The World at Home: Curiosity Collecting in the First Age of Globalisation, c. 1550-1750.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements i

Abstract ii

List of figures iii

I. Introduction 1
- Theories on collecting 3
- Early modern English collecting 8
- Collecting and the world 17
- Research possibilities 22

II. 'Monoceros Horns and Kidney Stones': The Contents of Cabinets 26
- Methodology 28
- Early modern organisational schemes and cosmology 33
- Early modern interests and inquiry 38
- Early modern England and the world at large 47

III. 'Many Heads are Better than One': Networks of Knowledge and Exchange 51
- Methodology 54
- Ways of seeing: Theory and practice 56
- Networks of the learned 64
- Plebeians in cabinets 70

IV. 'Love-Children of Lions and Panthers': The Cabinet in Society 75
- Methodology 76
- Cabinets in the spotlight 79
- 'Home' and 'Away': Truths, half-truths, and untruths 86

V. Conclusion: New Worlds and Future Directions 93

Bibliography 99

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Abstract

Curiosity collections have been studied from many disciplinary perspectives by scholars, with the aim of reconstructing the psychology and identity of the collector and his milieu. Museological studies in particular have seen the cabinet as an early precursor for the modern museum. The biographies of major collectors, such as Sloane, Ashmole and Tradescant, have featured prominently as the lionised founding fathers of museums. A new wave of research on less prominent collectors such as Bann's study of Bargrave has taken this trend further, adopting a postmodern and fragment-based approach to reconstructing the individual collector's identity through the subjective material and documentary traces he left behind. Benedict has recently given the concept of curiosity itself a more thorough examination, based on literary sources. Swann's study of collecting, authorship and identity has also added greatly to our understanding of how curiosity cabinets functioned on an individual as well as societal level.

This study attempts to build upon these perspectives by re-examining some well-known sources in a new light. It is based, firstly, on a statistical analysis of the catalogues of the major collections in order to characterise more accurately the contents of early modern English collections. It then expands upon and contextualises these statistical findings by discussing a range of visual, literary, and material cultural sources including: collectors' and virtuosi publications and personal papers, contemporary literature, broadsides, woodcuts and paintings; and the extant items from early collections still held in museums today. It has adopted a multi-disciplinary approach in order to analyse the significance of early modern English curiosity collections and to reconstruct the social and cultural practices that surrounded them.

The principal findings of this dissertation are that the collections were not irrational and disorderly affairs; and that they reflected the changing intellectual and cultural interests of the time. English cabinets were important spaces in which individuals from all social classes could encounter artefacts from around the world, discuss them with their peers, and form judgments about themselves, each other, and the world beyond. Collections were a major cultural force in the contemporary mind and came to represent a range of values from the powerful to the absurd, and still retain some of this resonance today. The experience of collecting and viewing in a cabinet was a varied and controversial one, but nevertheless facilitated both identity formation and information exchange between social classes and across geographical boundaries.

List of Figures

Fig.		Page #
1.1.	"Musei Wormani Historia"	6
2.1.	Sloane's shell drawer, in the British Museum	27
2.2.	Frans Francken, *Art Room*	31
2.3.	Rhinoceros horn cup, from the *Kunstkammern* of Rudolph II	35
2.4.	The typology of items in the catalogues of four curiosity collections	37
2.5.	Diagrams of items from the Royal Society's collection catalogue	39
2.6.	The geographical distribution of items in the catalogues of four curiosity collections	41
2.7.	The geographical distribution of items from the West Indies in the catalogues of four curiosity collections	42
2.8.	The geographical distribution of items from the East Indies in the catalogues of four curiosity collections	43
2.9.	"Navigation"	46
2.10.	Virginian natives fishing	49
3.1.	"The True Forme and Shape of a Monsterous Chyld"	52
3.2.	Introductory matter to the Tradescants' collection catalogue	63
3.3.	Inscription on the jawbone of a mastodon in the British Museum	65
4.1.	Nicholas Hilliard, *The Hardwick Hall Portrait of Elizabeth I of England*	80

I

Introduction

Collecting can be loosely defined as the acquisition and organisation of a range of objects as a singular, coherent body, and the preservation of this body as a meaningful whole. This is a phenomenon that is still familiar to us today, whether manifested as a personal hobby or institutionalised in museums. Arguably a human impulse that has persisted since the dawn of mankind, it provides an insight into each collector's milieu, since collections were formulated according to particular cultural assumptions, and had a commemorative function.[1] The curiosity collections of the early modern era were no exception, and provide the historian with a rich source with which to analyse the manifestations of knowledge, personal identity, social and commercial networks and etiquette, as well as the material culture of the period. Surprisingly, this has been a relatively under-explored area of research, in which not a great deal of historical analysis has been done. Much of the research is concentrated on biographical accounts of individual collectors, in which the collections and their preservation take centre stage at the expense of historical inquiry.[2] The museological perspective often looms large in other accounts, in which the curiosity collections are recounted as incidences in a larger teleological narrative with its end point as the modern museum.[3] Perhaps the most rigorous analysis comes from theorists and new museologists seeking to analyse the modes of collecting as well as the psychological and social implications of its practice, where specific historical analyses do not feature in great detail, but many insights can still be found.[4] More recently, scholars such as Findlen, Swann and Bann have plundered the

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[1] Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London, 1995) pp. 59-60.
[2] Jennifer Potter, *Strange Blooms: The Curious Lives and Adventures of the John Tradescants* (London, 2007); Arthur MacGregor, ed. *Tradescant's Rarities: Essays on the Foundation of the Ashmolean Museum 1683 with a Catalogue of the Surviving Early Collections* (Oxford, 1983).
[3] David Murray, *Museums: Their History and their Use, with a Bibliography and a List of Museums in the United Kingdom,* Vol. I (Glasgow, 1904), and Pearce, *On Collecting*, are just two of many who exhibit this tendency.
[4] Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, Trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Porter (Cambridge, 1990); Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*

theorists in order to perform more rigorous analyses of early modern cultures of collecting, each taking different methodological approaches and drawing different conclusions of the material.[5] A global history of collections as manifested in early modern England has yet to be written, however. English collections have mostly been eclipsed in the studies by continental examples, or generalised about based on the evidence of a slim group of case studies. Furthermore, the global origin of the collections has also been mostly taken for granted or briefly alluded to, and as such there is a great deal of potential for further inquiry on the impact of these cabinets in bringing an increasingly connected world into the physical, political and cultural context of early modern England.

Theories on collecting

Sociological and anthropological studies have focused on the motivations that lead people to collect, and the principles informing the shape that collections take. The comprehensiveness of collections, and their tendency towards classification have been seen as their defining characteristic, and are read as a desire to possess, and thereby to control, a specific schema of things and their significances. Shelton has described this as a 'panoptical impulse', related to the control of information, which invests the collector with power.[6] As with any system obsessed with completeness, however, it is fraught with insecurity; as Baudrillard suggests, the hallmark of any collection is its incompletion.[7] The thrill of the chase, rather than the final act of ownership, is thus the main aim and

(Oxford, 1991); Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting", in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting* (London, 1994) pp. 7-24.

5 Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (London, 1994); Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2001); Stephen Bann, *Under the Sign: John Bargrave as Collector, Traveller, and Witness* (Ann Arbor, 1994).

6 Anthony Alan Shelton, "The Collector's Zeal: Towards and Anthropology of Intentionality, Instrumentality, and Desire", in Pieter ter Keurs, ed. *Colonial Collections Revisited* (Leiden, 2007) p. 16.

7 Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting", pp. 23; 9.

(slightly neurotic) guilty pleasure of the collector, assuming his aim is the completion of his series.[8] Early modern comparisons of curio collections to Noah's Ark resonate with this interpretation: collection is equated with salvation, and the completed collection a full representation of God's creation, assembled and contained by human agency.[9] Elsner and Cardinal see this as an eloquent material manifestation of human attempts to grapple with knowledge, in which the collector assumes a shade of divine agency, for, by collecting, he preserves for eternity.[10] However, the God in this equation is a destructive, egocentric one, willing to destroy all of creation save its purest specimens in order to maintain its dependence on Him; likewise, the collector collects in his own image and his collection serves as a mirror, and is in many ways a discourse of the embodied self.[11]

In the study of collections, then, a highly individualised context can be discerned, for each is eloquent of the collector's subjective engagement with his society and its cultural assumptions. While perhaps not all collectors were as narcissistic and obsessed as Baudrillard's analysis paints them out to be, or consciously or unconsciously held Godlike aspirations, the shape of their practices was no doubt informed by their historical milieu. Shelton makes this point explicit in arguing that museums (as institutionalised collections) 'begin with the mind and look outwards to the world', rather than assemble a 'mental imaginary' out of objects, implying that the foundation of any collection is in its context.[12] Hooper-Greenhill adopts the Foucauldian concept of the *episteme* as a means to understand this, which she describes as the 'unconscious, but positive and productive set of relations within which knowledge is produced and

[8] Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting", p. 9.
[9] John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, "Introduction", in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting* (London, 1994) p. 1.
[10] Elsner and Cardinal, "Introduction", pp. 2; 5.
[11] Elsner and Cardinal, "Introduction", p. 3; Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting", pp. 12, 22.
[12] Shelton, "The Collector's Zeal", p. 18.

rationality defined' and thus the framework for all knowing.[13] Collections are a valuable resource in the attempt to approximate the *episteme*. Taking a material cultural approach to its concrete manifestations, we can surrogate an understanding of lived experience that cannot be approached with textual sources. Pearce has pointed out the false distinction between active human and passive object that has prejudiced earlier study, and argued for the eloquence of objects and in particular collected objects, which form a material language that must be engaged with for a better understanding of the past.[14]

Most extant studies, however, have failed to engage with collections in their own right and are more often concerned with narratives of accumulation, generalisations about their form, or their curatorial preservation. A notable exception is Bann, who in his study of John Bargrave, has painted an intimate portrait of the man and the society he lived in by directly analysing the various items of his collection and their personal or emblematic resonances.[15] Based on the theories of Pomian, the collected object is withdrawn from utilitarian purposes and enters the world of signs, recast as a 'semiophore'.[16] This is a class of object that mediates between the lived human world and the invisible world, and serves its purpose as pure meaning; a signifier in a collection constituting a language unto itself.[17] As such the collector— such as Bann's Bargrave— is the 'ultimate signified being', expressing his self thoroughly through his choice and arrangement of objects, and also revealing the *zeitgeist* that formed him.[18]

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[13] Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London, 1992) p. 12.
[14] Pearce, *On Collecting*, p. 18.
[15] Bann, *Under the Sign*.
[16] Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities*, p. 5.
[17] Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities*, p. 5.
[18] Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting", p. 24; Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society*, p. 32.

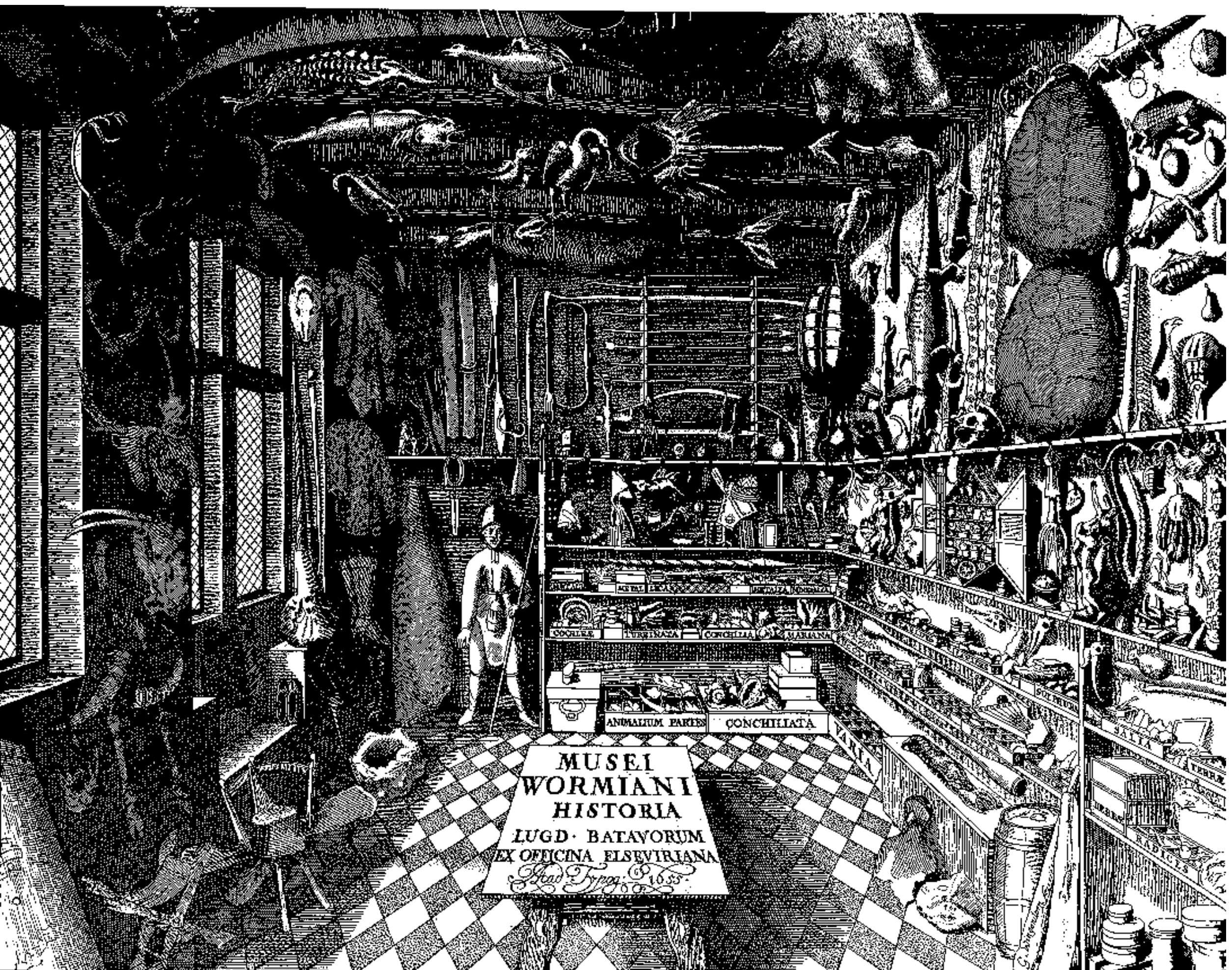

Fig. 1.1. "Musei Wormiani Historia" (print book illustration, 1655) Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. This illustration depicts the Dutch collector Old Worm's cabinet. Unfortunately no similar images survive which depict English collections. As English collections often followed continental models though, it would be reasonable to assume that this shows a good representation of a cabinet space.

Collections had resonances beyond the personal. Institutions, such as the Royal Society, also maintained holdings; likewise many private collections were enshrined in museums such as the Ashmolean or the British Museum, after which collection continued although the principles of collection perhaps subsequently diverged from the original owners' intentions. Indeed, even personal collections were often public affairs, whether shown to friends, patrons, or paying publics, they had a signifying role that extended beyond the personal, even if (and this was by no means always the case) they were created on individualistic principles. Appadurai and Kopytoff have both explored the idea of object biographies, which would be very relevant here.[19] In these analyses, the objects are invested with agency and reinstated to their central role in lived experience, and can thus yield interesting insights onto the contexts through which they have survived. Classic Marxist analysis of collecting would focus on the objects' socio-cultural resonance, and their functioning as a false consciousness through a 'material phantasmagoria' which could lead to alienation—an idea which is perhaps simplistic and outdated, but could have interesting implications when applied to the appropriation of colonial objects and knowledge that occurred during the early modern period.[20] Bhabba's theory of intersital spaces is perhaps a more nuanced development of this idea. The theory posits that objects are continually re-signified when transplanted from various cultural contexts, often retaining some of their original meaning albeit in a form that is mediated by the cultural lens of its host context.[21] Such analyses challenge the static and simplistic focus on the collector and collection alone, and offer interesting alternative perspectives on the examination of objects and their contexts through time and space.

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[19] Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value", in Arjun Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986) pp. 3-63; and Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditisation as Process", in Arjun Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986) pp. 64-94.

[20] Shelton, "The Collector's Zeal", p. 23.

[21] Shelton, "The Collector's Zeal", p. 36.

This has resonated with the study of museums and their maintenance, which is related very closely to curiosity collecting not just because museums were often formed of curiosity cabinets, but also because the former are in many cases seen as teleological heirs to the latter.[22] Assumptions about collecting regimens— for example promoting rationality over caprice, education over spectacle, or system over fetish—changed over time, in accordance with contemporary cultural values.[23] Scholars examining the genesis of the modern museum have only begun to realise that their subject is not above cultural bias, and are beginning to recognise that the changing museological paradigms were by no means inevitable, rational, or uniform.[24] Weiner's example of late colonial treasure rooms in museums challenges the assumption that these had transformed from the ugly-duckling curiosity cabinets into scientific exhibitions of knowledge; likewise Bal and Fabian have suggested that museums operate on a subjective, theatrical level, since all knowledge is narrative and all narrative is performed.[25] The curiosity cabinet is beginning to cast off the shadow of the modern museum and studied in its own right; the teleological and ideological certainty of the latter is thus being eclipsed.

Early modern English collecting

Curiosity was ostensibly the guiding principle of early modern collecting. It represented the contemporary attempt to distil the essence of the known world into an ultimate cabinet of knowledge: an idealistic endeavour, led by continental polymaths and inspired by the spirit of the Renaissance. Unlike commodity displays, cabinets were hallowed

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[22] One such example is Pearce, who sees this as quite a 'natural' process. *On Collecting*, p. 249.
[23] Shelton, "The Collector's Zeal", p. 27.
[24] Bann, *Under the Sign*, p. 9; Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, p. 37.
[25] Margaret J. Weiner, "The Magical Life of Things", in Pieter ter Keurs, ed. *Colonial Collections Revisited* (Leiden, 2007) p. 59-61; Bann, *Under the Sign*, p. 9; Shelton, "The Collector's Zeal", p. 34.

spaces of study where the wider world could be studied safe from the taint of commerce and for the sheer gratification of knowledge without agenda. Yet curiosity was a chameleon concept, changing shade to suit each individual employer, and while it retained a connotation of disinterested inquiry, could be used for various ends. Collections remained allied to navigational advances and expanding trade networks, and were in many instances competitive arenas where both knowledge and status were brokered via the means of cultural capital. Continental princely collections bear this out: Medici *studiolo* or Hapsburg *Wunderkammern* contained many sumptuous and valuable items from their expanding territories, some of them gifts from foreign envoys and allies, representing quite blatantly the richness of the macrocosm that the prince was in contact with and ruled over and thus, by extension his own personal power and glory.[26] Collections thus varied greatly, fostering a myriad of models of viewing and etiquette around the larger European collections, which were altered to suit the dispositions of individual collectors and viewers.

English collecting differed from European collecting though it was based on and shared certain principles with the latter. No concerted attempt has been made to outline its unique contours, though some general observations have been made. Findlen has dismissed English cabinets, quoting contemporary Italian travellers who describe a superficial accumulation and display of objects without reflection or regard for its audience.[27] Open to the public and without any dedicated custodian, the Tradescant museum in particular had prostituted itself, and therefore only 'contained objects, but did not contain knowledge'.[28] Citing this as a foil to the sophisticated scholarly society of

[26] Thomas DaCosta Kauffmann, "From Treasury to Museum: The Collections of the Austrian Habsburgs" in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting* (London, 1994) p. 142.
[27] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, pp. 147-9.
[28] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 150.

Renaissance Italy, this perhaps makes too stark a contrast and glosses over the very different collecting regime as it operated in England. By MacGregor's account, curiosity collecting was a late arrival to England, gaining vogue around the turn of the seventeenth century, where 'its superficial manifestations were seized on with more enthusiasm than the elaborate philosophical infrastructure that determined its outward appearance'.[29] English cabinets were also a more democratic affair than on the continent, with the majority of collections accrued by private individuals such as gentlemen and professionals. They ostensibly drew their inspiration from princely and academic cabinets, especially of the collector had social or academic aspirations, but also quite happily adopted conventions from the apothecary's shop, such as the practice of suspending specimens from the ceiling.[30] However, as MacGregor argues, the majority were used primarily and superficially as a status showcase, which would have caused the Italian outrage of the kind noted by Findlen.[31]

These generalisations have been based on a fairly limited study of a small number of English collectors, and as such it is probably misleading to take them as representative of national collecting. Curiosity collecting was certainly not a primary concern of the court, even if monarchs did amass extensive numbers of paintings or porcelain, and received curios as diplomatic gifts or as treasure from returned seamen. Most collecting took place on a private level, though it is uncertain as to how widespread or watered-down the phenomenon became. In any case, England certainly possessed a different scholarly culture to Italy, where an Italian-style humanist scholar was apparently believed by the ladies to be 'enamoured of the moon, or Venus, or some silly thing like that'.[32] However

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[29] Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 2007) p. 11.
[30] MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment,* pp. 11-12.
[31] MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, p. 33.
[32] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 150.

this did not mean that a scholarly culture did not exist or that collecting was necessarily indulgent and superficial, and it is necessary to engage more with the English material in order to better elucidate its nature. Studies of early modern English collecting have been mainly biographical, and have focused on a few key names of well-documented individuals and their collections, in particular those whose collections still survive or were the founders of present-day museums. Several names loom large in the historiography.

The John Tradescants have been studied the most extensively.[33] Gardeners to the social elite, and eventually to Charles I, their collection of curiosities as well as their botanical garden was amassed via the travels of John Tradescant the Elder, gifts from their patrons, or sourced from their patrons' contacts—most notably the Duke of Buckingham. Their collection was housed at South Lambeth, near London, and was accessible to the public in exchange for a small entrance fee. This was a famous attraction, drawing not just locals but also visitors from the continent, including Findlen's disappointed Italian, and as MacGregor has argued, took a vital step in the democratising process by serving as the first public museum.[34] Following John Tradescant the Younger's death the collection was the subject of a legal dispute with Elias Ashmole, who eventually took possession of the collection to the consternation of the younger John's widow, Hester, who had been selling items off on the sly in order to maintain herself.[35] Eventually this was enshrined as the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, which remained open to the public, though had undergone an institutional metamorphosis

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[33] Arthur MacGregor, ed., *Tradescant's Rarities: Essays on the Foundation of the Ashmolean Museum 1683 with a Catalogue of the Surviving Early Collections* (Oxford, 1983); Potter, *Strange Blooms*; Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2001).
[34] Arthur MacGregor, "Collectors and Collections of Rarities in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" in Arthur MacGregor, ed. *Tradescant's Rarities: Essays on the Foundation of the Ashmolean Museum 1683 with a Catalogue of the Surviving Early Collections* (Oxford, 1983) pp. 96-7.
[35] Lisa Jardine, *Ingenious Pursuits: Building the Scientific Revolution* (London, 2002) p. 258

'from rarity show to academic resource'.[36] Any analysis of English collecting must not neglect these monumental figures, for they maintained the best-known English collection, which underwent many changes in significance. Potter's argument that the Tradescants collected for the sheer joy of it perhaps belies the richer analyses that can be drawn from the account.[37] The complex web of knowledge, identity, economics and politics bound up in the collection's biography is also apparent in the Tradescants' social rise, self-presentation, and eventual "fall"; and likewise also Ashmole's own schemes for social climbing and commemoration. Swann has focused on the idea of authorship and self-presentation as practiced by the two, in order to analyse the forms of selfhood and identity current in their context.[38]

Bann's study of John Bargrave has similarly taken a penetrating look into the historical subjectivity of the individual as expressed through his collection.[39] The result is a revelatory and delightfully written book, almost an alternative biography, in which Bargrave's personal life and his family's political fortunes form the backdrop for his collecting experience, in the light of which he deftly unpacks Bargrave's collecting regimen. Bann also makes the vital point that the early modern collecting paradigm and its concept of history were unique, and cannot be studied in the shadow of the modern museum or modern ideas of the same.[40] More importantly, Bann argues that early modern England was a context in which social ascendancy conferred signifying power, and as such the semiophoric value of a collection and its components bolstered the individual's attempts at self-fashioning.[41]

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[36] MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, p. 41.
[37] Potter, *Strange Blooms*, pp. 233-4.
[38] Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*, p. 12.
[39] Bann, *Under the Sign*.
[40] Bann, *Under the Sign*, p. 103.
[41] Bann, *Under the Sign*, p. 104.

The Royal Society's Repository is also particularly interesting, because it began life as a paid museum owned by Robert Hubert. Acquired in 1666, this was meant to advance the Society's resources and to enhance its status as a revolutionary research institution, founded on the principles outlined by Francis Bacon in *The New Atlantis*. It promoted sociability amongst its members and sought to foster a culture of experimentation, promoting a new model of knowledge that was based on firsthand experience rather than classical study.[42] Fortey has rightly described this as 'a genuine love of scholarship happily mixed with a certain showmanship'.[43] The Repository accordingly grew with donations from members who sought to bolster their image, though it remained an underutilised and poorly maintained academic resource despite being catalogued by Nehemiah Grew in 1677.[44] The Repository, as compared to the later collections by Linnaeus and Darwin, seems to be something the Society would rather forget. Fortey's article in the book that celebrates the Society's 350th anniversary highlights specifically scientific collections, and saliently omits reference to the Repository even though it mentions the Ashmolean and British Museum. The Repository's trajectory is thus interesting to dwell upon, since it reflects the self-fashioning of the institution and its individual members, as well as the changing intellectual priorities throughout the period.

Sir Hans Sloane is perhaps the most celebrated of the early modern collectors, and possibly the most interesting for his public life. His interest in collecting sprang from visiting other English cabinets in his youth, and the collection itself was very much shaped by his voyage to Jamaica in 1687 as well as his medical training and his

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42 Jardine, *Ingenious Pursuits*, p. 132.

43 Richard Fortey, "Archives of Life: Science and Collections", in Bill Bryson, ed. *Seeing Further: The Story of Science and the Royal Society* (London, 2010) pp. 189.

44 MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, p. 40; the Uffenbach brothers also complain about the state of decay that the collection was in when they visited in 1710. Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, *London in 1710: From the Travels of Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach*, Trans. W. H. Quarrell and Margaret Mare (London, 1934) pp. 97-98.

correspondence with other scientists such as John Ray and Robert Boyle.[45] This was supplemented by the purchase of other collections throughout his career, which were meticulously and catalogued in a way that presaged modern curatorial paradigms.[46] Understood as an old-style collector to begin with, Sloane's stature changed dramatically upon his death, when his collection became the founding basis of the British Museum.[47] In this way he was a pivotal figure, arguably the last of the early modern collectors, spanning the gap between early modern collecting paradigms and the more deterministic and nationalistic modes of Enlightenment thinking and collecting.

Despite the dearth of scholarly attention, curiosity collecting in England was certainly a very visible and widely understood phenomenon. Peacham's *Compleat Gentleman* (1622), a code of conduct for the upper crust, included sections on how to acquire and model a collection, as well as a guide to visiting other peoples' collections.[48] Collecting was probably not a minority sport, and if the average gentleman or aspirant to gentility did not own one, he probably was familiar with someone else's. Cabinets were demonstrative devices, demanding an audience whatever the country they resided in.[49] In a social milieu in which status was consensual, the display of material culture and civilised manners was fast becoming a requisite for the successful negotiation of social standing.[50] The ownership and display of cabinets was an effective means of doing this, allowing

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[45] Arthur MacGregor, "The Life, Character and Career of Sir Hans Sloane", in Arthur MacGregor, ed. *Sir Hans Sloane: Collector, Scientist, Antiquary, Founding Father of the British Museum* (London, 1994) pp. 11, 14, 16.
[46] MacGregor, "The Life, Character and Career of Sir Hans Sloane", pp. 26.
[47] Marjorie Caygill, "Sloane's Will and the Establishment of the British Museum", in Arthur MacGregor, ed. *Sir Hans Sloane: Collector, Scientist, Antiquary, Founding Father of the British Museum* (London, 1994) pp. 46.
[48] Jardine, *Ingenious Pursuits*, p. 16.
[49] Linda Levy Peck, *Consuming Splendour: Society and Culture in Seventeenth Century England* (Cambridge, 2005) p. 156; Ken Arnold, "Trade, Travel and Treasure: Seventeenth Century Artificial Curiosities" in Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon, eds. *Transports: Travel, Pleasure and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830* (New Haven, 1996) pp. 266-7.
[50] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 99.

Ashmole to cultivate his image and the Royal Society to consolidate its respectability. The arrangement of a collection could confer power, create an identity, or make pointed statements about rivals: the Tradescants, for instance, adopted a cameo from their collection as their family seal—literally drawing their status from their public identity as collectors.[51] Later, in the nineteenth century, Linnaeus would spite his rival Buffon by naming a toad *Bufonia* in his great classification scheme.[52] Furthermore, as Ashmole's example demonstrates well, the collection served a commemorative function, lauding and immortalising the collector as revered patron when left in bequests, or even simply recording donors and eminent visitors in their records.[53]

Collections were usually exclusive affairs: even when open to the public, the entrance fee would have meant that their visitors had to afford the spare cash and the leisure time in order visit. Private collections would require introductory letters from learned or high-ranking friends to enter, and in the case of the Royal Society a strict and exclusive etiquette was observed by the group's membership.[54] Within these elite circles, however, collections could foster expanding and inclusive networks of knowledge, social and political contact, and even bolster commercial interests. The gifting and counter-gifting of curiosities could foster sociability, cement personal allegiances and political contracts, serving as well to demonstrate the well-connectedness of the gifter and complimenting the sophistication of the giftee, perfoming a brokering function that facilitated all kinds of relationships in early modern society.[55] Extending further down the social scale, the acquisition of objects put collectors in contact with artisans, merchants and foreigners

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[51] Potter, *Strange Blooms*, p. 238; Pearce, *On Collecting*, p. 124.
[52] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 22.
[53] Shelton, "The Collector's Zeal", p. 187; Bann, *Under the Sign*, pp. 91-3.
[54] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 200.
[55] Pearce, *On Collecting*, pp. 229-30; Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 292.

allowing the transaction of goods, knowledge and sometimes also power.[56] Entrance fees were not always forbidding either- plebeians could and did visit museums, and outside that, could gratify their curiosity in other exhibition arenas. While perhaps unequally weighted, this opened up new opportunities for interaction and formed a part of the structures of exchange, which as Findlen argues, was the 'primary social mechanism that defined elite society and perhaps early modern society as a whole.'[57]

The pan-European network of virtuosi is a case in point. A motley crew made up of intellectuals and intellectual aspirants of various backgrounds, they formed an informal community dedicated to the pursuit of learning, 'pursuing a curiously varied collection of investigative goals, and motivated by a volatile mixture of self-interest, opportunism, curiosity, and pure research.'[58] Many of them travelled extensively, carrying with them letters of introduction to various cities, which were the passports to the city's intellectual society and allowed them the reception of an insider, and the privilege of access to other virtuosi's collections, whether of books, art, or curios.[59] Individuals such as John Evelyn and Thomas Platter visited many curiosity collections and wrote extensively about their travels, flaunting their personal contacts and experience as well as providing practical tourist itineraries to each city in what was to become a genre of travel literature.[60] These are useful historical documents and give some idea as to the social practices surrounding the collections, as well as highlighting the cosmopolitan quality of the cabinets and their connoisseurs.

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[56] For more on the gift function, see Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison, 2000).
[57] MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, p. 66; Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 291.
[58] Jardine, *Ingenious Pursuits*, p. 8.
[59] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 102.
[60] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 133.

Not all of this was positive, however. Bacon's contempt of virtuosi who adored rarity for its own sake was only one of a rising tide of criticism against collectors for self-indulgent material fetishism and lack of focus and understanding.[61] Changing scientific paradigms from the late seventeenth century onwards were especially harsh on these groups, seeing them as anachronistic figures and amateurs of the worst sort.[62] More comprehensive schemes of collection and classification sprung up to take the place of them whimsical curio cabinet, whilst literary and visual satire of curio collectors abounded, painting them as misguided, slightly neurotic and self-obsessed figures who learnt nothing despite their immense investments.[63]

Collecting and the world

Curiosity collections were not entirely pointless, however. They connected people and places, and perhaps most importantly served as the entry point for items and ideas from all around the world into the early modern consciousness, broadening its horizons both literally and metaphorically. Despite their apparent irrationality, they were to contemporaries a very tangible connection to the rest of the world, and often were regarded as a more reliable type of evidence to literary accounts and other forms of reporting which often exaggerated claims or pursued particular agendas.[64] Travel, exploration and collecting became allied, mutually encouraging interests, and curiosity collections represented the richest and most engaging opportunity for those who could

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[61] Bann, *Under the Sign*, p. 2.
[62] Richard Hamblyn, "Private Cabinets and Popular Geology: The British Audiences for Volcanoes in the Eighteenth Century" in Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon, eds. *Transports: Travel, Pleasure and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830* (New Haven, 1996) p. 185; Barbara M. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Enquiry* (Chicago, 2001) pp. 47-70.
[63] Craig Ashley Hanson, *The English Virtuoso: Art, Medicine, and Antiquarianism in the Age of Empiricism* (Chicago, 2009) p. 140.
[64] Arnold, "Trade, Travel and Treasure", p. 264; Harold J. Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (London, 2007) p. 177.

not afford to travel to make contact with the world at large.[65] The Tradescants' epitaph, stating that they had 'liv'd till they had travelled art and nature thro" is a good instance of this, especially because the elder Tradescant never left Europe and the younger only reached Virginia, and so acquired this accolade on the sole basis of their collection.[66] Peter Mundy's comment that this same collection contained within a room more curiosities than he had seen in a lifetime of travel suggests further that the cabinet was possibly even superior to actual travel, offering the viewer a panoply of information which exceeded what he could have accumulated by venturing forth himself, and allowing him to better construct his own imagined geography with the best stimuli from around the world concentrated into a single room.[67]

Material objects allowed for a very real contact point between domestic and foreign cultures. The contents of curio cabinets and their infiltration into popular culture thus were important elements mediating the relationship between home and abroad, breaking down the boundaries of "strange" and "familiar" and helping to bring the world at large into the consciousness and the knowledge of early modern England.[68] Cook has argued that this facilitated real empathy with foreign cultures, as they were transported back alongside the very real knowledge accrued by merchants and adventurers on their travels.[69] However, this was necessarily limited, since most practical knowledge stayed with the practitioners, and the exotic appeal of the curios could overshadow any attempts at understanding. Exotic items could be (though were not necessarily always) pigeonholed or lost significance when put in a room with a confounding array of other

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[65] Arnold, "Trade, Travel and Treasure", p. 265; Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 163.
[66] Arnold, "Trade, Travel and Treasure", p. 265.
[67] Arnold, "Trade, Travel and Treasure", p. 265; E. S. Shaffer, "'To Remind Us on China'— William Beckford, Mental Traveller on the Grand Tour: The Construction of Significance in Landscape" in Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon, eds. *Transports: Travel, Pleasure and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830* (New Haven, 1996) p. 220.
[68] Jardine, *Ingenious Pursuits*, p. 246.
[69] Cook, *Matters of Exchange*, p. 102.

curious objects, 'leaving little space for contemplation', even though their presence suggested a degree of incorporation.[70] Ter Keurs' observation that cultural brokers—the mercantile middlemen, friendly natives, and translators of the world—were often written out of imperial accounts, finds a resonance with early modern travel writing, where their contributions were often unrecorded, or they were labelled with the rest of their tribe as "savages".[71] In addition, items such as botanical specimens or *materia medica* which contributed greatly to the stock of European knowledge and were the sites on which genuine cultural exchange occurred, were often shorn of their cultural significances on the voyage home, making these encounters essentially incomplete.[72] Curiosity, then, 'rarely [took] on the colours of sympathy', though it did remain an important contact point and was the means by which Europeans sought to integrate with the world they were discovering.[73]

Commerce was the obvious beneficiary. Collecting required a large stock of capital to acquire and maintain, since it comprised numerous rare and valuable items. Money thus conferred the power to purchase, order, and thus dominate.[74] It could also buy friends and forge networks, but perhaps even more importantly, it could beget more money. Commerce and politics were inseparable from collecting, and the three operated in a mutually reinforcing cycle that saw the generation of wealth, collections, and also the gradual extension of power over the territories from which curios originated.[75] Mercantile

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[70] Isabella Yaya, "Wonders of America: The Curiosity Cabinet as a Site of Representation and Knowledge", *Journal of the History of Collections* 20:2 (2008) pp. 180-1.
[71] Pieter ter Keurs, "Introduction: Theory and Practice of Colonial Collecting", in Pieter ter Keurs, ed. *Colonial Collections Revisited* (Leiden, 2007) p. 5; Henry R. Wagner, *Sir Francis Drake's Voyage Around the World: Its Aims and Achievements* (San Francisco, 1926).
[72] Daniela Bleichmar, "Books, Bodies, and Fields: Sixteenth Century Transatlantic Encounters with New World *Materia Medica*" in Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan eds. *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia, 2005) p. 98.
[73] Jardine, *Ingenious Pursuits*, p. 177.
[74] Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities*, p. 39.
[75] Ter Keurs, "Introduction", p. 3.

contact thrived both at home and abroad. Apart from the flourishing naval and scientific advances that were occurring in the period, the import of exotic commodities also stimulated a luxury market and early consumption practices on the domestic front.[76] Many collectors were aware of this potential and exploited it to their full advantage. The Tradescants' exhibition of their collection to a fee-paying public is the obvious example; less noted were collectors' attempts to introduce new products into the market, whether apothecaries' promoting new simples or Sir Hans Sloane's milk chocolate.[77]

Returning to the specific construct of the cabinet, however, it is difficult to evaluate just at what level they tied England or its individual collectors to the rest of the world. Firstly it is important to point out that the phenomenon was primarily an elite one, and although it served as the introductory point for such subsequently popular and ubiquitous commodities as porcelain and tea, the majority of objects that comprised collections never entered the popular consciousness at all. Furthermore, the mimetic activity of entering a cabinet as *theatrum mundi* could prove misleading, especially since the atypical were selected as representations of their original contexts.[78] In addition, as Findlen has argued, objects were often 'not authoritative in themselves but rather served as touchstones for varying claims to produce truth,' utilised as passive signifiers and deprived of cultural agency.[79] The example of Chinese ceramic patterns, which quickly permeated English convention, illustrates this. Pierson explains that while the decorative motifs were adopted easily enough and could also retain the stories behind their form, these discourses could also be appropriated by the English in order to argue for and

[76] Jardine, *Ingenious Pursuits*, p. 177; Stacey Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums: The Field of Chinese Ceramics in Britain, 1560-1960* (Oxford, 2007) p. 36.
[77] Jardine, *Ingenious Pursuits*, p. 268; Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, pp. 8; 245-6.
[78] Arnold, "Trade, Travel and Treasure", p. 277.
[79] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 240.

caricature Chinese barbarism![80] The early modern museum experience could also have been very much less than educational. MacGregor points out that many objects were 'designed to intrigue and to vex', a playful dimension to tease and tickle the spectator, rather than seriously stimulate philosophical or anthropological contemplation.[81] Ultimately, the experience was very dependent on the individual, and the general effect of the cabinets may be impossible to pinpoint. On the other hand, though, certain concrete advances are discernible through collection catalogues and travel accounts. Entries in catalogues using foreign names for an object—such as "canoo" and "Tamahuke" indicate a nascent engagement with the items and their host cultures on their own terms.

Looking forward to imperial collection and classification schemes, it is interesting to note how similar and how different the two are. Durrans' account of Indian collecting explains how collected items were similarly utilised to serve many purposes. He gives examples of their use to confirm existing paradigms about India, their deployment of India as a source for broader narrative arguments, or their presentation of particular items in order to control the public perception of and knowledge about India.[82] The Crystal Palace exhibition and similar commodity displays of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were likewise multivalent phenomena, and could promote sympathy with and understanding of the empire and increase interest in conquered territories. However, they could also further imperialist causes whether by stimulating knowledge-seeking through conquest or simply by the ugliest of caricaturing.[83] Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collectors and museums ostensibly rejected the earlier concept of curiosity as a guiding principle, associating it with irrationality and licentiousness and

[80] Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, Vol. II: A Century of Wonder, Book 1: The Visual Arts (Chicago, 1970) p. 43; Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums*, p. 53.
[81] MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, pp. 46-7.
[82] Brian Durrans, "Collecting in British India: A Sceptical View", in Pieter ter Keurs ed. *Colonial Collections Revisited* (Leiden, 2007) p. 248.
[83] Durrans, "Collecting in British India" p. 264.

sought to replace it with an objective pursuit of truth, presenting each item observed or collected in neutral surroundings to facilitate unbiased analysis.[84] This was a completely different animal from the curiosity collection or from virtuoso inquiry altogether, and cannot be seen as its logical heir. Yet, once again, these concepts did not spring from a vacuum, and retained some of earlier collections' intellectual or organisational frameworks. The enthusiasm for science and thirst for knowledge was one of these, with another being the signifying power of classification.[85] New museums still endeavoured to present comprehensive narratives of the world and all its constituent elements, although the way they did so and the stories they told were quite different and in no way inevitable outgrowths of earlier collecting practices.[86]

Research possibilities

Curiosity collections, then, can throw a great deal of light on paradigms past and present, and early modern curio collecting is a relatively unexplored area that promises great potential to the early modern social and cultural historian. This study will focus on English collecting from 1550-1750, a unique period beginning with the growth of 'rational' collecting and ending with Sloane's death, whereupon the early modern paradigms give way to imperial modes of collecting and viewing. A wide range of source material will be used, whereby old sources will be looked at in a new light, and used in conjunction with quantitative, material cultural, visual, spatial and global analyses in order to elucidate hitherto unexplored aspects of collecting as a phenomenon. This study is necessarily limited, though, and as such will focus on the large and well-documented

[84] Nicholas Thomas, "Licensed Curiosity: Cook's Pacific Voyages", in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting* (London, 1994) p. 118.
[85] Pearce, *On Collecting*, p. 124.
[86] Pearce, *On Collecting*, p. 139; Pierson, *Collectors, Collections and Museums*, p. 181.

collections belonging to the Tradescants, the Royal Society, Ralph Thoresby and Sloane, while making references to other smaller collections in order to supplement the analysis. By definition such large collections have received the most attention, since they are the most documented. To reconstruct the underworld of participation, though, one would need to broaden the frame of reference to include less formal collections and curiosities more generally. It is only then that one can extend the study of curiosity collections beyond narrow psychoanalytical, biographical or museological accounts and fully apprehend their significance in the early modern cultural milieu.

Ogborn's approach to global history, by which wider generalisations are approached through the study of fragments and subjective experience, is particularly relevant here.[87] As cabinets contained similarly discordant and differentiated sets of items and ideas, this method would seem most ideal to overcome source limitations and to cobble together an insightful analysis out of seemingly incompatible and fragmentary pieces of evidence. As such, this study seeks also to widen the definition of a 'collection' to include smaller-scale personal holdings and informal public displays, and thereby to attempt a reconstruction of collecting and viewing on a scale that extends beyond elite and institutional experience. As such, the potency of collections as a cultural force, as well as their global significance, may be approached. It is important to note, however, that due to the gap between the scope of the study and the ambition of its vision that any conclusions can only remain tentative, though they would indeed indicate avenues for future inquiry that could prove productive indeed. The cabinets, after all, displayed not just items but also the essence of early modernity, containing within them all the contradictions and coherences of an age that was both backward- and forward-, outward- and inward-

[87] Miles Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550-1800* (Cambridge, 2008) p. 8.

looking, and was an essential space in which contemporaries negotiated their individual as well as global identities.

This dissertation is divided into three sections. Chapter 2 will perform a statistical analysis of the collection catalogues of four major curiosity cabinets. It will lay bare the contents of the collections and pinpoint their geographical and intellectual foci. It will also dwell on the organisational schemes and cosmology of early modern England, and trace its changing attitude towards the exotic. Chapter 3 will build upon this analysis and attempt to reconstruct contemporary ways of seeing in the cabinet's space. It highlights theoretical and elite, as well as plebeian experiences; and proposes ways in which collections served as a cultural mediator between the domestic and the international as well as between the different social classes. It analyses the cabinet as an important space where individual and collective identity could be formed, but also recognises other spaces in which curious viewing could be practiced. Chapter 4 situates the cabinet within its cultural milieu, and examines its use and abuse in contemporary literary, intellectual and artistic representations. It examines the controversies surrounding collections in the public eye, and traces their trajectory into the late eighteenth century. It will also evaluate the collections' role in bringing the global to the local as this role changed through the career of early modern collections, and hint at how some of the cabinets' functions still endure today. Finally, the conclusion, while acknowledging the limitations of this study, proposes possible sources and approaches for future research.

In undertaking such an enterprise, the historian— as herself a collector and arranger of ideas and evidence—must be conscious of her own ideological premises and seek as consciously as possible to avoid the potential to narrate or descend into teleology. She must, like the collector, carefully negotiate the varied scholarship on the topic and choose

the most insightful and interesting fragments from which to construct a coherent and convincing study. She must undertake this in the hope that she will produce, like the very best cabinets did, an experience that is at once entertaining, engaging, exciting, and, of course, revelatory.

II

‘Monoceros Horns and Kidney Stones’: The Contents of Cabinets

Fig. 2.1. Sloane's shell drawer (c. 1700) British Museum. Photograph: Personal collection

A terracotta bust of Sir Hans Sloane looks over the Enlightenment Room in the British Museum, across which are distributed a vast array of disparate items, many from the original Sloane collection. Beautiful old books line the walls, and weaving through the display cabinets the twenty-first-century museumgoer can see the bill of a rhinoceros bird, fossils, numerous plant and mineral samples. Early modern scientific equipment and ethnographic artefacts occupy other cases, some with no obvious purpose other than to dazzle and delight the tourists, students, and casual onlookers. From antiquities to zoology, the room purports to embody eighteenth-century enquiry and stand as a testament to the museum's founder, and is perhaps the closest approximation we have to the experience of being in an early modern curiosity cabinet.

Yet one cannot help but sense how feeble an echo this must be: the hall is decidedly uncluttered and thematically coherent, the objects kept neatly behind glass cases, though there is a table where one may handle some of them—supervised by a curator, of course.

In the bottom of Case 2, however, the clear light of the modern museum reaches the exhibit only with some difficulty: this is a drawer of Sloane's shell specimens, crowded together in a narrowly partitioned box (Fig. 2.1). The claustrophobia of the specimens, squeezed together with laconic labels and random empty spaces, hints at a slightly different past. Much like the Enlightenment Room itself, early modern curiosity cabinets contained a *pot-pourri* of items—from monoceros (narwhal) horns to kidney stones—albeit they were displayed and understood in a decidedly different fashion. Pinpointing what exactly these collections contained would enable us to understand better their general paradigms as well as their individual quirks, just as understanding the selection of objects in the Enlightenment Room would give us a clue into the museum's curatorial perspective on the period. Early modern collections comprised of a wide and seemingly indiscriminate selection of items, but on closer inspection one may also discern individual interests and connections at play. Beyond that, they also displayed some general traits, most notably showing a fascination for natural history specimens, and a concentration of items from the New World. This suggests a particular locus of inquiry that belies the cramped and confused impression that they present on first sight, and which sheds light on early modern cosmology.

Methodology

I have attempted to understand the nature and purpose of early modern collections via a quantitative analysis of four published collection catalogues—namely Robert Hubert's (c.1664),

the Tradescants' (1656), the Royal Society's (1685) and Ralph Thoresby's (1715).[88] Individual items (2265 in total) as recorded and presented in the catalogues were entered into a data table, along with a brief description of each taken from the documents, including their place of origin (where recorded), their given classifications, their donors, and their collectors. As each document is distinct, though, these have not always been straightforward classifications. As far as possible, therefore, category names have been simplified in order to be applicable across all four catalogues. Complex categories— for instance, classifying plant or animal specimens under specific subdivisions, have been collapsed into wider labels: in this case 'specimens'—in order that the general tendencies of the data become clearly discernible, although one must also acknowledge the detail that is lost through this process of aggregation.

Certain sets of data were also excluded for the sake of simplicity and clarity; once again, however, this process of selection was not uniform because of the catalogues' individualities. For the scope of this study, ethnographic items as well as plant and animal specimens have been noted, and items of more uncertain providence, such as rocks and minerals, have been omitted. Numismatics, art, and antiquities have also been left out, since they were more local in nature and usually seen as a distinct section from natural and artificial curiosities. These seem more appropriate for separate study, apart from indicating the wider collecting practices of which

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[88] Robert Hubert, *A catalogue of part of those rarities collected in thirty years time with a great deal of pains and industry by one of His Majesties sworn servants R. H. aliàs Forges* (London, 1669), John Tradescant, *Musaeum Tradescantinum: or, A collection of rarities. Preserved at South- Lambeth neer London by John Tradescant* (London, 1656), Nehemiah Grew, *Musaeum Regalis Societatis, or, A catalogue and description of the natural and artificial rarities belonging to the Royal Society and preserved at Gresham Colledge made by Nehemiah Grew ; whereunto is subjoyned The comparative anatomy of stomachs and guts by the same author.* (London, 1685), Ralph Thoresby, *Ducatus Leodiensis: or, the topography of the ancient and populous town and parish of Leedes, and parts adjacent in the West-Riding of the county of York. With The Pedegrees of many of the Nobility and Gentry, and other Matters relating to those Parts; Extracted from Records, Original Evidences, and Manuscripts. By Ralph Thoresby, F. R. S. To which is added, at the Request of several Learned Persons, A Catalogue of his Musaeum, with the Curiosities Natural and Artificial, and the Antiquities; particularly the Roman, British, Saxon, Danish, Norman, and Scotch Coins, with Modern Medals. Also A Catalogue of Manuscripts; the various Editions of the Bible, and of Books Published in the Infancy of the Art of Printing. With An Account of some unusual Accidents that have attended some Persons, attempted after the Method of Dr. Plot.* (London, 1715).

exotic curios are only one part. Given the vagaries of each collection, more specific classificatory sections have not been considered here if they did not provide any useful information. Uffenbach's complaint about the Tradescant catalogue, that many specimens within it were 'only designated by one word', and therefore frustratingly unhelpful, is one I would echo.[89] Thus, the Tradescant *Herbarium* has been left out, as were the sea plants from Hubert's collection, corals, shells and insects from Thoresby's collection, and the shells, insects, mosses, fungi and sea plants from the Royal Society's Repository. In my general analyses, all of Hubert's items were also omitted, since his collection was acquired and re-catalogued by the Royal Society, although a comparison of the two catalogues reveals a great deal about the changing attitudes towards collections.

Of the 2265 items in my sample, 600 were from the Tradescants' collection, 734 from the Royal Society, 194 from Hubert and 737 from Thoresby. When it is considered that Hubert's list was not exhaustive, this sample gives an impression of the general size of each collection's store of exotic items. Each collection was formed on a highly individual basis, and while exhibiting general tendencies, also showcased their owners' interest areas as well as their commercial and social contacts.[90] Although every attempt has been made here to be systematic, it should be obvious that the ensuing data might not provide an entirely representative picture of early modern collections, especially since this sample would exclude both smaller holdings that did not leave catalogues, as well as catalogues that were printed in Latin. As such, this analysis can only be tentative, although it would still represent well the "curious" items in a cabinet, and can prove illuminating on the issue of cabinets' composition and the focus of early modern inquiry.

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[89] Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710: From the Travels of Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach*, trans. W. H. Quarrell and W. J. C Quarrell, (Oxford, 1928) pp. 30-1.
[90] Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2001) p. 8.

Fig. 2.2. Frans Francken, “Art Room” (oil on wood, 1636) Kunsthistoriches Museum, Vienna

Collection catalogues were a means of rationalising a seemingly discordant set of items, and performed a functional role in the administration of a collection. However, they were not free from vested interests. Robert Hubert’s listing, for instance, was only a partial one and meant to attract fee-paying visitors. The Tradescants’ had a similar slant, though also advertised to potential buyers: the first edition was dedicated to the College of Physicians, who were in negotiation to take over the collection, and the second to Charles II, whose goodwill the

collector hoped to tap.[91] Thoresby's collection was a showcase of its owner's well-connectedness, displaying his extensive holdings and the list of eminent personages who contributed items. It was also an invitation for fellow learned gentlemen to partake in the exchange of cultural capital that occurred in its confines.[92] The Royal Society, most interestingly, recatalogued Hubert's items when they acquired his collection, and re-viewed them in the light of their mode of scientific inquiry. As such items that had been played up for their rarity and amusement value in Hubert's possession were given more sceptical and academic treatment in the latter. A merman's rib, for example, is described with reference to various other catalogues as well as natural history treatises in the former, whereas in the latter it was not described, but rather noted for being taken by a certain Captain Finney and given by a Doctor Esg[ave] to Hubert.[93] Likewise, different collections presented different perspectives on similar objects.

Catalogues were also used variously in each cabinet's context, and depended on the visitor and curator's personal preferences. They were read with various degrees of credulity and scepticism, both in and outside collections, and can in no way stand in for the actual experience of seeing in a museum. Evelyn, for instance, takes the catalogue of Leyden University's Garden of Simples on faith, whereas the Uffenbach brothers express immense disappointment both in the Ashmolean and at the Royal Society's Repository that the items they had come to see had been poorly described, wrongly catalogued, or quite simply had gone missing.[94] Frans Francken's *Art Room* (Fig. 2.2) illustrates this well: although not an illustration of an English cabinet, it is

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[91] Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*, p. 38.

[92] For more on Ralph Thoresby as a collector and visitor of museums see P. C. D. Brears, "Ralph Thoresby, a Museum Visitor in Stuart England", *Journal of the History of Collections* 1:2 (1989) pp. 213-224.

[93] Grew, *Musaeum Regalis Societatis,* p. 81; Hubert, *A Catalogue*, p. 7.

[94] John Evelyn *The Diary of John Evelyn,* Vol II: Kalendarium 1620-1649, ed. E. S. de Beer (Oxford, 1955) pp. 52-4; von Uffenbach *Oxford in 1710*, pp. 24, 30-31; Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, *London in 1710: From the Travels of Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach*, trans. W. H. Quarrell and Margaret Mare, (London, 1934) pp. 97-8.

reasonable to assume that most collections would have functioned on a similar level. Whilst it illustrates well the sheer variety of items one could find in a cabinet, it shows, too, how they were not presented in the compartmentalised and formal way that the catalogues imply. The items here seem to be arranged for aesthetic effect and are unlabelled, with the exotic mixing with the ancient and the contemporary, a confusing jumble that belies the neat presentation of the catalogues. In the background, two men discourse in an inner chamber that contains items not immediately on display. This detail suggests that learned company, or a guide, could offer not only a greater insight into a collection, but also access to items which may appear on the catalogue, but were not open to all. Items could also have been rearranged to send certain messages. Portraits of learned persons or insignia of patrons could be displayed to influence the tone of the room. Similarly, as in the Enlightenment Room, a simple rearrangement of objects could serve a powerful didactic purpose.

Early modern organisational schemes and cosmology

Historiographically, early modern classification schemes have been simplified into a *naturalia-artificialia* dichotomy, the former containing all of God/ Nature's creations (including malformed ones), and the latter containing testaments to human ingenuity.[95] Other scholars have even asserted that curiosity collections had no organising principles at all.[96] A glance at the catalogues, however, clarifies this immediately (Fig. 2.4). The catalogues do maintain the basic natural/ artificial division, but are more complex entities: they contain a great many sub-categories which

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[95] Renate Pieper, "The Upper German Trade in Art and Curiosities Before the Thirty Years War", in Michael North and David Ormond, eds. *Art Markets in Europe, 1400-1800* (Hampshire, 1998) p. 95; Joy Kenseth, "The Age of the Marvellous: An Introduction", in Joy Kenseth, ed. *The Age of the Marvellous* (Chicago, 1991) p. 38.

[96] Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia, 1964) p. 162.

help accommodate the nuances of their contents, each varying in significance and differing in variance depending on the cataloguer. A full discussion of this has been recently provided by MacGregor, who unpacks each category and its meaning in relation to early modern cosmology.[97] However, it is essential at this point to highlight that many items elude even the taxonomic system that was imposed on them by contemporaries, let alone that created by historians. Categories such as "heathen deity" or "rarity" sought to convey degrees of complexity, with their respective connotations of religion or wonder value, but fail to capture the entire essence of the item in itself.

Each item transcended in many ways the category it was put into, having functional, academic, aesthetic, or even emotional significances that blurred the boundaries between categories. As such, one may see these classificatory exercises as an attempt to render the expanding early modern world as intelligible as possible, but contemporaries were almost certainly aware of the artificiality of such an exercise, and probably did not intend each category to be absolute. Rhinoceros horn (Fig. 2.3), for instance, was a common item found in cabinets. The Tradescants and Thoresby had two each, and the Royal Society had four, some of which were mounted as the picture shows. Such an item would have been appreciated on a multiplicity of levels. At the most basic, rhinoceros horn was a natural history specimen, offering an eloquent testimony to the animal from which it came. It was also prized for its rarity, since rhinoceroses did not reside in Europe. In another way, its exquisite carving and setting was a showcase for excellent craftsmanship. This was especially intriguing if it had been produced in a foreign country, telling also of that country's industry. The cup also recorded an ethnographic and natural historical

[97] Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 2007) pp. 44-50.

Fig. 2.3. Rhinoceros horn cup, from the *Kunstkammern* of Rudolph II, (c. 1590) Reproduced from MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment,* p. 59.[98]

[98] While this is of continental origin, similar mounted cups would have existed in the English collections.

impression, with the carved rhinoceros and its handlers on the top, although one can see that this has been made second-hand, since the rhinoceros has an extra horn on its back, a misconception that was perpetuated by Dürer's engraving of 1515.[99] The item is thus a document of prevailing ethnographic and natural knowledge, and, inaccuracies aside, also shows an attempt to understand and convey understandings of both the natural and human world outside of Europe. Additionally, muses have been carved on the base of the cup and classical figures on its body. This was in keeping with the Renaissance vogue for Greco-Roman antiquity, and demonstrated its commissioner's taste, knowledge and wealth. On yet another level, this item signalled knowledge, luxury and status, not least in respect of the medical value that rhinoceros horn was understood to have as an antidote to poison. Whilst this was probably not meant for functional use, its ownership and display were a testament to the many ways in which contemporaries handled and appreciated items from outside Europe, many of which shed light on their owners and observers as much as they do on the item itself.

Caveats aside, the data reveal quite clearly the categories of emphasis that were prevalent in the collections (Fig. 2.4). Even despite the exclusion of Tradescant's herbarium, the vast majority of items in the sample were of natural historical specimens. Ethnographic artefacts make up the second largest proportion: weapons, garments and utensils from around the world were held for comparative observation, likewise bespeaking an attempt to understand the world *vis-à-vis* its material productions and to discover and admire human life and endeavour on an international level. Surprisingly, only 42 items (2 percent) were "freaks of nature"—Siamese twins, double-eggs and the like— and only 14 (1 percent) were mythical—such as claws of gryphons—which

[99] Glynis Ridley, *Clara's Grand Tour: Travels with a Rhinoceros in Eighteenth- Century Europe* (New York, 2005) *passim*.

Fig. 2.4. The typology of items in the catalogues of four curiosity collections
Source: Collection catalogues

overturns the common conception of cabinets as containing fabricated monsters and misleading marvels. Moreover, as MacGregor argues, the study of "freaks of nature" were central to the early modern appreciation of nature, since they helped delineate the outer boundaries of Creation and the boundlessness of being. This adds a scientific layer to the wonder-value of such items and incorporates them into the scope of rational inquiry.[100] 'Counterfeits of nature', as MacGregor terms them, were also not necessarily taken on face value.[101] They could tease and intrigue, but were not meant to deceive. Mermaids and dragons were meant to be 'transparent' frauds that underscored the exotic reality of the other items, rather than be taken seriously as specimens. While once again noting that not all viewers would have shared the same experiences and perspectives, and that spatial arrangements could alter the import of an item, it is still significant to consider how these categorical trends span all four of the collections. This adds colour to the playful and positive aspect of the cabinet, since it was a space in which similitudes and sympathies, as well as concrete knowledge, could be formed.

Early modern interests and inquiry

Cabinets exhibited material culture in order to feed a growing contemporary curiosity, whose appetite, as Benedict argues, was 'primarily empirical'.[102] Travel reports and similar accounts of the weird and wonderful were no longer reliable as testaments to the world beyond Europe, and there was nothing more authoritative, short of actual travel, than concrete artefacts from distant shores. Accurate reportage and observation was prized, and as such the cabinets were especially valued since they contained real creatures and real items. Kenseth's assertion that New World

[100] MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, p. 46.
[101] MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment*, pp. 46-7.
[102] Barbara M. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Enquiry* (Chicago, 2001) p.14.

Tab. 5.

Ind. Stork's Head

Phoenicopter's Head

Ind. Hern's Head

Inches

Fig. 2.5. Diagrams of items from the Royal Society's collection catalogue. Reproduced from Grew, *Musæum Regalis Societatis*, Appendix 5.

wonders had to be given the 'fantastic appearance of creatures of fable' is perhaps misplaced: while the element of wonder was not lost from the cabinet, it seems rather that the items commanded this in their own right, and did not have to borrow a mythical patina in order to be interesting.[103] In the early modern period, then, the concept of the exotic shifted from the realm of the imagination to the appreciation of reality. Accurately observed creatures were just as magnificent and aesthetically impressive as their mythical cousins, and could command the same level of thrall (Fig. 2.4). At the same time, though, it must be noted that the collections necessarily retained an element of the fantastic, esoteric, and useless. Since they sought to represent a totality of knowledge, collections necessarily also contained a large number of seemingly superfluous and absurd articles, even if accurately observed and wonderfully preserved. They thus also occupied the same paradigm of inquiry that encouraged attempts to estimate the total rate of evaporation off the surface of the sea—a quest that would seem fruitless to many contemporary and modern minds.[104]

The cast of early modern inquiry is further shown by an analysis of the geographical origins of items in collection catalogues. As can be seen in Fig. 2.6, the contents of cabinets were clearly of global distribution, though a large proportion are of unspecified provenance. A great many items besides are noted down as exotic, but a specific place of origin has not been specified. This could be due to laziness or a lack of interest in such details, though it could also be due to a cataloguer's fatigue; it did not necessarily mean that such knowledge about the items was not known or not available, since catalogues were not the only source of information about a collection's contents. More interestingly, where origins are specified, one can see that interest in the newly discovered West Indies outweighs interest in any other part in the world (Fig. 2.6).

[103] Kenseth, 'The Age of the Marvellous', p. 34.
[104] E. Halley, in Royal Society, *Miscellanea curiosa : being a collection of some of the principal phenomena in nature, accounted for by the greatest philosophers of this age,* Volume I (London, 1705) pp. 1-12.

Fig. 2.6. The geographical distribution of items in the catalogues of four curiosity collections
Source: Collection catalogues

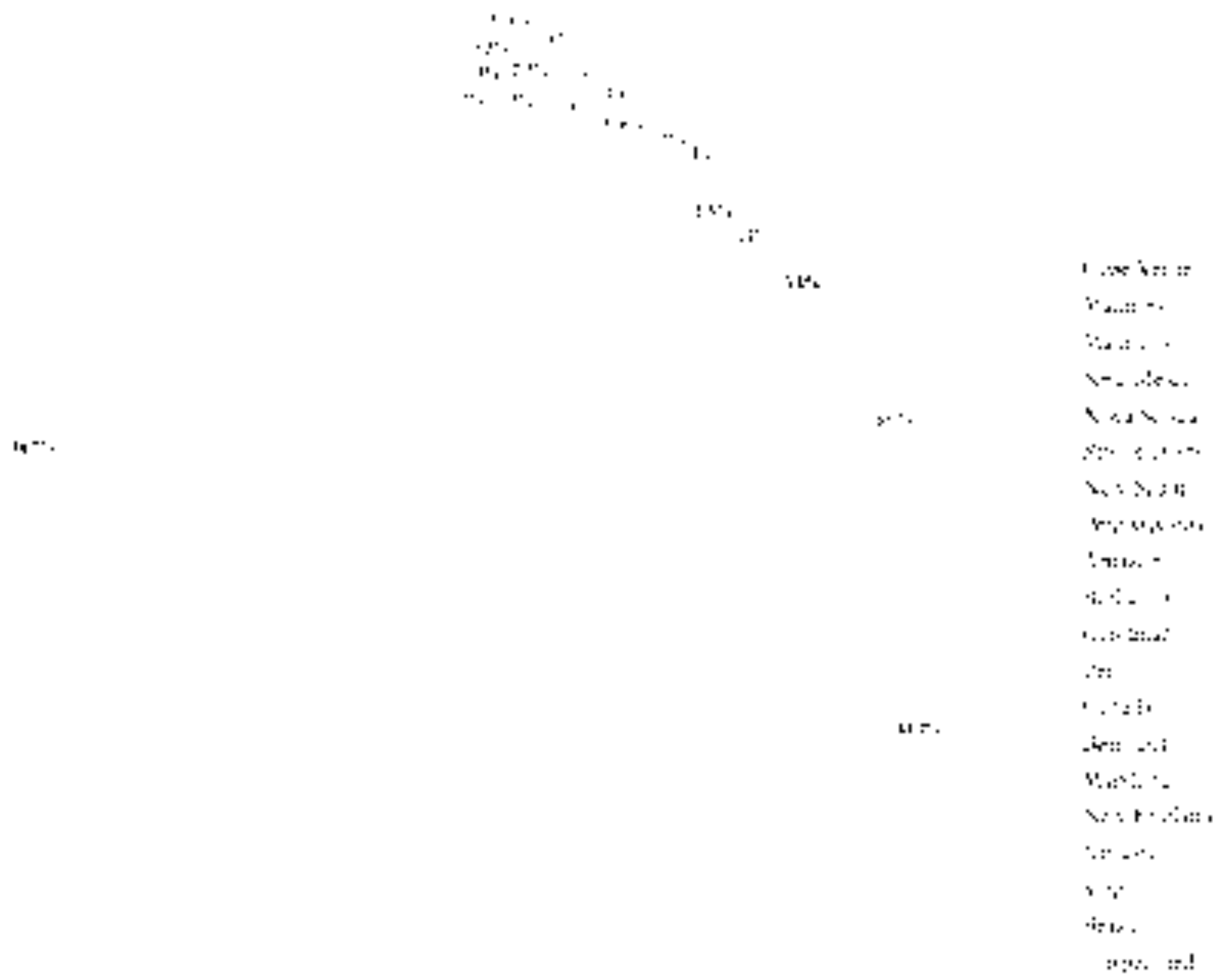

Fig. 2.7. The geographical distribution of items from the West Indies in the catalogues of four curiosity collections
Source: Collection catalogues

Fig. 2.8. The geographical distribution of items from the East Indies in the catalogues of four curiosity collections
Source: Collection catalogues

This can be partly explained by the fact that these collectors had more commercial and personal contacts in that part of the world: both Tradescants, for instance, as well as many members of the Royal Society, made trips to the New World in which they collected items for their collections. The novelty value of the West Indies may also have played a role. As it was a newly-colonised territory, it naturally commanded more immediate interest than other exotic locations such as the East Indies or Near East, whose natural and artificial productions had been relatively more familiar due to the centuries of prior trade and contact.

This point is further elaborated when one looks at a more specific breakdown. Comparing the West and East Indies (Figs. 2.7 and 2.8), which were arguably the areas that were considered most 'exotic' and with which Europe had the greatest commercial and imperial interest, there is a significant difference in the detail with which items are recorded. New world items were more often given a specific attribution, whereas the vast majority from the East were only designated as 'East Indian', or lumped into vast, undifferentiated geographical blocs such as China or India. In the West Indies, one can also see that most items came from British-influenced areas such as Virginia and Jamaica, a pattern that also discloses the colonial interests and networks that the curiosity cabinets tapped. Perhaps this was fuelled by nothing else but the lure of lucre. The New World, and in particular, its plants and animals, promised great potential to collectors and viewers, many of whom had medical or commercial interests. The cabinet contents would thus have provided cutting edge practical knowledge to its viewers and owners, rather than knowledge for its own sake or simple dumb wonder.

Ethnographic items also feature very strongly in these areas, which likewise were part of the colonial encounter. Powhatan's mantle, which one may still see in the Ashmolean today, is a particularly striking example of the type of items that were brought back and exhibited in large

numbers from the West Indies. The cabinet functioned as a space of negotiation in which collectors and viewers could engage with the foreign through its material traces. Regarded initially as Edenic, life in the New World fascinated contemporaries, who had not yet developed the idea of a hierarchy of races.[105] The space of cabinets thus became one of the initial 'contact zones' in which exotic cultures infiltrated native ones, assimilating into European cultural and linguistic paradigms. One may observe many a 'tamahuke' or 'canoo' in the collections, terms as well as items which had been imported from over the seas. As items could be repurposed or re-signified in cabinets, this could not be a pure act of 'transculturation'.[106] Still, it constituted a contemporary attempt to engage the Other on its own terms, as far as was possible, in a domestic context. Greenblatt has argued that this amounted to a trampling on and 'kidnapping' of foreign languages and cultures, but this would be to oversimplify the situation.[107] Rather, as Morgan has suggested, the process has allowed for 'the traces of the [marginalised to be] inscribed in the margins of the coloniser's discourse,' such that the English language itself could become a collection of sorts, housing and preserving foreign terminology.[108]

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105 Kenseth, 'The Age of the Marvellous', p. 36.
106 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, 1992); Eliean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London, 1992) p. 82.
107 Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford, 1991) p. 88.
108 Phillip D. Morgan, "Encounters between British and 'Indigenous' Peoples, c. 1500-1800", in Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern, eds. *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600-1850* (Philadelphia, 1999) p. 62; C. A. Bayly, "The British and Indigenous Peoples, 1760-1860: Power, Perception and Identity", in Martin Daunton and Rick Halpern, eds. *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600-1850* (Philadelphia, 1999) pp. 19-41.

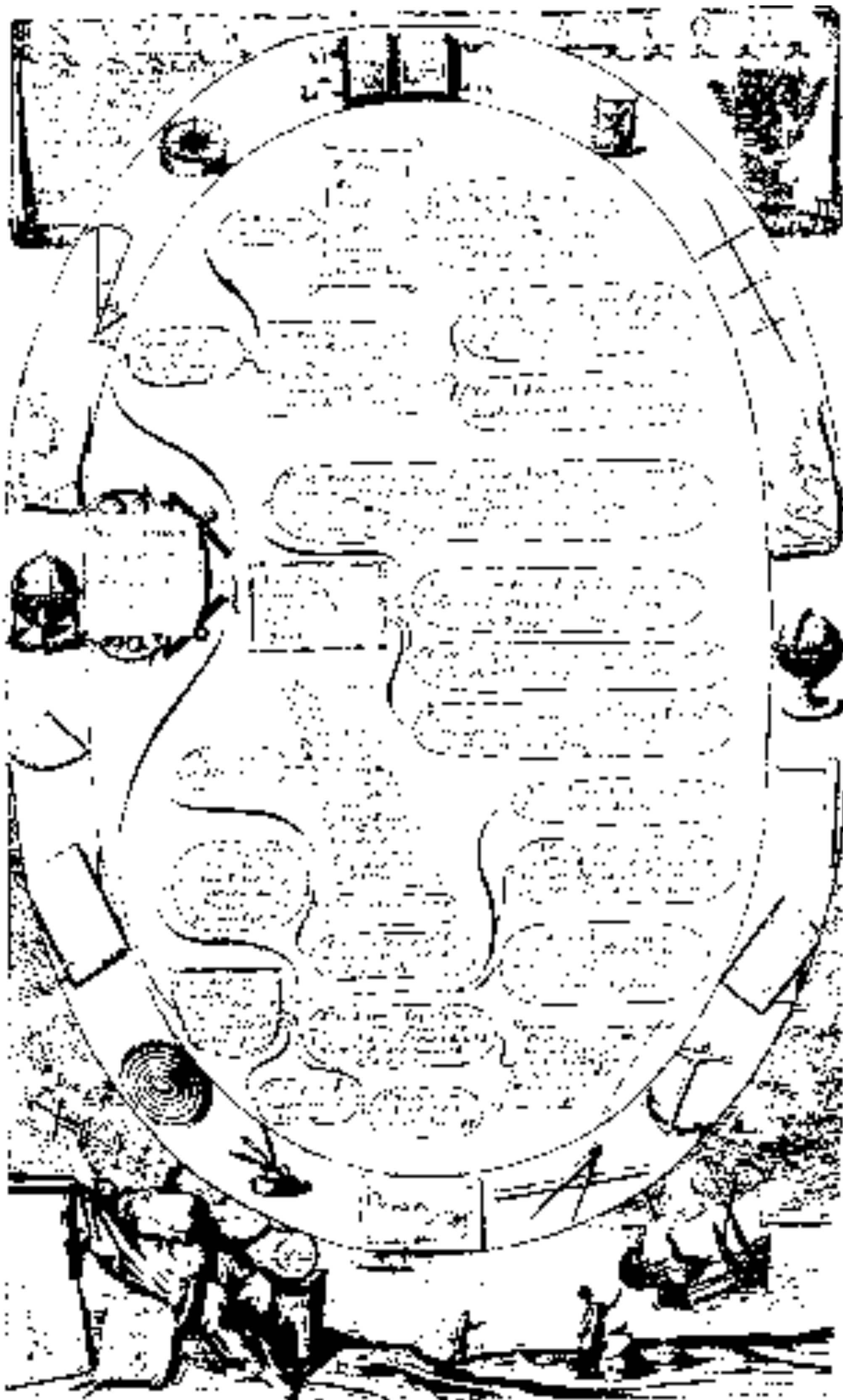

Fig. 2.9. "Navigation" (print book illustration, 1686) The British Museum, London

Early modern England and the world at large

Early modern curiosity was thus intense and focused, rather than diffuse and catholic. It operated according to particular guidelines, and was interested in particular areas, which are reflected in the cabinets' contents. One may read a more direct articulation of purpose in the various guides to travellers that were printed over the period. Dr. Woodward's pamphlet (1696) is a good example of this, setting out the conventions for observation and sampling, serving to direct both the traveller's mind and his luggage contents, and thus also the contents of cabinets.[109] It is a practical document, giving advice on such topics as preserving specimens and keeping journals, which, alongside the cabinets, served to standardise contemporary modes of inquiry and forms of engagement with the exotic. As Fig. 2.9 shows, this fed directly back into the basics of travel: not only was navigation concerned with the structure of a ship, it was also surrounded by a veritable cabinet-full of scientific equipment, cartographical and geographical knowledge. Cabinets were thus an important trope in building up the early modern cast of mind, where the individual pushed at the boundaries of an expanding world, seas were charted and Others met.

This was by no means a straightforward process. While collection catalogues present an ordered picture similar to the mind map of Fig. 2.9, in the actual cabinet spaces themselves items were not necessarily compartmentalised, and exotic things were interspersed with antiques, relics, coins, and other domestic or European items in a confusing array that the visitor would have to negotiate, carving out a unique equation for himself that would resolve these contradictions in line with his personal inclinations. Cabinets contained many different kinds of foreignness and

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[109] John Woodward, *Brief instructions for making observations in all parts of the world as also, for collecting, preserving, and sending over natural things : being an attempt to settle an universal correspondence for the advancement of knowledg both natural and civil / drawn up at the request of a person of honour and presented to the Royal Society* (London, 1696).

familiarity, which would have frustrated attempts to pigeonhole into categories such as 'Self', 'Other', 'Home' and 'Abroad'. The Past and the Heavenly, as represented in the cabinets, were possibly just as much another country as Barbados or the Moluccas. Similarly, the foreign could be co-opted into the matrix of early modern culture via the conferment of a religious, scientific, or classical pedigree.[110] Visiting cabinets was ultimately a subjective experience, and while it could prove formative to an individual there were no set conclusions that could be drawn.

The paradigms represented in the cabinets were not restricted to their confines, but rather filtered out into common parlance and influenced the early modern cast of mind. This is most discernible in the changing conception of the exotic, which transformed from an open-jawed gaping at magical monsters into the pursuit of empirical and practical knowledge. Travel writing displays this tendency most clearly: as Fig. 2.10 shows, the representation of Virginia had by the sixteenth century taken on the form of a printed catalogue in which every category that makes up a good collection is specified. Botanically accurate plants dot the landscape, and the sea is populated with horseshoe crabs, sting rays and hammerhead sharks. The natives and their activities (in this case, fishing with javelins) are accurately observed, and their equipment, from fish trap to canoe, are also rendered to the slightest detail. Even the flight patterns of the birds overhead have been recorded faithfully. It is hard to imagine anything further from the monsters and monopods of Sir John Mandeville.[111] Yet this image still possessed the same fascination and equivalent commercial potential. As Welu has noted in his study of maps, the rationalising of

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[110] Anthony Alan Shelton, "Cabinets of Transgression: Renaissance Collections and the Incorporation of the New World", in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting* (London, 1994) p. 201.
[111] Sir John Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. Charles Moseley (London, 2005).

representation was one of the hallmarks of early modernity, bespeaking a new concern with scientific truth, though without removing the element of wonder altogether.[112]

[112] James A. Welu, "Strange New Worlds: Mapping the Heavens and Earth's Great Extent", in Joy Kenseth, ed. *The Age of the Marvellous* (Chicago, 1991) p. 105.

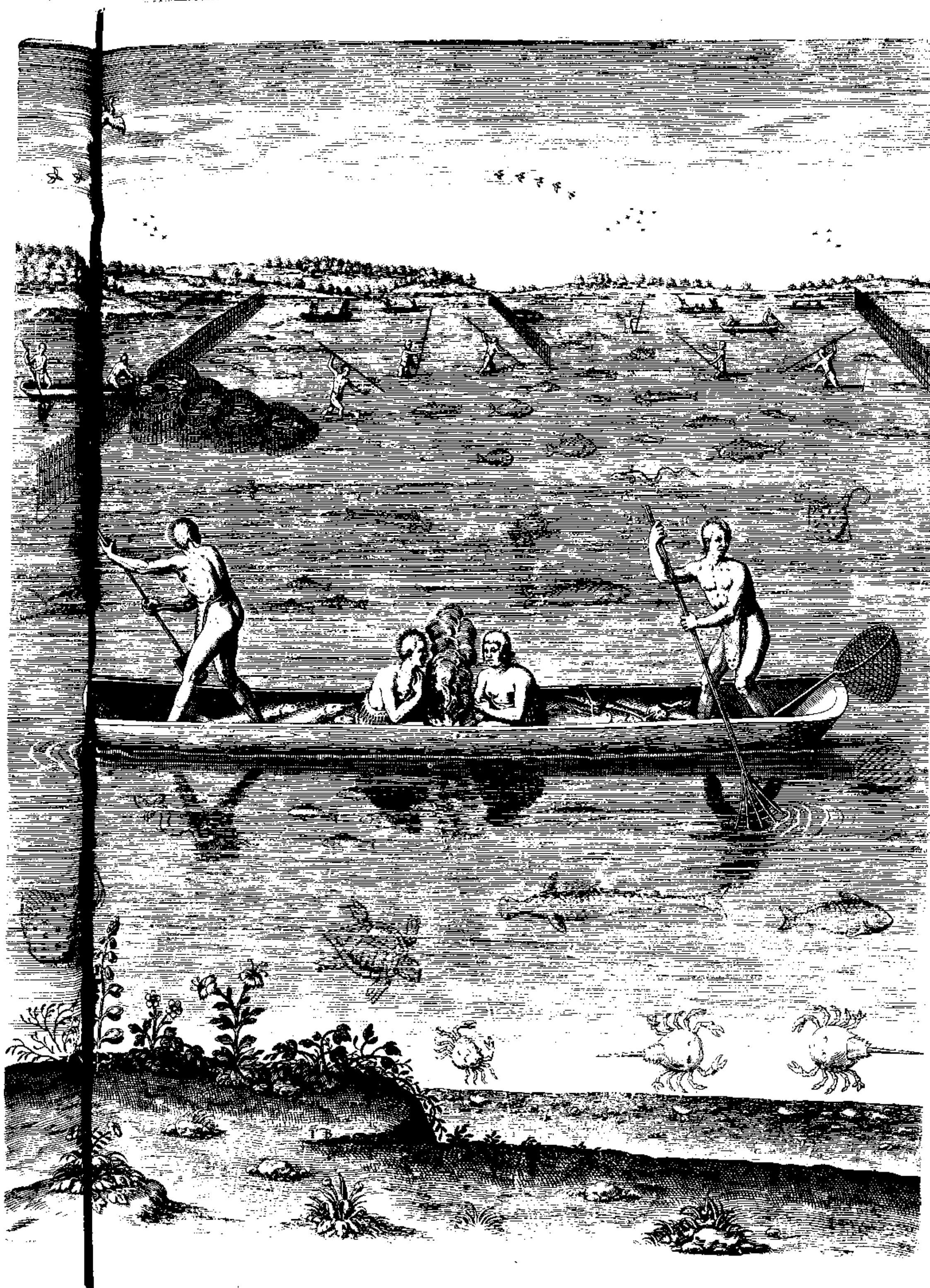


Fig. 2.10. Virginian natives fishing. (Woodcut illustration, 1590) Reproduced from Hariot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia,* p. 50.

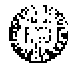
As such, curiosity cabinets proved to be a positive site in which truth could be approached, and relationships with the Other could be culturally brokered. This was only one side of the coin, of course. Whilst many collectors and viewers believed in knowledge for its own sake, one cannot deny that early modern empiricism was also acquisitive in nature. Francis Bacon, whose treatise on empiricism in *New Atlantis* (1624) served as the founding spirit of the Royal Society, also wrote to the Earl of Rutland on his travels that he should observe according to a given set of practices, specifically 'for your own use thereafter, and for your friends… in whatsoever concerneth either pleasure or profit'.[113] Modes of enquiry into the curious were therefore never far from personal, political and economic agendas; and cabinets correspondingly could never present a perfect or even a balanced picture of the world, reflecting rather the interests of the collector, his donors, and also his intended audience. Furthermore, they were not invariably regarded with entire seriousness. Whilst collections certainly exhibited tendencies towards a more rational and scientific appreciation of the world and all its constituents, the element of absurdity and wonder remained as a crucial characteristic of the items. One need look no further than the Royal Society's catalogue for evidence of this: Nehemiah Grew, charged with the thankless task of compiling this document, expressed his frustration and scepticism at some particularly strange items. He catalogued the horns of a hare, as well as of a dog-goat, noting that only 'so [he found] them inscribed', before suggesting more plausible alternatives in his description, but not discarding or dismissing them altogether.[114] Curiosity cabinets were similarly odd creatures, exhibiting generally observable tendencies, but for which a variety of explanations might be provided, all seemingly as ridiculous or reasonable as the next.

[113] Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford, 1996) p. 77.
[114] Grew, *Musaeum Regalis Socieatis,* p. 25.

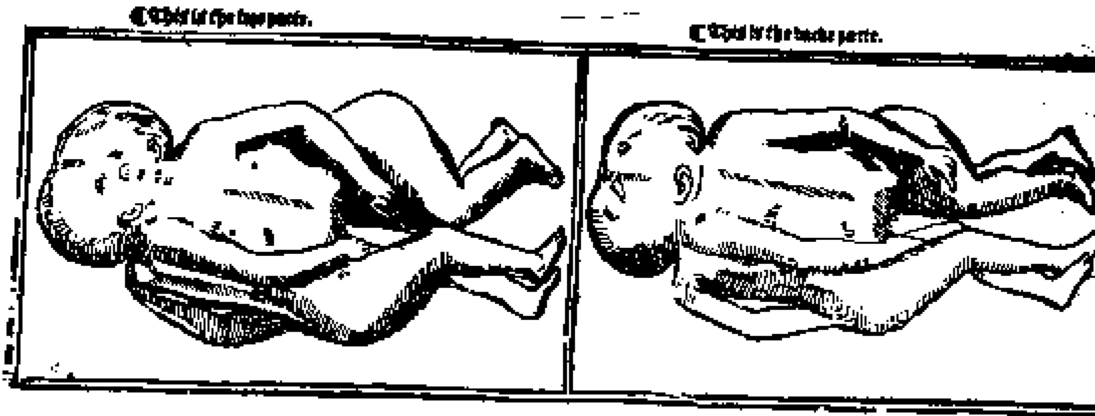
III

'Many Heads are Better than One': Networks of Knowledge and Exchange

[illegible] a monstrous Chyld
Whiche was borne in Stony Stratforde, in North hampton Shire.
The yeare of our Lord M.CCCCC.LXV.



This is the fore parte. This is the backe parte.



Ye that do see this Childe disfigured here,
Two Babes in one, disguised to beholde,
Thinke with your selues, when such thinges do appere
All is not well, as wise heades may be bolde:
But god that can in secretes shew the signe
Can bringe much more to pas, by power deuine.

And we that lyue to see this wonder, howe
The [illegible] is geuen to make this [illegible] great,
Let one by one that this beholdeth nowe,
Be warned as the wonder geues conceate:
To liue to mende the wonderous shape we see,
Contrarie much, in all that ought to bee.

For as we finde, this figure semeth straunge,
Because it showes proporcion not in vse,
So beare in minde, how time can choppe and chaunge,
Disguising workes, in willes that be vnsure:
From meane to more, from more to much excesse,
Where Nature willes, desire should be lesse.

Finis. W. Elderton.

Imprinted at London in Fletestrete beneath the Conduit at the signe of S. John Euangelist, by Thomas Colwell.

Fig. 3.1. “The True Forme and Shape of a Monsterous Chyld” (Broadside ballad, 1565) Bodleian Library, Oxford

On 20 April 1644, John Evelyn woke up to find a deformed kitten in his bed. Not knowing its significance immediately, he chose to record it, noting how it '[had] 6 Eares, eight legges, two bodys from the navil downewards, & two tailes: which strange Monster, I found dead; but warme by me in the Morning when I awaked'.[115] In the Oxford Anatomy Theatre, the Uffenbach brothers likewise chose to record, of all the specimens, the example of 'A monstrosity of a lamb with two bodies, eight feet, four ears but only one head.'[116] Such Siamese twins have been variously understood as portents (Fig. 3.1), whether personal or universal, as monsters, or as curios. They have vexed and fascinated throughout the ages, and people have been putting their heads together to puzzle them out.

Curiosity cabinets, too, were puzzling entities. Containing many double-headed, multi-limbed creatures, they also boasted a myriad of other items that were not necessarily malformed, but which remained mysterious and intriguing in themselves. There were many theoretical as well as practical approaches to viewing cabinets, and their meanings extended way beyond those presented in their catalogues. Cabinets were social spaces, where identity, knowledge and status could be formed in both collusive and competitive ways. Elite social networks were the immediate locus of discussion and sociability, as learned and well-connected gentlemen were the quintessential collectors, patrons, donors and viewers, and also left the most records of their experiences. English collections were atypical in the sense that many of them opened to a fee-paying public and were thus not as exclusive affairs as their continental counterparts, and allowed access to a much wider social spectrum whose experiences have not as yet been examined. These can be reconstructed in negative from elite accounts, and shed additional light

[115] John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn,* Vol II: Kalendarium 1620-1649, ed. E. S. de Beer, (Oxford, 1955) p. 136.
[116] Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710: From the Travels of Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach*, trans. W.H. Quarrell and W. J. C. Quarrell (Oxford, 1928) p. 21.

on the ways in which different modes of seeing were negotiated, reflecting both contextual and individual dilemmas. Comprehending the vagaries of early modern sight is important when considering the wider and long-lasting impact of curiosity collections, especially when considering their relationships to museums and modern modes of identity and knowledge formation.

Methodology

This chapter will attempt to reconstruct the patterns of viewing museums by engaging with the theoretical discussions of early modern modes of seeing. It will further compare these to contemporary travel accounts and published writings that concern themselves with the ways of approaching collections. These span the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth centuries, and thus perhaps reflect the cabinets in their more mature stages, though they still provide a gold mine of insights into contemporary practices. Their highly individualised nature can be regarded an advantage, as it shows most clearly the subjectivity of the cabinets and the multiple ways of viewing them. The diaries of Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach and John Evelyn are particularly useful for their candour and the detail with which they recorded their experiences, and I will thus be relying heavily on their accounts in this chapter.[117] The former was a German bibliophile who toured England with his brother in 1710, taking especial care to visit famous collections and to sneer at them; the latter an English gentleman and founding member of the Royal Society who travelled extensively through both England and Europe, visiting cabinets and making a small

[117] von Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710;* Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach, *London in 1710: From the Travels of Zacharias Conrad von Uffenbach*, trans. W. H. Quarrell and Margaret Mare (London, 1934); Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, Vols I-IV, ed. E. S. de Beer (Oxford, 1955).

collection of his own along the way.[118] The German traveller Thomas Platter also left an invaluable account of his English journey.[119] His visits to the royal houses where he was shown curios, as well as the homes of private individuals who owned exotic animals, suggests that there were alternative spaces in which one's appetite for curious viewing could be gratified. This hints suggestively at wider collecting practices that have been overlooked in the historiography, which has tended to focus on collections that subsequently turned into museums. Broadening the definition of "collections" and "curiosities" could prove constructive in an endeavour to access the wider experience of seeing. In this chapter some preliminary attempts have been made at this, though due to the limited scope of the study they can only remain provisional. In addition to these sources, contemporary travel accounts and natural history narratives written by those who were familiar with connections show also how the eye trained in the cabinet saw outside of it, in both domestic and exotic settings. Sloane's *Natural History of Jamaica* (1707-25), Plot's *Natural History of Oxfordshire* (1677) and Kaempfer's *History of Japan* (translated 1727) are prime examples, showing the influence of the cabinets in their inspiration, citation, and style. In each of these cases what becomes most apparent is the variance of experience: while one may be able to discern the theoretical framework behind each encounter, the individual moves fluidly between modes of viewing depending on the situation.

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[118] Gillian Darley, *John Evelyn: Living for Ingenuity* (New Haven, 2006); Frances Harris and Michael Hunter, eds. *John Evelyn and his Milieu* (London, 2003); Douglas D. C. Chambers, 'Evelyn, John (1620–1706)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, Sept 2004; online edn, Jan 2008), 16 Aug 2010 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/8996>.

[119] Vivienne Larminie, 'Platter, Thomas (1574–1628)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, May 2005), 16 Aug 2010 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/53269>; Thomas Platter, *Thomas Platter's Travels in England, 1599*, trans. Clare Williams (London, 1937).

Ways of seeing: Theory and practice

The curiosity cabinet did not spring from nowhere, even if it contained specimens of such wondrous wildlife as could supposedly spontaneously generate. It had its roots in the medieval aesthetic and medieval practices, and continued to be informed by them whether consciously or unconsciously through its subsequent history. It had an obvious precursor in the collections of relics housed in churches, items that possessed sacred power and performed as the perfect semiophores, mediating between the mortal world and the divine. Collections often occupied the same emotional space, and arguably still do. One can experience this other-worldliness in the reverenced hush of museum spaces and the pilgrimages made to these temples of knowledge.[120] Indeed, the term "museum" means the "temple of the muses", a shrine in which the act of stealing or moving would be tantamount to sacrilege.[121] In fact, many medieval churches also possessed collections of curiosities and natural history specimens, recording, as later cabinets did and museums still do, the identities of their donors.[122]

The medieval notions of the "miraculous" and "marvellous" served to underpin one of the main characteristics of curiosity collecting. These were categories under which the baffling was subsumed and incorporated into the Christian cosmology, functioning variously as examples of the variety of God's creation, portents of divine mood swings, or as material and metaphysical

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[120] Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London, 1995), p. 116; Arthur MacGregor, "The Tradescants as Collectors of Rarities", in Arthur MacGregor, ed. *Tradescant's Rarities: Essays on the Foundation of the Ashmolean Museum 1683 with a Catalogue of the Surviving Early Collections* (Oxford, 1983) p. 71.

[121] Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500-1800*, trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Porter (Cambridge, 1990) p. 13.

[122] Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities*, p. 17; Stephen Bann, *Under the Sign: John Bargrave as Collector, Traveller, and Witness* (Ann Arbor, 1994) p. 94.

stimuli to provoke higher contemplation and perhaps even communication with God.[123] In the early modern period, in which science was in the midst of an extended and painful divorce from religion, and religion itself suffering from the ravages of theological rifts and war, the secular quest for the curious was in a way a surrogate for the earlier tradition, 'absorbing some of its force but avoiding the theological and evidentiary problems inherent in directly asserting a miracle.'[124]

As Fig. 3.1 shows, objects of curiosity could have a portentous import, their allure closely associated with religious or personal significances.[125] Contemporaries had a mixed response to this. Evelyn exemplifies this well, noting, as above, the monstrous kitten, but in another instance expressing his scorn at the superstitions attached to the 1652 eclipse, where 'the whole Nation… [were] abused by knavish and ignorant star-gazers'.[126] Churches continued to exhibit curiosities after the Reformation, though they no longer contained old-style relics. John Bargrave's collection in Canterbury (c.1650) would have been a direct descendant of medieval religious collections.[127] The Frenchman's finger in this collection can be seen as a new relic of sorts, though it would attest more to an investigative than a religious spirit. Most other collections contained mementoes of famous people, such as Henry VIII's stirrups (which one may still see in the Ashmolean today) or slices of Queen Elizabeth's narwhal horn, which one could argue

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[123] Anthony Alan Shelton, "The Collector's Zeal: Towards and Anthropology of Intentionality, Instrumentality, and Desire", in Pieter ter Keurs, ed. *Colonial Collections Revisited* (Leiden, 2007) p. 177, 184-5; Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (London, 1995), p. 33.

[124] Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford, 1991) p. 70.

[125] For more on providence and portents, see Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999); Alexandra Walsham, "Vox Piscis: or the Book-Fish: Providence and the Uses of the Reformation Past in Caroline Cambridge", *The English Historical Review* 114:457 (1999) pp. 574-606.

[126] Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn,* Vol. III, p. 63.

[127] David Sturdy and Martin Henig, *The Gentle Traveller: John Bargrave, Canon of Canterbury, and his Collection* (Canterbury, 1983) p. 14; Stephen Bann, 'Bargrave, John (*bap.* 1610, *d.* 1680)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford University Press, Sept 2004), 10 Aug 2010 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/1371>.

were new, secular relics, whose exhibition reflected the longevity of the idea that an item could retain the spirit of its former owner.[128]

The Renaissance cult of the curious tapped into this vein in a somewhat unconscious way. This was an all-embracing scheme of knowledge, characterised by a never-ending thirst for its accumulation, and relatively open access to its hallowed ranks.[129] In an age of increasing global contacts, with the discovery of the Americas and burgeoning mercantile links with the East Indies, Europe found itself inundated with new specimens, items, and information from around the world. Material culture was imbued with a great deal of authority both as the basis of science and commerce, and became, in a sense, relics of the New World. Visiting cabinets was seen as a substitute for travel the way in which proximity to a relic was a surrogate for a saint's presence. Given that the New World was thought of initially as a new Eden, and given also the cabinets' bias for American items, a visit to a collection could easily be painted in neo-religious terms, with the old Gods replaced by the new ones of empiricism and economics.

As such, Greenblatt has argued that wonder was the primary response to the flood of information, drawing on the medieval aesthetic in order to domesticate the foreign and prevent chaos.[130] This was a more complex process than mere pigeonholing, however. The marvellous as

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128 John Tradescant, *Musaeum Tradescantinum: or, A collection of rarities. Preserved at South- Lambeth neer London by John Tradescant* (London, 1656) p. 47; Ralph Thoresby, *Ducatus Leodiensis: or, the topography of the ancient and populous town and parish of Leedes, and parts adjacent in the West-Riding of the county of York. With The Pedegrees of many of the Nobility and Gentry, and other Matters relating to those Parts; Extracted from Records, Original Evidences, and Manuscripts. By Ralph Thoresby, F. R. S. To which is added, at the Request of several Learned Persons, A Catalogue of his Musaeum, with the Curiosities Natural and Artificial, and the Antiquities; particularly the Roman, British, Saxon, Danish, Norman, and Scotch Coins, with Modern Medals. Also A Catalogue of Manuscripts; the various Editions of the Bible, and of Books Published in the Infancy of the Art of Printing. With An Account of some unusual Accidents that have attended some Persons, attempted after the Method of Dr. Plot.* (London, 1715) p. 437.

129 Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (London, 1994) p. 9.

130 Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*, p. 14; Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (London, 1995) p. 32.

a category was a means by which contemporaries sought to grapple with the new, allowing more complex understandings to develop after its first introduction.[131] As Shelton points out, categories such as the 'pagan' domesticated erstwhile foreign things and allowed for unthreatening cultural diversity.[132] This enabled the exotic to be studied on its own terms, to a certain degree. Material culture was given new weight as testimony to knowledge. Sloane, for instance, writes about a phenomenon in Port Royal where ants had eaten out buried body parts and perforated the bones to consume the marrow, and jubilantly declared the truth of this on the basis that 'I have proof, having brought with me from thence the Bone of the Arm of an *Indian* so perforated, and its Marrow eaten by them'.[133] This was, naturally, exhibited in his cabinet for all to see and to be convinced.

Such material-culture based observation was the cornerstone of the "new science". This was founded in principle on the basis of Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis*, and purported to pursue knowledge for its own sake, quite in the spirit of his fictional Merchants of Light, who travelled around the world in search of specimens, instruments, and knowledge without partaking in commerce or even demanding salaries.[134] Industrious rational observation was the new order of

[131] Shelton, "The Collector's Zeal", p. 189.
[132] Anthony Alan Shelton, "Cabinets of Transgression: Renaissance Collections and the Incorporation of the New World", in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting* (London, 1994) p. 201.
[133] Sir Hans Sloane, *A voyage to the islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, with the natural history of the Herbs and Trees, Four-Footed Beasts, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, &c. of the last of those islands; to which is prefix'd an introduction, wherein is an account of the inhabitants, air, waters, diseases, trade, &c. of that Place, with some Relations concerning the Neighbouring Continent, and Islands of America. Illustrated with the figures of the things describ'd, which have not been heretofore engraved; In large Copper-Plates as big as the Life. By Hans Sloane, M. D. Fellow of the College of Physicians and Secretary of the Royal-Society. In two volumes. Vol. I.* (London, 1707) p. xlvii.
[134] Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford, 1996) pp. 471-2; Similar ideal investigative principles were staunchly defended by their proponents as being selfless and productive, see Henry More's letter in response to an attack by Stubbe on the Royal Society, in Henry Stubbe, *A censure upon certain passages contained in the History of the Royall Society, as being destructive to the established religion and Church of England whereunto is added the letter of a virtuoso in opposition to the censure, A reply unto the letter aforesaid, and A reply unto the praefatory answer of Ecebolius Glanvill, chaplain to Mr. Rouse of Eaton (late member of the Rump Parlament) rectour of Bath, & fellow of the Royall Society : also and answer to the letter of Dr.*

the day, and cabinets played an important supporting role as a surrogate for travel, where those who had not the money or opportunity could encounter firsthand some elements of the world beyond.[135] It could also function as a training room for seeing abroad, as Sloane's experience in Jamaica shows.[136] This function came into increasing importance with the proliferation of civic education and educational change, as the Renaissance opened up its mind to embrace both the classical past and the New World. Collections represented an endeavour to distil the essence of the known world into an ultimate cabinet of knowledge. It sought to do this by replicating in microcosm the entirety of creation for contemplation, wherein the viewer could metonymically extrapolate his own truths. Apart from the metaphor of the Ark, cabinets of curiosity were often also described as *theatrum mundi*, in which the whole act of existence, from the playful to the mystical and the horrible, were comprehensively performed.[137] The cabinet thus played an important pedagogical role. The Tradescants' collection was thus seen as the best place 'for the full improvement of children in their education'; likewise Sloane and Woodward in their wills stated that their collections' preservation would aid in the noble task of instructing the nation.[138]

Whilst most cabinets might have attempted a level of comprehensiveness, each individual's motivations and practices no doubt differed. Private collectors such as the Tradescants, who were gardeners, could hardly have entertained visions of power and domination as would a Habsburg prince. Likewise the scale, content, and organising principles of many cabinets would have varied considerably. Pearce's suggestion that the arrangement of knowledge was a step

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Henry Moore, relating unto Henry Stubbe physician at Warwick, The second edition corrected & enlarged (Oxford, 1671) pp. 471-2.

135 Barbara M. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Enquiry* (Chicago, 2001).

136 Sloane, *Voyage to Jamaica*, Vol. I, p. A.

137 Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 91.

138 Joy Kenseth, "A World of Wonders in One Closet Shut", in Joy Kenseth, ed. *The Age of the Marvellous* (Chicago, 1991) p. 88; John Woodward, *Part of the late Dr. Woodward's will. Dated Oct. 1st, 1727* (Cambridge, 1778); Sir Hans Sloane, *The Will of Sir Hans Sloane, Bart. Deceased* (London, 1753).

towards developing a modern cast of mind is thus questionable.[139] Firstly, the equation of organisation with modernity and progress is a teleological fallacy. Furthermore, the scholarly collector had precursors, drawing on the idea of the scholar-saint and his cell, an image that was particularly popular with humanist collectors, who increasingly furnished representations of his cell with scientific instruments, curiosities, and natural history specimens— arguably looking *back* on him as the ideal collector.[140] Alternative models of collecting also existed. Private cabinets could have served as memory palaces for personal use. On another level, the anatomy theatre in Leiden's dancing skeletons bespoke a more macabre *memento mori* message.[141] Other collections were simply capricious and had no central organising principle, such as the Ashmolean, which Jardine has described as reflecting 'gentlemen's taste' rather than anything else.[142]

Cabinets contained a great many objects selected for their outlandishness or exception, and as such they were not the ideal resources for research. [143] Serious study of their contents could lead to misunderstanding and misappropriation, and was increasingly demonised. This reached a crescendo in the eighteenth century, where claims to rational enlightenment cast earlier collecting activity as suspicious.[144] Uffenbach expressed such scepticism in the Ashmolean for the proliferation of horns being exhibited, sarcastically writing how '[England] is everywhere prolific in horn, and moreover all horned creatures are extraordinarily well furnished with them'.[145] Further, he questioned the authenticity of other items, lamenting that 'some one of the same

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[139] Pearce, *On Collecting*, p. 110.
[140] Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment: Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, 2007) p. 12.
[141] MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment,* p. 39; Pearce, *On Collecting*, p. 113.
[142] Lisa Jardine, *Ingenious Pursuits: Building the Scientific Revolution* (London, 2002) p. 262.
[143] Ken Arnold, "Trade, Travel and Treasure: Seventeenth Century Artificial Curiosities" in Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon, eds. *Transports: Travel, Pleasure and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830* (New Haven, 1996) pp. 263-286.
[144] Nicholas Thomas, "Licensed Curiosity: Cook's Pacific Voyages", in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting* (London, 1994) p. 123.
[145] von Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710,* pp. 26-7.

epoch [as the items were from] ought really to be there too to take a solemn oath that they really are genuine, and not just announced as such and presented here in order to receive honour and admiration'.[146] As such, cabinets could be extremely anti-intellectual: mere private indulgence masquerading as legitimate science.

Furthermore, collections could present complex layered messages through their choice and arrangement of artefacts. This was part of the Renaissance trope of playfulness in which nods to patrons, classical allusions, *memento mori* and other subtle messages were coded into spatial arrangements and visual cues.[147] As with the conceit expressed in the Tradescants' catalogue (Fig. 3.2), where an anagram of the family name reveals their noble vocation, visitors were expected to delight in seeing similitudes in disparate items, an '[Excellent Contemplation of] unsearchable and stupendous worke'.[148] Criticisms of the cabinet as irrational were often based on this playfulness as much as on the quality of its contents, since such viewing practices fostered wide-eyed ignorance rather than objective, scientific knowledge. Uffenbach, for instance, expressed his frustration at a supposedly exquisite silk picture at the Bodelian, but which was so inferior that he 'even [had] better ones worked by [his] own grandmother'.[149] It is possible that scepticism about collecting undermined the upkeep of the Royal Society's Repository, which Uffenbach

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[146] von Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710,* p. 22.

[147] Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, p. 37; A good example of this would be the decoding of Holbein's 'The Ambassadors', where each object in the painted collection on the shelves sends a specific message. The crucifix in the background and distorted skull on the floor also subtly hint at the transience of life and the illusory nature of worldly authority. See also, Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye* (Oxford, 2007)

[148] Henry Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman, Fashioning him absolut, in the most necessary and commendable qualities concerning minde or body, that may be required in a noble gentleman. Whereunto is annexed a description of the order of a maine battaile or pitched field, eight severall wayes: with the art of limming and other additions newly enlarged. By Henry Peacham Master of Arts: sometime of Trinitie Colledge in Cambridge*, (London, 1634) p. 69.

[149] Uffenbach is also annoyed at being shown a talked-up golden quadrant which he finds badly worked and, for all practical purposes, worthless. von Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710*, pp. 11-12.

found in great disorder on his visit.[150] Grew's 'as inscribed' items certainly exhibit this discomfort.

[150] Uffenbach, *London in 1710*, pp. 97-8.

To *John Tradeſcant* the younger, ſurviving.

Anagr:

JOHN TRADESCANT.

Cannot hide Arts.

HEire of thy Fathers goods, and his good parts;
Which both preſerveſt, & augment'ſt his ſtore,
Tracing th' ingenuous ſteps he trod before:
Proceed as thou begin'ſt, and win thoſe hearts,
With gentle curt'ſie, which admir'd his Arts.
Whilſt thou conceal'ſt thine own, & do'ſt deplore
Thy want, compar'd with his, thou ſhew'ſt them
Modeſty clouds not worth; but hate diverts, (more.
And ſhames baſe envy, ARTS he CANNOT
(HIDE
That has them. Light through every chink is
ſpy'd.

Nugas has ego, peſſimus Poëta,
Plantarum tamen, optimique amici
Nuſquam peſſimus æſtimator, egi.

GUALTERUS STONEHOUSUS
Theologus ſervus natus.

Fig. 3.2. Introductory matter to the Tradescants' collection catalogue. (1656) Reproduced from Tradescant, *Musaeum Tradescantinum*

Each collection, its curatorial regimes, and each individual viewer was thus deeply subjective. To understand the nature of each experience, one has to be sensitive to the layers of nuance and acknowledge the uniqueness of every encounter.

Networks of the learned

Theoretical approaches to the cabinets and the best records of actual viewing practices were left by particular visiting elites. These were the pan-European networks of 'ingenious and learned gentlemen' who operated in both local cliques and international associations.[151] They met to broker both knowledge and status, and as such the cabinets were one of the prime loci for their convergence. Cataloguing and contesting the nature of items was one of the ways in which authority was asserted and power was contested within these spaces, and could form part of a totalizing project. Control was extended through the discussion, classification, and ordering of otherwise fragmented information. This could be an imperial project, the domestic and intellectual cousin to the expansion of European military and commercial hegemony on the high seas.[152] Providing information or items could confer prestige on a visitor as one was cited as an authority or a patron in catalogues or virtuosi publications. The formation of the Tradescant collection reflects well these dynamics: many items were donated to the collection by individuals who wanted to get close to Tradescant's patron, the Duke of Buckingham.[153] As the collection increased both in its holdings and by association, the Tradescants were able to claim a pedigree,

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[151] French's and Hanson's studies explore these networks in greater depth: H. R. French, "'Ingenious and Learned Gentlemen': Social Perceptions and Self-Fashioning among Parish Elites in Essex, 1680-1740", *Social History* 25:1 (2000), pp. 44-66; Craig Ashley Hanson, *The English Virtuoso: Art, Medicine, and Antiquarianism in the Age of Empiricism* (Chicago, 2009).

[152] Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, p. 90; Pearce, *On Collecting*, p. 114; Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 50.

[153] Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2001) pp. 29-31.

Fig. 3.3. Inscription on the jaw of a mastodon (1768) British Museum. Photograph: Personal collection

fashioning for themselves a family emblem on this basis of their accumulated curiosities.[154] Clearly the publicity and 'showmanship' of the cabinets made them an ideal place in which to fashion and parade one's identity.[155]

Membership of institutions such as the Royal Society could also put one ahead in the status-race that was run as much on cultural as landed capital.[156] In such scenarios, contributing to or discoursing on cabinets could open the doors to exclusive social circles, and enable the formation of elite collective identity. Such effects led, in some perspectives, to the corruption of the institution, which became 'proud and great' and lost sight of its earlier vision of objective academia.[157] This is not implausible considering the pervasiveness of material culture as a marker of status in early modernity, since an empirically-minded institution could not have functioned without the assistance of wealthy patrons and members.[158] Institutional cabinets could thus be extremely exclusive affairs, permitting privileged access to only a select few, and confirming their control over sociability, knowledge, the fruits of commerce, and, by extension, the entire socio-political edifice of empire. Fig. 3.3 shows this clearly: the jawbone of a mastodon in the British Museum is not marked with a conventional catalogue number, rather, it is inscribed with the issue of the *Philosophical Transactions* in which it was discussed. The jawbone was thus the exclusive intellectual property of the members of the Royal Society, which by implication had great enough clout to overwrite the authority of the museum itself! An elaborate etiquette was

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[154] Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*, p. 38.
[155] Richard Fortey, "Archives of Life: Science and Collections", in Bill Bryson, ed. *Seeing Further: The Story of Science and the Royal Society* (London, 2010) p. 189.
[156] Deborah E. Harkness, "'Strange' Ideas and 'English' Knowledge: Natural Science Exchange in Elizabethan London" in Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen, eds. *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science and Art in Early Modern Europe* (London, 2002) p. 147.
[157] Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710,* p. 38.
[158] For the role of material culture in the status race, see Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2005); Linda Levy Peck, *Consuming Splendour: Society and Culture in Seventeenth Century England* (Cambridge, 2005) p. 156; Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 99.

developed around visiting elite collections, where the inducted individual would display an introductory letter and receive an exclusive guided tour as well as intimate discussions. This was not dissimilar to the hospitality Evelyn received on the continent, which he reciprocated to continental visitors as a committee member in the Royal Society.[159] Conversely, the Uffenbach brothers' disappointing reception in London can possibly be put down to their not having previously made the appropriate acquaintances.[160] Practices such as these facilitated the self-fashioning of the individual and the formation of learned societies. These, at their best, were generous and productive affairs, facilitating international exchanges of information, items, and goodwill, though at their worst could be small-minded, vainglorious, and self-indulgent.

Curios, unlike lineages, were not the exclusive property of the elite. They were obtained through travel and trade, and emitted the unmistakable odour of commerce. As merchants and professionals sought social elevation by donating or collecting, so also did the financial and social elite look to cabinets as showcases for potential new commodities.[161] Specimens were thus both scientific sample and sample product, and the cabinets became the place to find examples of (and knowledge about) the most lucrative cultivar, the newest simple, or the most decadent luxury. Exotic items were never completely free from commercial interest: even regular correspondence with itinerant friends mentions opinions on 'the best Marchandise that is in all

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[159] In just a few instances, he was granted admittance to the exclusive *Tresoro San Marco* in Italy in June 1645 by the good graces of the French Ambassador and the Earl of Arundel took him as his protégé as he guided him through the gardens of Mantua. Later, he took the Portuguese Ambassador and Count de Castel Mellor round the Royal Society's Repository. Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn,* Vol. II, pp. 330-2, 455-8; Vol. IV, p. 133

[160] von Uffenbach, *London in 1710*, pp. 126-7.

[161] Claudia Swan, "Collecting *Naturalia* in the Shadow of Early Modern Dutch Trade", in Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan, eds. *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia, 2005) pp. 229-30.

the Indies'.[162] Sloane and Woodward likewise stocked their cabinets full of *materia medica*, reflecting their interest as physicians into the medicinal application of exotic products. Sloane's *Voyage to Jamaica* thus reads half like a catalogue and half like a receipt-book, as each new specimen, where encountered, is dissected not just for scientific gratification but also mined for its practical potential. Nor were the crudest of monetary evaluations absent from the cabinets: Peacham advised that an appraisal of an item's worth was an essential part of its appreciation; likewise, Evelyn consistently notes in his diary the stupendous value of the things he has seen, sometimes giving detailed justifications for the relative worth of each.[163]

In all these respects, the cabinets functioned as a cultural interface in which elites could dabble in trade and acknowledge alternative forms of knowledge without being stained by the taint of commerce. In such spaces, traders' and travellers' voices were accorded due respect as authorities over the objects and phenomena with which they had come into contact, and an international intelligentsia could find common ground.[164] Elite collectors, for instance, adopted the humble apothecary's convention of suspending specimens from the ceiling. Arguably, cabinets may be regarded 'safe' space or a 'quarantine zone' where items and knowledge, but also potentially transgressive messages, could be contained under the aegis of wonder. Thus, the

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[162] Hakluyt, Richard, *The Original Writings and Correspondence of the Two Richard Hakluyts,* ed. E. G. R. Taylor (London, 1935) p. 101.
[163] Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman*, pp. 104-5. Also see Evelyn's viewing of three Turkish horses in St James Park in Dec 1684. This was a spectacle in itself and observed in minute detail, but it is interesting to note how he ends his account with precise valuations of the horses and notes about their production and trade. Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, Vol. IV, pp. 398-9.
[164] E. S. Shaffer, "'To Remind Us on China'—William Beckford, Mental Traveller on the Grand Tour: The Construction of Significance in Landscape" in Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon, eds. *Transports: Travel, Pleasure and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830* (New Haven, 1996) p. 220; see also, Antonio Barrera, "Local Herbs, Global Medicines: Commerce, Knowledge, and Commodities in Spanish America" in Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen, eds. *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science and Art in Early Modern Europe* (London, 2002) pp. 163-181; J. Worth Estes, "The Reception of American Drugs in Europe, 1500-1650" in Simon Varey, Rafael Chabrán and Dora B. Weiner, eds. *Searching for the Secrets of Nature: The Life and Works of Dr. Francisco Hernández* (Stanford, 2000) pp. 111-121.

curious was a space that could harbour 'hidden transcripts'.[165] Henry Hawks recounts, as one of many 'great merveils', a tale where poor mens' plight under the hand of imperial authorities was avenged by an act of nature. These men had discovered a silver mine in Nova Hispania, but their find was requisitioned by the local officer who had gotten wind of the affair. Upon return with equipment and manpower, however, the officer found the site had disappeared. The King, on hearing the news, decreed that henceforth no one would be deprived of their finds by petty officers, representing a victory (even if Pyrrhic) for the erstwhile underdog.[166] In Sloane's account even the voice of the slave is respected for the knowledge he can offer on botanical specimens.[167] This suggests a degree of 'transculturation', where the cabinet was one of the liminal spaces in which global relations were negotiated.[168] Although parlance of this kind was necessarily asymmetrical, it is still heartening to read that even the considerate Sloane was criticised by his peers for speaking 'disrespectfully' of the Jamaican settlers![169]

Elite networks of sociability could be both constructive and destructive. They could foster friendship and understanding with both peers and subordinates, and were the witness to acts of great generosity and the most exalted exchange of ideas. However, they could also be parochial, jealous, and competitive, and were in certain ways thoroughly inadequate forums for the formation of true knowledge. Sloane's experience bears this out. Charitable to a fault, he wrote to other virtuosi offering help with their cataloguing enterprises and gifting them with items

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[165] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, 1990).
[166] Hakluyt, *The Original Writings and Correspondence*, p. 103.
[167] Sir Hans Sloane, *A voyage to the islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, with the natural history of the Herbs and Trees, Four-Footed Beasts, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, &c. of the last of those islands; to which is prefix'd an introduction, wherein is an account of the inhabitants, air, waters, diseases, trade, &c. of that Place, with some Relations concerning the Neighbouring Continent, and Islands of America. Illustrated with the figures of the things describ'd, which have not been heretofore engraved; In large Copper-Plates as big as the Life. By Hans Sloane, M. D. Fellow of the College of Physicians and Secretary of the Royal-Society. In two volumes. Vol. II.* (London, 1725) p. 89.
[168] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London, 1992).
[169] Sloane, *A Voyage to Jamaica*, Vol. II, pp. xv-xvi.

from his own collection.[170] Yet he also found the cabinets and conversation 'not so satisfactory', and while he internalised its intellectual underpinnings, desired to travel and see for himself.[171] Furthermore, he found to his great dismay that some of his purported friends some were 'so very curious, as to desire to carry part [of his collection] home with them privately, and injure that they left'.[172]

Plebeians in Cabinets

A horrified Zacharias von Uffenbach attempted to visit the Ashmolean on 23 August 1710, but found it infested with 'all sorts of country-folk, men and women, … for the *leges* that hang up on the door *parum honeste liberaliter* allow everyone to go in'.[173] He and his brother had to return again when it was not market-day and thus less crowded. Earlier, they had similarly complained in the Bodleian about casual browsers who had not paid for entry, including 'peasants and womenfolk, who gaze at the library as a cow might gaze a new gate with such a noise and tramping of feet that others are much disturbed.'[174] Quite unlike the continental collections he was used to, these English cabinets were rowdy and undiscerning in their admissions, thus allowing for a whole motley crew of disordered plebeians to overrun the space.

[170] See, for instance, Sloane's letter to Ray, Nov 1684, in John Ray and Francis Willughby, *Philosophical letters between the late learned Mr. Ray and several of his ingenious correspondents, Natives and Foreigners. To which are added those of Francis Willughby Esq; The Whole consisting of many curious Discoveries and Improvements in the History of Quadrupeds, Birds, Fishes, Insects, Plants, Fossiles, Fountains, &c. Published by W. Derham, Chaplain to his Royal Highness George Prince of Wales, and F. R. S.* (London, 1718) pp. 170.
[171] Sloane, *A Voyage to Jamaica*, Vol. I, p. A.
[172] Sloane *Jamaica* V2 xvi-xvii
[173] Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710*, p. 24.
[174] Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710*, p. 3.

Many English collections, including private collections such as those of Robert Hubert and Mr Charleton, were open to the public for money.[175] The Tradescants' and later the Ashmolean charged sixpence for entry and the Bodleian eight shillings for privileged access. These prices were fairly within reach for the everyman, when an agricultural labourer could expect to earn about eight pence for a day's work in summer, and seven in winter. There seems therefore to have been a certain democracy about English collecting. This is illustrated most dramatically by Sloane leaving his collection to the state and founding a national museum 'tending to the glory of God… and the benefit of mankind.'[176] Even Woodward in his will endowed a lectureship at Cambridge to 'shew [his] *Fossils* gratis, to all such curious and intelligent Persons as shall desire a view of them'.[177] Even the royal houses, as Platter notes, were open to fee-paying visitors.[178] While some collections, such as the Royal Society's Repository, remained restricted from public view, there was certainly no lack of opportunity for the casual gawker to sate his curiosity. Beyond institutionalised collections, there were also many other sites in which curiosities and mini-collections were displayed, ranging from commodity displays in coffee houses, private residences and public parks to curiosity shops, markets, itinerant performances and apothecaries' shops.[179] As such, the experience of the lower classes in cabinets cannot be ignored, for even if they did not leave documentary traces, their presence must have been significant.

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175 Evelyn is a rather big fan of Charleton's collection, and visits it for the first time in 1686. Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, Vol. IV, pp. 531-2; Vol. V pp. 13-14.
176 Sloane, *The Will*, pp. 2-3.
177 Woodward, *Part of the Late Dr. Woodward's Will*, pp. 9-10. The fact that both mens' wills were published in numerous editions suggests a general interest in their collections and also indicates how much collections were public affairs.
178 Platter, *Travels in England*, pp. 160-1.
179 At the risk of seeing collections everywhere, one may regard commodity displays, smaller scale holdings, or market-day shows as other instances of curious seeing. If one does so, though, a multiplicity of new examples arises. Evelyn's experience bears this out: amongst others, he visited Pepys' private collection in 1700, saw a lion play with a lamb in London in 1654, met a Jesuit who had a small collection in Deptford in 1664, saw a set of Japanese items in the Duchess of Portsmouth's collection in 1683, and visited the curiosity shop called Noah's Ark in Paris. Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, Vol. V, pp. 427-8; Vol. III, p. 93; Vol. III, pp. 373-5; Vol. IV, p. 343; Vol. II, p. 100. Other sites of seeing would also have existed, with varying degrees of public accessibility.

Any attempt to reconstruct the popular experience of cabinet viewing must be derived from 'elite' sources read against the grain. This can at best only be a tentative exercise, but one that could prove constructive. Of the sources I have examined, the Uffenbach account gives the greatest insight into this phenomenon, although it is written in poison pen—that is to say, with a great degree of disdain for which allowance has to be made. This would necessitate an exercise in historical imagination, which of course must be carried out with due caution, though in so doing one might be able to resurrect lower-class ways of seeing that were just as, if not more, important than elite ones.

Uffenbach's image of the peasant wandering into a cabinet dull as a cow may well have been valid. Especially when visited on market-day, the cabinet could have operated like a wonder-show or circus, as cheap and mindless entertainment for the masses. Without a guide and without privileged access to special items, the lower classes would have to walk through the halls unmediated, subject to the full sensory assault and a seemingly disarrayed assemblage of items. Yet perhaps awe and incredulity are underrated responses to the cabinets. Even the critical Uffenbach does not overly question the hand of a siren he sees in the Ashmolean, and records the Siamese twin lamb without a hint of irony. If even the learned John Evelyn found it 'impossible to remember all, or take particular notice' of much in the clutter of a cabinet, perhaps it may not be too condescending or unreasonable to consider that the vegetable-seller's response to the Ashmolean would have been sheer dumbfounded wonderment.[180] On the other hand, one may also consider the well-documented spread of education and print in early modern

[180] Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, Vol. II, pp. 52-4.

England.[181] Coupled with the consideration that travel writing and natural history publications found a wide reception, it is reasonable to assert that not all non-elite cabinet viewers were of the wide-eyed, open-mouthed sorts. They would have had varying educational attainments and exposure to knowledge, and could at least have approximated some of the modes of seeing that elites affected.

On another level, accounts of plebeian viewing may also throw some light on elite practices themselves. Uffenbach observed quite cannily in the Ashmolean that its catalogue was sorely inadequate whilst its collection in fairly good repair, whiles the Royal Society's impressive catalogue only paved the way for disappointment in a dusty hall full of damaged and decomposing items.[182] Social inclusivity was possibly thus an enabling factor for the collections, collectors, their housing institutions as well as the general public. Comparing the Ashmolean, which charged entrance fees, and the Repository, which was exclusive, one may conclude that opening to the public could provide the crucial incentive and funds for the upkeep of collections. The public would also have benefited, gaining exposure and possibly also an education. Additionally, Uffenbach's complaint that 'the people impetuously handle everything' is a useful reminder of how far early modern collections are removed from the modern 'see, don't touch' museological paradigm.[183] It is crucial to understand, however, that Uffenbach's problem was not with the touching of the items *per se*, but rather that this was done as a disorderly, uninformed and unsupervised 'grabbing'.[184] Curiosity collections were, after all,

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[181] For more on the topic, see: Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford, 2000); David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1980), Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Early Modern England* (Athens, Ga., 1981), Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge, 1991).
[182] von Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710*, p. 31; von Uffenbach, *London in 1710*, pp. 97-8.
[183] von Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710,* p. 31.
[184] von Uffenbach, *Oxford in 1710*, p. 31.

dynamic, multisensory affairs, and where the virtuosi would have been encouraged to handle and sniff at the items they were viewing.

If a creature was born with two heads, did this mean that it had twice the brainpower, that it had half the mobility, that it was a sign from God, or that it was a monstrosity? When two virtuosi or two plebeians came to discuss the said creature, did they have twice the knowledge, twice the ignorance, or vested interests in Siamese twin trafficking? In English curiosity collections, any or all of the above conclusions might indeed be true, or at least plausible. The viewing of curiosity cabinets could take many forms, whether theoretical, sociable, ignorant, or class-based. There was a great plurality in the ways of seeing, as well as a vast array of interactions and intimations that curiosity collections could facilitate, operating on both local and global levels, sometimes to the benefit of the cabinets and their viewers, and sometimes to their detriment. Ultimately, visiting a collection was an individual experience, and negotiated according to one's personality, prior knowledge, and social milieu. Beyond individual experience, however, it will be useful to consider a wider definition of the 'curious' and a 'collection' to include personal collections such as Evelyn's or Pepys', or even public commodity displays. This will yield a more genuinely representative impression of participation, and assist in our understanding of the concept of curiosity as manifested in the early modern England.

IV

'Love-children of Lions and Panthers': The Cabinet in Society

The Royal Society's collection boasted a creature that 'as he goes, always keeps the *Claws* of his fore-feet turned up from the ground,' and which is bred captive in Tartary 'for the hunting of *Deer*, and other Beasts.'[185] One might with some surprise discover that this creature, supposedly 'begotten by a *Lion* upon a *Panther*,' and allegedly numerous in Africa and Syria, is no stranger than the magnificent leopard.[186] Golden as a lion but marked with spots, he was unfortunate to have escaped the studious eye of Nehemiah Grew, who corrected the false attributions of horned hares, dog-goats and other improbably hybrid creatures.[187] In the halls of Gresham College, where the Society met, one could have observed another strange creature, this time a live specimen. It was beady-eyed and constantly hunched over, showed sophisticated use of tools and had a penchant for examining fleas, bread mould, and other unpleasant things. This was the celebrated and misunderstood Robert Hooke, who was similarly seen as both social pariah and scientific genius. As ways of seeing items varied enormously, so did society's appreciation of curiosity collections and their surrounding practices. As very visible public affairs, they were subject to the same societal scrutiny as the polymath would devote to a specimen.

Methodology

This chapter seeks to situate the curiosity collection in the early modern cultural milieu, and to examine a range of literary and visual sources voicing a range of perspectives in order to pinpoint the varying ways in which they catalogued the changing concepts of the world, as well as of English domestic society. As this is only a brief chapter and thus also selective in sources, it would be fitting to defer to Benedict's exhaustive study of the cabinet in popular literature, as

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[185] Nehemiah Grew, *Musaeum Regalis Societatis, or, A catalogue and description of the natural and artificial rarities belonging to the Royal Society and preserved at Gresham Colledge made by Nehemiah Grew ; whereunto is subjoyned The comparative anatomy of stomachs and guts by the same author.* (London, 1685) p. 12.
[186] Grew, *Musaeum Regalis Societatis*, p. 12.
[187] Grew, *Musaeum Regalis Societatis*, p. 25.

well as Swan's masterful meditation on collecting and the formation of personal identity, as greater authorities on the sources and popular culture itself.[188] Benedict has explored the curious as an inquisitive, empowering, but also transgressive and controversial concept in early modern culture, and Swann's analysis has highlighted how the authorship of a collection, its catalogue, or literature about collections, could prove empowering to the early modern individual. I intend to build on these insights by introducing a global element to the analysis, and to study the material for its implications on early modern globalization.

Collections were a major cultural force in early modern England, and were lauded and lambasted by various groups up and down the social spectrum. Public attention to the collections grew in intensity after the Reformation, for reasons that were shaped by personal, social and economic factors, but which also hinged on the cabinets' elitism and the exclusivity and usefulness (or lack thereof) of the knowledge they produced. Once again, these views were often contradictory and subject to change, and an individual could show supreme disdain for one particular aspect of collecting, yet embrace wholeheartedly or even utilise another of its facets. On a more unspoken level, cabinets were adopted into the real *theatrum mundi*, and infiltrated contemporary culture in many subconscious ways. As metaphor or icon they could prove particularly potent, and they were fairly ubiquitous as shorthand for a variety of cultural institutions and values. They could represent the supreme, fruitful and wonderful power of the royal and the religious, show the all-encompassing industry of the new science, or quite simply serve as an effective distillation of the wanton buffoonery of the idle rich. If one broadens the definition of a collection to include not just large institutional holdings but also personal assemblages, transient displays at coffee-houses and seasonal commodity displays, it is easy to understand the currency and effectiveness of these

[188] Barbara M. Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Enquiry* (Chicago, 2001); Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2001).

views.[189] As English collections were widely accessible affairs, the cabinet passed into common cultural parlance on a very broad scale.

Given this wide exposure, it is also possible to consider the cabinets' role as a cultural interface, mediating between the "world" and "home". This could be both positive and negative. Whilst the collections could be places in which true understanding and respect could be granted to the outside world, they could also, especially in their later incarnations, be imperial spaces and foster the worst forms of "Othering". This was by no means a static or inevitable process, nor did it follow a fixed developmental pattern. Rather, they were spaces of negotiation in which each viewer's—and indeed also each object's— experience was different. Even if their geographical situation meant that they were biased towards European interpretive power, they nonetheless retained the potential to broker a more inquisitive and humble appreciation of the world, rather than produce an army of hard-line imperialists. As such, this study's timeline is significant. Sloane's death in 1750 and the founding of the British Museum seems to have marked a turning point, heralding a semiotic and practical shift in which the collection changed from curiosity-house into nationalistic temple. It is also from the mid eighteenth-century that empire building starts to take on its most aggressive forms, and the playful cabinet is metamorphosed into the sober, absolutist museum which categorically Othered not only the foreign, but also its lower-class visitors.[190] The early modern period, perhaps inspired by the Renaissance tendency to notice

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[189] It is possible that many more people owned smaller-scale collections in England; even looking at the gentry, one sees many unexamined cabinets that are ripe for the picking. John Evelyn's little cabinet is one such example. He also describes seeing many exotic items on open display in London as well as exotic animals being sported for a small fee. For coffee house exhibitions, which endure through the eighteenth century and are closely related to early Crystal Palace- type commodity displays, see David Murray, *Museums: Their History and their Use, with a Bibliography and a List of Museums in the United Kingdom,* Vol. I (Glasgow, 1904) pp. 170-2.

[190] Durrans discusses how the British Museum in the late eighteenth century was 'simultaneously a democratic advance and a re-emphasis of the social division of knowledge'. Brian Durrans, "Collecting in British India: A Sceptical View", in Pieter ter Keurs, ed. *Colonial Collections Revisited* (Leiden, 2007) p. 264.

sympathies rather than discrepancies, was a somewhat more tolerant time. Moreover, due to the relatively restricted flow of goods and information, the cabinets, as one of the few sites in which one could encounter the Other at home, were more effective sites of negotiation. As trade and empire expanded, information and items flooded English shores, and the cabinet's authority as well as their presented picture of the world became increasingly challenged.

Cabinets in the spotlight

Earlier representations of collections in popular culture connected closely with the idea of power, luxury, and the marvels of creation.[191] No image demonstrates this more fabulously than the portrait of Queen Elizabeth that hangs in Hardwick Hall (Fig. 4.1). The Queen, who was well known to 'take pleasure in such strange and lovely curios,' is decked out with exquisite and exotic items, from pearls and precious metals to a lovely feather fan (possibly of West Indian origin).[192] Strikingly, her bodice and underskirt are embroidered with a veritable curiosity cabinet, with exotic birds and crabs and horticulturally accurate plants, though a few medieval monsters also feature. As a gift from the accomplished Countess of Shrewsbury, this piece of needlework was not just an example of stunning handiwork, but also demonstrated the donor's learning by representing her engagement with new scientific paradigms, even though errant sea monsters still managed to slip the net. Worn in an official portrait, the garment was a powerful iconographical symbol, representing Elizabeth's political dominion over the world and all its creation, and also reinforcing her mandate as God's representative on earth and sovereign over all.

[191] Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*, pp. 18, 20.
[192] Thomas Platter *Thomas Platter's Travels in England, 1599*, trans. Clare Williams (London, 1937) p. 226.

Fig. 4.1. Nicholas Hilliard, "The Hardwick Hall Portrait of Elizabeth I of England" (oil on canvas, 1599) Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire

Elizabeth was in many ways a curiosity in herself, prized and powerful, and in her displays of power, collections were a recurring theme.[193] Subsequent monarchs and public figures also continued in this vein. Busino records, for instance, a pageant in London in 1617 where exotic animals were paraded through the streets alongside floats decorated to represent the various continents. One of them was made like a fine castle, and another like 'a beautiful ship, supposed to be just returned from the Indies with its crew and cargo'.[194] Children dressed as Indians threw out nutmegs and dates at the audience, in a ceremony where the connection between trade, power, and material culture was celebrated. The Queen herself, seen on another occasion, was as prized and precious treasure as any other rarity, and Busino could only see her 'from a distant view', like an unprivileged visitor in a museum or botanic garden, for his 'share in these audiences resembled that of those who go to see enclosed gardens through the railings, not being allowed to draw near to have a good view, or to touch the plants.'[195] The collection as a demonstration of power and possession was thus extremely compelling, and one can still feel its reverberations today when one considers the British Museum not only as a source of national pride, but also as a controversial storehouse of "stolen" treasures.

The cabinet's function as a bridge between 'home' and 'the world' seems to have had a fairly positive impact in the early modern period. Beyond the obvious appreciation for the fruits of trade and empire, collections were lauded for being inspirations to travel, and their role in fostering trade and overseas development was acknowledged in travel writing and scientific

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193 Curiosities feature as a common theme in continental pageants as well. For more on the topic, see Mark S. Weil, "Love, Monsters, Movement, and Machines: The Marvellous in Theatres, Festivals, and Gardens", in Joy Kenseth, ed. *The Age of the Marvellous* (Chicago, 1991), pp. 159-178.
194 Horatio Busino and Thomas Platter, *The Journals of Two Travellers in Elizabethan and early Stuart England*, ed. Peter Razzell (London, 1995) pp. 118-9.
195 Busino, *The Journals*, p. 129.

treatises, many of which relied on the cabinet as a training ground or laboratory.[196] The cabinets and their paradigms heavily influenced the literary genres concerned with the exotic. Sloane's account of Jamaica, Ray's treatise on plants and Plot's *Natural History of Oxfordshire* all exhibit a particular cataloguing impulse as well as a penchant for accurate observation and detailed reportage which the cabinets encouraged. As such the collections propagated new stylistic tropes as much as new modes of inquiry.

Not all was rosy, however. From the mid seventeenth century onwards, the cabinet and its adherents were regarded with more scepticism. The civil war was a decisive phase in this process. Owners of large collectors were more likely to be members of the upper classes, or, as in Tradescant's case, have close affiliations with them.[197] As such the cabinets were stained with the tint of the decadent royalist, an indelible mark that set them apart as the self-indulgent pursuit of the idle rich and as spaces of illicit investigation, an accusation that remained even when the monarchy was restored. The ignorant, posturing upper class collector became a stock character in literary productions such as Shadwell's play *The Virtuoso* (1676). Narrow-minded and self-obsessed, the virtuoso uses bottles of air from every part of the country as a substitute for travel, and reads by the phosphorescence off a rotting leg of pork.[198] Absurdly comic in itself, the satire stung deeper for being a transparent parody of actual virtuoso endeavours, such as Woodward's

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[196] Sir Hans Sloane, *A voyage to the islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica, with the natural history of the Herbs and Trees, Four-Footed Beasts, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles, &c. of the last of those islands; to which is prefix'd an introduction, wherein is an account of the inhabitants, air, waters, diseases, trade, &c. of that Place, with some Relations concerning the Neighbouring Continent, and Islands of America. Illustrated with the figures of the things describ'd, which have not been heretofore engraved; In large Copper-Plates as big as the Life. By Hans Sloane, M. D. Fellow of the College of Physicians and Secretary of the Royal-Society. In two volumes. Vol. II.* (London, 1725); John Ray, *Catalogus plantarum Angliae, et insularum adjacentium tum indigenas, tum in agris passim cultas complectens in quo praeter synonyma necessaria facultates quoque summatim traduntur, unà cum observationibus & experimentis novis medicis & physicis / opera Joannis Raii* (London, 1670).

[197] Richard Hamblyn, "Private Cabinets and Popular Geology: The British Audiences for Volcanoes in the Eighteenth Century" in Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon, eds. *Transports: Travel, Pleasure and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830* (New Haven, 1996) p. 185.

[198] Thomas Shadwell, *The Virtuoso a Comedy, Acted in the Duke's Theatre*, (London, 1676) pp. 52, 72-3, 78; Benedict, *Curiosity*, p. 47-50.

request for samples of seawater from around the world.[199] Even fellow gentlemen joined in the fray, and Sir Phillip Skippon wrote frustratedly to Ray about coffee-house societies sabotaging Royal Society experiments, in this instance 'debauching' the man involved in a sheep-to-human blood transfusion, with the consequence of 'discredit[ing] the Royal Society, and [making] the Experiment ridiculous.'[200] The virtuosi were seen as intellectual magpies, picking up items and information without discrimination and wasting their wealth and leisure in fruitless pursuits.[201] Ironically, only the threat of sending his lover's letters to Gresham College prompts Shadwell's virtuoso to relent, suggesting how social standing, rather than the noble pursuit of knowledge, was his ultimate motivation.[202] Whether this was the case or not would have varied according to the individual, though the stage representation was humiliation enough for Boyle, who wrote in his diary that in a performance of the play he was so clearly spoofed that 'people almost pointed' as they laughed.[203]

There was an element of truth in these performances, since the cabinets and their owners did indeed encourage the fantastic, the esoteric, and the useless. The Tradescants' various carved cherry stones, for instance, would not have served any scientific inquiry or any public good, and many of the Royal Society's investigations would have been laughable in any perspective.[204]

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[199] John Woodward, *Brief instructions for making observations in all parts of the world as also, for collecting, preserving, and sending over natural things : being an attempt to settle an universal correspondence for the advancement of knowledg both natural and civil / drawn up at the request of a person of honour and presented to the Royal Society* (London, 1696) pp. 2-3.

[200] John Ray and Francis Willughby, *Philosophical letters between the late learned Mr. Ray and several of his ingenious correspondents, Natives and Foreigners. To which are added those of Francis Willughby Esq; The Whole consisting of many curious Discoveries and Improvements in the History of Quadrupeds, Birds, Fishes, Insects, Plants, Fossiles, Fountains, &c. Published by W. Derham, Chaplain to his Royal Highness George Prince of Wales, and F. R. S.* (London, 1718) pp. 27-8.

[201] Margaret T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia, 1964). p. 115.

[202] Shadwell, *The Virtuoso*, p. 96.

[203] Quoted in Gillian Darley, *John Evelyn: Living for Ingenuity* (New Haven, 2006) p. 250.

[204] John Tradescant, *Musaeum Tradescantinum: or, A collection of rarities. Preserved at South- Lambeth neer London by John Tradescant* (London, 1656) pp. 37, 38, 39.

Without self-knowledge and a clear practical purpose, even collecting's laudable aspects, such as its promotion of trade, could be cast as decadent and avaricious, and social aspirants who sought to ingratiate themselves through collecting were the very worst sorts of pretentious arriviste. Arguably, it was this aspect of collecting that was most disapproved of, since it departed from the empirical principles that were meant to grant them authority in the first place. Superfluous and self-indulgent pursuits were meant to be eradicated with rationalism, and Bacon chided in *The Advancement of Learning* that 'if any man shall think by view and inquiry into these sensible and material things to attain that light whereby he may reveal unto himself the nature or will of God, then indeed he is spoiled by vain philosophy: for the contemplation of God's creatures and works produceth… knowledge; but having regard to God, no perfect knowledge, but wonder, which is broken knowledge.'[205] These pretensions, to Bacon, were even worse if the ends of knowledge were status and self-glorification. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the scepticism was rising to a chorus, and in the early eighteenth the Earl of Shaftesbury, the Scriberlians and other wits were openly denouncing the virtuosi as outdated, blinkered, and supremely ignorant fools.[206]

Curiosity as a sight likewise came under heavy fire, and the metaphor of telescopes and microscopes was commonly employed to display its faults.[207] In a cabinet surrounded by such equipment, a man could purport to see the smallest of insects and the heavenly bodies, but would fail to see what was directly before him. Even as early as 1622, Peacham cautioned his would-be gentlemen that the study of far-off places and things was a dangerous pursuit. A

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[205] Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford, 1996) p. 125.

[206] For Shaftesbury, see Stephen Bann, *Under the Sign: John Bargrave as Collector, Traveller, and Witness* (Ann Arbor, 1994) p. 2; Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope: Vol. III: The Dunciad, 1728, and the Dunciad Variorum, 1729,* ed. Rumbold, Valerie (London, 2007), *passim*.

[207] James V. Mirollo, "The Aesthetics of the Marvellous: The Wondrous Work of Art in a Wondrous World", in Joy Kenseth, ed. *The Age of the Marvellous* (Chicago, 1991) p. 62.

fascination with exotica prevented the Englishman from understanding more about himself and his native country, and therefore made him the subject of ridicule of continental intellectuals.[208] Eighteenth-century wits exploited the notion of the marvellous to suit their own craft, delighting in their imaginative turns of mind rather than the exotic creatures of a cabinet, and appropriating the mantle of Creator through creative endeavour. The virtuosi, in their reckoning, were dull, plodding creatures of the past, with no imagination or perspective. The unmarried, bent, and bespectacled figure of Hooke became a specimen of social monstrosity to the wits, for his seeming detachment from the English reality as well as his study of fleas, flies and the like characterised him as a curiosity better suited to unlearned past as well as to deranged virtuoso circles.[209] It is perhaps ironic that one of his most venomous opponents was Alexander Pope, who was himself a social pariah for his Catholicism and physical disability. Perhaps Pope's vehemence derived from the fact that he saw his own work as constructive and aesthetically positive, and thus elevating him above his unfortunate status. Hooke's, on the contrary was perceived to be anachronistic and deformed, turning its worker into ever more of a beast.

Cabinets continued to fascinate nonetheless, and widespread interest for collecting and collectors remained throughout the period. Catalogues, reams of correspondence, wills, treatises and personal papers of collectors and their friends were printed and disseminated, with some reaching multiple editions, such was the public appetite. Even the critics had internalised some of the cabinets' findings: Young, who regarded Sloane as 'the foremost *toyman* of his time' and the Ashmolean a 'baby house', in a later section of the same satire employed Boyle's experiment

[208] Henry Peacham, *The Compleat Gentleman, Fashioning him absolut, in the most necessary and commendable qualities concerning minde or body, that may be required in a noble gentleman. Whereunto is annexed a description of the order of a maine battaile or pitched field, eight severall wayes: with the art of limming and other additions newly enlarged. By Henry Peacham Master of Arts: sometime of Trinitie Colledge in Cambridge*, (London, 1634) p. 51, see also Craig Ashley Hanson, *The English Virtuoso: Art, Medicine, and Antiquarianism in the Age of Empiricism* (Chicago, 2009).
[209] Benedict, *Curiosity*, pp. 67-8.

of cats in air pumps as a metaphor for the lack of cultural sustenance that materialistic people lived on.[210] Collections and their cultural milieu were thus accepted and rejected on various levels in a nuanced and individual fashion, and we may still see this at play in the field of museology, as theories and practices of display and view grapple with the cabinet's paradigms, at times embracing and at times rejecting its adoptive predecessor.

The changing public perception of Sloane perhaps illustrates this dynamic most vividly. In his lifetime, Sloane was satirised to no end for being an old-style collector with a 'passion for absurdity', who quested for such forgeries as 'That painted coat, which JOSEPH *never* wore', and even gave as his daughter's portion 'a rich *shell*'.[211] However, this reputation changed rapidly upon his death and the foundation of the British Museum, where he was transformed from selfish, superannuated scholar to national hero.[212] His collection likewise metamorphosed from a collection of rubbish to a celebrated icon of national heritage and a noble repository of knowledge for the public, a view that remains with us today.

'Home' and 'Away': Truths, half-truths, and untruths

Curiosity collections were undeniably international affairs, and, as previously discussed, could be a place for the productive contemplation of the world just as much as an arena in which parochial status contests could be fought out. The merits of globality were highly contested, however, as the dizzying speed of early modern exploration and the explosive growth of a

[210] Edward Young, *The Love of Fame the Universal Passion. In Seven Characteristical Satires. Together with Ocean, an ode, and A sea-piece, Containing I. The British Sailor's Exultation. II. His Prayer before Engagement. By Dr. Edward Young,* (London, 1778) pp. 42-3, 53.
[211] Young, *The Love of Fame*, pp. 42-3.
[212] See also Benedict, *Curiosity*, p. 181; Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*, pp. 14-15.

consumer society set contemporaries' teeth on edge.[213] In many ways, the cabinets' internationalism was unsettling and suspect, leading the gentry to ignore or undervalue the study of English phenomena. As such, Peacham's caution, which was echoed by other polemicists, can be seen as a proto-nationalistic (perhaps even 'little Englander') riposte to the depth of contemporary interest in the world. Stubbe, a dedicated critic of the Royal Society, took this a step further to suggest in 1670 that the collection and study of exotic artefacts was a new form of idolatry, and an attempt to bring back popery through the philosophy of seeing the spiritual in the material.[214] As such, the surge in interest in English antiquarianism and natural history can be seen as an effort to remedy this imbalance, where intensely localised fields of study employed the same methods and were written about in the same style, but fundamentally rejected the exotic in favour of the local.[215] In a sense, then, collections could be too international, fostering a sealing of borders rather than syncretism and exchange. However, this is surely too narrow a judgment. Antiquarianism, natural history, and curiosity cabinets were never discrete fields, and many curiosity collections also displayed their owners' interest in fossils, numismatics, and local history. Individuals engaged in such enquiry also corresponded freely with each other, exchanging items and ideas. Robert Plot is a prime example of how an individual could undertake both domestic and international study: while best known for his thoroughly researched volume on the natural histories of Oxfordshire and Staffordshire, he also served as the first keeper of the Ashmolean, and lectured in chemistry at Oxford.

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213 Mirollo, 'The Aesthetics of the Marvellous', p. 62.
214 Henry Stubbe, *A censure upon certain passages contained in the History of the Royall Society, as being destructive to the established religion and Church of England whereunto is added the letter of a virtuoso in opposition to the censure, A reply unto the letter aforesaid, and A reply unto the praefatory answer of Ecebolius Glanvill, chaplain to Mr. Rouse of Eaton (late member of the Rump Parlament) rectour of Bath, & fellow of the Royall Society : also and answer to the letter of Dr. Henry Moore, relating unto Henry Stubbe physician at Warwick, The second edition corrected & enlarged* (Oxford, 1671) pp. 27-8.
215 David Beck, 'Robert Plot's Investigation of Nature' (unpublished paper, July 2010); for more on antiquarianism and English local history, see also Jan Broadway, "*'No historie so meete': Gentry Culture and the Development of Local History in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Manchester, 2006); Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1995).

Collections could also be a vector of misunderstanding on a different level, spreading untruths and half-truths about the exotic to the general public. The Royal Society's leopard can be seen as an example of this, where false scientific theories were taken as facts in an official collection catalogue. It is perhaps unfair to judge the Royal Society, or indeed any other collection, on this basis, though. Considering that all knowledge is provisional and that verities can only be at best approximated, cabinet-contained concepts are possibly better read as attempts to push the boundaries of knowing, rather than obnoxious or misguided declarations of truth. The reclassification of unicorn horn as that of the narwhal, after all, took place in the cabinet of the Dutch collector Old Worm.[216] It is probably too harsh to judge the Royal Society for misunderstanding the leopard, especially considering the very recent discovery that panthers are melanistic variations of other big cats.

Rather, collections could be positive sites from which information could be disseminated widely and a forum in which opinions from across the social spectrum could be heard. Findlen has argued that they made a previously exclusive realm of textual study accessible to the public, and also accorded respect to the voices of people who had been previously excluded from the transactions of knowledge.[217] This was, particularly the case in England, where the 'tradition of public access' building up to the later endowment of free public museums, ensured that the collections' pedagogical value was even less restricted by social class.[218] The high viewership of the collections, as well as of other exotic items in the public arena, suggests that there was a great

216 William B. Ashworth, Jr., "Remarkable Humans and Singular Beasts", in Joy Kenseth, ed. *The Age of the Marvellous* (Chicago, 1991) p. 128.
217 Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (London, 1994) p. 9.
218 Richard Fortey, "Archives of Life: Science and Collections", in Bill Bryson, ed. *Seeing Further: The Story of Science and the Royal Society* (London, 2010) p. 198.

thirst for knowledge about the world in early modern England, and that the cabinets were able to some degree to satisfy those desires.

The language of the image and the material would have featured prominently in these experiences, serving as a vector for encoded messages that could qualify Eurocentric interpretations and official narratives attributed to certain items. Given that visiting a collection was a highly tactile experience, a contemporary visitor would have been able to learn through the employment of all his senses, rather than just rely on the sense of sight and snippets of textual information, the way we would see in a modern museum.[219] This was important, as items from the wider world were not inert and carried with them a degree of indigenous meaning, which could belie their linguistic representation in catalogues or museum labels. Scholars have previously overlooked or dismissed this function, but the recent emphasis on material culture has led to an increased scrutiny of such items and a new recognition of their potency.[220] Sobrevilla has, for instance, examined the hummingbird as a cultural vector by which pre-Columbian iconography and cultural forms were translated into and adopted into Western culture, challenging the idea that Western interpretations ran roughshod over the whole matrix of native American beliefs.[221] Feather pictures from the West Indies, a common feature in collections, also show this tendency. Used in native religious rituals, these reflected indigenous associations of

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219 Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p. 9.

220 Bleichmar, for instance, argued that objects left their networks of belief behind when they were transferred into a new cultural context. Material culture theorists such as Harvey, Douglas, Isherwood, and Appadurai have subsequently argued for a reinstatement of material objects to the 'heart of life'. Daniela Bleichmar, "Books, Bodies, and Fields: Sixteenth Century Transatlantic Encounters with New World *Materia Medica*" in Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan, eds. *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia, 2005) pp. 83-99; Karen Harvey, "Introduction: History and Material Culture", in Karen Harvey, ed. *History and Material Culture* (London, 2009) pp. 24-47; Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (London, 2002); Arjun Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986).

221 Iris Montero Sobrevilla, 'Knowledge Production and Authority over New World Nature in the Hernandian Corpus, 1571-1651' (unpublished paper, July 2010).

particular birds with divinity and exaltation. Interestingly, as European contact with the Americas grew, as did the Christianising mission, production of feather pictures did not cease. Rather, they came to depict more conventional Christian scenes, effectively translating a foreign ideas and cultural values into an European context.[222] Such items therefore preserved and conveyed elements of exotic culture in a way that resisted official obliteration. The destruction of Meso-American codices and artefacts was no less a travesty, but it was tempered somewhat by the adoption of iconography and material culture through the syncretic space of the cabinet. As such, therefore, the collection could serve as a cultural interface in which goods and knowledge were transacted as well as cultural knowledge itself, albeit on a less conscious level. While in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries cabinets may have served the imperial mission and encouraged caricaturing and 'Othering', it seems that in the early modern period they were brokers of transculturation, even if they could not effect full mutual understanding.[223]

It is important to remember, though, that cabinets were not the only place in which negotiations over the concepts of "self", "other", "home" and "away" could take place.[224] In particular, from the late seventeenth century onwards, curiosity collections' authority as comprehensive stores of information and material culture from foreign lands was beginning to erode. Empire building, the expansion of travel, the proliferation of travel literature and widespread availability of imported commodities made the exotic into an increasingly everyday experience. The world outside English shores was less and less one that was (or could be) contained in a cabinet, but

[222] Tradescant, *Musaeum Tradescantinum*, p. 40.
[223] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 2003); Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, Londa Schiebinger, "Prospecting for Drugs: European Naturalists in the West Indies" in Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan, eds. *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce and Politics in the Early Modern World* (Philadelphia, 2005) p. 125; Pieter ter Keurs, "Introduction: Theory and Practice of Colonial Collecting", in Pieter ter Keurs, ed. *Colonial Collections Revisited* (Leiden, 2007) p. 5.
[224] Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe*, Vol. II: A Century of Wonder, Book 1: The Visual Arts (Chicago, 1970) p. 44.

had entered common parlance and practice and was navigated on more mundane levels. Furthermore, the plurality of ways of seeing meant that the cabinets would have functioned both as syncretic device, propagator if ignorance, and a tool of empire, and it is crucial to note the immense variability of the viewing experience. However, it seems plausible that before the institutionalisation of the British Museum, collections were more sympathetic affairs than aggressive imperial exercises, and could and did indeed broker a breaking down of borders between home and abroad.

Curiosity collections have lost none of their relevance as a cultural force today. The original modes of seeing and of thinking about them may have been replaced, but these old *theatrum mundi* seem to have retained their fascination to the twenty-first century individual. As 'wholes' composed of multiple, seemingly incoherent constituent parts, they speak particularly eloquently as a symbol of postmodern fragmentation, encapsulating in material form the assemblages of random things that make up identities and lives.[225] Neither have the desire for documentary vision or the appetite for the weird and wonderful left us completely, nor have we managed to break free from status-races or the subjective nature of reality.[226] The barnacle-goose, for instance, has retained its name to the present though we no longer think that they hatch from barnacle-trees, a linguistic relic from the early modern period which echoes the way in which collections and their contents retained traces of the past and the unfamiliar, and slipped them seamlessly into the popular consciousness.[227] Curiosity collections, then, were ambiguous

[225] Bann, *Under the Sign*, p. 21; John Elsner, "A Collector's Model of Desire: The House and Museum of Sir John Soane", in John Elsner, and Roger Cardinal, eds. *The Cultures of Collecting* (London, 1994) 155, Benedict, *Curiosity,* p. 252.
[226] Peter Mason, *Before Disenchantment: Images of Exotic Animals and Plants in the Early Modern World* (London, 2009) pp. 22, 222.
[227] Pankhurst describes oyster trees to Hakluyt in 1578; in 1674 Ray and Johnson discuss possible scientific explanations for barnacles, theorising that they are shrimp spawn rather than goose spawn. Richard Hakluyt, *The Original Writings and Correspondence of the Two Richard Hakluyts,* ed. E. G. R. Taylor

creatures, encapsulating well the various contradictions of early modern England. They were a showcase of the period's cosmopolitanism and of the inclusive nature of knowledge formation, but also could bring out the most ignorant and parochially competitive in the individual. As such, collections were as simultaneously familiar and foreign as their contents to the *zeitgeist* of the time as to our own. The early modern cabinet was constructed and reconstructed in a myriad of ways in the contemporary English context. Like the Royal Society's leopard, it could be pariah and misunderstood, but was still a magnificent and powerful creature in itself.

(London, 1935), p. 131; John Ray and Francis Willughby, *Philosophical Letters*, p. 121. For more on barnacle geese and oyster trees, see Mason, *Before Disenchantment*, pp. 65-86.

V

Conclusion: New Worlds and Future Directions

At first glance, early modern English curiosity collections present a confusing image of an undiscriminating and irrational set of items, presented to tease the senses and evoke wonderment in the visitor (Fig. 1.1). This study has attempted to demystify such impressions, and to provide, like a guide, an informed discussion of the exhibit and an indication of the layers of order and meaning apparent in such a display. This has been done through an analysis of collection catalogues, travel writing, personal papers, images, and the material traces that collectors and collections have left. It builds upon existing research that encompasses the psychology of collecting, museology, history, and biography. The sources, as incomplete and fragmentary attributes of the past, were approached in a multi-disciplinary fashion to elucidate their sympathies and coherences, as well as their inconsistencies and contradictions, in order to approach a fuller understanding of the phenomenon. This study has meditated in particular upon the composition of collections, the various experiences of collecting and seeing in the cabinets, and the public perception of curiosity collecting. As global phenomena situated in highly localised contexts, such an approach to collections has also yielded interesting insights into the early modern English cosmology, its attitude towards the world and the focus of its intellectual, social and commercial interests and inquiry. More importantly, the cabinet is also examined as a crucial space in which individuals, institutions, and even English society as a whole, negotiated their identity in the first age of globalisation.

Curiosity cabinets were spaces of directed study, and contained items that bespoke both their collectors' concerns as well as the general interests of early modern English society. A quantitative analysis of the collection catalogues shows that a great majority of items were natural history specimens and that especial interest was shown in the West Indies. This reflects the novelty and commercial value of the newly discovered parts of the globe, and also a particularly scientific and medical interest in the fruits of the earth. Collections also contained very few

chimeras and medieval monsters, suggesting that the concept of the "exotic" had changed from one of misty-eyed religious wonder to a more discerning, rational appreciation for the ingenuity, variety and delight of natural as well human creations. This new empiricism filtered out into the early modern English paradigms, influencing tropes of travel writing, experimentation, and, ultimately, the contemporary mode of seeing.

Collection catalogues were only one angle into the cabinets, however. They presented an artificially ordered view into the collections' contents, and could not replicate the actual experience of collecting and visiting. The choice of items to exhibit or store, the spatial arrangement of these objects, the prior knowledge and exposure of a viewer and his company as well as his social status all modified the practice of seeing in a cabinet. English cabinets were unique because many of them were open to the public for a small fee. As such, previous scholarship, which has focused on elite viewing, has omitted consideration of the wide penumbra of plebeian visiting. Entering a cabinet space (Fig. 1.1) was a highly individual experience, and the visitor's assessment of the exhibits depended on his subscription to different models of thinking, the nature of (or even lack of) the discussions he held about the exhibit, and his personality. Cabinets could have been a quarantine space in which knowledge passed easily from lower classes or foreign countries into English culture and knowledge, though they could also have been one in which class markers were reinforced and ignorance perpetuated. Visiting an early modern curiosity cabinet was a full sensory experience and thus extremely different from a modern museum. In order to more fully understand the functions of a cabinet and their contemporary appropriation, a wider range definition of a 'collection' or 'curiosity' needs to be considered and the full range of participation given due attention.

Curiosity cabinets were controversial entities themselves, and were a prominent feature of early modern English culture. Their metonymic function as microcosms of the world promoted their use as symbols of authority and wealth by monarchs and gentleman-aspirants alike. Their value as research resource also gained them recognition as fountains of wealth and important points of contact with the wider geographical and commercial world. From the mid-seventeenth-century, however, scepticism was being voiced about the elitism of collecting and the self-indulgent uselessness of the 'knowledge' formed within the cabinets' confines. Collections could thus be seen as unproductive and faddish, leading to social pretension and distracting from more immediate concerns. The guileless virtuoso became the stock figure in popular satire, who eschewed self-knowledge and more domestic investigations in favour of myopic or overly fanciful pursuits. A degree of nationalism tinged such accounts, for the cabinet could be too threateningly international and detract from local study. However, this also worked in converse: the foundation of the British Museum was seen as a patriotic act by Sloane, and turned an erstwhile personal assemblage of items into a focal point of national pride.

Curiosity collections could thus be important areas in which contemporaries from a wide range of social backgrounds could come into contact with items and ideas from the far corners of the globe, but without having to set foot outside English soil. The cabinets were therefore an important resource that enabled the formation of identity on an individual or collective level, but also directed the nature of knowledge and lines of inquiry that Englishmen then took along to the rest of the world.

While all attempts have been made to be comprehensive and thorough in this study, it must be pointed out that its brevity has meant that it can only remain unambitious in scope and cautious in its conclusions. The range of sources considered is therefore limited, and focuses on re-

evaluating known sources from a different perspective. These are elite accounts left of major collections, and thus the analysis is necessarily biased towards elite experiences, attitudes, and impressions from large and formalised collections. An attempt has been made to reconstruct a more democratic range of experiences from these sources, and also by tentatively expanding the scope of curious viewing to extrapolate the wider range of participation. However, because this was done in negative from elite sources, one must still consider the source bias inherent in the analysis. Likewise, the reconstruction of personal experience in the cabinets and of their global as well as local significance must also be duly qualified. Collections could indeed function along particular theoretical lines and produce powerful repercussions. It is essential, however, to be cautious in the generalisation. Each encounter was unique, and the collection must be placed in its wider cultural milieu for its significance or insignificance to be fully apprehended.

These considerations must not be seen as disqualifications and debilitations. Rather, they are indicators of new worlds of inquiry, which the historian may subsequently pursue, in order to better understand the early modern English cultures of collecting. This study has attempted a limited endeavour at indicating the wider modes of participation in curious viewing, as well as signalling the cabinets' significance in both national and international dynamics. Broadening the definition of a 'collection' to include more informal holdings such as Pepys' or Evelyn's personal cabinets could provide the historian with a wider range of source material to work with. Manor house records, the correspondence of antiquarians, probate inventories and wills of moneyed or well-connected individuals could thus prove interesting and yield an insight into collecting as practiced on a smaller scale. Widening the definition of the 'curious' to include items in commodity displays, the showing of live animals, and other public exhibitions of imported or interesting items is also another research possibility. Such exhibitions were the more common corollary of elite cabinets, and analysing pamphlets, personal accounts and merchants' record

books could thus give an insight into the cabinets' wider cultural reverberations and more everyday manifestations. The historian must cast her net slightly wider to capture these previously marginal sources and perspectives and preserve them in her analysis. As a collector of traces travelling through the archive, she must select, catalogue and display each fragment effectively and discerningly. It is only then that these new worlds of insight may be charted, and the entire richness and revelation of the subject matter revealed.

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