

OBJECTS, PEOPLE, INVENTORIES: AN APPROACH TO THE BERLIN KUNSTKAMMER

The chapters in this book are linked with cross-references.

The different kinds of texts are indicated by the following symbols:

- Object Biography
- Time Frame
- ◆ Perspectives on the Collection

1 | Georg Pfründt (circle), Ornate vessel made from zebu horn, late seventeenth century, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstgewerbemuseum (Museum of Decorative Arts), in the exhibition *Illustrious Guests: Treasures from the Kunstammer Würth*, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin 2021.

The holdings of the Museum of Decorative Arts of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin include an ornate vessel about 43 cm in height (fig. 1).¹ As a prototypical Kunstammer piece [■ Nautilus], this object intimates the complex history of such collections – the acquisition of raw materials, the decorative-artistic fabrication process, and the changes of ownership, as well as its presentation as an exhibit and the research conducted on it. All of these aspects raise questions about the interactions of people from different social and geographical backgrounds. To this day, in every encounter with this object, the “K” in the inventory number K 3429 communicates its provenance from the Kunstammer in the Berlin Palace. A hasty classification by an expert in the nineteenth century set its date of origin in “the eighteenth century”;² more in-depth analysis by art historians comparing it to similar pieces in other collections later came to the conclusion that it was from the circle of Georg Pfründt in southern Germany in the third quarter of the seventeenth century.

Although the vessel was carved from the horn of a zebu (*Bos indicus*), eighteenth-century visitors to the Kunstammer identified the raw material as “rhinoceros horn” and recorded what they



had been told during a guided tour of the collection [●Around 1740]: “The rhinoceros is the enemy of the elephant. It has its horn on its nose, and when the elephant comes too close, it cuts the elephant’s stomach open” (fig. 2).³ Above a base of entwined sea serpents, a man in a feather apron and a woman draped in cloth, both with European features and embracing as a couple, form the shaft of the vessel. On its horn-shaped corpus are other battling “beasts” in relief. A seated figure with a parasol crowns the composition. What was the artist referring to with the depictions on this cup? How did the raw material get to his workshop, and how did the vessel then make its way from there to the royal collection? What images of distant worlds did visitors – both male and female [■Priapus] – have when looking at this object? And what happened when the eye surveyed a multiplicity of similar objects [◆Canon and Transformation]?

The Berlin *Kunstkammer* as such never existed: in the course of its remarkably long history, this institution – initially electoral and later royal – experienced constantly changing ambiguities of collection history. In their approach to the collection, to the objects and spaces, the classificatory systems and visiting practices, and the media used for dissemination and presentation, the protagonists constantly reinvented the Brandenburg-Prussian *Kunstkammer*. After preliminary steps in the sixteenth century, the collection became identifiable as a *Kunstkammer* for the first time around 1600 as the legacy of a princess [●Around 1600]. These holdings, which were comparable in their profile to other early modern cabinets of curiosities, were lost in the turmoil of the Thirty Years’ War. Re-established in the apothecary wing of the Berlin Palace under Electors Friedrich Wilhelm and Friedrich III [●1685/1688], after 1700 the *Kunstkammer* and the Antiquities Collection were moved to new rooms on the third upper floor of the now first Prussian king’s residence, which had been rebuilt by Andreas Schlüter (fig. 3) [●1696 vs. 1708]. A chequered history in the eighteenth century [●Around 1740] was followed by attempts to redefine the collection around 1800 [●Around 1800]. Wars and institutional revisions led to the extensive displacements of holdings. There was an innovative re-orientation of the institution as a section of the (Altes) Museum, which opened in 1830, followed by the move to the Neues Museum beginning in 1855, and finally the institutional dissolution in the 1870s [●Around 1855]. The *Kunstkammer* was transformed in the new specialized museums, whose collection profiles it had crucially shaped. From these new museums, the present-day Berlin museum landscape emerged, and the history of



2 | Georg Pfründt (circle), Ornate vessel made from zebu horn, late seventeenth century, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kunstgewerbemuseum, detail.



3 | Floor plan of the Kunstammer (Room 989–991/992, later also 1001 and 1005) as well as the Antiquities and Medals Cabinet (Room 985–987) on the third upper floor of the north-east corner of the Berlin Palace. The room numbers used in the palace during the Wilhelmine era and until its destruction have been maintained in the present book for easier orientation.

this current landscape, in turn, charts a struggle for the reconstruction and interpretation of the former Kunstammer [●1930].

The present book arose from the research project *A Window on Nature and Art*, which was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) as a collaborative project of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (HU), the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (MfN), and the Staatliche Museen Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SMB) and which brought together scholars of history, art history, and the digital humanities (fig. 4). The project sought to combine a chronology of collection history with an analysis of objects from the Kunstammer – existing and known collection pieces from the museums founded in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as pieces that had been forgotten or that no longer exist. Material culture and written documents provide insight into the biographies of artefacts and naturalia, which at least for a time were sought after for the collection of Brandenburg-Prussian rulers and were kept as Kunstammer objects before being incorporated, for example, into the collections of the Museum of Decorative Arts or Natural History, sold, or even simply discarded. Drawing on the now-canonical approaches of Igor Kopytoff und Arjun Appadurai for object-centred research, the project has focused on transitional moments, on the changes in meaning in the lives of the objects that often accompanied changes of location.⁴ In these objects, the changing meaning of the collection becomes visible.

Adopting the critical reflections of an object-biographical approach with respect to the concept of agency as well as of fixed starting and end points,⁵ the Berlin project understands the individual objects as prisms⁶ through which the different themes are refracted like rays of light. The chronological development of the *Kunstkammer* becomes clear in each of the object biographies presented here, although the emphasis is on the processes of reinterpretation into which the objects were repeatedly incorporated. The media history of the *Kunstkammer* is a crucial foundation for this dynamic, which occurs in the context of the collection: the question of registering and recording practices, of narrativizations and visualizations constitutes the basis for investigating the different interpretations and assessments of the objects in the collection. This shifts attention to the various handwritten inventories and correspondence that have arisen since the seventeenth century as well as the printed travelogues and city guides, collection and museum guidebooks, hand drawings of objects, and etchings and photographs.

In past decades, the Berlin *Kunstkammer* has repeatedly been the subject of intensive research. One of these projects has undertaken an approximate reconstruction of its holdings,⁷ while another has illuminated the transformation of the collection during different phases of its history.⁸ In the present book, the approach to the history of the Berlin *Kunstkammer* has been consistently guided by the objects themselves, thereby shifting the focus to themes that have hitherto been largely ignored in the research on collection history. This applies first and foremost to the changes in status that many objects have undergone in the course of their path through various modes of selection, systematization, and exhibition. Even prior to the transformation of artefacts and naturalia into collection objects of the Berlin *Kunstkammer*, their value was altered in the course of fabrication and trade practices. In addition to their status as *Kunstkammer* pieces, numerous objects were embedded in economic and social contexts beyond the court collection, and their paths into the *Kunstkammer* were closely tied to the trade routes of similar materials [■ Crystalline Gold / ■ Bezoars]. In the nineteenth century, for instance, very different kinds of objects were semanticized as memorabilia of the Prussian ruling house or classified as “patriotic” [■ Justus Bertram / ■ Night Clock / ■ Wax / ■ Shattered Die], while others were transformed from a research object into a didactic demonstration



4 | Working with objects, archival materials, and parerga in the Berlin project *A Window on Nature and Art*.

piece [■Adams Mammoth] or from a highly esteemed piece of decorative art into a toy kept in a storeroom [■Crab Automaton]. The change in an object's status could lead to the alteration of that object, which in turn resulted in its reinterpretation [■Night Clock] or even deaccession from the collection [■Shattered Die / ■Monkey Hand / ■Antlers]. It could also, however, result in an object genre becoming representative of the Kunstkammer as an entire collection type [■Nautilus].

The different object biographies also reveal the entanglements of the Kunstkammer with various institutions and other collections such as the library [■Anteater], the apothecary [■Bezoars], the armoury [■Justus Bertram], the Academy of Sciences [■Golden Plover / ■Monkey Hand], the Antiquities Cabinet [■Priapus], and the pleasure garden [■Cupid]. They also make visible the (primarily male) protagonists – owners, wardens, and researchers – who, according to the surviving sources, affected the semanticization of objects, their selection and their classification [■Crystalline Gold / ■Wax / ■Crab Automaton]. Female protagonists, however, do appear at times, for example in the gender politics of the collection visit [■Priapus]. Moreover, the Kunstkammer is also recognizable as a site of diverging body politics, whether in terms of the memorialization of the body [■Justus Bertram / ■Wax] or the association fields of role models [■Pearls].

The meaning of Kunstkammer naturalia as royal memorabilia [■Antlers / ■Pearls], as objects of popular religious practices [■Monkey Hand], as representatives of near or distant worlds promising wealth [■Crystalline Gold], or as historical evidence of past collection practices all competed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with their function as zoological or palaeontological specimens. Provenance from the Kunstkammer receded in favour of information about locality and biological classification. The separation of these objects from their parerga – for instance, their labels – as well as material decay, intensified through the effects of war, has meant that only a fragment of Kunstkammer naturalia can be traced in object biographies from the Kunstkammer in the palace into the twenty-first century. In cultural studies, in contrast, the objects and their interpretations became part of the complex differentiation and specialization of museum knowledge, in which the classification of “typical” Kunstkammer objects frequently represented a longer process [■Night Clock / ■Crab Automaton]. Once again it becomes clear that the history of the Kunstkammer did not end with the dissolution of individual collections.

Complementary to the object biographies, the time frames in the book make horizontal intersections through the history of the Berlin Kunstkammer. These are snapshots that, on the basis of specific documents drawn from administrative, collection, and exhibition practices, mark important moments in the development of the institution from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century. The selected sources render audible especially those voices that have otherwise been perceived only on the margins of the history of the royal collections narrated primarily on the basis of major figures. Inventories, etchings, and floor plans show that the orientation and the scope of the Kunstkammer were dependent not only on the respective rulers, but also on the wardens of the collection and the historiographers of Berlin as well as the visitors and their individual perceptions. The time frames investigate these different practices and ways of documentation, the changing forms of presentation, and the ideas and interests of the protagonists as well as the historical attempts to classify the Kunstkammer within various museum-related semantic fields.

Finally, the perspectives on the collection – the third level of reflection in the book – connect aspects of object-centring and institutional history by addressing specific museological issues. These perspectives identify the inherent laws of the collections, which are influenced by the universal dynamics of collection practices, but are always individually moulded. These praxiologically-oriented perspectives focus on fields of action in museums that have influenced and continue to influence not only the Berlin collection, but all collections from the early modern era into the twenty-first century.

With the establishment of the Berlin museums in the nineteenth century, the written documents pertaining to the *Kunstkammer* were divided up among the various institutions, making the investigation of the history and objects of the *Kunstkammer* a complex and laborious process. This has been exacerbated by the loss of important archival materials through war damage. As a result, only a single complete inventory of the Berlin *Kunstkammer*, dating from the seventeenth century, has survived.

This inventory does not include the cup carved from zebu horn because, according to the cataloguing of the nineteenth century, the object came to the *Kunstkammer* only in 1702.⁹ This cup, which had hitherto been regarded primarily as a typical *Kunstkammer* object of the seventeenth century [◆ Changing Focuses, fig. 4], also functions like a prism for the ascriptions of value and the reinterpretations that the objects of the Berlin *Kunstkammer* have undergone throughout its history, casting light on a series of questions that must remain unanswered for the time being due to the state of existing sources. However, combined with the Virtual Research Environment [VRE], which makes a multiplicity of existing sources available as open access, the in-depth investigations of the history of the Berlin *Kunstkammer* presented in this book open up possibilities for further interdisciplinary research on the objects of such historical collections.

Translated by Tom Lampert

Notes

- 1 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum of Decorative Arts, Ident.-Nr. K 3429; see SMB-digital, <http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=903509&viewType=detailView> (accessed 8 March 2022); Hildebrand/Theuerkauff 1981, pp. 113–14.
- 2 See *Kunstkammerinventar 1875*, vol. 5, fol. 570v.
- 3 Anonymus B, fol. 3v.
- 4 See Siebenhüner 2018, p. 16; Kopytoff 1986; Appadurai 1986.
- 5 See Siebenhüner 2017, p. 39.
- 6 See Cremer 2017, pp. 17–18.
- 7 See Hildebrand/Theuerkauff 1981.
- 8 See especially Röber 2001; Segelken 2010b; Bredekamp 2011; Dolezel 2019.
- 9 See *Kunstkammerinventar 1875*, vol. 5, fol. 571r.