

## What are you looking at?

Collections are at the heart of all museums: humans seem to have an instinct to collect objects. The earliest historically recorded collector was the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC Babylonian King **Nabonidus**, who had a collection of antiquities dating back to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century BC<sup>1</sup>. Our contemporary museums originate from the collections of early renaissance antiquarians who began gathering artefacts into **Cabinets of Curiosity**, with their inspiration in turn coming from the relic collections of medieval ecclesiastical foundations recently destroyed in the iconoclasm of the reformation. The mysterious aura of supernatural intercession inherent to miracle-working relics was passed on to these antiquarian collections, which quickly became places for enlightened pilgrimage; with a secretive sense of occult practice hanging about them<sup>2</sup>. Antiquarian practices of classification and their emphasis upon the interconnection of the natural world embodied an approach to the universe that recognized the fundamental **hermetic principle** “as above, so below”<sup>3</sup>: cabinets of

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<sup>1</sup> Museums, History of. (2006). *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved January 12, 2006, from Encyclopædia Britannica Online <http://www.search.eb.com/eb/article-76503> We might refer to Noah’s Ark as a collection of Natural History, as Peale did.

<sup>2</sup> A situation used to fullest extent by Dan Brown in *The Da Vinci Code*.

<sup>3</sup> The Emerald Table of Hermes Trismegistus, here in full from Steele, Robert & Singer, Dorothy. 1928 Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine xxi p.42.

curiosity were above all a search for meaning, collections motivated by a desire to contain the mysteries of the universe<sup>4</sup>. The renaissance was driven above all by a sense of regaining lost classical knowledge that could be reconstructed by study. According to Ashmole: “many secrets of nature had been divulged in remote antiquity and hence were available by careful scrutiny of ancient lore.”<sup>5</sup> Occasionally a collector would state openly their hermetic credo: Athanasius Kircher’s museum had upon its ceiling the alchemical inscription: “Whosoever perceives the chain that binds the world below to the world above will know the mysteries of

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“0) When I entered into the cave, I received the tablet zaradi, which was inscribed, from between the hands of Hermes, in which I discovered these words:

- 1) True, without falsehood, certain, most certain.
- 2) What is above is like what is below, and what is below is like that which is above. To make the miracle of the one thing.
- 3) And as all things were made from contemplation of one, so all things were born from one adaptation.
- 4) Its father is the Sun, its mother is the Moon.
- 5) The wind carried it in its womb, the earth breast fed it.
- 6) It is the father of all ‘works of wonder’ (Telesmi) in the world.
- 6a) Its power is complete (integra).
- 7) If cast to (turned towards- versa fuerit) earth,
- 7a) it will separate earth from fire, the subtile from the gross.
- 8) With great capacity it ascends from earth to heaven. Again it descends to earth, and takes back the power of the above and the below.
- 9) Thus you will receive the glory of the distinctiveness of the world. All obscurity will flee from you.
- 10) This is the whole most strong strength of all strength, for it overcomes all subtle things, and penetrates all solid things.
- 11a) Thus was the world created.
- 12) From this comes marvelous adaptations of which this is the procedure.
- 13) Therefore I am called Hermes, because I have three parts of the wisdom of the whole world.
- 14) And complete is what I had to say about the work of the Sun, from the book of Galieni Alfachimi.”

<sup>4</sup> Mauriès, 25

<sup>5</sup> *Op. Cit.* Mauriès, 135

nature and achieve miracles.”<sup>6</sup> His collection displayed a mermaid’s tail, a giant’s bones, optical illusions and other rarities. A particular interest in things that stood astride established elemental boundaries has been noted by Mauriès: one might expect to find petrified creatures, hybrids and freaks given places of honour in the cabinet<sup>7</sup>. It is here, in the early Renaissance, before the Enlightenment had coloured the discovery of rationalism, that we find a methodology of display that lends itself to creative display and hermetic pleasure.

By the early Nineteenth Century the stereotypical antiquarian gentleman dilettante had become well enough established so that in 1816 Walter Scott could sell in six days a spectacular six thousand copies of his novel “The Antiquary”, including in it his description of a late Eighteenth Century antiquarian’s **chaotic den** (note the familiar cat in the text, a hint at the occult flavour of the eponymous character’s den):

*“It was, indeed, some time before Lovel could, through the thick atmosphere, perceive in what sort of den his friend had constructed his retreat. It was a lofty room of middling size, obscurely lighted by high narrow latticed windows. One end was entirely occupied by book-shelves, greatly too limited in space for the number of volumes placed upon them, which were, there fore, drawn up in ranks of two or three files deep, while numberless others littered the floor and the tables, amid a chaos of maps, engravings, scraps of parchment, bundles of papers, pieces of old armour, swords, dirks, helmets, and Highland targets. Behind Mr. Oldbuck's seat (which was an ancient leathern-covered easy-chair, worn smooth by constant use), was a huge oaken cabinet, decorated at each corner with*

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<sup>6</sup> *Op. Cit.* G. Olmi *Tout les Savoirs du Monde* p.275

<sup>7</sup> Mauriès, 34

*Dutch cherubs, having their little duck-wings displayed, and great jolter-headed visages placed between them. The top of this cabinet was covered with busts, and Roman lamps and paterae, intermingled with one or two bronze figures. The walls of the apartment were partly clothed with grim old tapestry, representing the memorable story of Sir Gawaine's wedding, in which full justice was done to the ugliness of the Lothely Lady; although, to judge from his own looks, the gentle knight had less reason to be disgusted with the match on account of disparity of outward favour, than the romancer has given us to understand. The rest of the room was panelled, or wainscoted, with black oak, against which Scottish history, favourites of Mr. Oldbuck, and as many in tie-wigs and laced coats, staring representatives of his own ancestors. A large old-fashioned oaken table was covered with a profusion of papers, parchments, books, and nondescript trinkets and gew-gaws, which seemed to have little to recommend them, besides rust and the antiquity which it indicates. In the midst of this wreck of ancient books and utensils, with a gravity equal to Marius among the ruins of Carthage, sat a large black cat, which, to a superstitious eye, might have presented the genius loci, the tutelary demon of the apartment. The floor, as well as the table and chairs, was overflowed by the same mare magnum of miscellaneous trumpery, where it would have been as impossible to find any individual article wanted, as to put it to any use when discovered.*

*Amid this medley, it was no easy matter to find one's way to a chair, without stumbling over a prostrate folio, or the still more awkward mischance of overturning some piece of Roman or ancient British pottery. And, when the chair was attained, it had to be disencumbered, with a careful hand, of engravings which might have received damage, and of antique spurs and buckles, which would certainly have occasioned it to any sudden occupant. Of this the Antiquary made Lovel particularly aware, adding, that his friend, the Rev. Doctor Heavysterne from the Low Countries, had sustained much injury by sitting down suddenly and incautiously on three ancient calthrops, or craw-taes, which had been lately dug up in the bog near Bannockburn, and which, dispersed by Robert Bruce to lacerate the feet of the English chargers, came thus in process of time to endamage the sitting part of a learned professor of Utrecht.”<sup>8</sup>*

This description of the chaos of the eponymous hero's den should give nightmares to a contemporary curator, but I find this utterly tempting. It is reminiscent of a child's visit to an archetypal attic, offering explorations

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<sup>8</sup> Scott, 1900, 37-38.

of old dusty trunks, finding mysterious and exciting objects to play with, musty, interesting books in odd languages, perhaps spiders or a skeleton of a long dead mouse.

The phenomenon of the modern public museum is confined to a narrow and recent period of time, with **the Ashmolean** Museum in Oxford holding the distinction of being the first publicly displayed collection of artefacts in a building built for the purpose. The artefacts originally displayed there were collected in the mid seventeenth Century by the naturalist John Tradescant (and his father) and upon his death in 1662 were given to Elias Ashmole, who in turn gave the collection to the University, who erected a building to house it that opened in 1683. We might imagine Tradescant's collection as a more tidily organized version of the chaotic chamber of Sir Scott's novel.



Figure 50. Gabriel de Saint-Aubin's *Cabinet of a Connoisseur*. Oil on wood. Musée des Beaux-Arts (inv. 975.4.149). Copyright Direction des Musées de France, 1994.  
Photo: Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen.

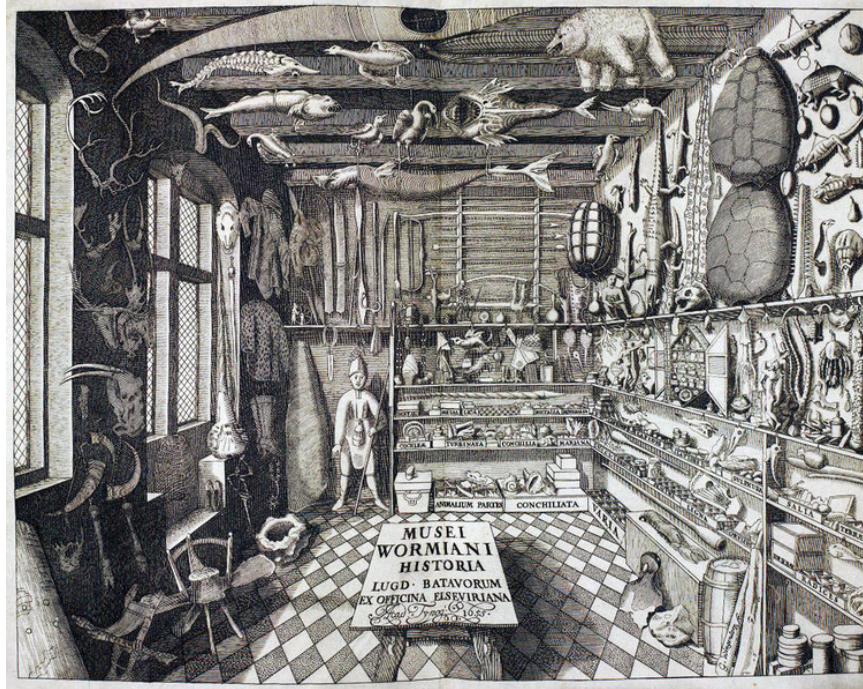


Figure 51. *Musei Wormiani Historia* frontispiece from the *Museum Wormianum*  
An example of a typical Cabinet of Curiosities

We know what was in the Tradescant cabinet thanks to another delightful description in 1638 by German visitor Georg Christoph Stirn:

*In the museum of Mr. John Tradescant are the following things: first in the courtyard there lie two ribs of a whale, also a very ingenious little boat of bark; then in the garden all kinds of foreign plants, which are to be found in a special little book which Mr. Tradescant has had printed about them. In the museum itself we saw a salamander, a chameleon, a pelican, a remora, a lanhado from Africa, a white partridge, a goose which has grown in Scotland on a tree, a flying squirrel, another squirrel like a fish, all kinds of bright coloured birds from India, a number of things changed into stone, amongst others a piece of human flesh on a bone, gourds, olives, a piece of wood, an ape's head, a cheese, etc; all kinds of shells, the hand of a mermaid, the hand of a mummy, a very natural wax hand under glass, all kinds of precious stones, coins, a picture wrought in feathers, a small piece of wood from the cross of Christ, pictures in*

*perspective of Henry IV and Louis XIII of France, who are shown, as in nature, on a polished steel mirror when this is held against the middle of the picture, a little box in which a landscape is seen in perspective, pictures from the church of S. Sophia in Constantinople copied by a Jew into a book, two cups of rinocerode, a cup of an E. Indian alcedo which is a kind of unicorn, many Turkish and other foreign shoes and boots, a sea parrot, a toad-fish, an elk's hoof with three claws, a bat as large as a pigeon, a human bone weighing 42 lbs., Indian arrows such as are used by the executioners in the West Indies- when a man is condemned to death, they lay open his back with them and he dies of it, an instrument used by the Jews in circumcision, some very light wood from Africa, the robe of the King of Virginia, a few goblets of agate, a girdle such as the Turks wear in Jerusalem, the passion of Christ carved very daintily on a plumstone, a large magnet stone, a S. Francis in wax under glass, as also a S. Jerome, the Pater Noster of Pope Gregory XV, pipes from the East and West Indies, a stone found in the West Indies in the water, whereon are graven Jesus, Mary and Joseph, a beautiful present from the Duke of Buckingham, which was of gold and diamonds affixed to a feather by which the four elements were signified, Isidor's MS of de natura hominis, a scourge with which Charles V is said to have scourged himself, a hat band of snake bones'.<sup>9</sup>*

In Continental Europe prototypical museum collections had been opened earlier than in Britain, for example in 1582 the private collection of Medici artefacts had been moved for display into the upper floor of the converted Uffizi palace (“Uffizi” means “offices”) by Francesco I. The Uffizi museum itself opened to the public in 1737 when the last of the Medici, Anna Maria Lodovici entreated the collection to the trust of the House of Lorraine on condition that it remained in Florence for the edification of the public. Elsewhere in Europe the Louvre opened to the public in Paris in the revolutionary year of 1789, although the collection

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<sup>9</sup> Ashmolean Museum website. Accessed at 4.51pm Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> January, 2006.  
<http://www.ashmol.ox.ac.uk/ash/amulets/tradescant/tradescant03.html>

had been accessible to scholars and students since 1769. In the United States the Revolutionary War artist **Charles Willson Peale**<sup>10</sup> made museum culture his lifelong calling with the establishment in Philadelphia of the first American museum to be funded by public money, where he displayed live and mounted animals, fossils and his own portraits of the heroes of the War for Independence. An excellent example of the transition from a cabinet of curiosity to full fledged museum, the purpose of his museum was to offer:

*...the most instructive school for the naturalist, botanist, mineralogist, chemist, anatomist, mechanist, manufacturer, agriculturist, antiquarian and lover of the fine arts.*<sup>11</sup>

In Peale's own work "The Artist in his Museum" (Fig. 52) we have an opportunity to see what both he and his museum looked like: at his feet stands a group of taxidermist's tools and a mount of a turkey collected from the Rocky Mountains. A mastodon's bones lie in the foreground, while brushes and palette rest upon the table. Behind the grand theatrical drape we see a young lady turning her back to the displays of fauna, her hands raised in wonder as she beholds the gigantic skeleton of a dinosaur, while in the background a father takes the opportunity to teach his son of the birds of America.

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<sup>10</sup> Outside Philadelphia Peale is perhaps best known as the portraitist of George Washington.

<sup>11</sup> Sellers, 194.





Figure 52. "The Artist in His Museum" by Charles Willson Peale 1822. Photo: Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Gift of Mrs. Sarah Harrison (The Joseph Harrison, Jr. Collection)

It is instructive to compare the exhibit hall behind Peale's self-portrait with other renaissance collections from which museum display is clearly descended. We've all seen these ubiquitous images rendered in ostentatious oils: Giovanni Pannini's 1749 *Interior of a Picture Gallery with the Collection of Cardinal Gonzaga* (Fig. 53) is typical. In Peale's museum paintings were displayed in exactly the same way as the taxidermy cases, the fossils and live animals; clearly artefacts in this museum were viewed with the same "weight" as works of art. In Gonzaga's Picture Gallery paintings line the walls of a huge chamber with barely an inch of plaster

showing between the gilded frames, while sculpture looms above. Small paintings are hung low, while huge pieces fill the upper levels, surrounded by portraits. On the left a group of men discuss etchings while a heap of the papers tumbles to the floor; small children regard a tome at the feet of the gentleman just left of centre, while the cardinal himself gestures at a Madonna held by a servant. Architectural and freestanding sculpture feature prominently, and piles of books are stacked on cushions and rugs.



Figure 53. Panini, Giovanni Paolo. 1749. *Interior of a Picture Gallery with the Collection of Cardinal Gonzaga*. Oil on canvas. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT.

In the Cardinal's gallery the single piece that possesses any individual status is the Madonna, doubtless presented to the Cardinal by his lackey as a reminder that his wealth comes from God, a gesture that falls a little flat because the painting is so overwhelmingly concerned with extravagant display. Peale's museum was not as indiscriminate: he was an admirer of Linnaeus, and determined to categorize the items he collected.

In London an unusually late architectural cabinet, **John Soane's** Museum, remains open as it was left in its original setting and arrangement. The collection was opened to amateurs and students in 1887 upon Soane's death, who had arranged for an Act of Parliament to guarantee the availability of the collection and to keep it from his surviving son, of whom he disapproved. It's an interesting museum to visit because it represents a change in the development of display. Visitors to the collection are overwhelmed by the **sheer quantity** of the architectural artefacts that completely cover the walls of three houses, but although the objects are never explained, and include a crossbow hung next to a classical sculpture, and slave chains suspended beside an alabaster sarcophagus, there is a sense of thematic classification that is absent from the seventeenth century collections.



Figure 54. Soane's Museum. Scanned from one of the Museum's postcards.

The Soane collection discriminates and is inspired by the approach of an completist, although it does not yet offer itself as a descriptive catalogue of examples. By the mid-eighteenth century the esoteric background of the cabinets had largely been lost, replaced by a didactic classification that emphasised the differences between things instead of the similarities.

The desire of the visitor to be excited is central to the early museum experience. **Peale's extravagant gesture** as he dramatically pulls back his grand velvet drape to reveal proudly the galleries of his establishment is a gesture of the theatre, and it is this aspect of display in his museum that is of interest to us now. Peale was a showman at heart, and his museum, although regarded seriously by no less august a body than the American

Philosophical Society, was as much a public place of entertainment as edification. When he passed away his sons continued his work until the collection was dispersed by sale at auction or lost in fire, then P.T. Barnum purchased a large part of the collection and showed it in conjunction with attention grabbing sideshows.

Aside from his interest in Peale's museum, Barnum was heavily invested in the Museum of Natural History in New York, which he acquired from John Scudder in 1842, turning the cabinet into a full-on freak show complete with midgets and performers.

The earliest figures shown by the enterprising Mme Tussaud's were casts of the heads of victims of the guillotine (*Fig. 55*), some of whom she is said to have known during a stint as art teacher to Louis XVI's sister. Tussaud had herself been under threat of execution, and was imprisoned with her mother in the Bastille for a short time.



Figure 55. Madams Tussaud's wax heads of victims of the guillotine.  
Photo by Julie Wiskirchen.

The well-known London attraction that carries her name originated as a travelling show taken on the road in 1803 over Britain and Ireland by Mme. Tussaud herself until she settled in London in 1835 upon a permanent site to display her famous wax figures, drawing a healthy crowd and leaving her a wealthy lady<sup>12</sup>. Although specialized, her collection was the direct descendant of cabinets of curiosity, which often included both life and death masks cast in lifelike wax.

Contemporary museums that sit firmly within the tradition of cabinets of curiosity include David Wilson's Los Angeles *Museum of Jurassic*

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<sup>12</sup> Berridge 2006



*Technology*; Madame Tussaud's in London; and the Twentieth Century newcomer *Ripley's Believe it or Not Museum* which presently appears as sixteen franchise attractions in the United States, and one each in Australia, Canada and Denmark<sup>13</sup>. Some claim to share the honourable intentions of Charles Willson Peale:

*The Museum of Jurassic Technology's in Los Angeles, California is an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic. Like a coat of two colors, the museum serves two functions. On the one hand the museum provides the academic community with a specialized repository of relics and artefacts from the Lower Jurassic, with an emphasis on those that demonstrate unusual or curious technological qualities. On the other hand the museum serves the general public by providing the visitor with a hands-on experience of "life in the Jurassic."(sic)<sup>14</sup>*

So the boundaries blur as freak show barkers call the crowds beside Ashmole and Peale to see artefacts of the eccentric and bizarre, basing their spectacles upon reality but stretching the truth. On the respectable end of the spectrum since the Eighteenth Century museums have become centrepieces to Western cities, acting as symbols of cultural superiority, education and national status. Objects shown in museums are cultural

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<sup>13</sup> For more information about *Ripley's Believe it or Not* visit their website, Accessed Friday January 13, 2006 <http://www.ripleys.com/>

<sup>14</sup> From that venerable institution's handout: "The Museum of Jurassic Technology and You."

artefacts, including the art objects that we view as the apogee of our civilization, or objects taken from colonized cultures and displayed as symbols of their disenfranchisement. (It is notable that more than two thirds of the world's museums are in the industrialized nations).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century commercial gallery exhibit style became entrenched as individual masterpieces were viewed with special selectivity, given bulletproof glass to shelter behind, bank vaults within which to dwell, and security cameras to stand guard upon them. Galleries were now hung by placing all flat art hung on the wall centred at eye level, with at least as much space around the work as the work itself covered. Taken to its extreme, objects that were thought to be particular masterpieces were displayed in isolation, like the stolen **Euphronius Krater**, now scandalously returned to Italy by the Metropolitan Museum of New York. This work was purchased in 1973 for a million dollars, and displayed alone with carefully focused lighting in its own room, emphasizing its stature as the supreme masterpiece of the classical antiquities collection in the collection.

In O'Doherty's interpretation of the relationship of the viewer to the work displayed in the gallery, the gallery is seen as the inheritor of liminal museum space favoured by enlightenment benefactors as reconstructions



of classical temples<sup>15</sup>. Objects within these “temples of art” continue to be displayed with a reverence that is regarded by many as a replacement for the religious awe offered to **holy relics** fetched to Europe by returning crusaders.



Figure 56. Reliquary containing a fragment of the true cross  
Photo courtesy of the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore

Such objects, including the bones of saints and fragments of the true cross of Christ, became the destination points of a population pre-occupied with pilgrimage when enshrined within medieval churches and cathedrals, a fascination with travel to a fulfilling goal that ultimately became the tourist industry.

The gallery offers itself as an ersatz place of pilgrimage within the

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<sup>15</sup> O'Doherty, 1999

scope of international tourism, a place of sanctuary and transcendent transformation to visitors who come in search of **representations of the “modern divine”**, or to put it another way, a secular experience equivalent to religious enlightenment. Modern Curators sought to endow their collections with the “aura” of authenticity described by Walter Benjamin in his seminal *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* <sup>16</sup>. Here the work of art was an original object that possessed an aura of authenticity, and adopted the role of the religious artefacts collected by the wealthy during and after the crusading era. This “aura” was enhanced by the concentration of money about the object, exemplified by the multi-millions paid recently for the gilded Gustav Klimt *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer I*, that quite appropriately resembles a humanist substitute for a religious icon.<sup>17</sup>

With a few hundred years of history behind **vitrine display**, visitors to galleries understand the semiotics of the glass case, opening this kind of display up to manipulation by artists working with an artefacting methodology. To display objects of little value in a display immediately transfers the semiotics of monetary and aesthetic value to the piece, enabling artists to manipulate the perceptions of visitors to their shows.

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<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, 1969

<sup>17</sup> Barker, 1999, 15

Nor are vitrines without some sense of safe containment: we keep reptiles in terrariums, fish in aquariums. Glass cases were used at Peale's museum to contain taxidermy displays because Peale found it impossible to prevent the public from touching and damaging the feathers of his birds, despite a posted warning that the feathers were coated in arsenic!<sup>18</sup> The practice of display *in vitrine* has been used by artists throughout the Twentieth Century by various artists notably including the illustrious Joseph Beuys, the infamous **Damien Hirst**, and in the new Millennium by Kostabi, the notorious New York artist who has taken on the art-as-factory-produced-commodity mantle of Andy Warhol:

*I make a thousand paintings a year and out of those around fifty are duds. I lacerate those with a razor knife. I brought the lacerated remains to Arman's studio. We put those into clear plexi-glass boxes which then were sealed. We co-signed those with a razor blade on the Plexiglas. They are like time capsules of my rejected artworks. You can still see recognizable Kostabi images. You can see inside from all sides. They are quite heavy which surprised me. Thanks to Arman's genius he turned my trash into treasure.<sup>19</sup>*

While we may question Kostabi's evidence for the "genius" of Arman, his comment that placing the destroyed paintings in a glass case turned

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<sup>18</sup> Sellers 1980, 38

<sup>19</sup> Jones, 2006, 8

“trash into treasure” clearly points to the transformational nature of the practice.

Similarly, **lighting** may be seen to act as a glass case in museum displays. The soft lighting that makes objects seem to glow independently does not originate in commercial display as suggested by Barker<sup>20</sup>, but in theatrical lighting. The spotlight beam on the stage focuses the attention of the spectator upon the character or place that the director and lighting designer wish. As a controlling technology that is used effectively to control the gaze its role in the gallery setting is to enhance the significance of an object within its surroundings: objects are transformed by the spotlight beyond the everyday mundane.

After the First World War it became apparent that the old order had brought reason to its logical but frightful conclusion and cost the lives of a generation. With their wholesale rejection of Imperial culture the Dadaists swept away the academic expectations of what art could be, and began the modernist deconstruction that was to continue throughout the Twentieth Century. Artists quickly began to respond to museums as places of display: recognizing that galleries offered a context that affected the perception of the objects displayed, they manipulated the

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<sup>20</sup> Barker 1999, 15. I do not intend to detract from Barker’s commentary on the use of lighting in the context of a Marxist approach to cultural objects as fetishes, but simply wish to correct her inaccurate observation about the origins of gallery lighting.

relationship between viewer and artefact by showing mundane items that were transformed into works of art simply by their presentation. Artists working with the presentation of “found” objects deal with issues of the context of display of artefacts, the relationship between the public and the set-aside gallery space. Writing that concerns the most well known of these artists, Marcel Duchamp, has occupied an inordinate amount of space in books, histories and critiques of the art of the twentieth century, in particular the lengthy discussion of his found object *Fountain* (Fig. 58) that continues to this day, recently in Donald Kuspit’s *End of Art*.

Kuspit predictably takes *Fountain* as an example of the dilemma he sees in the contemporary art world: the question of the aesthetic value of the readymade<sup>21</sup>. But the century old conflict caused by Duchamp’s insinuation of the urinal into the museum is made possible by the sanctified liminal space of the gallery, and the consternation that its display continues to cause simply reflects the concern of the guardians of museum culture, who have correctly felt embattled by the forces of cultural change. Kuspit’s irritation at *Fountain* is misplaced; Duchamp is simply doing what antiquarians had done two hundred years before by introducing disparate elements into the gallery; in the presence of other

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<sup>21</sup> Kuspit 2004, 22-24.

objects in the Tradescant collection - a typical cabinet of curiosity - Duchamp's urinal would hardly have raised an eyebrow. Executioner's tools! Devices for circumcision! Charles V's scourge! Wood from the Holy Cross! A stink ant with a fungus-spiked head! Against such attention grabbing delicacies, an overturned urinal simply isn't a threat. **Man Ray's photograph** of the Surrealist exhibition at the Charles Ratton Gallery in 1936 serves to underscore this relationship: Duchamp's bottle rack readymade is displayed in a vitrine alongside other surrealist objects of curiosity (*Fig. 57*).



Figure 57. A Surrealist Display including Duchamp's readymade bottle rack. Photo by

Man Ray

Because Renaissance cabinets are “a reflection on the impossibility of recapturing the past and on the irresistible desire to do so”<sup>22</sup> the surrealist cabinet here makes an attempt to restore the past, having rejected the imperial culture and returned to the culture of display of the hermetic early enlightenment.

André Breton, the “godfather of surrealism” made a display of his home, describing it in this invitation to the public:

*Among some two hundred entries in the catalogue, we find “natural objects”, minerals (crystals containing water one hundred thousand years old), plants (carnivorous species), animals (giant ant-eater, an egg laid by one “oexpyorhix”), “interpretations of natural objects” (a monkey among ferns) or “incorporated” into sculptures, and “disrupted objects” (that is modified by natural forces, fires, storms, etc). Here, revealed to the public for the first time, are several objects from Picasso’s studio, which take their place, historically, alongside the celebrated “ready-mades”, and “assisted ready-mades” of Marcel Duchamp, also on display. Finally, so-called “savage” objects, the finest fetishes and masks from the Americas and Oceania, selected from Charles Ratton’s private collection. The “mathematical objects” are astonishing incarnations in concrete form of the subtlest problems of three dimensional geometry, while the “found objects” and “interpreted found objects” lead us to the “surrealist objects” proper.<sup>23</sup>*

This is an early Twentieth Century cabinet of curiosities! And Breton was not the only surrealist to be deeply involved in collecting, deeply

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<sup>22</sup> Mauriès, 2002, 229

<sup>23</sup> *op. cit.* Mauriès, 216

interested in the presentation of the object *qua* object. Thus, when properly placed in the context of museum history we see that instead of de-sanctifying the display space Duchamp's *Fountain* gesture reminds us that the specialized art gallery space originates from collections of curiosities, and that the only difference between a bronze-age chamber pot and a contemporary chamber pot is two or three millennia. With *Fountain*, Duchamp successfully begins the closure of the circle of the narrative of display in its return to the cabinet.



Left: Figure 58. Duchamp, Marcel. 1917. *Fountain*. Readymade. Photo: Alfred Stieglitz  
Right: Figure 59. Toilet Display. Photo courtesy of Gladstone Pottery Museum

It is amusing to note that since the days of the outrageous appearance of Duchamp's *Fountain*, displays of toilets have become almost commonplace. Among many toilet themed exhibits there is now a Salubh International Toilet Museum in Delhi; a permanent display of toilets in the



London Science Museum; in Stratford upon Avon the Thomas Crapper Company has a small toilet museum and the American Sanitary Plumbing Museum operates in Worcester, Massachusetts. (Specialised cabinets all.)

Although it is clear that readymade sculpture was a product of its time and the art gallery environment of its time, depending entirely upon acceptance of the art gallery as specialized museum space for the display of objects representing the height of cultured good taste, Duchamp's question continues to be raised with more or less success by a wide variety of contemporary artists. A notable example among Duchamp and surrealist camp-followers is **David Mach**, cited by Renfrew as an example of an artist who is chiefly concerned with consumerism<sup>24</sup>. At first glance Mach's work may seem far removed from the mud and rock of archaeology that is Renfrew's specialty, but he has chosen Mach because his polemical use of fetish domestic goods runs parallel to the display of artefacts in museum collections.

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<sup>24</sup> Renfrew 2004, 17.



Figure 60. Trophy Room, 1995. David Mach. Ujazdowski Castle, Poland

In his *Trophy Room* installation Mach takes the objects of desire of consumers in the late twentieth century and offers them as trophies in a simulated manor house snooker room. It should also be emphasized both that this is just such a room that might contain an antiquarian collection such as that described by Scott, and that the artefacts of antiquarian archaeological cabinets were viewed in much the same way as trophy animal heads. In fact the great archaeologist Lord Renfrew uses Mach's work to goad his digging colleagues in his recent book on art and archaeology, reminding them that the display of objects uncovered in excavation has an enduring history that runs parallel to the display of the trophies of the hunt. But any one of these objects can be taken as the analogue of *Fountain*; Mach's achievement in placing his iconic objects in

the trophy room in fact is to open up the origins of Duchamp's work for us.

As technicians of the cabinet, surrealists and their descendants may be seen as reactionaries attempting to bring back an occult and arcane view of the world as a hermetic and irrational place. The found object may be seen as the curio or oddity restored from its relegated place in museum storerooms to its place on display. In a way the Surrealists succeeded: irrational, global post-modernism has prevailed, irony laden but as arcane and self-referential as the cabinets.