CHAPTER EIGHT

WHERE ART AND NATURE PLAY:
THE SARAH CAMPBELL BLAFFER
FOUNDATION CURIOSITY CABINET

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The Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation owns, develops, and manages a collection of early modern European art (from roughly 1500 to 1800), much of which has been exhibited in five dedicated galleries at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) since 2000.1 Although the primary focus of the collection has always been on paintings, the foundation has since 2008 collected objects for a curiosity cabinet, beginning with an ebony writing desk (Schreibtisch) or house altar (Hausaltar) made in Augsburg in 1601, with paintings attributed to Anton Mozart (Fig. 8-1).2

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, European princes, wealthy collectors, natural philosophers, and learned societies created so-called curiosity cabinets (or cabinets of curiosities), also known in German as Kunst- und Wunderkammern (chambers of art and wonder). Benefitting from the voyages of explorers and the development of international commerce networks that spanned the globe, they gathered intriguing, exotic,

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2 On the Schreibtisch, the Christian iconography of whose paintings is unusual, see James Clifton, “‘Verbum Domini manet in eternum’: Devotional Cabinets and Kunst- und Wunderkammern around 1600,” in The Primacy of the Image in Northern European Art, 1400-1700: Essays in Honor of Larry Silver, ed. Debra Cashion (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 474-86. It is now exhibited with a writing casket and tower clock, both also of ebony or ebonized wood (and other materials) and produced in Augsburg in the early seventeenth century.
and visually stunning objects into both specialized and encyclopedic collections that were forerunners of modern museums. Including both natural and human-made objects (naturalia and artificialia)—and combinations of the two—curiosity cabinets were often meant to represent the world in microcosm and believed to reveal fundamental relationships

**Figure 8-1:** Cabinet with Altar for Private Devotions. 1601, pear wood, ebonized walnut, oak, and conifer wood with steel-etched, part fire-gilt brass mounts and fittings; oil on copper paintings attributed to Anton Mozart, 47 x 34 x 26.5 cm (closed). Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston.
among diverse things and materials. The marvelous intricacy, artifice, and rarity of the individual objects and the broad scope of a collection as a whole generated a sense of wonder. Curiosity cabinets played a role (of debated importance) in the developing culture of scientific inquiry in the Renaissance.

In the eighteenth century, new disciplines—including art history and archaeology (spurred by discoveries at the ancient Roman towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum)—and the introduction of rigorous classification systems had an impact on collections. As knowledge of geography, science, and ethnography progressed rapidly, collections became less dependent on a sense of the exotic. As Nehemiah Grew, implicitly suggesting the role of collections in the production of knowledge, explained in the preface to his late-seventeenth-century catalogue of the collection of the Royal Society in London, “not only Things strange and rare, but the most known and common amongst us, were thus describ’d. Not meerly, for that what is common in one Countrey, is rare in another: but because, likewise, it would yield a great aboundance of matter for any Man’s Reason to work upon.” In the eighteenth century, science was also increasingly popularized in books, public demonstrations, and collections, and gentlemen were expected to be conversant with its precepts. Instruments such as the pocket globe and microscope in the foundation’s cabinet—as well as paintings, prints, decorative arts objects, and books—were produced for so-called virtuosos or amateurs, lovers of the arts and sciences.


4 Nehemiah Grew, Musaeum Regalis Societatis Or a Catalogue & Description of the Natural and Artificial Rarities Belonging to the Royal Society and Preserved at Gresham College (London: W. Rawlins, 1681), n. p. (“The Preface”).
The Blaffer curiosity cabinet, which is installed in a small gallery (Fig. 8-2), includes manufactured objects—*artificialia*, of which a subset is *scientifica* (scientific instruments)—made in a variety of materials: ivory, bronze, brass, wax, ceramic, and so on. In addition to European objects, the collection includes several Asian objects made for European audiences. A few pieces are altered and mounted natural objects or materials, such as a knife with an agate handle and a spoon with a mother-of-pearl bowl. The unworked natural objects (*naturalia*) in the cabinet, such as shells, fossils, an ostrich egg, a puffer fish, small mammal and bird skeletons, and two varieties of South American armadillo are of more recent origin, harvesting, or discovery, but are in keeping with what was known in the early-modern period. The installation also often includes a.

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5 The shells, for example, though acquired through eBay, were chosen in reference to those depicted in Wenzel Hollar’s series of etchings; see Richard Pennington, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Etched Work of Wenceslaus Hollar, 1607-1677* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 337-38 (cat. nos. 2187-2224); they are also echoed in the Blaffer cabinet by illustrations from Georgius
few Asian objects and Roman antiquities from the collection of the MFAH. As with early-modern collections, in the Blaffer cabinet, paintings, such as Pietro Longhi’s *Display of the Elephant*, and prints may substitute for unavailable specimens.6

All these objects are installed (and resonate) with related prints, illustrated books, watercolors, and densely hung paintings. The objects are displayed in ostensibly casual arrangements rather than as traditionally ordered in museums, and didactic texts appear only in notebooks and on interactive screens available to visitors in the gallery. The goal is to evoke the cabinets of European collectors from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries without, obviously, replicating any one of them.7 Early modern cabinets varied widely in size, type of collections, and preciousness of objects. The Blaffer cabinet resembles more a scholarly cabinet than a princely one, given its relatively modest objects. Sources for

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the collection of objects and the installation of the cabinet include descriptions and depictions of early-modern collections, such as Flemish paintings of the first half of the seventeenth century (which are themselves evocations of collections rather than reliable documents of the actual appearance of collections) and printed illustrations such as the frontispiece to the *Museum Wormianum* of 1655, the posthumously published catalogue of the famous encyclopedic collection of the Danish physician and natural philosopher, Ole Worm, a copy of which is in the Blaffer Foundation collection (Fig. 8-3).[^8]

The installation is not fixed: Blaffer works (especially paintings) are frequently lent to other institutions and are generally replaced during the loan period by objects from storage or elsewhere in the galleries. But the general arrangement remains consistent: the earlier objects and associated paintings are for the most part installed toward one end of the gallery, with the later objects installed at the other end. Presiding over the two ends of the gallery are an Allegory of Experience by Laurent de La Hyre of around 1650 and an Allegory of Europe by Jean-Baptiste Oudry of 1722. The chronological differentiation between the two ends of the gallery, while not strictly demarcated, hints at the practical and conceptual shifts in taste, collecting, and the production of knowledge from the early sixteenth century to the late eighteenth century. The installation itself continues to evolve, and plans for the space include replacing the low steel cases with wooden ones that will combine display surfaces with shelves for the foundation’s rare books (including a number of early collections catalogues such as the Museum Wormianum, as well as works on natural history and pictorial practice), which are rotated for exhibition, and drawers for prints and low-profile objects, which could be opened by visitors (as at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, for example), thereby increasing the number of accessible works.

The Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation curiosity cabinet is unusual, but by no means unique. Early modern collections and cabinets have become fashionable in recent decades, and both scholarly and popular publications on the subject have proliferated. American public art collections have long held objects that would have been at home in early musea et museoceleberrimum (Amsterdam, 1678), frontispiece; and The Coral and Sponge Cabinet of Levinus Vincent, engraving from Levinus Vincent, Het tweede deel of vervolg van het Wondertooneel der Natuur (Amsterdam, 1715), plate 3. On the Flemish cabinet paintings, see Marlise Rijks, “Defenders of the Image: Painted Collectors’ Cabinets and the Display of Display in Counter-Reformation Antwerp,” in Arts of Display / Het vertoon van de kunst, ed. H. Perry Chapman, Frits Scholten, and Joanna Woodall (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 55-82, with further bibliography.

9 On these paintings, see Renaud Temperini, French Painting of the Ancien Régime from the Collection of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation (Houston: Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 1996), 82-87 and 140-45, respectively.

10 Early collections were often associated with libraries; see MacGregor, Curiosity and Enlightenment, 35-36. On early collections catalogues, see ibid., 60-64.

11 For a substantial entry into the subject, with further bibliography, see MacGregor, Curiosity and Enlightenment.
modern European curiosity cabinets, but only recently have several American museums emphasized the nature of such collections, while maintaining a focus on individual objects, with permanent installations that evoke early modern cabinets, the most elaborate of which is in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore—called there the Chamber of Wonders—curated by Joaneath Spicer. Museums have also mounted temporary exhibitions that partially reconstruct historical cabinets or collections, notably the eighteenth-century collection of Harvard University at the Harvard University Art Museums and the collection of Thomas Browne at the Royal College of Physicians of London. Furthermore, recent projects of various types—including curatorial interventions—by contemporary artists, especially Mark Dion, have self-consciously drawn on the curiosity-cabinet tradition and related impetuses, such as an investigation of natural history and the accumulation of found objects. Lamentably, perhaps, the very idea of the curiosity cabinet has

been stretched nearly beyond recognition—witness Cirque du Soleil’s recent (2017) program, “KuriosTM: Cabinet of Curiosities”—but such echoes, however faint, also attest to how compelling the concept is. The Blaffer cabinet, though an art-historical installation with a didactic purpose, is not immune to, and is even at least partially a product of, these forces.

The Blaffer Foundation cabinet gallery is relatively small (approximately 4.75 x 8.75 meters), only slightly larger than the intimate stanzino (now called the studiolo) of Francesco I de’ Medici in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence (3.5 x 8.5 meters), which, though short lived, was very influential on subsequent collectors. Yet Francesco’s room was meant to be a solitary retreat, its objects enclosed in cabinets to be taken out for the prince’s private delectation, whereas the Blaffer room is public and thus more akin to those early-modern spaces in which objects in the collection were shared with visitors, by either the collector himself or a curator. It is the Blaffer Foundation’s brief—in the words of the English king Charles II, who confirmed public access to John Tradescant’s collection in 1661—“freely & quietly to proceed . . . in entertaining & receaving all persons, whose curiosity shall invite them to the delight of seeing his rare & ingenious Collections of Art & nature.”

Curiosity cabinets often pretended to represent the entire world: divine creation and human manufacture, conceived both diachronically (with historical artifacts) and synchronically (with objects from around the

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17 On access to curiosity cabinets and the emergence of the professional curator, see MacGregor, Curiosity and Enlightenment, 64-66.

world at that moment in time). They were representations in microcosm of the larger macrocosm, allegories of power and repositories of knowledge. In 1565, Samuel Quiccheberg called his ideal collection, proposed for the Bavarian duke, Albrecht V, a “most ample theater that houses exemplary objects and exceptional images of the entire world” and a “universal theater,” and John Tradescant’s collection, founded in 1638, was described as “a world of wonders in one closet.” Voyages of discovery from the fifteenth century on—especially, but not exclusively, to the New World—provided European collectors with a global reach for objects of both naturalia and artificialia. In the Blaffer cabinet, that reach is suggested by a hand-colored copy of the first world atlas, Abraham Ortelius’s monumental Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (called the Theatre of the Whole World in its 1606 English translation), first published in 1570, but here in its most complete form in the first posthumous edition of 1603—said by a contemporary to be the most important book in the world after the Bible—by which the armchair traveler could visit the world in the comfort of his study. Two pocket sundials—one of ivory, signed by Paulus Reinmann and dated 1601, and one of brass, by Nikolaus Rugendas of around a century later, with an inscribed list of major cities and their latitudes—and an English pocket globe, made by Nathaniel Hill in 1754, further suggest the European collector’s interest in travel. And exploration was still thriving in the later eighteenth century, evidenced by a pair of large watercolors by Edward Dayes resulting from a scientific expedition to Iceland and the Faroe Islands in 1789, undertaken by John Thomas Stanley. Some objects, probably made specifically for the European


21 Abraham Ortelius, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (Antwerp: Jan Baptist Vrients, 1603). On Ortelius’s atlas and armchair traveling, see Clifton, “Journeys, Real and Imaginary, in China and Europe: Cartography, Landscape, and Travel around 1600,” in The Nomadic Object: The Challenge of World for Early Modern Religious Art, ed. Christine Göttler and Mia M. Mochizuki (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), 553-54; on the comment by Guillaume Postel, see ibid., 566.
market, were brought from afar: a colonial Dutch wooden pipe case of around 1670, made in either Ceylon (Sri Lanka) or Batavia (Jakarta) is carved in relief with naked indigenous peoples and bearded Europeans with feathered headdresses; a late-seventeenth-century Japanese porcelain Kakiemon ewer was fitted in Europe in the eighteenth century with a silver cover; and an early eighteenth-century octagonal Arita porcelain bowl was made in Japan for a European audience: its decoration depicts a European harbor scene with tall ships, thus representing the very means of trade that brought the bowl to Europe.

Early-modern developments in botany and horticulture, spurred in part by voyages of exploration and global commerce, are represented in the Blaffer cabinet in a number of paintings, prints, and illustrated books. The establishment of flowers as independent still-life subjects around the turn of the seventeenth century is evident in paintings by Balthasar van der Ast and Osias Beert. Early books on the subject include Fabio Colonna’s *Phytobasanos sive Plantarum aliquot Historia* (*Plant Touchstone, or the History of Some Plants*), published in Naples in 1592, with delicate and accurate etchings probably by the author himself, who was primarily concerned with the identification and illustration of plants mentioned in ancient texts; Giovanni Battista Ferrari’s *De Florum Cultura* (*On the Cultivation of Flowers*), published in Rome in 1633, which is illustrated by engravings not only of garden designs and botanical specimens, but also allegorical scenes conceived by Ferrari and designed by Pietro da Cortona and other leading Italian artists; and Johann Theodor de Bry’s *Florilegium novum* (*New Book of Flowers*), produced in three parts in de Bry’s publishing house in Oppenheim, Germany in 1612-1614, which is one of the most famous and influential of early florilegia, or books on flowers, and depicts plants from all over the world, including abnormal floral wonders that especially incited the curiosity of natural historians and collectors, “so that those who because of chance misfortune do not travel through foreign lands may be able to see extraordinary plants, from our presented images of them” (echoing Ortelius’s appeal to the armchair

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While no garden could bring forth all kinds of plants, De Bry could show them together in his book, which thus might function as a metaphor for the curiosity cabinet itself. Just as he acted as a virtual collector to exhibit the global diversity of nature in a way that nature itself could not, the Kunstd und Wunderkammer collector exhibits not only the global diversity of nature, but also the global diversity of manufactured objects, such that no single artist or people could produce.

Perched among the flowers and crawling below them in van der Ast’s Still Life of Flowers in a Glass Vase are diverse insects, typical of his work and early seventeenth-century floral still lifes more generally. These insects evince an entomological interest that resulted in other paintings, like Jan van Kessel’s Study of Butterflies, Moths, Spiders, and Insects of around 1655-1660 (Fig. 8-4), prints, and illustrated books in the Blaffer cabinet. Among the prints are sixteen of the fifty-two engravings of flowers and other plants, insects, small rodents, amphibians, and reptiles by Jacob Hoefnagel after his father, Joris Hoefnagel—a manuscript illuminator at the court of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II, whose curiosity cabinet was surpassed by none—in a series of 1592 called the Archetypa. The humanist inscriptions on the engravings, which would have appealed to collectors of naturalia at the time, suggest the broader significance of such collections, beyond the mere accumulation of exotica or even the use of specimens for scientific investigation. Most collections

23 Johann Theodor De Bry, Florilegium Novum (Frankfurt: Johann Theodor de Bry, 1612-1614), n.p. (“Dem WolEdlen / Gestrengen vnd Besten Herman zon und zu Kronberg”): “als daß diejenigen / die wegen fürfallenden Ungelegenheiten / frembde Länder nicht durchreisen noch derselben sonderbare Gewächs beschawen mögen / auß diesen vnseren vorgemachten Anbildungen dessen.” The Florilegium Novum has a somewhat complicated publication history and varying configurations. The copy in Houston consists of prefatory matter and eighty-seven engravings of flowers and flowering plants.
24 The Florilegium Novum’s title-page engraving, with a view of a garden framed by a colonnade, suggests that the book is conceived as a metaphorical garden—a garden on paper.
of natural objects and pictorial representations of (and substitutions for) them were informed—whether explicitly or implicitly—by a sense of the wonders of divine creation. One of the Hoefnagel prints in the Blaffer collection, for example, includes the line, “And any blade of grass points to the presence of God.”27 We find a sustained tribute to the divine in the prefatory letters to the dedicatee and the reader in De Bry’s Florilegium novum, in which he repeatedly marvels at God’s creation: “we must understand that God’s singular wisdom shows itself especially in the hearty flowerwork, which Nature itself generates, in so many and varied types, forms, sizes, and colors, that whoever takes account of such must say with the royal prophet David from Psalm 111 [Psalm 110:2]: Great is the work of the Lord; whoever attends to it shall have pleasure therein.”28

Figure 8-4: Jan van Kessel, A Study of Butterflies, Moths, Spiders, and Insects. 1655-60, oil on panel, 18.4 x 30.5 cm. Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston.

The counterpart to the life represented in the blooming flowers and crawling insects throughout the gallery and implicit within that life is the death also ubiquitous in the gallery. The related themes of vanitas and memento mori—that is, the vanity of worldly things and the reminder of death—frequently appear in early-modern imagery, both pictorial and literary, and it is not surprising that they should inform curiosity cabinets as well. The themes are addressed by paintings in the Blaffer cabinet, most directly in a Vanitas Still Life with Books, a Globe, a Skull, a Violin, and a Fan of around 1625-1630, by an unidentified Dutch painter probably active in Leiden. More subtly, Bartolomeo Bettera’s Still Life with Musical Instruments, probably painted in the 1680s, includes, in addition to the featured string instruments, a collector’s cabinet, some books, a triton shell, and an armillary sphere stacked together, suggesting that the knowledge and achievement thus represented may be as ephemeral as the sound of music. A seventeenth-century Dutch mirror frame in the Blaffer cabinet, replete with skulls and cross bones surmounted by a winged hourglass recalling the ancient aphorism “tempus fugit” (time flies), as well as skeletons digging flowers (here the two powers of life and death come into direct contact), reminds the viewer as he or she looks into the glass that beauty and youth are fleeting, and the flesh will decay and return to the earth (Fig. 8-5). A similar theme informs a marginal illumination to the Office of the Dead in an early sixteenth-century book of hours that features a skull and the inscription “Mors vincit omnia” (Death conquers all), as well as a sixteenth-century Franco-Flemish ivory pendant for a rosary with a woman’s face on one side and a skull with a snake crawling through its cavities on the other, which recalls the little skull on a shelf in the hexagonal cabinet at the right of the frontispiece to the Museum Wormianum, among the sundry naturalia of Worm’s collection (Fig. 8-3).

Discussions of vanitas and memento mori in the context of collections often point to specialized medical collections, especially those of the


30 Corstens, “Collection Checklist,” 183-84. The armillary sphere appears as a staple in representations of the studies of scholars, and thus as a metonym of knowledge, from Botticelli’s Saint Augustine to the Harry Potter films’ Professor Albus Dumbledore.
Figure 8-5: Allegorical Mirror Frame. 17th century, walnut, 57.2 x 48.3 cm. Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston.

University of Leiden anatomical theater and the famous anatomist Frederik Ruysch, with their skeletons accompanied by moralizing messages.\(^{31}\) To

make the presentation of collections more engaging, Ruysch combined human, animal, and botanical specimens into anecdotal narratives (such as a poisonous gecko holding a human fetus in its jaws); he embellished fetal and infant body parts with luxurious fabrics; he decorated the lids and stands of specimen jars with fabrics, stones, shells, coral, and other objects; and, most famously, he staged landscape scenes, using rocks, fetal skeletons, stones accreted in internal organs, bones, intestines, human membranes, and other body parts and objects, that expressed the ephemerality and vanity of life. He then had these allegorical tableaux engraved for publication. But skulls, skeletons, and representations of them often appear in collections of diverse types—one might point not only to the skull sculpture in the Museum Wormianum frontispiece, but also to the full-length skeleton on a pedestal among the paintings, sculptures, artifacts, Egyptian obelisks, maps and globes depicted on the frontispiece of the catalogue to the collection created by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher at the Collegio Romano—and the curiosity cabinet as a whole might even be considered a vanitas or memento mori, where a world of life is represented, but only in stilled image (the French term for still life, nature morte, comes to mind here) and objects removed from the life of the world.

Within the modern encyclopedic museum, objects from different cultures and periods resonate with each other (as well as with broader historical and contemporary knowledge), and it is not surprising that the Blaffer cabinet’s vanitas theme (inter alia) is traceable elsewhere in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, most saliently, perhaps in Damien Hirst’s End Game (2000-2004). With its human skeletons and medical instruments and supplies arranged neatly in a mirror-backed stainless steel-and-glass


33 Athanasius Kircher and Georgio de Sepi, Romani Collegii Societatis Jesu Museaeum Celebrerrimum (Amsterdam: Jansson-Waesberg, 1678), a copy of which is held by the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation.
case, it echoes an early-modern interest in anatomy and medical science, manifested in part in the collection and display of skeletons, anatomical specimens, and associated instruments, and may be seen as part of the same historical continuum.\(^{34}\) Likewise, the viewing of early-modern objects through a lens created by contemporary culture, however anachronistic it may seem, is inevitable, and it may be even more sharply inflected in the case of curiosity cabinets because of recent uses of the form and iconography. Thus, the presence of the Hirst piece (which carries a considerable famous-artist aura) in the museum may condition the viewer’s engagement with objects in the Blaffer curiosity cabinet. Such resonances may be felt from further afield as well: museum visitors may recognize correlations (whether consciously or not) between the Blaffer cabinet and “Witness to a Surrealist Vision,” a permanent exhibition of around 150 objects, curated by the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, at the Menil Collection nearby.\(^{35}\) The gallery includes European, African, Oceanic, and American objects, whose juxtaposition is inspired by the collections of Surrealist artists, as “witnesses” to a shared humanity among diverse peoples. That installation itself resonates with the objects exhibited in adjacent galleries.


Within the Blaffer cabinet, given its plethora of objects and pictures, it is not surprising that there are many correspondences among them—some intentional, some not; some of historical significance, some not—though they will not all be noticeable to the casual visitor. In addition to the skulls and flowers appearing throughout the gallery, already noted, and the rather prominent armadillos echoed in book frontispieces, ram’s horns, for example, are illustrated in Nehemiah Grew’s catalogue of the collection of the Royal Society and again as a drawing challenge in a book on perspective\(^6\), an early sixteenth-century South German bronze statuette of a wild man stands next to the Japanese ewer whose fitting incorporates a coin from 1625—a quarter taler of Friedrich Ulrich of Braunschweig-Lüneberg—that features the ducal symbol of a wild man; and so on.

In evoking an early-modern collection, one must be aware that such collections—and especially the collectors—were satirized already early in their history, in part precisely for the seemingly random assemblage of disparate objects. In a well-known passage in his critical essay on the poet Torquato Tasso, Galileo Galilei condescendingly compared Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata to “the study of some little man with a taste for curios (uno studietto di qualche ometto curioso) who has been pleased to fit it out with things that have something strange (del pellegrino) about them because of age or rarity or for some other reason but are, as a matter of fact, nothing but bric-a-brac (coselline): a petrified crayfish, a dried-up chameleon, a fly and a spider embedded in a piece of amber; some of those little clay figures which are said to be found in the ancient tombs of Egypt; and, as far as painting is concerned, some little sketches by Baccio Bandinelli or Parmigianino.”\(^7\) Erwin Panofsky noted that “Galileo portrays to a nicety and with evident gusto one of those jumbled Kunst- und Wunderkammern so typical of the Mannerist age,” illustrating his comment with a detail of the frontispiece of the catalogue of Ole Worm’s catalogue (Fig. 8-3).\(^8\) To be sure, in that image, there are some unexpected and probably unintended juxtapositions—a small bronze or plaster version of Giambologna’s monumental marble Rape of the Sabine Woman is flanked by a piece of coral on one side and a squid and small globe on the

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\(^{6}\) Grew, Musaeum Regalis Societatis, plate 2; Thomas Bardwell, The Practice of Painting and Perspective Made Easy (London: S. Richardson for T. Bardwell, 1756).


\(^{8}\) Panofsky, “Galileo as a Critic of the Arts,” 10.
other, and a zither lies atop a box of wood samples—but objects are collected into labeled boxes; ethnographic objects hang, for the most part, on the back wall, separated from the natural specimens on the wall at right; and there does seem to be some gesture toward organization. In any event, already during the full flowering of the curiosity cabinet around the turn of the seventeenth century, one of Europe’s most important scientists, a man of considerable culture, dismissed the utility of the collection of naturalia and artificialia, as well as small works of art—which might stand as a viable description of the objects in the Blaffer Foundation cabinet—implicitly finding them of little or no value in the production of knowledge. This perspective is sharpened in the context of a modern museum that evokes a generic collection. Needless to say, the Blaffer objects (jumbled or not) and their juxtapositions do not contribute to a production of scientific knowledge that a collector four hundred years ago might have claimed (Galileo’s criticism notwithstanding). But the cabinet relies, to borrow Bruce Robertson’s words, on “unexpected juxtaposition, the sense of disorder that seems most often to characterize curiosity cabinets,” to provoke wonder not only at individual objects, but at the infinite variety of threads that might connect them, thus evoking not simply early-modern curiosity cabinets, but the manner in which they worked, in contrast to the conventional, more linear organizational principles of most modern museums. As Robertson has pointed out, “a curiosity cabinet is ordered yet resists any simple, categorical ordering. The ultimate order of the curiosity cabinet is produced by each viewer through association, as each person puts together objects that make meaning and inspire original thought.” In that way, meanings produced by (or, rather, in) the cabinet are as varied as the visitors themselves. There may be not only some method in the apparent madness, but play and whimsy as well, which should not be undervalued for engaging the viewer

40 Robertson, “Curiosity Cabinets, Museums, and Universities,” 47.
41 Ibid., 46; see also p. 48: “Through juxtaposition, often the odder the better, the viewer might be prompted to speculate, to wonder on the structure of the world. This order was not predetermined but lay waiting to be constructed by the active, engaged mind of the viewer.”
and teasing out the meaning and significance of museum objects. The illustration in Grew’s Royal Society catalogue of an irregularly shaped, coarsely textured object that is described as “Skin on ye Buttock of a Rhinoceros,” for example, can be both funny and intellectually provocative. Seeing specimens of naturalia in an art museum is highly unexpected by most visitors to the MFAH, but it may prompt them to consider the relationship between works of art and works of nature in new ways, and, to put things in more historical terms, to consider the cultural differences between Europe of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when armadillos were extraordinary possessions displayed on the walls, and Texas of the twenty-first century, when they are most likely to be encountered as roadkill, or, as in Robert Earl Keen’s song, “belts and neckties and boots for rodeo.”

We might adopt for the Blaffer curiosity cabinet the terminology employed by the Jesuit Nicolaus Mohr in his prologue to Gaspar Schott’s *Magia Universalis Naturae et Artis* (*Universal Magic of Nature and Art*) of 1657, which he describes as a “theater where art and nature play.”

**Bibliography**


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44 “Hic curiositati Theatr um panditur, / In quo Art & Natura ludunt”; cited and quoted by Findlen, “Jokes of Nature,” 319. Mohr uses this image throughout the prologue, but also an image of art and nature wedded. On Schott, who was an assistant to Athanasius Kircher, see Mark A. Waddell, *Jesuit Science and the End of Nature’s Secrets* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 80-84, 161-86.


Authoris in Machinis concinnandis Executor. Amsterdam: Jansson-Waesberg, 1678.


The Menil Collection. “Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision.”


Collecting Early Modern Art (1400-1800) in the U.S. South

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