



*Collecting Nature*. Schwabenakademie Irsee, 24.05.2013-28.05.2013.

**Reviewed by** Markwart Herzog

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## Collecting Nature

What do minerals artistically worked into *Handsteine*, silver lizards cast from nature, and stuffed exotic birds have to do with one another? Why at one and the same time did they serve visual curiosity, princely display, and early natural history? Under the rubric of *Collecting Nature* these and related themes were the discussion topic of museum curators as well as historians of science and art from Europe, the United States, and Australia who met from 24 to 28 May 2013 at the Schwabenakademie Irsee to take part in an interdisciplinary conference. The idea, structure, and programme of the conference were developed in collaboration with Sylvia Heudecker (Irsee) by art historian Andrea GÄldy (Ottobeuren), FRHistS, who in 2004 founded the Collecting and Display research group. Since then four international conferences on very varied questions of collecting and reception have taken place. What is special about these meetings is their interdisciplinarity, grounded in their very themes, as well as the participation of well-known, established professors and the chance for younger scholars to present the results of their most recent research.

The theme of this year's conference was the historical view of nature in scholarly collections, princely *Kunst- und Wunderkammern*, libraries, gardens and menageries from the early modern period into the nineteenth century. Topics included not only natural objects and their aesthetic presentation, but also their representation in paintings, diagrams and inventories and what these images reveal about how people understood the objects. A common thread of almost all the papers was the attempt to tell history not through and about objects, but

to let the objects and their history speak for themselves.

Three papers concentrated on particular objects or types of objects. RACHEL KING (Munich) investigated the fascination of early-modern collectors for amber real and artificial with inclusions of frogs and lizards, objects that have not survived but that were once highly prized. Known now only from representations, these amber inclusions carried a heavy symbolic value that underlay the pull they exerted on collectors. VIRGINIE SPENLÄ (Munich) presented a hitherto unknown and unpublished piece by Wenzel Jamnitzer, a mortar with the life-cast decoration for which the artist is famous, arguing that it was probably made for use by a woman. Metal work casts after life are typical examples of a crossover between nature and art in the *Kunst- und Wunderkammer*. Mimicking nature in the most astonishing manner, these works of art were highly estimated and considered most valuable collectibles. Following Pamela H. Smith's path of interpretation[1] (*The Body of the Artisan*, 2004) SpenlÄ© demonstrated convincingly that in the late sixteenth century artistic, or rather artisanal activities aiming at a realistic representation of nature were in fact considered the only way to a scientific knowledge that could be achieved by means of experience and meticulous labour.

An approach grounded closely in early-modern theory underpinned INGA ELMQVIST SÄDERLUNDÄs (Stockholm) paper on scientific instruments, which she showed to have been integral elements in libraries, not just in prescriptive texts but also in fact. Libraries contained three-dimensional objects like *naturalia*, antiqui-

ties, sculptures, scientific instruments, coins and medals. In museum collections of today a number of scientific instruments have their provenance from libraries, indicating that these collectibles were important objects for display as well as for occasional use. The paper took into account theoretical literature on the ideal library, its construction and disposition. Three-dimensional artefacts and scientific instruments in the library were linked to the representative functions of the space, seen as decoration as well as objects to be used for the pursuit of knowledge, parallel to the books. A comparison with the typical content of a *Kunst- und Wunderkammer*, inventories of which also record the possession of artefacts, books and instruments, shows that there are similarities but also significant differences.

Four papers addressed specific collections that are now available to us largely through representations in images and texts. These papers in particular sparked friendly discussion about the problems involved in how literally we should take representations. GIADA DAMEN (Princeton) spoke on Andrea Vendramin's mineral specimens, a collection preserved in two illustrated catalogues that are less well known than those documenting Vendramin's art objects. These volumes can help us understand how Venetians saw the collecting of natural objects, Damen argued. In contrast, IVO RABAND (Bern) discussed the painting collection of Archduke Ernst of Austria, arguing the connection between its emphasis on landscape and Ernst's position as governor of the Spanish Netherlands. MARCELL SEBÁK (Budapest) used prints from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century to compare the collections of natural historians Ferrante Imperato (Neapolitan pharmacist and herbalist), Ferdinando Cospi (Bolognese senator and purchasing agent of the Medici family), and Ole Worm (Danish physician and writer) to present an argument that the scholars had a new attitude toward nature embodied in their collections. All of these collectors displayed prepared animals and *wonders* within their museums, but in the course of sixteenth century the accumulation of knowledge on display reached a new phase and a new quality because it was based on personal experimenting as opposed to the acceptance of traditional Antique explanations of Nature. In this way the collections reflected a new perception and understanding of nature.

IORDAN AVRAMOV (Sofia) addressed the fact that we have little concrete information on the contents of collections such as those at the Royal Society. We can improve our grasp by looking at correspondence, as Avramov did in presenting evidence of natural objects

discussed in the correspondence of Henry Oldenburg, the Royal Society's first Secretary, who became one of the most dominant figures of European science of this period. The stream of letters to and from London contained all sorts of scientific news: astronomical observations, reports of experiments, anatomical accounts, book reviews et al., but also it contained rich information about different types of objects: scientific instruments, exotic remedies, precious minerals, and useful inventions. In some cases the objects themselves travelled together with the letters to London. A part of them were in the repositories of the collections of the Royal Society, which in Oldenburg's time mainly resembled a traditional cabinet of curiosities. Fortunately, the right use and application of these objects were often reflected in many ways in the correspondence.

The involvement of early-modern women in collecting and display has been somewhat neglected, but two papers ensured that the conference did not fall into this common scholarly trap. LISA SKOGH's (Stockholm) presentation on Swedish Queen Hedwig Eleonora placed particular emphasis on those quintessential *Kunstkammer* objects, *Handsteine*, connecting them to a ruler's need to understand the industrial use of nature. Here the queen's knowledge of Saxon precedents and of the importance of Swedish mining played a role in the prominence of *Handsteine* in the royal collections. A later Swedish queen, Lovisa Ulrika, featured in the paper by ANNE HARBERS (Sydney). Lovisa Ulrika collected extensively and corresponded with Linnaeus, whom she later engaged to catalogue her collection of natural objects, a circumstance of importance in how Linnaeus continued to develop his system of classifying species.

Two papers opened the view to the outdoors with a focus on Renaissance gardens. MIRIAM KIRCH (Florence, Alabama) discussed the gardens of Elector Palatine Ottheinrich in Neuburg on the Danube and Heidelberg, relying on archival evidence to reveal the prince's personal involvement in collecting. BARBARA TRAMELLI (Berlin) presented the *nymphaeum* at Pirro Visconti Borromeo's villa at Lainate, showing that it served to exhibit varied collections, including painting, in a space conceived to evoke the wonders of nature. Borromeo's collection of paintings, fossils, minerals, coins, sacred relics and archaeological findings was hosted in the symmetrically organized spaces of the *nymphaeum*. Tramelli's paper analysed Borromeo's specific *quest for nature* and his connections with the artistic and scientific communities in Milan at the end of the sixteenth century.

Perspectives on the early-modern interest in birds emerged in three papers. ANGELICA GROOM (Milton Keynes) spoke on bird paintings for the last two Medici dukes, Cosimo III and Gian Gastone. Groom argued that the decrease in naturalism between works by Bartolomeo Bimbi and those by Pietro Neri Scacciati reflected improvements in taxidermy and the consequently greater freedom afforded artists in representing birds and other animals. JOY KEARNEY (Rotterdam) discussed the realistic depiction of birds, especially exotic species, in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic. Paying close attention to Melchior de Hondecoeter, but also discussing his predecessors and contemporaries, Kearney linked the subjects of the paintings to collections enriched by Dutch overseas commercial ventures. SHEPHERD KRECH III (Providence, Rhode Island) also ventured a comparative discussion in his paper on the eighteenth-century observer of birds, Mark Catesby. In contrast to others, Catesby asked questions that show a scientific attitude toward the avian creatures he portrayed, Krech argued.

The presentations that opened and closed the conference expanded its theme both geographically and chronologically. Rather than looking at European collections, SUSANNE FORMANEK (Vienna) began her paper with a discussion of European naturalists who made the West aware of Japanese plants between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Formanek demonstrated that Japanese collectors helped them. Japanese collectors came from the nobility as well as the merchant classes, and their interest in nature led them to establish botanical gardens, assemble large collections of plants and insects, as well as to form scientific circles. Formanek showed that this development in Japan closely paralleled that in Europe, particularly during the Enlightenment. A different expansion of "Collecting Nature" lay in photo artist DORNITH DOHERTY (Denton, Texas) keynote address. This took the idea of collecting nature into the twenty-first century by presenting Doherty's work on botanical collections. These range from Renaissance foundations to contemporary seed banks that are meant to preserve plants of differing value, be they endangered native species or those critical to the world's food supply. While denying that her work is documentary, Doherty showed pieces in a variety of photographic techniques that demonstrate the broad range of approaches both in collecting and in representing collections alike.

The two presentations by Susanne Formanek and Dornith Doherty created an apt frame for a conference that successfully reflected the current renaissance of the "Kunst- und Wunderkammer" both in historical disci-

plines and in museum display. Objects from the "Wunderkammer" evoke a new pleasure that is also present in contemporary art and that has recently shown itself in a tremendous response to the re-opening of the "Kunst- und Wunderkammer" in the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Vienna) in March 2013.

Physically walking through the spaces of a restored or reconstructed "Kunst- und Wunderkammer", such as those at Burg Trausnitz or Schloss Ambras, is comparable to an intellectual stroll through the cosmos of early modern science. The diversity of the presentations at the Irsee conference convincingly demonstrated that theoretical treatment of the phenomenon of the "Kunst- und Wunderkammer" should not be too removed from the objects, and this includes the research into their presence in their contemporary inventories and images. This applies fundamentally to all objects of the "Kunst- und Wunderkammer" but is especially applicable to the naturalia that were discussed and examined *pars pro toto* at this conference. Above and beyond that, the conference once again proved that a scientifically satisfactory treatment of "Kunst- und Wunderkammer" objects can only be reached by means of the interdisciplinary cooperation of multiple branches of history.

The exemplary organization of the conference in the aptly Baroque atmosphere of the monastery was owed to Sylvia Heudecker of the Schwabenakademie Irsee, who co-organises its conferences on art history, and to Andrea G&ldy (Collecting & Display).

After the presentations and lively discussions an excursion took participants to the South Seas Museum in Oberg&nzburg. This displays objects collected by Oberg&nzburg native Captain Karl Nauer. He forsook the idyllic landscape of his childhood for a life at sea and spent many years in the German colonies in Melanesia. The museum showcases a large variety of objects – masks, utensils, hunting implements, weapons, jewellery – from places such as New Guinea and houses an as yet unpublished treasure, the hundreds of glass-plate negatives of Captain Nauer's photographs.

#### Conference Overview:

Welcome by Markwart Herzog, Director of the Schwabenakademie Irsee, Andrea G&ldy, Collecting & Display, and Sylvia Heudecker, Schwabenakademie Irsee

Susanne Formanek, Institut für Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens, Vienna, Austria: Collecting and Displaying Nature in Early Modern Japan

*Section 1: Naturalia and Sculpture after Nature*

Rachel King, Pinakothek und Nationalmuseum, Munich, Germany: Collecting Nature within Nature – Animal Inclusions in Amber in Early Modern Collections

Lisa Skogh, Stockholms Universitet, Sweden: Bergwerke & Handsteine in the Royal Swedish Collections 1654–1720

Angelica Groom, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK: Animal Collecting at the Medici Court in Florence: Real, Stuffed and Painted Beasts as Evidence of Shifting Values in the Display and Conceptualisation of the Zoological Other

Virginie Spéniel, Kunstkammer Georg Laue, Munich, Germany: Casting from Nature: Wenzel Jamnitzer's Metal Works for Kunst- and Wunderkammern

*Section 2: Nature and Naturalia Indoors*

Marcell Sebők, Central European University, Budapest, Hungary: Wonders on the Walls: Visual Presentations and Displaying Nature and Knowledge in Early Modern Private Collections

Giada Damen, Princeton University, USA: Collecting and Cataloguing Art and Nature in a Venetian Palazzo

Ivo Raband, Universität Bern, Switzerland: An Archducal Collection in Brussels: Archduke Ernest of Austria and his Collecting Ambitions

Shepherd Krech III, Brown University, Providence, USA: Catesby's Birds

*Section 3: Specific Locations of Display of Naturalia: Libraries and Wunderkammern*

Barbara Tramelli, Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Berlin, Germany: Nature and Grotesques: Pirro Visconti Borromeo and the Collection in his Villa of Lainate

Inga Elmqvist Sjöderlund, Museum of the History of Science, Oxford University, UK: Scientific Instruments in the Ideal Early Modern Library

Miriam H. Kirch, University of North Alabama, Florence, USA: A Princely Plant Collector in Renaissance Germany

Joy Kearney, Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, Netherlands: Ornithology in the Dutch Golden Age – Captured Specimens, the Collecting of Exotica

Iordan Avramov, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria: The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg and Circulation of Objects at the Early Royal Society of London, 1660–1677

Anne Harbers, University of Sydney, Australia: Carl Linnaeus & The Natural History Collections of Lovisa Ulrika of Sweden at Drottningholm Palace

Dornith Doherty, University of North Texas, Denton, USA: Keynote Speech: Archiving Eden

Visit to the Dase Museum, Obergünzburg (guided tour)

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<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

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