvrale*, Naples 1599**



**Fig. 2: Still life with *Kunstkammer* objects from the Renaissance and Baroque period made of fire-gilt silver, coconut, ibex horn, ivory, and rhinoceros horn, 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries**  
Kunstkammer Georg Laue, Munich

one cannot dismiss the *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammer* as a simple collection of precious and rare curiosities, for it possesses a deeper meaning that is clearly reflected in the order (and disorder) of its exhibits.

As a collection of encyclopaedic character, the *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammer* should be a representation of the world in miniature as well as an illustration of man's position in the universe. Not only the natural philosophy of the early modern period is reflected in the *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammer*, but also the categories of knowledge that underlie the understanding of the world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The principle of the analogy between macrocosm and microcosm is thereby essential for our insight into the *Kunstkammer*: the cosmological system is interpreted as a relationship network, in which objects and living things of all forms are connected and influence one another at the same time. The task of the *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammer* is to illustrate this network of concealed connections. The four elements, the seasons, the planets, and the plant and animal world are the main motifs of the various objects in a *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammer*. The microcosm of mankind, who stands in competition with God with his own artistic creations, is also a major theme. Accordingly, the exhibits fall into two categories: *naturalia*, the creations of God, and *artificialia*, the creations of man. The dividing line between these two groups is fluid inasmuch as the artist aspires to refine and improve upon nature with his artworks. Hence rare natural objects were transformed into magnificent works using artistic skill (**Fig. 3**), including cups made of



**Fig. 3: *Naturalia* and *artificialia* in the *Kunstkammer*:** a turned serpentine cup, narwhal tooth, bezoar with a silver filigree mount. A small container made of a crab claw, an ibex-horn tankard, a tortoiseshell powder flask and an etched nautilus shell, 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries  
Kunstkammer Georg Laue, Munich

polished, engraved, or carved coconuts, ostrich eggs, rhinoceros horn, and nautilus shells. These are examples of the creative skill of the artist, which surpasses nature by means of *ars*.

Such artworks are considered to be *artificilia*, which in the eye of today's observer have only little to do with art. An example would be scientific instruments (**Fig. 4**). The so-called *scientifica* in a *Kunstkammer* represent the highest art form within the category of



**Fig. 4: Group of *scientifica*** with a sextant from Augsburg by Georg Friedrich Brander and Christoph Caspar Höschel, ca. 1783; a pedometer in a leather case from Augsburg, ca. 1720; a solar ring dial made by Nicolas Bion in Paris, ca. 1700; a pocket globe from the London globe maker Newton Son and Berry, ca. 1830, and a sundial by the Dresden artist Christoph Trechsler, ca. 1610  
Kunstkammer Georg Laue, Munich

*artificilia*, for they illustrate with great clarity that mankind is a lesser god: he is capable of measuring time and space with his own inventive instruments and machines and can create artificial movement through automatons. Interestingly, mechanics, mathematics, astronomy, and geography were favoured research fields during the Renaissance. However, whoever believes that collecting scientific instruments was an activity limited to scholars is mistaken: even princes possessed a particular interest in *scientifica* at the time. Thus the *Kunst-* and *Wunderkammer* of the Elector of Saxony is particularly famous for its rare instruments and tools: sundials, drawing instruments, pedometers, and other measuring and counting mechanisms were not only available to the Saxon rulers for research purposes, but also to scholars and artists at the Dresden court.

*Scientifica* were also valued in the context of a princely collection as evidence of not only the creative power of mankind, but also of the skill of the ruler to measure his land as well as to control, to improve, and to organise society. Turned artworks attained a similar significance (**Fig. 5**). Indeed, turning was a permanent part of a prince's education since the sixteenth century, for the practise of this exceedingly complex art reflected the prince's ability to rule justly. Hence how the prince refined the raw material on the turning lathe into an artwork was directly related to how he would help society reach a higher order. Significantly, the ivory cups turned by August of Saxony with his own hands were displayed in the Dresden *Kunstkammer* along with the turning lathe on which the prince elector worked, according to the inventory from 1585.



**Fig. 5: Turned artworks** by François Barreau, Paris, ca. 1790  
Kunstkammer Georg Laue, Munich



**Fig. 6: Coconut cups** with fire-gilt silver or copper mountings, German, Swiss and from Antwerp, 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries  
Kunstammer Georg Laue, Munich

These examples demonstrate that *Kunstammer* objects are not only expensive and aesthetically valuable rarities; they are also carriers of meaning, whose contemporary symbolism easily evades us. Indeed, these objects have several levels of meaning. In the case of the coconut cup, (**Fig. 6**) one should be aware that the coconut was categorised in a *Kunstammer* not only as a piece of *naturalia*, but also as an example of *exotica*. On account of its artistic mounting, the coconut cup is also considered to be a piece of *artificialia*, exemplifying the creative power of the artist. Yet it does not end here: the coconut cup also has another function: that of a drinking vessel. The use of the coconut as a bowl should benefit the drinker, for the coconut was considered to be a universal remedy and a detector of poison. The coconut is sometimes covered in

carvings that warn the drinker of the damages that Noah or Loth incurred in their drunken state, reminding the beholder not to partake in excessive drinking. In its semantic complexity, the coconut cup is a typical example of a *Kunstkammer* object.

In light of the variety of possible meanings and the abundance of exhibits, one must imagine that visiting a *Kunstkammer* can be quite demanding. The silent marvelling of the audience at the exceptional artworks and natural objects was not its only purpose, although the moment of wonder itself represents an essential experience that the name of the collection itself gives away: the *Kunstkammer* is also a *Wunderkammer*. In fact, awe and wonder were considered to be the first step on the journey to recognition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Amazement sparks the curiosity of the visitor, who must then begin a journey of discovery in order to understand the meaning behind



**Fig. 7:** A view into the secret compartments of an ebony cabinet with ivory intarsia by Ulrich Baumgartner, Augsburg, ca. 1650  
Kunstkammer Georg Laue, Munich

the objects. Thereby the cabinet played an important role as *Kunstkammer* furniture: first the objects hidden inside were to be found and consequently discovered, and the hidden drawers of the cabinet, which revealed unexpected compartments, helped to heighten the excitement (**Figs. 7, 8**). Several *Kunstkammer* objects are specifically designed for this moment of surprise. What at first appears to be a precious castor made of ivory (**Fig. 9**), reveals itself to be a compendium upon closer examination: when the inquisitive beholder finds the well disguised opening of the box, the object shows itself to be a sundial, a compass, and an eternal calendar.

The haptic and the playful take on an important role in the case of this object: the visitor must take the box in his or her hand and must discover how it opens through



**Fig. 8: Unexpected hidden compartments in an architecture cabinet** made of ebony with silver plaques by Ulrich Boas, circle of, Augsburg, ca. 1600  
Kunstammer Georg Laue, Munich

feeling and strength. Recognition follows after the moment of surprise. Wonder, discovery, and understanding: this could be the programme of the *Kunstammer*. It shows again, if proof be needed, how modern the *Wunderkammer* really is and how it continues to cast a spell over anyone who encounters its wonders.

Virginie Spenlé



**Fig. 9: Ivory castor** with scientific instruments, Nuremberg, first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century  
Kunstammer Georg Laue, Munich