
Bitte nicht berühren !

Eva Dolezel

# CRAB AUTOMATON FROM CHINA: ON FORGETTING AND REDISCOVERING

The storeroom in the Berlin Ethnological Museum contains an object that is at first difficult to identify, not least because it is partially damaged: a crab-shaped automaton made of amber, wood, and metal (fig. 1).[1] The story behind the object, which was acquired by the Berlin Kunstkammer around 1700, is one of forgetting and rediscovering and of the shifting meanings inherent in such processes. The crab was one of the few objects highlighted in descriptions of the Berlin Kunstkammer from the eighteenth century. It was initially displayed together with precious works by goldsmiths, but by the twentieth century it had faded from view.

The crab measures approximately 11 x 24 cm and consists of two loosely joined parts. The bottom is made of a white metal alloy; the wooden shell on top is coated in amber-coloured lacquer. The eyes are formed by two small metal sockets that probably once held glass beads. The crab's two claws, which it stretches out toward the viewer, are fashioned from different-coloured amber pieces. Only six of the eight amber legs have survived, and some have missing segments. When the clockwork mechanism in the crab's body was wound up with a now lost key, the automaton was originally able to move sideways. Because of its fragile state, it is pinned to a Styrofoam board.[2]

Visible on the right side of the body is a label with the inventory number I D 870 (fig. 2). This provides us with an initial clue as to the crab's identity. In the mid-nineteenth century, Kunstkammer curator Leopold von Ledebur recorded the crab under this number in the catalogue of the Ethnographic Collection, describing it as a "spider crab of amber, with clockwork".[3] Thanks to this entry, we can trace the object to an anonymous description of the Kunstkammer from the 1740s: "An amber crab with clockwork: [it] is finely made and can walk on its own".[4] In other words, the crab automaton passed from the Kunstkammer in the Berlin Palace to the Ethnographic Cabinet of the same institution, which was established in the 1840s. From there it went to the Ethnographic Department of the Neues Museum, founded in the 1850s, and then to the Museum für Völkerkunde (today's Ethnological Museum), established in 1873.

References to the object throughout the centuries show disagreement on the zoological terminology. The designations alternate between the largely synonymous *Krabbe* (crab), *Seespinne* (spider crab), *Krebs* (crab), and *Taschenkrebs* (brown crab).[5] Unlike other object biographies, though, the one presented here will not focus on the semanticizing function of such terms. Rather, by drawing on the inventories, collection descriptions, and museum guides that have accompanied the crab automaton throughout its Berlin history, it will illustrate how the object was classified into different groups and contexts. In this way, it will shed light on the related processes of reinterpretation and re-evaluation to which the crab was subjected from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries.

‹ 1 | Crab automaton from China, seventeenth century (?), Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnological Museum.

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2 I would like to thank Birgit Kantzenbach of the Ethnological Museum, SMB, for kindly commenting on the condition of the object and the materials it incorporates.

3 Hauptkatalog Ostasien des Berliner Museums für Völkerkunde, Mitte 19. Jahrhundert, SMB, Ethnologisches Museum, Fachreferat Ostasien, unpag., no. 870.

4 Anonymus B, fol. 6v, no. 89.

5 For a discussion of terminology, see Krünitz 1773/1858, vol. 87, p. 221.

6 Anonymus B, fol. 6v, nos. 90–1; SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Ident.-Nr. 6460–1.

7 Ibid., fol. 6r, no. 87; SMB, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Ident.-Nr. K 3899.

8 Küster 1756, p. 20, nos. 24–6. Regarding the crab automaton, Küster writes: "A brown crab that the residents of Hamburg gave as a gift . . . also driven by a clockwork mechanism". The section "Zusäze und Verbesserungen" also contains an entry mentioning the object; see ibid., col. 545, no. 53.

9 Verzeichnis Kunstsachen und Seltenheiten [um 1800], pp. 283–5.

10 From no. 41 on, the entries in the Verzeichnis Kunstsachen und Seltenheiten are set off typographically from the previous listings.

11 See entry no. 41 (Christoph Jamnitzer, elephant-shaped pitcher, c. 1610, SMB, Kunstgewerbemuseum, K 3900) and nos. 47–9 in Verzeichnis Kunstsachen und Seltenheiten.

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2 | Crab automaton from China, seventeenth century (?), detail, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnological Museum.

## An Automaton among Automata

In descriptions of the Berlin Kunstkammer from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the handcrafted crab was associated with two groups of objects: automata and East Asian artefacts. The anonymous description of the Kunstkammer mentioned above, which consists of an unsystematic list of items, suggests that the objects were displayed close together in the collection space [●Around 1740]. In the description, the crab automaton is surrounded by other East Asian objects, specifically by two lacquered pieces made in Japan around 1700 but described as "Chinese": a picnic box and a melon-shaped vessel, both of which are now held in the Museum of Asian Art (fig. 3).[6] The description also indicates a proximity to the Diana automaton produced around 1600 by the Augsburg goldsmith Matthias Wallbaum and now in the collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts (fig. 4) [◆Changing Focuses / ◆Intact and Damaged].[7] A similar constellation of objects can be found in *Altes und neues Berlin*, published by Georg Gottfried Küster in 1756. Here the crab automaton is surrounded by a "small ivory cabinet containing idols, made in China" and "a small ship, also made in China, that moves back and forth on the tabletop by means of clockwork, raising and lowering its sails".[8]

3 | Pumpkin-shaped picnic box, Japan, ca. 1700, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum of Asian Art.

4 | Matthias Wallbaum, Diana automaton, Augsburg, c. 1600, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum of Decorative Arts.

In the fragment of a list made around 1800 by the Kunstkammer curator Jean Henry, the crab automaton continues to be associated with the category of automata [●Around 1800].[9] The fragment describes a small part of the presentation – objects arranged in a cabinet in the Ivory Room (Room 989) – and is thus one of the rare Berlin Kunstkammer sources that can be used to reconstruct specific constellations of objects in a display case [●1685/1688].

The fragment documents the contents of the cabinet to the left of the passage to the Instrument Chamber (Room 991, fig. 5). It lists fifty objects, which were probably arranged on two shelves,[10] and then abruptly breaks off. According to this list, around 1800 the crab automaton, which even at that time was described as "defective", was exhibited directly next to Wallbaum's Diana automaton. Other objects in the direct vicinity were the Chinese ship automaton mentioned by Küster and an elephant-shaped pitcher made by Christoph Jamnitzer – likewise a goldsmith's work made around 1600 that is currently on display in the Museum of Decorative Arts.[11] Unlike the Chinese crab automaton, these objects are among the best-known holdings of the former Berlin Kunstkammer even today.

Without a detailed conservation report, which is still pending, it is impossible to determine exactly when and where the crab automaton was made. However, the Chinese ship automaton mentioned in eighteenth-century descriptions,

which has not survived, can help us to identify the object. According to Friedrich Nicolai's description of the Kunstkammer from 1769, the automaton was a "ship of amber with clockwork".[12] The 1830 register kept by the Kunstkammer's Ethnographic Department refers to it as "a two-masted junk of ivory [possibly erroneous?] with a deck and a sail of pressed silver. Once the clockwork is wound and a silver bell is gently pressed, the junk moves forward, turns, and the figures on board dance. [It is] 13 inches long and 16 inches tall."[13]

5 | Ivory Cabinet in the Berlin Kunstkammer, Room 989, photograph from 1930.

6 | Ship automaton, China, second half of the seventeenth century, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Braunschweig.

A ship automaton from the curiosity cabinet in Salzdahlum, now in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum in Braunschweig, seems comparable in terms of object type (fig. 6).[14] It has roughly the same dimensions as the Berlin ship and, like the crab automaton, part of its hull is made of lacquered amber-like wood. In addition, it has several small amber parts, including the figures on deck, and sails that move up and down, like those on the Berlin automaton described by Küster.[15]

Although this ship automaton was first mentioned in the Braunschweig inventories in the second half of the eighteenth century,[16] it cannot be ruled out that it arrived in Braunschweig at around the same time that the crab automaton reached Berlin. Furthermore, in the early eighteenth century, the St. Petersburg Kunstkamera possessed a similar ship automaton that had been made in China in the first third of the eighteenth century.[17] So it is entirely possible that this type of object was common in early eighteenth-century collections.

7 | Hans Schlottheim, crayfish automaton, Augsburg, c. 1590, Royal Cabinet of Mathematical and Physical Instruments, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.

In terms of their design, both the Berlin crab and the Braunschweig ship reflect the automaton craze of European curiosity cabinets. As early as the sixteenth century, Hans Schlottheim, an Augsburg clock and automaton maker, produced crab-shaped automata that entered the collection of the Dresden Kunstkammer (fig. 7). The ship automata manufactured in China probably go back to a type of automaton developed by Schlottheim and equipped with a clock, an organ, and "firing" cannons. Because of these features, this type of automaton was more technically ambitious than the subsequent Chinese models. Examples have survived in London (possibly from the Dresden Kunstkammer), Vienna (made for Rudolf II, fig. 8), and Écouen, France.[18]

From the beginning, automata – like clocks and scientific instruments – played an important role in the cultural exchange between China and western Europe. Already in 1601, Matteo Ricci, an

12 Nicolai 1769, p. 347.
13 Verzeichnis der ethnografischen Sammlung 1830, p. 128, no. 161.
14 For more on this topic, see Ottaviani-Jaede 1999; Weltenharmonie 2000, p. 266, cat. no. 322; Palast des Wissens 2003, cat. vol., p. 167, cat. no. 202; Freivogel-Sippel 1996.
15 See note 8. On the mechanism in the Braunschweig automaton, see Ottaviani-Jaede 1999, pp. 27–8.
16 See ibid., 28, note 3.

8 | Hans Schlottheim, ship-shaped automaton, 1585, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Italian Jesuit priest considered the founder of the Christian mission in China, brought clocks with him as diplomatic gifts. In the following period, automata were often given to the Chinese imperial family by Europeans, and they probably included one made by Schlottheim. Such objects formed the basis of a type of automaton production in China that closely followed European models.[19] Surviving automata from Beijing, for example, incorporate the basic forms of European automata, but combine these with Chinese iconography and formal idioms.[20] The crab automaton held in Berlin probably originated in such a context, but like the Braunschweig ship, its design suggests provincial production.[21]

In the object from Braunschweig, the Chinese design elements are immediately recognizable. The same applies to the Coromandel lacquer cabinet, another Chinese automaton from the Berlin Kunstkammer dating to around 1700. Concealed inside is a garden landscape with numerous figures moved by clockwork (fig. 9).[22] The Berlin crab automaton differs in terms of its formal design, which is so reserved that its Chinese origins are not noticeable. Perfectly meeting the expectations of visitors to European curiosity cabinets, it fit in seamlessly with the European automata. Nevertheless, knowledge of its Chinese origins was handed down for centuries, and the object may even have drawn some of its appeal from the fact that such origins could only be conveyed through a narrative.

9 | Coromandel lacquer cabinet, China, before 1693, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum of Asian Art.

At the same time, the crab and the ship automata appear to be the products of an unusual development in the history of collecting: with them, a type of object that had been popular in the magnificent curiosity cabinets of an earlier period finally reached Berlin, Braunschweig, and St. Petersburg – after a detour through China and a delay of around a hundred years. As a result, these collections, which never attained the prestige of their predecessors and which in some cases had only just been founded, incorporated one of the most sensational object categories from the curiosity cabinets of Prague and Dresden, though with pieces that were considerably less impressive.

## Chinese Origins

As an object of East Asian origin, the crab automaton was part of a body of holdings that had been established under Elector Friedrich Wilhelm and Friedrich III/I with the help of the Dutch East India Company. This collection was partially reconstructed in 1932 by the art historian Leopold Reidemeister, curator of the Collection of

East Asian Art at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. The objects Reidemeister studied were presented at an exhibition in the Martin-Gropius-Bau two years after the Kunstkammer had been honoured at a show in the Messehallen am Funkturm (the trade fair halls of the Berlin Radio Tower) [●1930]. In an accompanying essay titled "Wiederentdeckungen aus der Brandenburgisch-Preußischen Kunstkammer", Reidemeister discussed the objects from the Brandenburg-Prussian Kunstkammer which he had rediscovered in the storerooms of the Museum für Völkerkunde. Most went missing during the Second World War.[23]

Among the holdings that arrived in Berlin around 1700 were several porcelain vessels and figurines, including a small Chinese goblet from the early seventeenth century that Reidemeister described as "a unique piece with great artistic significance" and a typical curiosity cabinet object [◆Changing Focuses, fig. 10].[24] In addition to carved vessels that combined precious natural materials such as rhinoceros horn and jade with intricate craftsmanship, there were several lacquered works that were produced for export to Europe, including various cabinets and two shields bearing the electoral coat of arms. While the three automata from China also fall into the category of traditional curiosity cabinet objects, the above-mentioned Japanese lacquer vessels, which were manufactured for the domestic market, were an anomaly among the East Asian holdings in curiosity cabinets of the period.[25]

10 | Small goblet with openwork design, China, early seventeenth century, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum of Asian Art.

In other words, the crab automaton was acquired by the Berlin collection with a series of handcrafted East Asian objects that in terms of object type were similar to many pieces of European origin and were probably displayed with them. There was no paradigm shift in this regard until Jean Henry became director. Whereas the crab automaton appears next to the Diana automaton on Henry's list, it was ultimately removed from this context and assigned to the newly created Ethnographic Department, whose first inventory, compiled around 1830, classifies it as one of the objects of Chinese origin – along with the ship automaton.[26]

In 1844, this new classification was made clear in Leopold von Ledebur's guide *Leitfaden für die Königliche Kunstkammer und das Ethnographische Cabinet*, which contains 600 entries for a department with objects from China and Japan.[27] The crab and the two other automata from China, which had entered the collection around 1700, are highlighted as works from "earlier times" – with no reference to their Kunstkammer origins.[28] The emphasis is on nineteenth-century acquisitions. As in the other divisions of the Kunstkammer, especially the Department of Decorative Arts, the seventeenth and eighteenth-century holdings were eclipsed by extensive new acquisitions [●Around 1855].

In the mid-nineteenth century, the crab automaton was integrated into a constellation of holdings that had undergone comprehensive shifts within a relatively short time and had been fundamentally reorganized. In the section devoted to ethnographica in Ledebur's guide, written by the director of the Ethnographic Department, Friedrich Christoph Förster, the objects are assigned to a taxonomic system that first "localizes" them – i.e. classifies them according to regions of the

17 See Palast des Wissens 2003, cat. vol., p. 167, cat. no., 201.

18 See Ottaviani-Jaede 1999, p. 30; on the London automaton, see British Museum, available at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1866-1030-1 (accessed 8 February 2022); Thompson 2004, pp. 52–5; MacGregor 2010, pp. 490–6; and Keating 2018, pp. 17–36.

19 See Kremer 2009, pp. 130–7.

20 See Die Wittelsbacher und das Reich der Mitte 2009, pp. 218–19, cat. no. 90; on the exchange of material culture between China and Europe in the early modern period, see also the more recent publications Grasskamp/Juneja 2018 and Grasskamp 2019.

21 For more on this topic in relation to the object from Braunschweig, see Ottaviani-Jaede 1999, p. 30.

world – and then sorts them according to *Kulturtechniken* (cultural techniques). Here the categories range from "A: Rohe Stoffe, Zeuge, Kleidungsstücke" (A: Raw Materials, Equipment, Clothing) to "G: Gegenstände des Cultus" (G: Cult Objects).[29]

Within this classification system, the crab automaton was assigned to "B: Jewellery and Artworks" in the "China and Japan" category. It was listed in the direct vicinity of crafts, toilet articles, and jewellery, including "letter holders" and "sewing boxes".[30] On the micro-level of organization, there was also an evident attempt to integrate the former Kunstkammer objects into a new collection structure intended to encompass all expressions of culture. In the late nineteenth century, the geographical criterion, introduced into the classification system by Förster, prevailed.[31] The crab automaton thus became part of a changing classificatory discourse in the field of ethnology, which was slowly developing into an academic discipline at this time.

## The Amber Gap

Although the crab's body is made of wood that merely resembles amber, it was described as an amber object well into the twentieth century. This is not surprising, at least not in the eighteenth-century descriptions. To the average Kunstkammer visitor of the early modern period, the difference between amber and lacquered wood was probably not apparent, as they were not encountered on a daily basis. The descriptions by travellers from this period are not always precise, particularly as regards material [■Justus Bertram]. The origin of the amber in the crab's legs and claws has not yet been established; in early modern China, the fossilized resin came not only from Burma (present-day Myanmar), but also from the Baltic region.[32] From an object-biographical perspective, though, it is significant that in terms of its classification, the crab automaton – regardless of the origin of its amber parts – was never associated with other amber objects. This gap in its classification history should also be taken into account when considering the different interpretations of the crab.[33]

In Europe, amber was long perceived as a genuinely Prussian material. From 1647, Elector Friedrich Wilhelm held an amber monopoly (*Bernsteinregal*) that gave him control over the trade in amber from the Baltic Sea. In the period afterwards, amber was used for lavish diplomatic gifts given by the ruling Brandenburg-Prussian dynasty. As a result, works of Baltic amber gradually entered various European curiosity cabinets and treasure chambers. The most extraordinary examples of this amber diplomacy are the amber throne commissioned by Elector Friedrich for Emperor Leopold I in 1676, which has survived only in fragmentary form, and the legendary Amber Room presented as a gift to Tsar Peter I in Russia in 1716.[34]

The sources offer a mixed picture of the role of amber in the Berlin Kunstkammer. Amber holdings were emphasized mainly in descriptions by non-German visitors,[35] and it is probable that this widely travelled audience expected to encounter the mineral in its rooms. But in 1796 the Berlin-born Friedrich Nicolai also noted: "The cabinet of worked amber is superb thanks to the size and number of its pieces."[36]

However, the 1694 inventory conveys a different impression. It mentions forty works of amber, all of which were lost in the Second World War: in addition to goblets, bowls, flasks, boxes,

22 See the references in Tschirnhaus 1727, n. 280; Anonymus B, fol. 10r, no. 147; Schramm 1744, col. 149 (SMB, Museum of Asian Art, Ident.-Nr. 6515). For more on this topic, see Butz 2017, pp. 90–1; Reidemeister 1932, pp. 182–3; and, from a conservation perspective, Piert-Borgers 2000.

23 See Reidemeister 1932 and China und Japan 1932. On Reidemeister, see Moeller 2017; on the exhibition, Butz 2017.

24 See Reidemeister 1932, pp. 181–2; also Butz 2017, p. 92.

25 See Reidemeister 1932, pp. 179–81, 184–6.

26 Verzeichnis der ethnographischen Sammlung 1830, p. 128, nos. 161–2. On the ethnographica under Jean Henry, see Dolezel 2019, pp. 92–8, 122–36.

27 See Ledebur 1844, pp. 118–22.

28 See ibid., p. 120.

29 See ibid., p. 118.

30 Ibid., pp. 119–20.

31 See Bolz 2011, pp. 123–4.

32 See Amber 1996, pp. 194–202, and Laufer 1906, which remains the authoritative work on the subject.

33 Nicolai assigns the ship automaton to the amber section of the collection without mentioning its Chinese origin; see Nicolai 1769, p. 347.

34 For more on this topic, see Netzer 1993. On the amber throne commissioned for Leopold I, see also Bernstein 2005, pp. 76–84; on amber in curiosity cabinets and museums, see Hinrichs 2007.

35 See Bichi 1891, p. 27; Anonimo Veneziano 1999, p. 125; and similarly Sturm 1704, p. 141. On amber in the Berlin Kunstkammer, see Hinrichs 2007, pp. 234–44.

36 Nicolai 1769, p. 347.

11 | *China and Japan in the Kunstkammer of the Brandenburg Electors*, special exhibition at the Collection of East Asian Art, 1932.

and containers, the Kunstkammer held small amber cabinets and a variety of elaborately constructed objects with many figurines, such as a sheep grange and a farm with animals.[37] In other words, whereas the Kunstkammer did indeed hold several intricately designed amber objects, the collection was rather small in size, at least around 1700. Its modest nature is further underscored by the heading of the amber section of the 1694 inventory, the only one to mention the condition of the objects: "Verzeuchnüß des Gearbeiteten Bernsteins, so mehrern theils sehr schadhafft" ("List of Worked Amber Objects, Several Badly Damaged" [◆Intact and Damaged].[38]

Beginning in the nineteenth century, the amber holdings of the Berlin Kunstkammer were increasingly interpreted from the perspective of a nascent nationalism. In Jean Henry's *Allgemeines Verzeichniss* of 1805, amber is mentioned as starting the tour.[39] Forty years later, according to Ledebur's guide, the Kunstkammer exhibited not only handcrafted works, but also Philipp Jacob Hartmann's amber-encrusted manuscript on the natural history of the material, dedicated to Friedrich I: *Succincta Succini Prussici Historia Et demonstration.* Also on display were pieces of raw amber, including several with fossil inclusions. It is noteworthy that all this occurred after the naturalia had been handed over to the university's museums [●Around 1800 / ■Golden Plover / ■Adams Mammoth].[40] At the Kunstkammer, amber was presented as a specifically Prussian material. In connection with one acquisition, Ledebur even called it a "truly patriotic

37 One of the preserved objects from the Kunstkammer's Amber Department is a house altar made in East Prussia around 1620 (SMB, Kunstgewerbemuseum, K 9213). See also Mundt and Lambacher 1998, p. 63.
38 Inventar 1694, p. 53.
39 See Henry 1805, unpag.
40 See Ledebur 1844, pp. 19–22.

substance",[41] an interpretation that art historian Alfred Rohde expressed even more pointedly in the Nazi period when he stylized amber into a "German material" (*deutscher Werkstoff*).[42]

This shift in the meaning of amber, evident above all in Ledebur's work, coincided with a reappraisal of the crab automaton in the nineteenth century. The Prussian associations with the material kept the crab automaton from being grouped with objects of amber from the Baltic. At the same time that the "patriotic" qualities of amber began playing a role in its reception, the Chinese origins of the crab automaton were gaining a new relevance for its classification. The geographical origin of objects in museums was becoming increasingly important.

## Museum Taxonomies in the Twentieth Century

Leopold Reidemeister rediscovered the crab automaton while preparing for his 1932 exhibition *China and Japan in the Kunstkammer of the Brandenburg Electors* (fig. 11). In an essay describing the discoveries made in the storerooms of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, he summarizes:

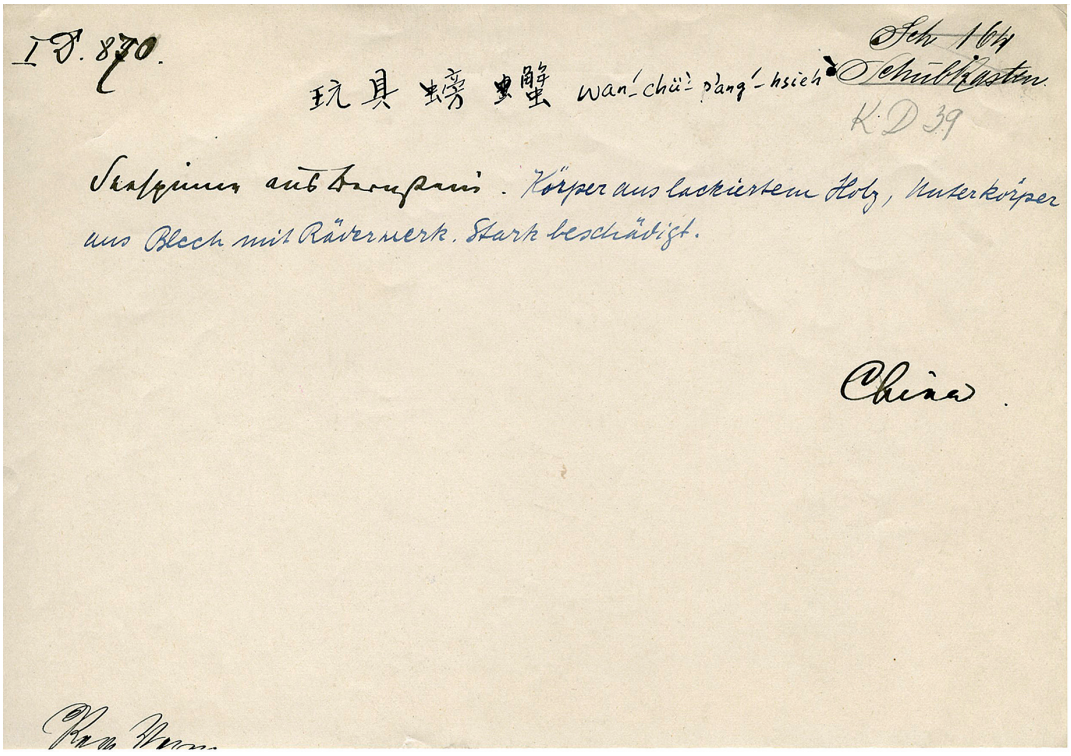
> This study has deliberately ignored objects that are only of ethnological or cultural-historical interest. At the very least, though, allow me to mention – as curiosities – the "Chinese ship with clockwork" and the "large amber spider, also driven by clockwork", which arrived in the Kunstkammer in 1698 and can still be found in the storeroom of the Völkerkundemuseum today.[43]

Reidemeister's perception of the crab automaton as a "curiosity" is based mainly on his evaluation of its artistic and artisanal quality. This is also made clear in his comments about the third automaton from the Kunstkammer, the Coromandel lacquer cabinet. He describes its inner workings as "cheap theatrics", explaining: "But [the interior] does not interest us as much as the exterior."[44] In his eyes, the object was significant mainly as an early example of Coromandel lacquerware.

Reidemeister's assessment was important for the further fate of these items. In 1941, 130 objects in the Museum für Völkerkunde that had come from the former Kunstkammer were selected for transfer to the Museum of East Asian Art, which had been founded in 1906. Whereas the Coromandel lacquer cabinet went to the art collection, the crab automaton remained in the ethnology museum,[45] where it once again became entangled in changing classification processes.

Because of the crab automaton's assignment to the Museum für Völkerkunde, which worked according to the rules of a different academic discipline, knowledge about it also changed. An inventory card has survived, probably from around 1900 (fig. 12), that bears the number now assigned to the crab and also taped to its body. Like Ledebur's main catalogue, the card identifies it as a "spider crab" of amber. For the first time in its Berlin history, it is noted that the crab is partially made of wood – the first indication of a more thorough inspection. However, no mention is made of the object's origins in the Kunstkammer.

The index card also includes a few Chinese words identifying the object as a toy crab. This linguistic classification became a common practice at the Museum für Völkerkunde and was intended to make it easier to embed objects in their culture of origin.[46] A later index card, made in the




12 | Inventory card, ca. 1900, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnological Museum.

1960s, categorizes it simply as a "toy", a description that was important for its new place in the classification system. To date, the crab automaton has been held in a section of the storeroom reserved for East Asian toys.

The Chinese crab automaton exists at the intersection of three object categories central to curiosity cabinets in general and to the eighteenth-century Berlin Kunstkammer in particular: automata, East Asian artefacts, and works of amber. Its assignment to ever-changing object groups and contexts is linked in important ways to the development of these categories in the Berlin collection. Consequently, the history of the crab automaton provides insight into the principles of museum classification in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The selection and organizational mechanisms used by the emerging specialized museums were shaped by the categories of geographical origin and by a specific conception of art. Such mechanisms created special patterns in the reception of both the Kunstkammer and its works – patterns that through their exclusionary criteria had considerable influence on the perception of this type of collection. In addition, the crab automaton is an impressive example of how the interpretation of an object can determine its state of preservation.

Translated by Adam Blauhut

41 Leopold von Ledeburs to an unknown recipient, 9 January 1831, quoted in Hinrichs 2007, p. 326.
42 See Rohde 1937a; Rohde 1937b.
43 Reidemeister 1932, p. 187.
44 Ibid., p. 183.
45 On this selection of objects, see Katalogbuch der Ostasiatischen Kunstsammlung 1941, SMB, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Archiv, pp. 169–79 (unpublished).
46 According to Henriette Lavaulx-Vrécourt, SMB, Ethnological Museum.