



DISPLAY CASES, BOXES, LABELS: STAGING, STORING, DESIGNATING

No collection can do without them: display cases, cabinets, pedestals, boxes, crates, frames, folders, catalogues, and labels – they are all necessary *parerga*, that is, “accessories”, of collection objects.¹ The material framings of a collection not only protect the objects from external influences such as light and dirt, but also assist viewers in interpreting and handling them and even specify how this should be done. They set the scene for objects and are important carriers of information.²

Few of the presentation forms and ordering aids have survived from the Berlin *Kunstammer*. Although the furnishings were initially preserved in the early moves of the collections to new locations [● 1685/1688 / ● 1698 vs. 1708], a culling or repurposing of furniture and other fittings took place in the nineteenth century as a result of altered presentation modes and classification systems. Collection display cases were the most likely of the furnishings to survive due to their often ambiguous position between storage container and exhibition piece. The display case is a “space within a space”, whose multi-dimensionality is particularly significant in any collection because it both structures and presents that collection.³ As in other locations, however, in Berlin almost no functional pieces such as repositories (shelves and storage furniture) or simple display cases have survived from the *Kunstammer*, but only furniture that was considered impressive and representative. Several ornate display cabinets, for example, are still located in the Museum of Decorative Arts. Only in rare cases have special collection cabinets for coins, medals, minerals, and other objects from the *Kunstammer* or its successor institutions been preserved.⁴

Similarly, very little of the textual framing from historical *Kunstammer* exhibitions has survived. It is impossible to determine from existing sources whether and how collection objects were labelled in their presentation in the palace. The role of the *Kunstammer* warden primarily revolved around explaining these objects during tours, opening containers, and demonstrating objects, instruments, and models [● Around 1740]. This was perhaps the reason why there was so little textual framing. The museum practices of the Berlin *Kunstammer* must be deduced almost exclusively from files, inventories, visitor descriptions, and travel notes. These, however, paint a vivid picture of the historical forms of presentation and the contextualization of collection objects. Not only artisan invoices and sketches have survived, but also numerous documents containing information conveyed about the objects during tours [■ Priapus].

The physical absence of the *parerga* of the *Kunstammer* also indicates the significance of such framings, which current museum practices seek to preserve. In order to facilitate further research on historical collection practices, existing information about the material and textual framings is recorded in the Virtual Research Environment of the Berlin *Kunstammer* [VRE] under the following categories: *Kinds of Presentation*, *Ascriptions of Condition*, *Anecdotes*, and *Special Explanations*.

Diana Stört

1. The Pomeranian Art Cabinet, early seventeenth century, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum of Decorative Arts

Ornate display cabinets function as presentation furniture and are also considered exhibition pieces. The Pomeranian Art Cabinet is a kind of *Kunstkammer* in miniature. Hidden compartments, rare objects, and instruments are supposed to cause astonishment. This cabinet was opened in front of the public to emphasize its performative aspect. In 1708, a visitor to the Berlin *Kunstkammer* described the Pomeranian Art Cabinet as a “cabinet of miraculous design”, filled with things “that are not intended for use.”⁵ Cabinets are usually displayed closed in exhibitions today. The performative character disappears, as the objects inside have been removed for conservational reasons. The exterior of this cabinet was destroyed by fire during the Second World War. Most of the objects inside survived and are currently held in the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.⁶ DS



1

Stones.⁷ This ensemble was adopted during the reconfiguration of the *Kunstkammer*, when the old Coins and Medals Cabinet found a new home in the Schlüter building. [● 1696 vs. 1708]. Except for two pieces of furniture, however, the ensemble has not survived to the present day. The exterior of the cabinet depicted here is elaborately decorated with chinoiserie; the interior is functional and equipped with numerous drawers. The cabinet’s exterior expressed a fascination with the foreign, while its parergonal function of creating a classifying system for familiar European objects remained hidden inside. DS



3

2. Gérard Dagly, coin cabinet, 1690–95, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum of Decorative Arts

Lacquer artist Gérard Dagly was commissioned by Friedrich III/I to design an interrelated interior ensemble of multiple pieces of furniture for the Collection of Coins, Medals, and Cut



2

3. Georg Schweigger, Paracelsus, brass medallion with black frame, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Sculpture Collection and Museum of Byzantine Art

Parerga such as frames play an important role in determining the historical status of objects, for example pictures. A collection of receipts from *Kunstkammer* administrator Christoph Ungelter with invoices from artisans indicates that at the end of the seventeenth century, the collection was presented in a black colour scheme. Frames, pedestals, repositories, numerous “housings” (glass containers), and display cabinets were painted black, thus forming an ensem-

- 1 On the concept of the parergon and its function in art theory, see Derrida 1987; Degler 2015.
- 2 See Knebel/Ortlieb/Püschel 2018, especially the introduction “Sammlung und Beiwerk, Parerga und Paratexte”, pp. 7–30, as well as Grave et al. 2018.
- 3 See Heesen/Michels 2007, p. 10; Hackenschmidt/Engelhorn 2011; Stört 2020.
- 4 See Dolezel 2010; Dolezel 2019, pp. 70–4.
- 5 Anonimo Veneziano 1999, pp. 122–3.
- 6 On these objects, see Mundt 2009.
- 7 On Dagly’s lacquered furniture, see Dagly 2015.



4

ble despite the heterogeneity of objects.⁸ This medallion, which has been preserved together with two similar humanist portraits [●1685/1688], still testifies today to this phase. Since the frame has been preserved, it evidently went from parergon to an integral component of the work – even though such black settings were no longer regarded as modern after 1700. DS

4. The Ivory Cabinet of the Berlin Kunstkammer (Room 989), photograph, 1930

The so-called Ivory Cabinet had been equipped with built-in wall display cases since its establishment under Friedrich III/I. The glass panes allowed objects to be seen and also provided protection. In contrast to modern museum vitrines, however, these display cases were probably opened for visitors, as was typical in many such

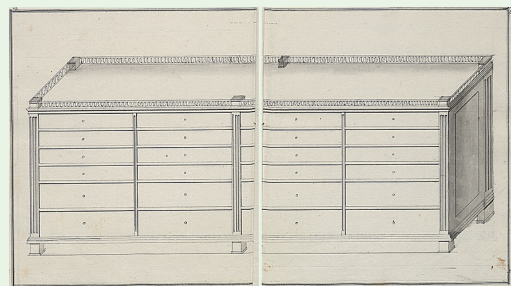
locations into the nineteenth century. Experiencing the exhibits – which had been designed performatively – close-up and in focus was a central component of viewing early modern collections, and often visitors were even allowed to touch the objects.⁹ Automaton, for instance, were displayed in another wall case of the same room around 1800 and were presumably demonstrated for visitors on a table [■Crab Automaton / ●1685/1688]. ED

5. Anonymous (W. Hamann?), design drawing of a commode, no date, archive of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences

This pen and ink drawing is one of the few visual documents of the reconfiguration of the Berlin Kunstkammer around 1800. Under Jean Henry, the administrator at the time, two such commodes were placed in the middle of one of the Naturalia rooms for fish specimens from the recently purchased Marcus Élieser Bloch collection. The two commodes were part of a redesign of the rooms that sought to adapt the originally Baroque furnishings to the classical taste of the time. Henry's project of turning the Berlin Kunstkammer into a "Royal Museum of Art, Natural History, and Antiquities" [●Around 1800] included updating not only the collection profile, but also the furniture, which was supposed to visually recontextualize the exhibits and adapt their presentation to the conventions of museum design in the eighteenth century.¹⁰ ED

6. Inventory of the furniture of the Zoological Museum, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, HBSB, ZM, S I, Inventarium 1812–1846, fol. 12v

After the Royal Zoological Museum was established at the University of Berlin in 1810 [■Golden Plover], the museum acquired not only objects, but also furniture from the Kunstkammer: ten display cases, eight repositories, and two commodes. The page of the inventory



5

8 See the invoices in Materialbuch Ungelter.

9 See Dolezel 2019, pp. 191–201.

10 See *ibid.*, pp. 63–107, on the Naturalia hall with the Bloch fish specimens, see pp. 81–7.

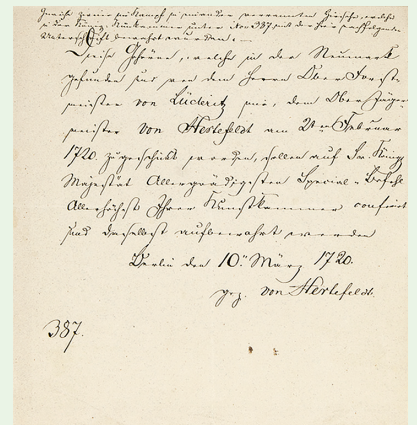
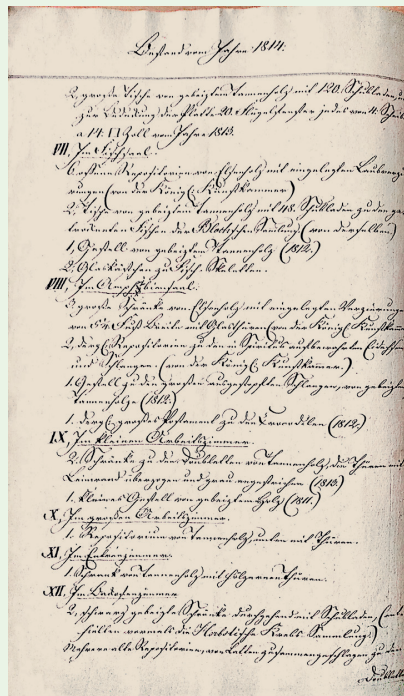
depicted here records the exhibition furniture for the Fish and Amphibian Hall in 1812. This furniture included shelves and display cases with glass doors made of South American “elf wood” (lacewood) with “inlaid acanthi” along with “2 tables of stained fir wood with 48 drawers for the dried fish of the Bloch collection” that had also been used in the *Kunstammer*. Only a sketch of the latter has survived (see no. 5). The inventory also documents the fact that in later years, modern exhibition furniture was made and the old furnishings were repurposed, sold, or discarded. DS

7. Box with amber, “Old Cabinet Collection” with insect inclusions, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, Palaeontological Museum

Boxes, crates, and folders assist in the proper handling of objects. At the same time, they are also often used to convey a classification system. Here various amber objects with inclusions constitute a unit through their storage together in a modern box. Whether this storage and the hand-written label with the inscription “12 different kinds of insects in amber” in fact refer to a similarly worded entry in the old *Kunstammer* registers – “12 small pieces of amber, therein spiders and flies” – cannot be definitively verified today, since several different historical collections were included in the so-called “Old Cabinet Collection” [■Monkey Hand]. MK

8. Note on antlers from the *Kunstammer*, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin, HBSB, ZM, S I, *Kunstammer*, fol. 20r

Written evidence such as a label provides information about the provenance, value, and type of an object. This transcription in the archive of the Museum für Naturkunde is one of the few documentations of written presentation media in the *Kunstammer*. Several antlers hung on the walls of *Kunstammer* rooms, and the



6

8

“horns” mentioned here were presented together with a text about the provenance of the two objects, although it remains unclear what the caption looked like in the actual document [■Antlers]. The number 387 noted on the transcription indicates where the object could have been found in the (now lost) *Kunstammer* inventory. DS

Translated by Tom Lampert



7