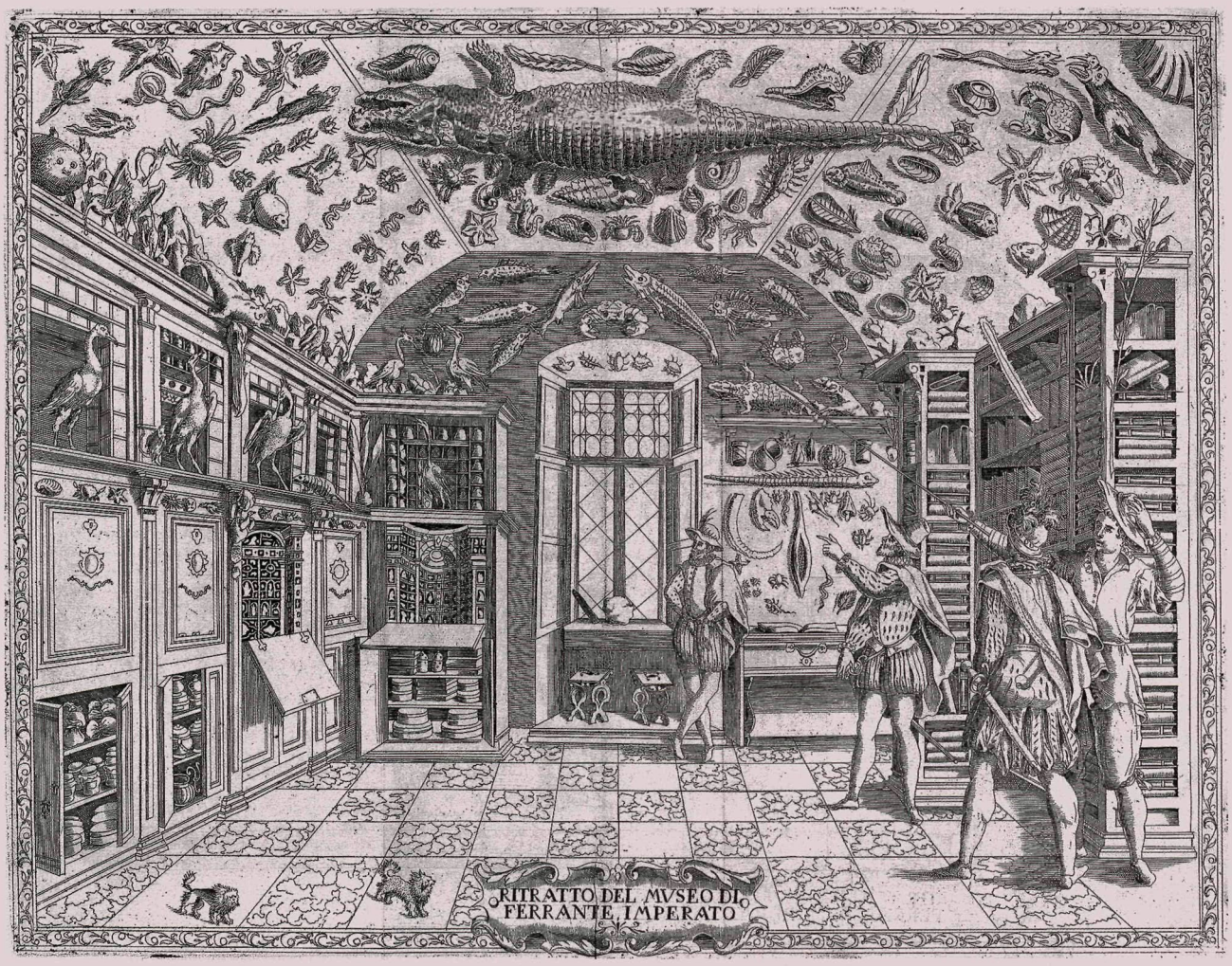


Fold-out engraving of Ferrante Imperato's Dell'Historia Naturale, Naples 1599.

CABINETS OF **CURIOSITY** (WUNDERKAMMERS)

By Melody Amsel-Arieli

Who among us has not slipped a whorled shell, an autumn leaf, or a shiny pebble into her pocket? We have collected the rare, the beautiful, and the wondrous since time immemorial.

Beginning in the 15th century, Europeans, aided by strides in cartography, astronomy, and ship building, explored and mapped distant African, Asian, and American shores. In their travels, they encountered astonishing varieties of flora, fauna, art, culture, and customs. Along with exciting accounts of their adventures, they also brought home some of their credible and incredible discoveries.

European inquisitive minds, including physicians, aristocrats, and royalty, assembled collections of these natural and unnatural specimens, religious relics, and objets d'art for their personal pleasure, to reflect their wisdom, power, and prestige. They arranged them subjectively organized in cabinets, a term that originally described chambers rather than pieces of furniture. Since these cabinets were filled with curios, they became known as cabinets of curiosity. In German, these are known as wunderkammers, wonder-rooms or *kunstkammers*, art-rooms.

Creating cabinets of curiosity became increasingly popular as printed engravings, which illustrated them, and catalogs, which listed their contents, were circulated. A catalog that first appeared in 1593, "Chiefest Rarities in the Publick Theater and Anatomie-Hall of the University of Leyden," reveals the eclectic nature of a cabinet's contents. Conceived as a educating endeavor, its entranceway featured, along with other astounding exhibits, a pair of "Polonian" boots, the "bristly Skin of a Brazilian Beast," the snout of an unknown fish, a trumpet made of birch trees

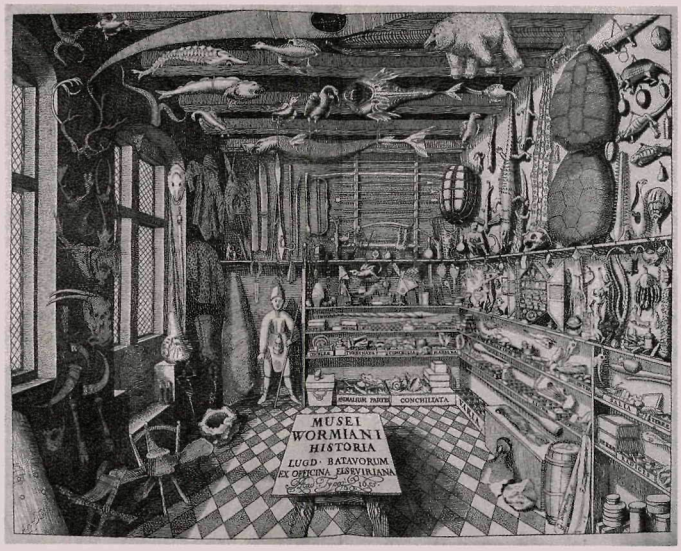
(9)

In the Presse C *are as followeth.*

1 The Sceleton of a Newborn childe.
2 The Sceleton of a Mouse.
3 The Sceleton of a Mole.
4 All the veines of a man's Liver.
5 A Flying Hart, by *Franc. Schurmans.*
6 An Abortus embalm'd.
7 An Egg of a Stork, an a great large Egg of a Fowl.
8 A piece of Wax out of Cinnemant.

In the Presse D

1 An Egyptian Urn, in which is an Abortis Embalm'd, above a 1000. Yeares old.
2 A Viper or Flying Adder.
3 An Egyptian Flie.
4 The Cheek-Bone of a Mumie.
5 A Sea-Spider, from *New Yorke*, *D. Hermanni Bloem.*
6 Capriscus Rhondeletii.
7 The Veines of a Man's Liver.
8 An Egyptian Night-Owl.
9 A Little Box, wherein is some bloud of a Crocodile.
10 A Piece of Bread made of Farnil.
11 A mallet, or hammer that the *Savages* in *New Yorke* kill with, *D. Herm. Bloem.*



LEFT: **Page from " Chiefest Rarities in the Publick Theater and Anatomie-Hall of the University of Leyden," published 1727, England.** RIGHT: **Ole Worm's cabinet of curiosities, from Museum Wormianum, 1655.**

from Muscovy, and two 300-pound East Indian oyster shells. Its central "Publick Theatre" was ringed by "Two Blue coat souldiers in their Skins", as well as skeletons of man and beast, some adorned with banners encouraging humility before such glories of Creation. Adjoining wings, chambers, and elaborate wooden cupboards, featuring many drawers and compartments, displayed assortments similar only by their remarkable diversity. "A Roman Lamp which burnes alwayes under Ground," for example, lay beside "a Lizard's Skin from Brazile, a thunder-bolt, a Gold-Ring from China," and "a Stone of Considerable bignesse, taken out of a maid's kidneys." Beyond descriptions like these, no further information was given.

One of the earliest engravings of a cabinet of curiosity, which was assembled by Neapolitan apothecary Ferrante Imperato, dates to 1599. In it, books line one wall, opposite stuffed birds guarding cupboards of specimen jars and pigeon-holed cabinets displaying marbles and minerals. Its vaulted ceiling, packed with shells, preserved sea creatures, stuffed mammals, is crowned by a monstrous, suspended stuffed crocodile.

In the early 1600s, royal gardener John Tradescant the Elder, scouring Europe, the Levant, the Caribbean, and the East Indies for botanical specimens, amassed natural and cultural oddities as well. He arranged his acquisitions in one of the earliest English cabinets of curiosity, which, for its size and scope, he called an "Ark."

Georg Christoph Stim, who visited the Ark in 1638, noted, along with a garden of exotic plants, "*all kinds of bright colored birds from India, a number of things changed into stone ...a piece of human flesh on a bone, gourds, olives, a piece of wood, an ape's head, a cheese, etc; all kinds of shells, the hand of a mermaid, the hand of a mummy, a very natural wax hand under glass, all kinds of precious stones, coins, a picture wrought in feathers, a small piece of wood from the cross of Christ*," along with many other worldly wonders. John Tradescant the Younger added Native American items like wampam belts and a ceremonial cloak belonging to Chief Powhatan, father of Pocahontas.

Father and son, to impose some sort of order, separated naturalia from artificialia, then, displayed them in sub-categories like animals, plants, minerals, religious relics, and portraits of royalty. Yet, since they considered all forms, factual or mythical, part of Man's sum of knowledge, each object held equal importance. Since the Ark was open to the public for a small entrance fee, common folk, like the aristocracy, could also behold wondrous rarities.

As Renaissance intellectual, artistic, and scientific horizons continued to expand, many collectors added innovative artwork, optical and astronomical instruments, celestial globes, experimental devices, and medical manuscripts to their curiosity collections.

Ole Worm, a Danish physician and student of antiquities, for example, alongside preserved animals, exotic plants, ancient sculptures, and fossils, displayed clockwork automata. Athanasius Kircher, a German Jesuit scholar, included musical, magnetic, and perpetual-motion machines in his vast collection of curios and sculptures. Manfredo Settala of Milan, in addition to natural and ethnographic oddities, included several of his own mechanical and optical inventions.

Because 17th century collectors described, organized, and displayed their acquisitions subjectively, each cabinet of curiosity differed subtly from the next. All these kaleidoscopes of knowledge, by mixing art with artifice and science with superstition, reflected the rich

diversity of the Renaissance. Despite their scope, however, they were not museums organized as we know them today.

Toward the end of the 17th century, as the pursuit to understand the natural world grew, the quest for natural specimens replaced the quest for rarities and curiosities per se. Sir Hans Sloane, physician to King George II, not only collected coins, seals, cameos, prints and drawings, antiquities, ethnological artifacts, and oddities, he also strove, through personal effort and the acquisition of existing collections, to gather examples of all the works of nature. He then meticulously compared, identified, and classified most of his natural specimens by number, name, description, and locality. After his death, Sloane's entire collection, more than 71,000 objects, formed the foundation of the British Museum. In 1881, his natural history collection became part of Britain's Natural History Museum.

Individual curiosities have rarely found their way into modern collections. Yet, like the British Museum, other world class history, ethnology, art, anthropology, science, medical, and archeology museums have also evolved from cabinets of curiosity. Museum Boerhaave, the National Museum for Science and Medicine at Leiden, Netherlands developed from the Publick Theater and Anatomie-Hall of the University of Leyden. It even features a reconstruction of the University's 17th century, round, tiered anatomy hall.

The Kunstkamera Museum, which is located in St Petersburg, Russia, developed from Peter the Great's cabinet of curiosities. In addition to books, fish, reptiles, insects, an extensive mineral collection, and scientific instruments, this monarch collected malformed human and animal fetuses, reputedly to ease his countrymen's superstitious fear of monsters.

The Ashmolean Museum (today the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archeology) is another institution that developed from a cabinet of wonder. Elias Ashmole, decades after inheriting the Tradescant Ark, donated its contents, along with other acquired collections, to the University of Oxford, which established a museum in his name.

Over the years, however, many Tradescant zoological specimens, including the last (stuffed) dodo ever seen in Europe, deteriorated beyond recognition. Yet its more stable curiosities, including a model of a 17th century merchant ship carved from solid oak, the earliest known Russian wooden bead counting frame, a Scandinavian boxwood perpetual almanac carved with runic symbols, and a 12th century German copper-alloy lantern set with crystals, continue to delight visitors today.

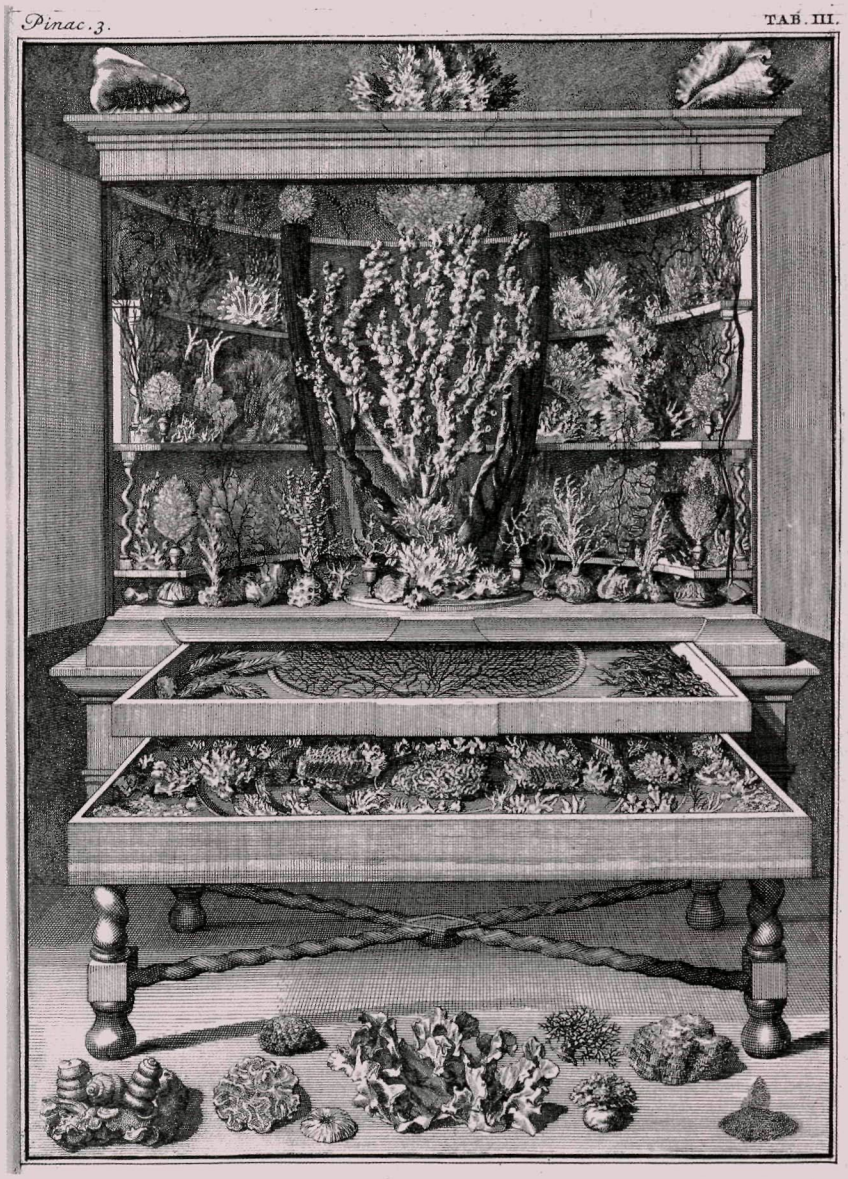


Illustration from the book, Wondertooneel der Nature - a Cabinet of Curiosities or Wunderkammern in Holland.

Melody Amsel-Arieli *is an American-Israeli freelance writer whose articles have appeared in genealogical and historical magazines across the UK, US, and Canada. She is the author of Between Galicia and Hungary: The Jews of Stropkov (Avotaynu 2002) and her forthcoming book, Jewish Lives: 1750-1950 (Pen & Sword coming 2013). Visit her website at http://amselbird.com.*