

Georg Laue (ed.): *Exotica*

This richly illustrated catalogue of over 100 objects from exotic countries is a forceful reminder of how highly such pieces were regarded by collectors of the sixteenth to eighteenth century. In addition 321 high-quality colour illustrations explain more clearly than any caption or essay, why this should have been so. The sheer elegance and beauty of the majority of collectibles (e.g. cats. 36 and 42) may have been the main incentive; the startling foreign character of some others (e.g. cats. 69 and 95) may have added extra curiosity and conversation value.

The pieces described come from collections of southern Germany, for example in Augsburg, Nuremberg and Munich; it surprises at first glance that such landlocked cities had access to the trade routes across the oceans (illustrated by a world map at the end of the book). Globalisation is obviously not a new phenomenon but rather the by-product of an age of exploration that brought far-away countries filled with the most awe-inspiring treasures of *naturalia* and *artificialia*, flora and fauna, precious jewels and spices into the horizon of Europeans. Recent research has shown that big trading hubs existed in coastal cities such as Lisbon, Genoa or Antwerp and that the great banking houses, Italian but also the Fuggers of Augsburg, had long established a sophisticated system of letters of exchange and credit that made the purchase of luxury items much easier. This financial globalisation resulted in the foundation of several East India companies for the exploitation of newly available resources and a colonisation of distant lands and in the institution of a triangular trade that connected various source countries to manufacturing sites and consumer markets in such a way that no single trade route remained without cargo and profit.

But what exactly were collectors looking for? How did they form their taste and what was an exotic object in the perception of the sixteenth century? How did a potential buyer tell his or her agent, courtier or envoy, which of the pieces on the market in Gujarat, Macao and Sri Lanka or for sale in the European emporia, was most appropriate to fill a gap? What kind of instructions were agents or dealers given by the collector? It appears that well-educated and wily businessmen, such as Anthonio Meyting from Augsburg, fulfilled multiple tasks for a manifold clientele. Like double-agents, they sourced exotic collectibles for more than one client, connecting offers and demands of markets to the satisfaction of their customers and not without advantages to themselves. Being sent abroad by the Fugger or by his patron, Duke Albrecht V, a man such as Meyting constantly kept his eyes peeled for opportunities, whether that meant bringing *exotica* from Lisbon to Bavaria or taking Bavarian manufacture west to the big-spending collector, King Philip II of Spain.

Two examples from the Florentine Medici context throw comparative light on imports: in 1545 Jacopo Capponi was sent by Cosimo I de' Medici to Egypt and given 300 scudi to buy souvenirs (not specified); his duchess added to the budget in case Capponi found "qualcosa bella et rara per donne." [1] There is obvious trust in the honesty and good taste of the envoy. In 1584 Cosimo's son Francesco I imported various objects from Goa that he seems to have been redistributing as diplomatic gifts, since he was well aware of their singularity. [2] His court in the south of Europe entertained close ties to Old and New Spain through its international family connections. But how about the courts north of the Alps?

Three essays, by Annemarie Jordan-Gschwend, Virginie Spenlé and Robert Schmitt, set out the background for these exotic collectibles. Each is written in German and English and followed by an abstract in Chinese and Arabic that contributes to the international character of the paper *kunstkammer*. The catalogue proper contains 101 entries, first a rich photographic section with large images of the collectibles, followed by the text entries (only in English) with smaller photos on the margin. [3] The objects presented contain a wide range of different categories ranging from mounted shells, carved rhinoceros' horns, over taxidermists'

specimen to intricately ornamented ivory casks small enough to be taken off the shelves and to be passed round among fellow enthusiasts.

The term "exotic" is, as we all know, not unproblematic. [4] Even though we all have some notion of what it is supposed to mean, this label is nonetheless notoriously hard to define. Foreign, by implication strange, rare and startling, are adjectives that come to mind when translating the original Greek word. Foreign objects from a certain part of the world may have been rare and unfamiliar for some time but improved business connections may have done away with the rarity while continued exposure to a different culture may have taken the edge off the original surprise. Exotic objects were sometimes original works of art or even archaeological artefacts but we also know of mass products manufactured for the European market. For European agents this must have been a mine field, difficult to navigate until they found expert advice or had developed the necessary specialist knowledge.

Perhaps the strongest point arising from the essays is that of the major shift in human perception which had taken place in the fifteenth century and that was going to change intellectual history for ever. Its aftershocks continue to this day. Events, such as the conquest of Constantinople (1453), had closed off existing trade routes that needed replacement but, even worse, had destroyed certainties of security and military might. Alleged ancient sources and documents had revealed their inconsistencies or had been unmasked as forgeries. More and more often, scholars and proto-scientists found that to rely on written sources alone happened at one's peril. Curiosity ceased to be a sin and became a necessity, even a virtue. Experience and experiment were now at the centre of any new explorative endeavour; ultimately this new *modus operandi* was going to lead to the discovery of new worlds and new, highly profitable markets.

The less secure and familiar one's own world was going to become, the more important it must have seemed to be able to control the objects owned at home, whether these had been acquired at 0 kilometres or were imported from the other side of the globe. Grasping a world that had become more interesting and varied - but also more dangerous, thanks to human curiosity and spirit of adventure - by locking as much of it as possible into a *kunst- and wunderkammer*, must have seemed a fabulous idea at the time. Surely it laid the foundations for a win-win situation: a vicarious victory against foreign enemies and against one's own fears: a conquest of the world without leaving home. And, the inclusion of a whole new range of collectors' items that raised the bar among competing *cognoscenti* and eventually led to the establishment of new disciplines and the rise of the natural sciences.

Today, we have kept our fear of the other while our ways of dealing with it seem less felicitous or sensible than the setting up of an encyclopaedic *kunstzimmer* filled with the most beautiful treasures from the far side of the world. But as long as we send rovers called - appropriately and not entirely by chance - Spirit, Opportunity and Curiosity to Mars, there is hope that they will, one day, send down images of a Martian *kunstzimmer* full of earthling collectibles that have been gathered by a puzzled but fascinated little green man.

Notes:

[1] ASF, MP 1171, ins. 8 (fol. 389) Medici Archive Project entry n. 7212.

[2] Roberta Piccinelli: *Le Collezioni Gonzaga, Il Carteggio tra Firenze e Mantova (1554-1626)*. Cinisello Balsamo (Milano) 2000, 69, number 35; letter dated 14 July 1584 and sent from Florence by Francesco I de' Medici to Guglielmo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua [ASMn, AG, b. 1088, f. II, fol. 97].

[3] Given the careful presentation and beautiful illustration of the book, it seems almost churlish to note that the multitude of font colours, glossy paper and small text size do not contribute to the overall legibility.

[4] Neither is, at least, part of the imported exotic ware nor the modes of acquisition and exhibition adopted for human remains, threatened species or sacred objects in past centuries or, indeed, in our own times.

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