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CURATING CURIOSITY: THE EVOLUTION OF MUSEOLOGICAL THEORY IN THE
LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY AT THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE DE SAINTE-GENEVIÈVE

By: Erin Anderson

Imagine a museum. Odds are, you've pictured collections of art, historical artifacts, and natural history objects, yet the term "museum" can be applied as truthfully to these quintessential collections as to a diverse community of zoos, aquariums, planetariums, children's museums, arboretums, historical sites, and "living history" programs. Just as it would be inappropriate to treat these institutions as equals, it would be entirely inaccurate to assume that museums have always been as we understand them to be today. Museums have developed and changed over time in response to socio-cultural and political movements, expanding global exchange networks, and advances in scientific theory. In recent years, historians have begun to challenge traditional definitions and parameters of collections and to consider the influence of exhibit design, audience experience, the relationship between collections, the role of inventories and catalogs, and other previously underrepresented facets of museological theory. This paper aims to further this discussion by examining the evolution of early modern museological theory in so-called "cabinets of curiosities" by comparing the methods of acquisition, display, and organization in late seventeenth century Europe to those of the previous century and the modern era. The well-documented cabinet of curiosities contained within the Bibliothèque de Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, France, provides an excellent model to better understand this transitional period. However, in order to do so, we must first begin by describing the state of early modern collections.

New and expanding studies of the history of collecting have greatly diversified our understanding of the curators, content, and locations of collections. To name only a few examples from the early modern era, physicians, apothecaries, and botanists built up assortments of natural specimens in greenhouses and workshops for medicinal and chemical purposes;

nobility collected art, exotic treasures, and weaponry in specially-designed palace rooms; and artists amassed eclectic collections of disparate objects to be used as models for still lifes.¹

Unlike Wunderkammern, which were typically established by relatively elite collectors (often wealthy merchants or nobles) and arose from a Renaissance desire for antiquities and increasing exchange with non-European lands, many other forms of collections were informal gatherings of objects lacking permanence or reliable documentation. As Bert van der Roemer has pointed out, our modern views on early modern collecting have likely been skewed toward the experiences of collectors in the upper strata of society because those of lower status often left fewer records with which to study their collections.² For this reason, cabinets of curiosities remain a comparatively better documented genre of collection than other varieties, making them particularly useful for tracing changes over time.

Furthermore, we should not assume that even within a single genre of collections that the contents of individual cabinets were identical. As Krzysztof Pomian notes in his study of early modern collections, “Completely homogenous collections seem, however, to have been exceptions, and the varying proportions of objects from different catalogs to be found in museums which were... contemporaneous apparently reflected differences in wealth, education,

¹ Giuseppe Olmi, “Science-Honour-Metaphor: Italian Cabinets of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *The Origin of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 6; Benjamin Schmidt, “Collecting Global Icons: The Case of the Exotic Parasol,” in *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, ed. Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 32-33.

² While I have no desire to discount the experiences and influence of these genres of collection, it would nevertheless be impossible to examine each of these unique collections adequately in this discussion. For this reason, I have chosen to restrict this discussion to the so-called “cabinets of curiosities,” or *Wunderkammern*. Bert Van de Roemer, “Neat Nature: The Relation Between Nature and Art in a Dutch Cabinet of Curiosities from the Early Eighteenth Century,” *History of Science* 42, no. 1 (2004): 49.

or social rank between their owners, as well as the distance separating them from the centers where new fashions were born and nurtured and not to mention national, categorical, and individual differences in interest and taste.”³ In describing the nature of Wunderkammern in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries below, I have attempted to present only characteristics which most scholars agree define such collections as a unique genre of collection during this period; it is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all traits or indicative of each unique collection across such a broad geographic and chronological expanse. There are undoubtedly examples of assemblages which will contradict the generalizations I have offered, which only further evidences the variable, diverse, and evolving nature of early modern collections.

The cabinets of curiosities established during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were designed to create a sensationalist microcosm of the known universe to the benefit of their possessors, usually those of an elite or merchant background.⁴ Private owners, especially those who were noble or especially wealthy, often used their collections to symbolically express power and dominion over the world by owning a diverse collection of rare, valuable, and often exotic items.⁵ Ultimately, the exact nature of items within a collection mattered very little so

³ Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 48.

⁴ Olmi, “Science-Honour-Metaphor,” 5; Deanna Macdonald, “Collecting a New World: The Ethnographic Collections of Margaret of Austria,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 33, no. 3 (2002): 663; Alexander Marr, introduction to *Curiosity and Wonder from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, ed. R. J. W. Evans and Alexander Marr (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006), 15.

⁵ Colonialism and the exploration of newly claimed territories across the globe created a frenzy of interest in foreign objects and exotic images further fueled by European reproductions and representations in the forms of plays, images, literature, exhibitions, and the like. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, introduction to *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 2; Schmidt, “Collecting Global Icons, 33; MacDonald, “Collecting a New World,” 663.

long as they could induce a feeling of wonder in visitors. Describing a gift of splendid Aztec treasures for the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, conquistador Hernán Cortés wrote, “In addition to their intrinsic worth, they are so marvelous that considering their novelty and strangeness they are priceless.”⁶ The rare and often anomalous items were far more valuable than the cost of their materials. Less prestigious owners used their collections as a form of “cultural capital” to gain fame by providing a spectacle for a public audience by displaying exceptional and anomalous objects *en masse*.⁷ The presence of such objects in a collection could bestow prominence on its owner by enticing high status visitors and wide public attention. Additionally, the larger the volume of items within a collection, the greater the symbolic and aesthetic impact.⁸ Innumerable *artificialia* and *naturalia* of imprecise geographic origins blended chaotically on the walls, shelves, and ceilings of Wunderkammern to heighten this sensation.⁹ The owners exploited the aesthetic and marvelous aspects of their collections for personal gain. For this reason, the contents of collections varied widely according to personal preferences, the availability of items, and the financial means of the curator.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, today’s museums are quite different from their early modern counterparts. Perhaps one of the most useful models for understanding the evolution of modern museological theory is Adam Gopnik’s progression from the antiquated “museum as

⁶ Carina L. Johnson, “Aztec Regalia and the Reformation of Display,” in *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, ed. Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 88.

⁷ Pomian, “Collectors and Curiosities,” 48; Samuel J. M. M. Alberti, “Objects and the Museum,” *Isis* 96, no. 4 (2005): 562.

⁸ Daniela Bleichmar, “Seeing the World in a Room: Looking at Exotica in Early Modern Collections,” in *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, ed. Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 27-28.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Impey & MacGregor, “Introduction,” 3-4.

mausoleum” to an ideal (and perhaps not yet realized) “mindful museum”. Gopnik describes the “museum as mausoleum,” as “a repository, a holding place – a tomb...a place where you go to see old things and where you go to find yourself as an aesthete or a scholar.”¹¹ Visitors experienced such exhibits largely in silence and seclusion, ritual objects were placed in aesthetic rather than cultural contexts, and with few (if any) accompanying labels, visitors often left as ignorant of the museum’s contents as they had been when they arrived.¹² In contrast, modern museological theory, especially since the early twentieth century, emphasizes viewer experience (including not only aesthetic effects, but interactive engagement, technological integration, and opportunities for socialization), cultural engagement (including promoting minorities, intersectional narratives, and cultivating a space for cultural exchange), educational programming (including dedicated “children’s museum” spaces and interactive, non-traditional teaching opportunities like plays, arts and crafts, games, etc.) and community building.¹³ Furthermore, modern collections do not acquire objects haphazardly, but instead deliberately curate collections in accordance with a predetermined “collection plan”, which John Simmons describes as an “intellectual framework that explains why the museum is uniquely suited to collect certain objects and...how it will add to or remove from the existing objects to achieve the ideal collection.”¹⁴ In this sense, most modern museums strive to become Gopnik’s ideal

¹¹ Adam Gopnik, “The Mindful Museum,” *Museum News*, November/December 2007, 38.

¹² Susannah Munson, “The Mindful Museum” (class lecture, Museology from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL, August 30, 2016).

¹³ Susannah Munson, “Riches, Rivals, & Radicals” (class lecture, Museology from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, IL, September 1, 2016).

¹⁴ John Simmons, “Managing Things: Crafting a Collections Policy,” *Museum News* January/February 2004, 31.

“mindful museum” which considers in equal parts the needs of its visitors, its collection, and itself.¹⁵

However, although our current understanding of museological theory only began in earnest in the twentieth century, museums have by no means remained static since the early modern period. Even by the end of the seventeenth century, collections were changing significantly. Collectibles were more systematically acquired and organized than before, attitudes about wonder and curiosity were in flux, and collections had begun to do away with the symbolic arrangements of the wondrous microcosm.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it is possible to observe the early development of modern museological theories of acquisition, display, and organization in these transitional collections. Collectors began to appreciate the didactic and investigative qualities of their cabinets (including the ability to perform tactile and comparative examinations of physical objects) alongside the aesthetic and monetary values. The cabinet at the Bibliothèque de Sainte-Geneviève belongs to this transitional category of modern museum predecessors. Giuseppe Olmi has argued that it would be anachronistic to treat collections such as these as designated research institutions because they still often valued the curiousness of objects over modern preferences for universality and the equality of objects in a collection.¹⁷ However, his argument addresses only privately owned collections, not institutional collections like the Bibliothèque de Sainte-Geneviève. Furthermore, though I do not dispute his assessment that contemporary collections often shared a fondness for rare items, I argue that it is not the physical contents of its collection which differentiates the cabinet of Sainte-Geneviève from earlier cabinets of curiosities, but rather the institution’s evolution of museological theory concerning acquisition, display, and

¹⁵ Gopnik, “The Mindful Museum,” 40.

¹⁶ Olmi, “Science-Honour-Metaphor,” 7.

¹⁷ Ibid, 14, 15.

organization. These alterations fundamentally change the purpose of the Bibliothèque de Sainte-Geneviève's collection and align it much more closely with modern museums than with the traditional Wunderkammern of the early modern period.

The Bibliothèque de Sainte-Geneviève was founded in the sixth century as an abbey, one of the oldest in Paris. Although the earliest known manuscript in the collection was acquired sometime during the twelfth century, the abbey did not begin accumulating a library collection deliberately until more than a hundred years later, at which point the archive contained religious texts of various sorts: sermons, church law, scriptural commentaries, etc. In the sixteenth century, the administrators of the library, probably at the direction of Benjamin de Brichanteau, ordered nearly all the abbey's texts to be sold or otherwise dispersed, decimating the institution's function as a library.¹⁸ Then, in 1624, the Cardinal de la Rochefoucault ordered the restoration of the library in order to build a source of monastic scholarship. He donated approximately 600 volumes from his own library which formed the nucleus of the Bibliothèque de Sainte-Geneviève's modern collection.¹⁹ From 1675 to 1687, Father Claude du Molinet served as the chief librarian of the collection which had by that point acquired nearly 20,000 books.²⁰ In 1675,

¹⁸ "Histoire, des origines à 1851," *Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève*, accessed April 13, 2017, <http://www.bsg.univ-paris3.fr/mieux-connaître-la-bsg/histoire-chronologie-2/histoire-chronologie>; Alfred de Bougy, *Histoire de la bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève : précédée de la chronique de l'abbaye, de l'ancien collège de Montaigu et des monuments voisins, d'après des documents originaux et des ouvrages peu connus* (Paris: Comptoir des Imprimeurs-Unis, 1847), 98.

¹⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine. Claude du Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliothèque de Sainte Geneviève : divisé en deux parties : contenant les antiquitez de la religion des chrétiens, des Egyptiens, & des Romains; des tombeaux, des poids & des médailles; de monnoyes, des pierres antiques gravées, & des minéraux, des talismans, des lampes antiques, des animaux les plus rare & plus singuliers, des coquilles les plus considerables, des fruits étrangers, & queles plantes exquisés* (Paris: Chez Antoine Dezallier, 1692), preface, retrieved from <http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/127390#page/311/mode/1up> ; "Histoire, des origines à 1851."

²⁰ "Histoire, des origines à 1851."

Molinet decided that the addition of a cabinet of curiosities would be a logical expansion of the *bibliothèque*'s role as an institution of knowledge and study.²¹

Molinet therefore curated his cabinet as a supplement to the library's existing holdings of books and manuscripts compiled within the previous half century. His goal was not to create a collection for personal aggrandizement or public entertainment, but rather to assemble historical artifacts and natural specimens which could be used for study and to complement *les belles lettres*.²² He summarizes his collecting objectives this way: "...in the choice of these curiosities...I have endeavored not to seek and not to have that which cannot be useful to the Sciences, Mathematics, Astronomy, Optics, Geometry and above all, to History, whether natural, ancient, or modern."²³ Though Molinet may have attempted to restrict the collection's subject matter, the included topics still encompassed the biological and physical sciences, mathematics, and history, ensuring a diverse assemblage nevertheless. His 1692 catalog published posthumously describes at length the cabinet's contents including Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Christian antiquities, exotic weaponry from the Far East and the Americas, thousands of coins and medals depicting primarily European royalty and popes, as well as diverse natural history specimens both biological and geological, the former of which were often imported from the Americas.²⁴ However, in keeping with Molinet's acquisition goals, the collection had few contemporary anthropological materials or traditional forms of artwork.²⁵ All these items were stored and displayed in a series of shelves, buffets, and cabinets, placed along the walls of a

²¹ Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliotheque de Sainte Genevieve*, preface.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ The collection does in fact include many painted portraits of French kings and Catholic Popes, but Molinet makes it clear that these artworks were selected for their historical contributions to the cabinet, not for artistic or aesthetic reasons. Ibid.

singular room adjacent to the library proper (Appendix, Images 1-5).²⁶ The cabinet as Molinet envisioned and created it was encyclopedic in that its contents represented a plurality of subjects, but it was never intended to be an all-inclusive museum. Because the contents of the cabinet needed to reflect the library's existing collection, Molinet sought out only items which would accomplish this goal. Unlike the curators of earlier Wunderkammern, Molinet did not amass items haphazardly, he methodically and deliberately acquired items which he considered beneficial for the advancement of research in select fields of study. In this sense, the librarian's detailed procurement plan began to approach modern theories of systematic acquisition which value ordered comprehensiveness over eclectic exhaustiveness.

Considering that the purpose of Molinet's rigid guidelines for acquisition was to ensure that the *bibliothèque*'s collection remained a didactically useful supplement to the library's textual archives, it should perhaps seem strange that such a large volume of the cabinet's space should have been occupied by many of the same types of rarities and curiosities that had comprised the relatively unsystematic collections of early Wunderkammern. Molinet's posthumous catalog frequently describes the various categories held within the cabinet using superlatives emphasizing their peculiarity: "The Rarest Medals of Popes Since Paul II," "The Most Singular Animals," "The Most Curious Fish and Serpents," and "The Most Significant Shells" title several chapters (Appendix: Images 7-8).²⁷ Additionally, many of the flora and fauna in Molinet's collection are exotica native to Central and South America, and include such

²⁶ A note on image citations: Because the images in Molinet's catalog lack page numbers and often fall between sequentially numbered pages, I have listed page numbers which most closely approximate the location of the images within the volume. Images listed as "after preface" fall between the book's preface and the start of chapter 1 (pg. 1); Images found elsewhere in the book may be located between the two listed pages: for example, an image listed as "pgs. 191-192" can be found *between* pages 191 and 192. Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 153, 191, 201, 213.

mythological items as a unicorn horn, mandrake, and the hand of a mermaid.²⁸ How can it be that two types of cabinets with very different goals – one designed to provoke astonishments in visitors by reproducing the world in miniature, the other intended to promote scholarship – could value so many of the same rare and curious items? And why would Molinet preferentially select rare and curious items when it would be so much more cost effective to build a collection with native and commonly produced archive? The answers lie in the evolution of attitudes about ‘wonder’ at the end of the seventeenth century.

Most scholars agree that wonder and the closely related term curiosity were and are tremendously influential tools for exploring the history of collecting, yet it has proven difficult to reach a consensus on how to define and even differentiate them. Alexander Marr has argued that this ambiguity is exactly what makes wonder a useful “vantage point” from which to examine the “intersections and divergences of currents, motifs, and sensibilities in early modern cultural and intellectual life.”²⁹ However, as Peter Lamont points out, this non-definition is inclusive but not particularly helpful for examining an individual’s experience of wonder.³⁰ Perhaps the most useful definition is Sarah Benson’s which defines wonder “as a noun, that category of objects that are unusual, novel, or monstrous, but also a verb, a ritualized reaction on the part of the viewer.”³¹ Wonder served not only as an intrinsic quality, but also as an emotional response to such items. The source of such a quality varied enormously: foreign or exotic origins,

²⁸ Ibid, 193, 203, 211.

²⁹ Marr, “Introduction,” 4.

³⁰ Peter Lamont, “A Particular King of Wonder: The Experience of Magic Past and Present,” *Review of General Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2017): 2.

³¹ Sarah Benson, “European Wonders at the Court of Siam,” in *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, ed. Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 157.

technological novelty, physical abnormalities or deformities, and association with famous or mythological entities could all imbue an object with wonder.³²

By the time Molinet had established the cabinet at the Bibliothèque de Sainte-Geneviève in the latter half of the seventeenth century, however, the ability for such items to inspire an emotional response in their audience was fading. European colonialism and global exchange networks had been growing increasingly rapidly over the last century and the demand for non-European exotica was higher than ever.³³ Guiseppi Olmi has shown in his research on early modern natural history collections that this demand for foreign (and therefore wondrous) collectibles flooded the market with objects from foreign travelers, explorers, and merchants. The value of this “cultural capital” dropped so low that curators chose to return to collecting antiquities and art rather than attempt to expand their collections of rare and curious items, deeming the task unviable.³⁴ Furthermore, Daniela Bleichmar has argued that the combination of exchange networks, both global and local, and the referentiality of print culture helped standardize and homogenize seventeenth century collections.³⁵ Molinet himself hints at these changes in Europe while characterizing a taxidermized specimen in the cabinet: “The crocodile is now so well known in France by the quantity brought from Egypt and other places, that it would be a waste of time to stop to describe it...”³⁶ Molinet’s desire to continue to include such ‘devalued’ items in the collection suggests that the once wondrous artifacts’ value now lay beyond their usefulness as a tool for personal social advancement and public entertainment.

³² Kathryn A. Hoffman, “Of Monkey Girls and a Hog-Faced Gentlewoman: Marvel in Fairy Tales, Fairgrounds, and Cabinets of Curiosities,” *Marvels & Tales* 19, no. 1 (2005): 1.

³³ Schmidt, “Collecting Global Icons,” 33.

³⁴ Olmi, “Science-Honour-Metaphor,” 11.

³⁵ Bleichmar, “Seeing the World in a Room” 20-21.

³⁶ Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliothèque de Sainte Genevieve*, 199.

Molinet's preference for rare items may reflect a growing trend among early modern intellectuals to update and revise ancient descriptions of both *naturalia* and *artificialia*. Olmi perhaps summarizes it best, saying, "...while showing a respect for the ancient authors...it became necessary to embark upon a thorough revision of all existing knowledge, to correct past errors and to take the species of the New World into consideration."³⁷ Evidence for this revisionary push can be seen in the descriptions of the cabinet's mythological items. Though one item is labelled and identified as a 'unicorn horn', Molinet's description is far more scientific than mythological (Appendix: Image 7):

There are presently few curious people who assert that this horn, which is called an alicorn, comes from a terrestrial animal, and one can say that today the question is decided and this it is no longer permitted to deny that it is the horn of a fish. In truth, some historians say that animals the size and shape of a donkey have been seen, which had a horn on their foreheads.... But in the last century so many of these horns have come...that no one doubts anymore that those we have in France at the Treasury of S. Denys and more than twenty others in Paris in the Cabinets of Curiosities, have been fished in Greenland and the Northern Islands. The fish which bears this horn, or to speak more correctly, this tooth in its upper jaw...is commonly called "Narhval" by the inhabitants of Iceland because it feeds on corpses.³⁸

Molinet's description seeks to actively reverse the fantastical understanding of the 'unicorn horn' in favor of an increasingly scientific description.

The rare objects housed in Molinet's cabinet were prized less for their wondrous qualities and more because their rarity offered a unique opportunity to not only complement but advance the knowledge contained within the library's book and manuscript archive. Having physical examples within the cabinet allowed for the first-hand observation of these rare items that the merely textual collections of the library could not offer. As Constance Classen has shown,

³⁷ Olmi, "Science-Honour-Metaphor," 6.

³⁸ The Old Norse word "Nar" means "corpse." I have omitted extraneous some extraneous punctuation for the sake of clarity within the English translation. Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliotheque de Sainte Genevieve*, 193-194.

handling an item allowed visitors to glean information which could not be acquired visually including weight, quality, and texture, and may have even been an expected part of a visitor's museum experience. Tactile examination of objects was a well-established didactic practice of early modern collections, as has re-emerged in modern museums as a cornerstone of interactive exhibitions.³⁹ We also know that when the poor preservation techniques of the era left Molinet's collection, like so many others, with only partial specimens of natural history objects (e.g. animal pelts, horns, or feathers rather than entire specimens), the *bibliothèque*'s curator attempted to accompany these incomplete artifacts with images to show a complete specimen, often contextualized by common iconographies to suggest its geographical origins.⁴⁰ In one sketch of the cabinet, we can see the taxidermized head of a walrus (mentioned in Molinet's catalog) resting beneath on the lower shelf of a cupboard; above the cupboard is a small, but clearly articulated drawing of a adult and juvenile walrus pair (Appendix: Image 3).⁴¹ The intellectual purpose of Molinet's cabinet aligns much more closely with the goals of modern research institutions than with the theatrical collections of earlier centuries. Though "the rules of science were studied by their exceptions," they were being studied nevertheless.⁴²

We have now examined the acquisition practices of early modern collections, considering the late seventeenth century shift in not only *what* the curators of cabinets of curiosities collected, but *why* they selected particular objects. Now we turn our attention to two other facets of museological theory which underwent a major transformation at the end of the seventeenth

³⁹ Olmi, "Science-Honour-Metaphor," 6; Constance Classen, "Museum Manners: The Sensory Life of the Early Modern Museum," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 1 (2007): 900, 901.

⁴⁰ Claudia Swan, "Exotica on the Move: Birds of Paradise in Early Modern Holland," *Art History* 38, no. 4 (2015); Schmidt, "Collecting Global Icons: The Case of the Exotic Parasol," 32; Olmi, "Science-Honour-Metaphor," 7.

⁴¹ Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliothèque de Sainte Genevieve*, 5.

⁴² Benson, "European Wonders at the Court of Siam," 157.

century: display and organization. Scholarship about modern museums is plentiful with examinations of exhibition techniques, viewer experiences, and proper archival management techniques, but for early modern collections, existing historiography on these subjects, though growing, remains small.⁴³ This is in part because contemporary accounts of collections often omit these details, and the few artistic prints depicting the arrangement of cabinets of curiosities are almost certainly highly idealized.⁴⁴ Additionally, ‘display’ – used here to encompass the visual aesthetics and arrangement of an exhibit – and ‘organization’ – defined here as the deliberate combination of elements with shared properties into unique groups to facilitate location and comparison – were often one and the same in early modern collections.⁴⁵ Today, it is typical for all but the smallest museums to have separate spaces for the public display of objects (gallery) and for the orderly, preservative storage of items (archive). In early modern collections, no such distinct spaces existed; if not permanently visible, objects were only tucked inside drawers or cupboards, still fully accessible to the public.

The display of objects is perhaps the one aspect of the Bibliothèque de Sainte-Geneviève’s collection where Molinet most clearly continued the legacy of earlier Wunderkammern. Though the detailed sketches of Molinet’s collection included in the 1692 catalog show that Molinet avoided the deliberately overcrowded ‘maximalism’ of earlier cabinets in favor of a simpler display, he retained a desire for balance, symmetry, and juxtaposition (Appendix: Images 3-5).⁴⁶ Laura Laurencich-Minelli describes early modern displays as utilizing one or both of two types of symmetry: the first, ‘alternate microsymmetry,’

⁴³ Bleichmar, “Seeing the World in a Room,” 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁵ Van de Roemer, “Neat Nature,” 73.

⁴⁶ Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliothèque de Sainte Genevieve*, 4-7; Bleichmar, “Seeing the World in a Room,” 27-28.

describes the repeated juxtaposition of adjacent, dissimilar items, often contrasting *artificialia* with *naturalia*; the second, ‘repeating macrosymmetry,’ describes the repeated placement of object groupings with a shared theme.⁴⁷ The chaotic displays of earlier Wunderkammern capitalized on the former style of arrangement to emphasize the curious nature of collected objects with contagious effect: the wondrous effect of each unusual item increased the effect of those surrounding it.⁴⁸ In contrast, the cabinet of the Bibliothèque de Sainte-Geneviève opted for the latter aesthetic style, grouping similar items together. Molinet tells the readers of his catalog that the room contains 12 cabinets (four large and eight small) as well as several buffets and shelving units, each of which contains a certain theme of items (Appendix: Images 1, 3-5). For example, he writes,

The third large cabinet has the measures, weights, and antique coins of the Romans; it contains also the Greek coins and silver coins of the Hebrews. There are shelves of talismans of both stone and metal, ancient and modern, in all kinds of languages. Finally, the fourth large cabinet contains the sacrificial instruments, Roman arms, and other utensils and antiquities of the Romans, Greeks, and Egyptians, and many other ancient things.⁴⁹

The accompanying drawings of the cabinet’s collection also show the well-ordered placements of natural specimens and antiquities above, inside, and below these cupboards, as well as the portraits of French kings and Catholic Popes arranged in neat lines and pairings along the walls (Appendix: Images 3-5).⁵⁰ The result is a balanced, macrosymmetrical arrangement that is less

⁴⁷ Laura Laurencich-Minelli, “Museography and Ethnographical Collections in Bologna During the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *The Origin of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*, ed. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 19; Maria Zytaruk, “Cabinets of Curiosities and the Organization of Knowledge,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2011): 3.

⁴⁸ Peter Mason, *Infelicities: Representations of the Exotic* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press: 1998), 85; François Forster-Hahn, “The Politics of Display or the Display of Politics?,” *Art Bulletin* 72, no. 2 (1995): 175.

⁴⁹ Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliothèque de Sainte Genevieve*, preface.

⁵⁰ Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliothèque de Sainte Genevieve*, 4-7.

chaotic than the crowded cabinets of curiosities from earlier periods and more akin to the displays of eighteenth and nineteenth century museums.

Because the methods of display and storage of collectibles were inextricably related in early modern collections, the desire for an orderly, symmetrical aesthetic effect influenced (and was influenced by) newer systematic models of organization in the late seventeenth century. Bert van de Roemer summarizes a contemporaneous German curator's advice for collection arrangement this way:

[The curator, Johann Daniel Major] made it clear that a collector should not place all sorts of precious things next to each other, nor should he put them in alphabetical order.... [T]he collector must take notice of two main principles for good arrangement: he should take care that everything is set out with splendor and luster, but at the same time he should pay heed to the natural order of the objects, as dictated by sound philosophy.⁵¹

Though we cannot know if Molinet was personally familiar with Major's treatise on museological theory, the French curator nevertheless perfectly captured the author's sentiments in his cabinet.⁵² Molinet's organizational structure is based primarily on thematic similarities based on historical contemporaneity, geographic origins, similarity of media, and comparable physiological traits.⁵³ Groupings of related items are then organized into numbered cabinets making it easy to locate objects stored items within the collection with what might be considered a precursor to modern accession numbers.⁵⁴

However, it would be ahistorical to conclude that the Bibliothèque de Sainte-Geneviève's cabinet was sorted according to modern scientific taxonomies or standard museological object identifications. Historian of furniture and collections Clive Wainwright describes the

⁵¹ Van de Roemer, "Neat Nature," 74.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliothèque de Sainte Genevieve*, preface.

⁵⁴ Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliothèque de Sainte Genevieve*, preface,

organization of contemporary collections this way: “If one accompanied the collector himself through the rooms...all became clear. For each object fitted into the collector’s mental model of his collection.”⁵⁵ Molinet sorted a variety of beetle with the avian specimens because it shared their ability for flight; one might also speculate that he chose to place several varieties of snakes alongside his assortment of fish rather than with other terrestrial reptiles because they were not similarly quadrupedal (Appendix: Images 6-7).⁵⁶ The collection, while logically and systematically arranged, was organized only according to Molinet’s own taste and theory.

The relationship between collectors and their collections changed dramatically in the late seventeenth century. Global exchange networks had reduced the socio-cultural value of foreign and exotic items, and attitudes about science developed a more systematic and empirical approach to the study of the natural history. It is understandable that collections, particularly those in institutions of knowledge like the Bibliothèque de Sainte-Geneviève, should evolve in tandem with the world around them. Claude de Molinet’s detailed catalog offers evidence of these changes in museological theory – areas of study which are still relatively understudied topics in the history of early modern collecting. Though late seventeenth-century, European cabinets of curiosities maintained certain continuities with their predecessors of earlier centuries, they nevertheless developed their own theories of acquisition, display, and organization which reflect the evolving world around them.

⁵⁵ C. Wainwright, *The Romantic Interior* (New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre BA, 1989), 8, quoted in Wolfgang Ernst, “Frames at Work: Museological Imagination and Historical Discourse in Neoclassical Britain,” *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 3 (1993): 494.

⁵⁶ Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliothèque de Sainte Genevieve*, 184, 187, 200, 206-207.

Appendix



Image 1 : Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliotheque de Sainte Genevieve*, after preface.



Image 2 : Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliotheque de Sainte Genevieve*, after preface.

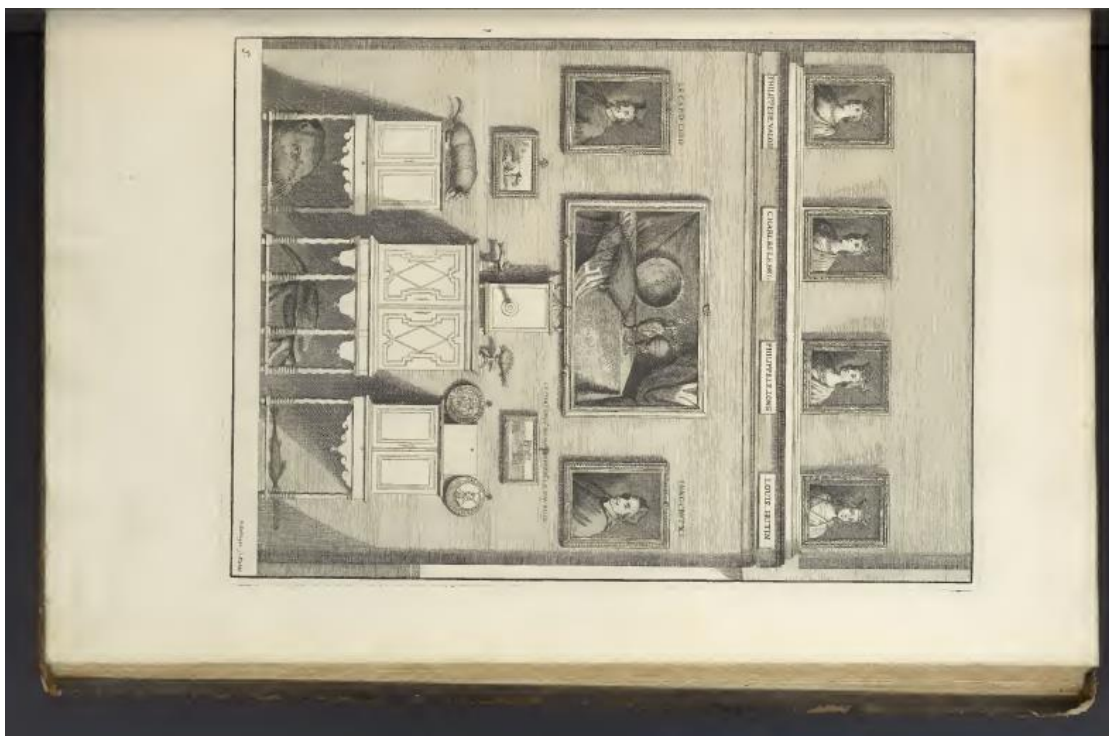


Image 3 : Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliotheque de Sainte Genevieve*, after preface.



Image 4 : Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliotheque de Sainte Genevieve*, after preface.



Image 5 : Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliotheque de Sainte Genevieve*, after preface.



Image 6 : Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliotheque de Sainte Genevieve*, 184-185.

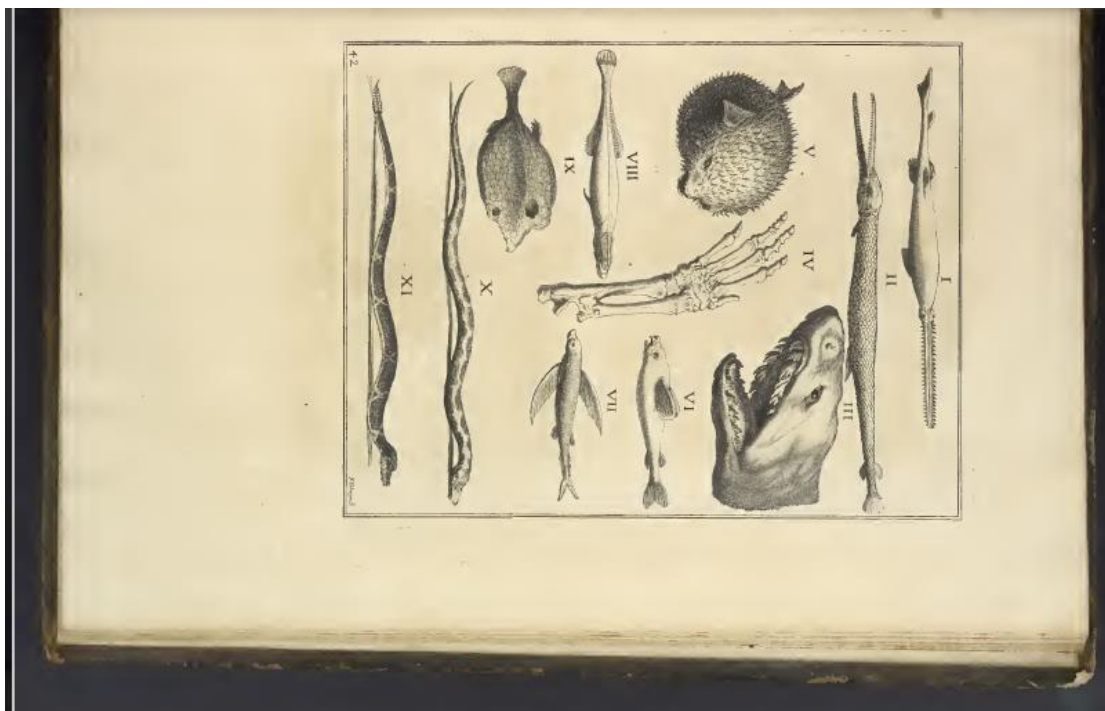


Image 7 : Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliothèque de Sainte Genevieve*, 200-201.

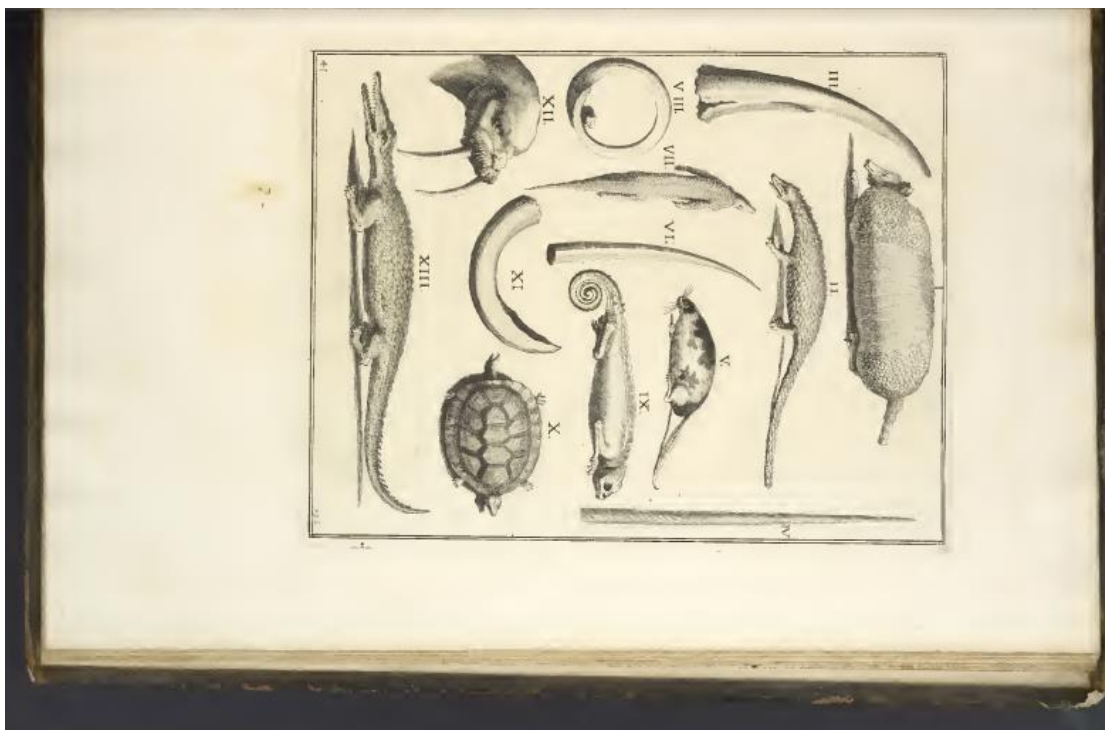


Image 8 : Molinet, *Le cabinet de la Bibliothèque de Sainte Genevieve*, 190-191.

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