"WINTERTHUR'S CABINET OF CURIOSITIES"

Case labels and supplementary text Internship project for Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library

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Cabinets of curiosities (also known as curiosity cabinets, wonder cabinets, or wunderkammern) were the predecessors of modern-day museums. These displays emerged during the European Renaissance and could include natural history specimens such as fossils, shells, and bones as well as man-made objects such as coins, sculptures, and paintings. They often occupied not just cabinets in private homes, but entire rooms. The objects might be arranged in a particular order or simply jumbled together. Regardless, they all reflected the curiosities of their creators. What would you display in your curiosity cabinet?

Shown here are some of the eye-catching and unusual objects in the Winterthur collection. Check the notebook nearby to learn more about each one.

To the modern eye, these anatomical drawings are an odd choice for decorating teaware. In the 1700s, however, scientific discoveries were a favorite topic of conversation. The illustrations were likely copied from an anatomy text.

Sugar bowl cover and saucer
Jingdezhen, China
Decorated by Pleun Pira
Amsterdam; 1761
Porcelain
Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont
1968.751.1, .3

These porcelain pieces, originally part of a larger set, were probably specially ordered by a physician or surgeon. The illustration on the saucer is copied from German anatomist Johann Adam Kulmus's Tabulae Anatomicae, originally published in 1731. There are additional pieces in other collections, but together they seem to be a one-of-a-kind group.

For the last 2,000 years, Jingdezhen, China, has been the center of porcelain production. The area around the city boasts a wealth of natural resources, including the "kaolin" clay needed to make high-quality porcelain. The city is also located near a river, providing access to trading routes. Manufacturers in China routinely exported plain white ceramics that were then decorated by artists in European cities such as Amsterdam, where this cover and saucer were done.

The frog in this mug looks like it is ready to leap into the drinker's mouth. Although the mug resembles the one you may use for morning coffee, such vessels in the 1700s could have been found in taverns, holding alcoholic beverages. They were humorous and were used as a joke. The frog would have emerged as a drinker emptied the mug.

Frog mug
England; 1770–90
Earthenware (dipped ware)
Gift of Osborne R. and Mary M. Soverel in memory of Lilian Wilkinson Boschen
1992.40

The style of decoration on the outside of this mug is commonly known as "mochaware" or dipped ware. It was especially popular in the early 1800s and was relatively inexpensive at the time. The green bands were molded with a special tool.

This tureen, shaped like a tub of fish, would have been an unusual addition to a dining table. What do you think it held? Note how the fish finial (for lifting the lid) and the carrying handles are cleverly incorporated as part of the design.

Tureen
Rato factory
Lisbon, Portugal; 1767–71
Earthenware (delftware, faience)
Campbell Collection of Soup Tureens at Winterthur 1996.4.247a,b

Fish were important to the Portuguese, and dried cod served as a mainstay of their diet. So it was not unusual to find fish displayed on their ceramics. Portuguese ceramics were first imported to America in the 1640s to replace the luxuries unavailable to the colonies during the English Civil War. The Rato factory in Lisbon, where this tureen was made, was also known as the Royal Portuguese faience factory at Rato. It was founded in 1767 by Tomas Brunetto, an Italian.

In 1755 an earthquake, fire, and tsunami in Lisbon destroyed the city, making ceramics dating earlier than this tureen nearly impossible to find. A matching tureen, however, is part of the collection at Portugal's National Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon. The design was also printed on a stamp circulated between 1991 and 1999.

During the 1700s, ornamental porcelain figures such as this one were quite fashionable and decorated the homes of wealthy Americans as well as the European gentry. Such "curiosities" were imported in large quantities from China. Europeans and Americans always considered porcelain to be exotic, and the earliest imports could often be found in curiosity cabinets.

Goose figure
Jingdezhen, China; 1750–80
Porcelain (hard-paste)
Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont
1966.606

Wild geese are an important symbol in Chinese society, and the bumps on the bill are markers of breeds. Always seen flying in pairs, the geese signified matrimonial loyalty, and porcelain figures were commonly given as betrothal presents. The migratory patterns of geese made them useful message carriers, and they were depicted on a flag for the Chinese postal system in 1919. The earliest documentation of *live* Chinese geese in the Americas is from 1788, when Gouverneur Morris (a New York delegate to the Continental Congress) wrote to George Washington offering him a gift of two "Chinese Geese."

These cheerful characters aren't just decorative objects, they are actually teapots! If you look closely, you may be able to see the seam around the man's top hat and the woman's bonnet, which unscrew as lids. The upraised arms form the spouts, while the bent arms double as handles.

Teapots
Staffordshire or Yorkshire, England; 1795–1820
Earthenware (pearlware)
Museum purchase with funds provided by the Charles E. Merrill Trust Fund for the Purchase of English Objects
1977.114a,b, .115a,b

Some collectors call these Toby-style teapots—offshoots of the type of jug by the same name. "Toby jugs" originated in the 1760s and took the form of a stout seated man wearing a tricorn hat, which doubled as the pouring spout. This man is sometimes referred to as a "John Bull" teapot, depicting a literary character that personified the nation of Great Britain in the 1700s.

The teapots are decorated in a style similar to Prattware—cream-color wares with hand-painted underglaze decoration in the limited color palette you see here. This type of ceramic was intended for a more lowbrow market in the 1800s, and the stylistic themes are rustic in nature. Pratt-style teapots were fairly uncommon, and Winterthur is lucky enough to have two!

Although these lions look like they are made of solid silver, they are in fact a type of ceramic known as lusterware, which was produced by applying a thin metallic film to a glazed ceramic surface. Manufacturers also produced lusterware in gold, copper, pink, and purple colors with a variety of decorative patterns. These lions have a rather odd shape. Were they meant to be decorative or functional?

Window stops (?)
Staffordshire, England; 1815–25
Earthenware (lusterware)
Gift in recognition of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur J. Gutman 1996.23.4.1, .2

These lions are a mystery. Opinions vary quite a bit as to their intended purpose. Were they used to elevate a piece of furniture off a damp floor? Because they always came in pairs, some experts think they may have functioned as window stops for propping windows open. Still others have even suggested that they supported potted plants. Who knows? Perhaps they were multifunctional objects with a variety of uses. What do you think?

Although the pointed beard on this object (which is called a stirrup cup) contributes to a sinister appearance, the long shape is a clear indicator that the drinking cup was not intended to be set down on a base. Therefore, the cup had to be held in the hands and its contents downed quickly. The figure resembles a satyr, who was associated with Bacchus and excessive alcohol consumption . . . a fitting figure for the intended contents.

Stirrup cup
Staffordshire, England; 1750–80
Earthenware (creamware)
Museum purchase 1959.67

Prior to a hunt or long journey, riders on horseback would often consume a final quick drink such as port or sherry from a peculiar-shaped cup. Consequently, these vessels became known as "stirrup cups." They held only a small amount of liquid and were often made in the shape of animals related to hunting themes, such as hounds or foxes.

The most expensive stirrup cups were made of silver and were ornately molded and engraved. Less expensive options were often ceramic, such as this one. Regardless of the material, they indicated that an owner could afford leisure activities as well as the servants needed to carry and present the cups to the riders.

These tiny utensils were intended for removing earwax, akin to the modern-day cotton swab. The pointed end on the twisted example could possibly be a toothpick, which was often made in combination with other tools of hygiene. On the undecorated spoon, the two notches in the handle may have served as a stop guide to prevent the spoon from going too far into the ear canal.

Ear spoon
England; 1730–90
Silver
Museum purchase
1955.136.45d

Ear spoon
England; 1800–1850
Silver
Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont
1967.526c

These ear spoons were kept in a type of box called an *étui* or *nécessaire*, which was a small case for personal items. The term *étui* was coined in the 1600s but became popular in the 1800s. Most often, a woman used an étui to carry sewing implements. The lids often doubled as pin cushions. Other times, the cases contained toilette utensils such as hairpins, tweezers, and ear spoons. Some have even suggested that ear spoons were included with sewing equipment, since earwax was used to keep the ends of threads from unraveling.

These spoons are made of silver, but étuis and their contents can also be found in ivory, tortoiseshell, wood, leather, and mother of pearl. Ear spoons made from bamboo are still common in East Asian countries today

This lantern made by Louis Aubert is one of only a few made in the shape of a human. Aubert lanterns typically feature ornamental detail, bright colors, and imaginative shapes, such as you see here. But why was it called a “magic” lantern?

Magic lantern
Louis Aubert
Paris, France; 1870–91
Sheet iron, paint, and glass
Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont
1966.627

This object began life as a “magic lantern,” which was a type of projector that combined a light source, focusing lens, and transparent slides. The first documented magic lantern show in America occurred in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1743. The shows, which were popular in the 1800s, could be both educational and entertaining, and the lanterns themselves often had a theatrical or whimsical appearance, as seen here.

The choice of a Chinese man for the shape of the lantern may be attributed to the popularity of “chinoiserie,” the European interpretation of Chinese decoration and style. Most magic lanterns in America were of European origin. In this one, the internal lamp and projection lens have been removed, and the metal shell was refitted with electricity, making it a modern-day lantern.

Mulls (derived from the Scottish word for "mill") contained tobacco that had been ground to a powder. Mulls and snuff boxes were a status symbol for men and came in a variety of materials: silver, silver plate, porcelain, wood, tortoiseshell, and horn. This one looks like a ram's horn. It is small and curved, making it easy to slide into a pocket or fit well into the hand for tobacco "snuffing."

Snuff mull
United Kingdom; 1775–1825
Pewter and Britannia metal
Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont
1965.1470

The inhaling of tobacco was a popular diversion for both men and women in the 1600s and 1700s, and the earliest "snuff mulls" were actually hollowed-out rams' horns. Although later mulls were made in a variety of forms, rams' horns—a symbol of masculinity and virility—remained a favor shape.

On this mull, the decoration is fairly simple, consisting of stippled bands (made with tiny dots or holes) with triangular forms. There is a stippled outline of a shield on each side. Incised into the lid are the letters "SF," likely the initials of the owner.

Doorstops were sometimes produced in brass, glass, and ceramic, but they were most often cast iron with a hollow back or underside, such as this turtle. They were a crucial tool in the 1800s for aiding air circulation in houses that were stuffy or smoky. Door stops began to fall out of use with the advent of gas stoves in the 1920s, residential air conditioning in the 1930s, and military demands for iron during World War II.

Doorstop
United States; 1800–1900
Iron
Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont
1958.2388

Prior to the 1900s, most houses contained coal or wood-burning stoves for meal preparation as well as heating. As a result, they were constantly full of soot and smoke. Produced as early as the 1700s, doorstops could hold heavy wooden doors open, thus helping air circulation. By the mid-1800s, they were being mass-produced as decorative items that also served a practical purpose.

Door stops first gained popularity in Europe, where forms were often based on mythology. In America they took on human forms or could be pastoral in nature. The Winterthur collection contains several made of metal and glass, generally in the shape of animals such as turtles, frogs, roosters, hens, foxed, rams, and ewes.

This object doesn't look anything like a modern-day dog collar! Made of a simple band of brass, it has the inscription "Pray kind people let me jog, For I am Josiah Smith's good Dog." Perhaps this canine was a hunting companion, prone to getting separated from his master.

Dog collar
England or United States; 1790–1830
Brass
Gift of Mrs. Samuel Schwartz 1968.67

Decorative dog collars were in use as early as Ancient Egypt, and metal ones can be traced back to the 1500s, when dog armor for protecting an animal's neck from bites was not uncommon. When dogs became affordable to the middle class during the Renaissance, simple, undecorated leather bands were commonplace.

In America there have been laws requiring dogs to be collared and identifiable as early as 1765, and several paintings in the Winterthur collection reflect their use. Like modern-day dogs, those in early America were not only pets but also hunting companions as well as status symbols. In fact, it was fashionable to engrave the collars with a witty phrase such as the famous Alexander Pope rhyme, "I am His Majesty's dog at Kew; Pray tell me Sir, whose dog are you?"

This fabulous centerpiece for a grand dining table could have held punch in the large bowl and condiments or desserts in the shells surrounding the base. The decoration was influenced by the rococo revival and clearly evokes sea life. The fluted bowl is supported by dolphins that are balanced on a base of shells and rocks, mimicking the sea floor.

Punch bowl or epergne
England; 1800–1820
Earthenware (lusterware)
Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont
1958.1247

This punch bowl can also be referred to as an "epergne," which was placed on a dining table for the display, and self-service, of delicacies. Epergnes were popular in the Victorian era, and mass-production made them available to the middle-class home. Dining habits changed over time, however, and when it became fashionable to serve each course of a meal separately—eliminating the need for a central server—epergnes were often turned into vases and filled with flowers instead of food. Some were made of glass or silver, but this one is lusterware, a type of earthenware coated in platinum, which gives the surface a metallic appearance.

In the 1700s and 1800s, it was fashionable to keep birds as pets, and elaborate birdcages were status symbols. Bird-keeping was generally considered a feminine domestic occupation, while the scientific study of birds (ornithology) was firmly in the realm of men. Bird owners had both seed feeders and fountains such as this for keeping their feathered friends watered and fed.

Bird fountain or feeder
England; 1725–50
Glass (lead)
Museum purchase 1970.436

What a strange-looking bird fountain. This one is topped with the head of a male figure wearing a tricorn hat and ruffled collar, which was typical fashion for men in the American colonies in the early 1700s, when this fountain was made.

The “hopper” at the base of the fountain slid through the wire, allowing the bird to drink. To create this humorous shape, the artisan used a pattern mold, which was technologically innovative for the time. Because these fountains were everyday household items, they were rarely important enough to preserve, making this one quite special. Most such items are found through archaeological excavation.

This is a rather odd-looking tureen. The artisan was trying to create a piece in the rococo taste, which featured naturalistic, organic, and exotic forms. Do you think he succeeded?

Tureen
Eckernförde factory
Schleswig, Denmark; 1765–75
Earthenware (delftware, faience)
Campbell Collection of Soup Tureens at Winterthur 1996.4.51a,b

In 1759 German brothers Johann Nikolaus Otte and Friedrich Wilhelm Otte founded a ceramics factory that later was named Eckernförde. Most of the ceramics made there were very high quality, unlike this strange piece. Produced at the height of rococo popularity, this tureen is one of the more unusual and original creations from a factory that also sold more conventional designs.

At first glance, this dog immediately gives the viewer a clue that the object is playful in nature. Although the animal sits on a flat base like a toy figurine, the holes at the shoulder and just above the tail suggest that it is a children's whistle. The bottom of the piece is inscribed with the name "Jakie," likely the owner.

Whistle
Pennsylvania; 1810–50
Earthenware (redware)
Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont
1961.176

This Pennsylvania German whistle presents a humorous side to redware, which was typically made into utilitarian objects. First manufactured in the American colonies in the 1600s, redware could be found all along the eastern coastal states. The clay could originally be red, gray, brown, or yellow, but it acquired its red color when the iron content reacted to low-temperature firing. The clear glaze on this hand-molded dog emphasizes the red color but also makes the surface of the object waterproof.