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 staring 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
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. 2: Still life with Kunstkammer objects from the Renaissance and Baroque period made of fire-gilt silver, coconut, ibex horn, ivory, and rhinoceros horn, 16th to 18th 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 artificialia, 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. 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, 17th-18th centuries
Kunstkammer Georg Laue, Munich

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
These examples demonstrate that Kunstкаммер objects are not only expensive and aesthetically valuable rarities; they are also carriers of meaning, whose contemporary symbolism easily eludes 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 Kunstкаммер 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 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.

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 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
feeling and strength. Recognition follows after the moment of surprise. Wonder, discovery, and understanding: this could be the programme of the Kunstkammer. 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. 8: Unexpected hidden compartments in an architecture cabinet** made of ebony with silver plaques by Ulrich Boas, circle of, Augsburg, ca. 1600  
Kunstkammer Georg Laue, Munich

**Fig. 9: Ivory castor** with scientific instruments, Nuremberg, first half of the 17th century  
Kunstkammer Georg Laue, Munich