

ART

The Renaissance Artifact Collections That Are Back in Style

By GISELA WILLIAMS OCT. 20, 2016

At the beginning of the Renaissance, in the 16th century, aristocrats and scholars began to fill rooms with exotic artifacts from far-flung territories — horns said to have belonged to unicorns, brilliant red coral, animal skeletons, chalices made of silver or coconut shells — often displayed among Old Master paintings and sculptures. Over time, the practice of collecting items for one’s “wunderkammer” (“cabinet of wonders”) became more and more elaborate. Kings would gift extraordinary objects to other rulers to impress them with their wealth, such as a windup automaton that poured wine or a boat carved of gold and set with hundreds of precious stones. Perhaps one of the world’s greatest collections, which still exists, is the **Green Vault**, the treasure chamber of August the Strong, which reopened to the public in Dresden in 2004 and contains thousands of objects, from a cherry stone carved with over a hundred faces to the largest green-hued diamond in the world.

In the last few years, wunderkammers, and the objects found in these collections, have become exceedingly fashionable with contemporary art galleries and collectors. A leading hunter and expert of wunderkammer objects is Georg Laue of the **Kunstammer** in Munich, a dizzying Aladdin’s Cave of rare historic pieces. Among them: a Renaissance-era trunk of carved ebony with secret drawers and a 17th-century automaton clock of a Moor with a dog and a monkey. (When the hour strikes, the dog jumps.)

Laue's booth is one of the most anticipated at this weekend's debut of TEFAF New York, the Manhattan outpost of Europe's most prestigious art and antiques fairs, on through Oct. 26. His booth will feature items including an exceptional 16th-century Renaissance mortar with life casts made by the famous Nuremberg artist Wenzel Jamnitzer, which Laue just sold to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "If you see a Hirst or Koons, you recognize it and move on," he notes. "In my gallery, there are hundreds of objects and a very special atmosphere. Behind each piece is an amazing story. Everyone who stops by, even contemporary gallerists and collectors, is so engaged and asks so many questions."

Below, Laue shares a few key destinations for wunderkammer enthusiasts around the world.

Me Collectors Room

Berlin

"The best example of a *kunstkammer* collection shown in a modern context is the Wunderkammer Olbricht, in the Me Collectors Room in Berlin, a museum open to the public that features a permanent wunderkammer exhibition and temporary exhibitions dedicated to modern and contemporary art. I set up the Wunderkammer Olbricht and have been curating the wunderkammer collection since it opened to the public in 2010."

Kunsthistorisches Museum

Vienna

"This fall, the ceramicist and author Edmund De Waal will be creating a wunderkammer-inspired show called 'During the Night' at the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum. The show will be up through the end of January 2017."

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Cloisters

New York City

“The Cloisters have many exceptional medieval treasures, including a rare 14th-century amber medallion carved with the face of Christ that was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art from us in 2011.”

The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

Hartford, Conn.

“In 2015, the museum completed the renovation and reopening of its collection of European art and decorative art. In the new display room is a *kunstkammer*, a cabinet of curiosities, to which I contributed to with several objects, including a South German rock-crystal cup from the 17th century.”