

CHAPTER EIGHT

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

JAMES CLIFTON

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,

¹ On the history of the foundation and its collection, see James Clifton, “A History of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation,” in *A Golden Age of European Art: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation*, eds. James Clifton and Melina Kervandjian (Houston: The Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2016), 11-41.

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.



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.

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

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.³ 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 abundance of matter for any Man’s Reason to work upon.”⁴ 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.

³ On wonder in relation to cabinets of curiosity, see Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. I. Karp and S. Lavine (Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 50; E. Bruce Robertson, “Curiosity Cabinets, Museums, and Universities,” in *Cabinet of Curiosities: Mark Dion and the University as Installation*, ed. Colleen Sheehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 48.

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”).



Figure 8-2: Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation curiosity cabinet, Audrey Jones Beck Building, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

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.⁵ The installation also often includes a

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

Everhardus Rumphius's *D'Amboinsche Rariteitkamer . . . (The Amboinese Rarity Cabinet)* (Amsterdam, 1741), compiled after decades of working for the Dutch East India Company on Ambon Island (also called Amboyna), part of the Maluku archipelago of Indonesia. On armadillos in early-modern collections, see Florike Egmond and Peter Mason, "Armadillos in Unlikely Places: Some Unpublished Sixteenth-Century Sources for the New World 'Rezeptionsgeschichte' in Northern Europe," *Ibero-amerikanisches Archiv* 20 (1994): 3-52. In the Blaffer Foundation collection, an armadillo—the most commonly collected exotic animal, called by Nehemiah Grew "The Great Shell'd Hedghog" (Grew, *Musaeum Regalis Societatis*, 17)—is depicted in several books, including on the frontispieces of Ole Worm, *Museum Wormianum* (Leiden: House of Elzevir, 1655); Ferrante Imperato, *Historia Naturale*, 2nd ed. (Venice, 1672); and Michael Bernhard Valentini, *Museum museorum, oder, Vollständige Schau-Bühne aller Materialien und Specereyen : nebst deren natürlichen Beschreibung ... aus andern Material-, Kunst- und Naturalien-Kammern, Oost-und-West-Indischen Reisz-Beschreibungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Johann David Zunner sel. Erben and Johann Adam Junge, 1714).

⁶ On the Longhi, see Steven F. Ostrow, "Pietro Longhi's Elephant: Public Spectacle and Marvel of Nature," in *A Golden Age of European Art: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation*, eds. James Clifton and Melina Kervandjian (Houston: The Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2016), 81-99. Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007), 71-72, notes that drawings (which the Blaffer Foundation does not collect) complemented objects in early-modern collections by showing things otherwise not available.

⁷ On evocation in museums, see James Clifton, "Conversations in Museums," in *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, ed. Sally M. Promey (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 208.



Figure 8-3: G. Wingendorp, Frontispiece. 1655. From: Ole Worm. *Museum Wormianum*. Leiden: House of Elzevir, 1655. Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, Houston.

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

⁸ Ole Worm, *Museum Wormianum*; on this image, see H. D. Schepelern, "The Museum Wormianum Reconstructed: A Note on the Illustration of 1655," *Journal of the History of Collections* 2 (1990): 81-85. Other images of collection installations in the Blaffer Foundation collection include: Imperato, *Historia Naturale*, frontispiece; Georgius de Sepibus, *Romani collegii Societatus [sic] Jesu*

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 1722.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ American public art collections have long held objects that would have been at home in early

musaeum celeberrimum (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. Pery 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,¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Lamentably, perhaps, the very idea of the curiosity cabinet has

¹² Foremost among them is perhaps the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on whose collection of such objects, see Wolfram Koeppe, “Collecting for the *Kunstkammer*,” in *Heilbronn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/kuns/hd_kuns.htm (October 2002) (accessed 12 June 2017).

¹³ On the Walters Chamber of Wonders, see Joaneath Spicer, “A Noble Collection of Art and Wonders of the 1600s in the Spanish Netherlands,” *The Chamber of Wonders*, www.thewalters.org/chamberofwonders/ (2017) (accessed 19 December 2017). See also Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, “The Cabinet of Art and Curiosity at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art,” <https://thewadsworth.org/cabinet-of-art-and-curiosity/> (accessed 19 December 2017) and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, “New *Kunstkammer* Gallery Offers a ‘Curiosity Cabinet’ of Precious Wonders,” <http://www.mfa.org/news/kunstkammer> (accessed 19 December 2016).

¹⁴ Ethan W. Lasser, ed., *The Philosophy Chamber: Art and Science in Harvard’s Teaching Cabinet, 1766-1820* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums, 2017); Royal College of Physicians, “‘A cabinet of rarities’: The Curious Collections of Sir Thomas Browne,” <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/events/cabinet-rarities-curious-collections-sir-thomas-browne> (accessed 19 December 2017).

¹⁵ A conference, “Curiosity 2.0: Die Wunderkammer in der zeigenössischen Kunst / The Cabinet of Curiosities in Contemporary Art,” organized by Petra Lange-Berndt and Dietmar Rübel, was held at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden in 2015, in conjunction with the exhibition by Mark Dion, “The Academy of Things,” <http://www.contemporaryand.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Curiosity-2.0.pdf> (accessed 19 December 2017). See also Stephanie Bowry, “Re-thinking the Curiosity Cabinet: A Study of Visual Representation in Early and Post Modernity,” (PhD diss., University of Leicester, 2015), 255-313.

been stretched nearly beyond recognition—witness Cirque du Soleil’s recent (2017) program, “Kurios™: 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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 & receiving all persons, whose curiosity shall invite them to the delight of seeing his rare & ingenious Collections of Art & nature.”¹⁸

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

On Dion’s “curated” works, see Colleen J. Sheehy, ed., *Cabinet of Curiosities: Mark Dion and the University as Installation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); René De Guzman, ed., *The Marvelous Museum: Orphans, Curiosities & Treasure: A Mark Dion Project* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010); Petra Lange-Berndt and Dietmar Rübel, eds., *Mark Dion: The Academy of Things / Die Akademie der Dinge* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2015); Mary-Kay Lombino and Elizabeth Nogrady, eds., *Universal Collection: A Mark Dion Project* (Poughkeepsie, NY: Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, 2016).

¹⁶ On Francesco’s *studiolo*, see Larry J. Feinberg, “The Studiolo of Francesco I Reconsidered” in *The Medici, Michelangelo, and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002); MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, 13-15.

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

¹⁸ Quoted by MacGregor, “The Tradescants as Collectors of Rarities,” in *Tradescant’s Rarities: Essays on the Foundation of the Ashmolean Museum 1683 with a Catalogue of the Surviving Early Collections*, ed. Arthur MacGregor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 23.

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,”¹⁹ and John Tradescant’s collection, founded in 1638, was described as “a world of wonders in one closet.”²⁰ 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.²¹ 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

¹⁹ Samuel Quiccheberg, *Inscriptiones vel titvli theatri amplissimi, complectentis rerum vniuersitatis singulas materias et imagines eximias* (Munich: Adam Berg, 1565), title page and n.p. (“Admonitio sev consilium atque item digressiones Sam. Quicchebergi de vniuerso theatro”); trans. Mark A. Meadow, ed., *The First Treatise on Museums: Samuel Quiccheberg’s Inscriptiones, 1565* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013), 61 and 73. On Quiccheberg, see *ibid.*, 1-41.

²⁰ The phrase, “A world of wonders in one closet,” comes from an epitaph for the Tradescant family tomb; see MacGregor, “The Tradescants: Gardeners and Botanists,” in *Tradescant’s Rarities: Essays on the Foundation of the Ashmolean Museum 1683 with a Catalogue of the Surviving Early Collections*, ed. Arthur MacGregor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 15.

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.²² 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

²² On the Van der Ast, see Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., "Balthasar van der Ast and the Artifice of Still Life," in *A Golden Age of European Art: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation*, eds. James Clifton and Melina Kervandjian (Houston: The Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2016), 55-65. For the relationship between botany and floral still lifes, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., *From Botany to Bouquets: Flowers in Northern Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1999).

traveler).²³ While no garden could bring forth all kinds of plants, De Bry could show them together in his book,²⁴ 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 *Kunst- 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.²⁵ 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*.²⁶ 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.

²⁵ Josine Corstens, “Collection Checklist,” in *A Golden Age of European Art: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation*, eds. James Clifton and Melina Kervandjian (Houston: The Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation, 2016), 156. On the painting, see Kenseth, *The Age of the Marvelous* (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 1991), 349-50.

²⁶ On the *Archetypa*, see Thea Vignau-Wilberg, *Archetypa Studiaque Patris Georgii Hoefnagelii 1592: Natur, Dichtung und Wissenschaft in der Kunst um 1600 / Nature, Poetry and Science in Art around 1600* (Munich: Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, 1994).

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.

²⁷ “Praesentemque Deum quaelibet herba refert”; trans. Vignau-Wilberg, *Archetypa Studiaque Patris Georgii Hoefnagelii*, 72.

²⁸ De Bry, *Florilegium Novum*, n.p. (“Dem WolEdlen / Gestrengen vnd Besten Herman zon und zu Kronberg”): “Unter andern müssen wir gestehen / daß Gottes sonderbare Weißheit sich sonderlich erzeige / in dem herzlichen Blumwerck / dwelches die Natur selber zeuget / in so viel vnd mancherley Gattung / Gestalt / Größ / vnd Farben / daß / wer solches in acht nimpt / mit dem Königlichen Propheten David sagen muß auß dem 111. Psalm: Groß seynd die Werck deß Herrn / wer ihr achtet / der hat eitel Lust daran.”

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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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

²⁹ Corstens, "Collection Checklist," 259. On the painting, see Jasper Hilligers in Diederik Bakhuys, Jasper Hilligers, and Cécile Tainturier, eds., *Tableaux flamands et hollandais du musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen* (Paris: Fondation Custodia, and Rouen: Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2009), 182-86, fig. 48b, and Jasper Hilligers in Salomon Lilian, ed., *Salomon Lilian: Old Masters* (Amsterdam: Salomon Lilian, 2012), 22-35 (as by Jan Davidsz. de Heem).

³⁰ Corstens, "Collection Checklist," 183-84. The armillary sphere appears as a staple in representations of the studies of scholars, and thus as a metonymy 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

³¹ See, for example, Robert Felfe, “Modern *Wunderkammern*,” in *Collection—Laboratory—Theater: Scenes of Knowledge in the 17th Century*, eds. Helmar Schramm, Ludger Schwarte, and Jan Lazardzig (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 255; MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, 39.

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.³² 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 Romano³³—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

³² On Ruysch's *tableaux*, engraved by Cornelis Huijberts, see Antonie M. Luyendijk-Elshout, "Death Enlightened: A Study of Frederik Ruysch," *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 212 (1970): 121-26; Julie V. Hansen, "Resurrecting Death: Anatomical Art in the Cabinet of Dr. Frederik Ruysch," *The Art Bulletin* 78 (1996): 663-79, esp. 670-71; Gijsbert M. van de Roemer, "From *Vanitas* to Veneration: The Embellishments in the Anatomical Cabinet of Frederik Ruysch," *Journal of the History of Collections* 22 (2010): 169-86. Discussion of Ruysch's *tableaux* and Huijberts's plates is usually based on the posthumously published *Opera Omnia* (Amsterdam, 1720), but the plates were originally published in a series of fascicules, which are held by the Blaffer Foundation: Frederik Ruysch, *Thesaurus anatomicus primus [-decimus]... Het eerste [-tiende] anatomisch cabinet* (Amsterdam: Joannem Wolters, 1701-1716).

³³ Athanasius Kircher and Geiorgio de Sepi, *Romani Collegii Societatis Jesu Musaeum Celeberrimum* (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.

³⁴ On *End Game*, see Elliott Zooey Martin's commentary in Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, *End Game: British Contemporary Art from the Chaney Family Collection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), Exhibition catalogue, 32-33, in which she notes the work's placement within the *Wunderkammer* tradition; on Hirst's relationship to that tradition, see Bowry, "Re-thinking the Curiosity Cabinet," 291-304. On Hirst's ambiguous relationship to the *vanitas* and *memento mori* traditions, see Debora Silverman, "Marketing Thanatos: Damien Hirst's Heart of Darkness," *American Imago* 68 (2011): 391-424. On the early-modern collection and display of anatomical specimens, see Dániel Margócsy, *Commercial Visions: Science, Trade, and Visual Culture in the Dutch Golden Age* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 109-66. At the turn of the seventeenth century, the Leiden University anatomical theater featured a prominent display of surgical instruments in a cabinet, labeled "Archivum Instrumentorum Anatomicorum," along with human and animal skeletons; see Tim Huisman, *The Finger of God: Anatomical Practice in 17th-Century Leiden* (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2009), 39-42, with reproduction of two engravings of the theater.

³⁵ On the Menil's cabinet, see The Menil Collection, "Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision," <https://www.menil.org/collection/5137-witnesses> (accessed 13 June 2017); Katharine Conley, "What Makes a Collection Surrealist? Twentieth-Century Cabinets of Curiosities in Paris and Houston," *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 6 (2012): 1-23. The Blaffer cabinet and the Menil installation are treated together by Rainey Knudson, "Dueling Cabinets of Curiosities: The Menil and the MFAH," *Glasstire*, 15 May 2015, <http://glasstire.com/2015/05/15/dueling-cabinets-of-curiosities-the-menil-and-the-mfah/> (accessed 12 June 2017).

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 perspective³⁶; 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.”³⁷ 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).³⁸ 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

³⁶ Grew, *Musaeum Regalis Societatis*, plate 2; Thomas Bardwell, *The Practice of Painting and Perspective Made Easy* (London: S. Richardson for T. Bardwell, 1756).

³⁷ Galilei, “Considerazioni al Tasso,” in *Le Opere di Galileo Galilei. Edizione nazionale*, ed. Antonio Favaro (Florence: Tipografia di G. Barbèra, 1899), 69; trans. Panofsky, “Galileo as a Critic of the Arts: Aesthetic Attitude and Scientific Thought,” *Isis* 47 (1956): 9-10.

³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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,"⁴⁰ 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."⁴¹ 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

³⁹ For satires of collectors and "virtuosos," see Claire Preston, "The Jocund Cabinet and the Melancholy Museum in Seventeenth-Century English Literature," in *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. R. J. W. Evans and Alexander Marr (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 87-106.

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.⁴² The illustration in Grew's Royal Society catalogue of an irregularly shaped, coarsely textured object that is described as "Skin on y^e 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."⁴³ 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."⁴⁴

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⁴² On play in early-modern natural history, see Paula Findlen, "Jokes of Nature and Jokes of Knowledge: The Playfulness of Scientific Discourse in Early Modern Europe," *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990): 292-331; on play in collecting, see Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel, "No Two Alike: Play and Aesthetics in Collecting," in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. Susan M. Pearce (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 220-39.

⁴³ Robert Earl Keen, "The Armadillo Jackal," *No Kinda Dancer* (Workshop Records, 1984).

⁴⁴ "Hic curiositati Theatrum 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.

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