

PREFACE

The fragment of a fossilized mammoth tooth from the palaeontological collection of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, the figure of *Cupid Carving His Bow* from the Skulpturensammlung in the Bode Museum, and a clock lost during the Second World War from the Kunstgewerbemuseum appear to have little in common. They are exhibits from various museums, items from different scientific cultures, and come from different epochs. All of them, however, belonged to the holdings of the Berlin Kunstammer, which is still present in the modern-day Berlin collections in the form of inventory entries and objects. The history of this institution is a challenging and largely un-researched area of collection history. Researchers from the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HU), the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (MfN), and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (SMB) have come together to explore this desideratum. The present book reports the results of this research alliance and in so doing opens a fundamentally new perspective on the subject of the Kunstammer.

One of the many challenges of this project has been the tension between contemporary scientific collection models and the model of the Kunstammer that exists in latent form in its objects. Already at the very beginning of the project, it became clear that the Kunstammer should not be reconstructed as a static collection or established in the sense of an original narrative of the Berlin collections.

The history of the Berlin Kunstammer is reflected in its continuing development, change, and diversity. Part of the special status of the Berlin Kunstammer is that due to its incessant metamorphoses, it cannot be reduced to a fixed concept. As the research project was able to determine in the three years of its work, the former electoral and then royal Kunstammer was permanently re-invented. It was not a static container, but rather a membrane through which there passed continual and tremendous increases, but also extensive losses, the most profound of which was the transfer of large holdings to Paris under Napoleon's reign. What remained, however, was the approach formulated by Leibniz in the context of the foundation of the Berlin Academy of Sciences: that no academy has a *raison d'être* if it does not have access to the corresponding laboratories and universal collections. In regard to this principle, there were also periods of attenuation and expansion, but the fundamental approach remained and came to be associated with the concept of the academy museum around 1800.

In an entry from 1818 in the guest book of what is now the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, a visitor expressed great satisfaction with the “newly built museum”. From a present-day perspective, the contents of this entry are as surprising as the visitor himself: King Friedrich Wilhelm III. The king here refers to the fact that at the behest of Wilhelm von Humboldt, a large part of the Kunstammer in the Berlin Palace had been transferred as material for research and instruction to the new university, which had opened in 1810. Because of this, the rooms facing the boulevard Unter den Linden were so full of objects from the Zoological Museum, the Anatomical-Zootomic Museum, the Mineralogical Museum (from 1814 on), and with parts of the painting gallery (until the establishment of the Altes Museum in 1830), that most of the instruction had to be held outside of the university building. In the face of steadily increasing holdings, the decision was finally

made to unite the natural history collections in a building to be constructed on Invalidenstraße as the Museum für Naturkunde (which opened in 1889). Thus in 1810, the naturalia from the Berlin Kunstkammer, together with other public and private scientific collections, constituted the basis for the establishment of this research museum.

The special role of the Berlin Kunstkammer is evident in the fact that despite these transfers, it continued to grow in considerable ways until it comprised the basic holdings of the Neues Museum on Museum Island. The latter thus constitutes an early example of a modern museum complex that not only directed the arrow of knowledge vertically back to origins and early history, but also embraced global cultural perspectives. The non-European art holdings formed the nucleus of the later Museum für Völkerkunde, from which arose the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) and the Museum Europäischer Kulturen (Museum of European Cultures). Other Kunstkammer objects became part of the Kunstgewerbemuseum (Museum of Decorative Arts) and the Kupferstichkabinett (Museum of Prints and Drawings), to name but a few examples.

Without taking into account this special role of the Kunstkammer, we cannot begin to understand the emergence of the Berlin museum landscape, which along with major industrial forces such as Borsig and Siemens fostered the urban development of the city. The Berlin research project has sought to describe the development of the Berlin Kunstkammer as a process that must be comprehended in its object-related, spatial, and interest-guided plurality. This meant that the results of the project would not be portrayed as a finished history of the institution. Instead, the diversity of the collection would be illuminated on the basis of object biographies. On another level, historical intersections have been identified, thereby making visible the continuities, ruptures, and interactions with comparable initiatives both within and beyond Berlin. Finally, the project has also outlined aspects of collection dynamics, such as processes of focusing and re-focusing, acquisition and deaccession, as well as notions of intactness and damage.

Although the Kunstkammer experienced its heyday from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, since the 1990s it has become a reference model for museum practices. In fact, this issue has also experienced a new upswing in current research interests. The highly regarded reconstructions that have taken place, for instance, in Braunschweig, Dresden, Prague, Stuttgart, and Vienna demonstrate the relevance of these efforts in an impressive and illuminating manner.

In particular, the global orientation of the Kunstkammer and its transcultural object histories provide connecting points to current research questions about early global entanglements and collection practices in colonial settings. The origin histories worked out in the research project for a series of objects that were acquired through physicians, mining engineers, and aristocrats in the territories of the European colonial powers reveal the manifold motivations and diverse ways of collecting artefacts and naturalia.

In this way, the holdings open up multi-focal and complex global perspectives that are well suited for developing future research topics and continuing the investigation of the Berlin Kunstkammer.

The research project has also broken ground in the areas of participation and digitization, which are pioneering for science and research museums. Complementary to the results depicted in this

book, the digital research environment *berlinerkunstkammer.de* presents a virtual collection space that makes accessible the historical sources of the Berlin Kunstammer and draws connections to the collection objects, people, and locations from multiple perspectives. The transcription of several historical documents has been accomplished with the help of a citizen science project of the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. As a contemporary digital reconstruction of the Berlin Kunstammer, this virtual knowledge network, together with the book publication, is addressed to anyone interested in a deeper understanding of the Berlin Kunstammer.

We would like to thank all of the parties who made this research project possible and were involved in its implementation, first and foremost the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) for its generous financial support. Special thanks are due to the research team: Marcus Becker, Eva Dolezel, Meike Knittel, Diana Stört, and Sarah Wagner, who despite the obstacles of the pandemic carried out the project with enormous dedication and were able to produce significant results. We would also like to thank Kay Usenbinz for his coordination of the project as well as student assistants Janna Müller, Rosa Miriam Reinhardt, Marna Schneider, and Annika Thielen.

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The implementation of the Virtual Research Environment required diverse components that were successfully assembled in the team together with many citizen scientists and contributors. We are sincerely grateful to all of the participants. We would also like to thank the archives and museums that have made source material available. Not least of all, we are grateful to our publisher, Imhof Verlag, for their expert cooperation as well as to Allison Brown, Tom Lampert, and Adam Blauhut for their competent and accurate translations and Melissa M. Thorson for her excellent editing.

We hope this book provides you with stimulating reading and inspires new and fruitful investigations of the early history of the Berlin museums and collections!

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