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**Silver, Bells and Nautilus Shells:  
Royal cabinets of curiosity and  
antiquarian collecting**

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In 1812 James Wyatt, architect to the Prince Regent, was given instructions to complete the Plate Closet in Carlton House, the Prince's residence on Pall Mall. The plans included a large proportion of plate glass. James Wyatt noted this glass although expensive was 'indispensably necessary, as it is intended that the Plate shall be seen and as the Plate is chiefly if not entirely ornamental, any glass but Plate [glass] therefore would cripple the forms and perhaps the most ornamental parts would be the most injured.'<sup>1</sup> The Plate Closet was to be a place of wonder, where visitors would be surrounded by great treasures of wrought silver and gilt. George IV's collections, particularly of silver for the Wunderkammer, show an interest in an area of collecting that was largely unfashionable in the early-nineteenth century and suggest a yearning to recreate the past glories of the English court. What follows is a suggestion of where this interest was born.

The term Wunderkammer, usually translated as a 'Cabinet of Curiosities', encompassed far more than the traditional piece of furniture containing unusual works of art and items of natural history (fig 1). The concept of a Wunderkammer was essentially born in the 16th century as the princely courts of Europe became less peripatetic and as humanist philosophy spread. The idea was to create a collection to hold the sum of man's knowledge. This was clarified by Francis Bacon in the 17th century<sup>2</sup> who stated that the first principle of a ruler was to gather together a 'most perfect and general library' holding every branch of knowledge then published. Secondly a prince should create a spacious and wonderful garden to contain plants and fauna 'so that you may have in small compass a model of universal nature made private'. The third essential was 'a goodly huge cabinet wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine hath made rare in stuff, form or motion; whatsoever



**Figure 1.** Frans Francken the Younger (1581-1642), *The Cabinet of a Collector*, 1617. Oil on panel. RCIN 405781

singularity, chance and the shuffle of things hath produced; whatsoever nature hath wrought in things that want life and may be kept, shall be sorted and included'. As Bacon stated 'Thus your Excellency shall have added depth of knowledge to the fineness of your spirits and greatness of your power'...

Bacon was not the first to discuss these ideas. Other philosophers had laid out the ideal formula for the Wunderkammer – these treasure troves were to house items created by the earth – fossils and mineral ores; items that were drawn from nature – shells, corals, specimens of plant and animal life, stuffed animals and birds, bones, and unusual natural phenomena – petrified items of wood, unicorn horns and mermaids; items wrought by man – including turned ivories, works of silver and gold, mounted jewels, cameos, medals and small sculptures – together with items from the wider world and items that brought a greater understanding of the universe – scientific instruments, tools and mathematical tables and items relating to history. Together these works created an empirical and humanistic view of learning, but at the same time they showed the prince's extensive powers over the natural world, as well as his trade links and his ancestral credentials as ruler.

One of the great theoreticians of this philosophy was Samuel Quiccheberg who put together in essence a manual for collectors in 1565, to tie in with Albrecht V of Bavaria's building of a new set of rooms in Munich for this purpose<sup>3</sup>. Quiccheberg called these rooms a 'theatre of wisdom', a secure space under lock and key where all knowledge was collected. We might call it a museum. These rooms were usually only intended for a very few – they were private spaces to contemplate and amaze only a handful of privileged guests. Some of the great princely collections survive today – famously in Dresden in the Grünes Gewölbe, a collection compiled by Augustus II of Saxony and later expanded by Augustus the Strong. It was Augustus the Strong who directed the collections towards the more opulent decorative arts of the type produced in the German cities of Augsburg and Nuremberg. Another magnificent collection was compiled by Rudolf II in Prague – a Kunstkammer packed with the natural, the man-made and the scientific, and reflecting the Emperor's own tastes for astrology and works of hardstone. Much of the collection was later moved to Vienna and was combined with the Holy Roman Emperor's regalia and other opulent treasures. Other examples were found in the Rosenborg in Copenhagen, Schloss Ambras in Innsbruck and the Residenz in Munich.

In England the idea of a Wunderkammer was slow to take on. The great inventory of Henry VIII's collections, drawn up after his death in 1547, lists extraordinary treasures<sup>4</sup>. These include great jewels and items of turned ivory, works wrought from ostrich eggs and unicorn horns, coconuts, alabaster and ebony. One description at least seems to relate to a nautilus or turbo shell cup, listing: 'A snail of mother of pearl borne up by an antique man of silver and gilt'. Among the hardstones and gemstones were items of agate, jasper, beryl, rock crystal, pearls, rubies, sapphires, diamonds, emeralds, turquoises, topaz, garnets and serpentine as well as enamel, glass and mother of pearl. Most of these objects were housed in the Tower of London, the secure repository of the King's treasures, with the Jewel House holding the regalia alongside. However the King also had 'secret Jewel Houses' in the privy apartments at Whitehall Palace, placed next to his bedchamber, and at Hampton Court. Some designs for the type of



**Figure 2.** Hans Holbein the Younger (c. 1497-1543), Design for a clock-salt, 1543. Pen, ink and wash. British Museum 1850,0713.14





**Figure 3.** Roman, Emperor Claudius, AD 43-5, with 17th century mount. Sardonyx with gilt copper mount. RCIN 65238

**Figure 4.** Hans Holbein the Younger (c. 1497-1543), Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), 1526-7. Black and coloured chalks. RCIN 912268



objects collected by Henry VIII survive among the works of Hans Holbein, for example, including an ornamental clock thought to be the design for a gift from Anthony Denny to the King in 1543 (fig 2).

An inventory of 1574 of Elizabeth I's property is equally revealing <sup>5</sup>. It lists first the items of regalia themselves. But the second category in value are the 'Cups and bowls of gold set with stone' – that is the great jewelled and hardstone standing cups which are described in detail. Cups of crystal and serpentine follow on and so through lesser bowls and cups, crosses, candlesticks, salts, spoons and forks, ewers and basins and finally 'sundry parcels'. Among the quantities of jewels, silver plate, and items inherited from her father, are numbers of German double cups, and others of Spanish, French and Venetian making, which were undoubtedly items of the type found in a Wunderkammer. The final count of silver and gilded cups is somewhere in the region of 230. The natural world was represented by unicorn horns decorated with plates of silver, a vessel listed as 'white bone garnished with silver and gilt' – probably an animal horn of some kind, and there were also corals and even a pelican skeleton. Science was represented by clocks and hourglasses, as well as a touchstone for determining gold and silver.

The Tudor collections were largely dispersed in the early 17th century. The Stuart kings on the whole preferred their New Year's Gifts in the form of cash rather than great wrought treasures, although notably James I did commission a new 'New Years' Gift Room' at Whitehall Palace in a space adjoining Inigo Jones's new Banqueting House. James I and his son had already depleted the Jewel House long before the depredations of the Civil War caused Charles I to sell off treasures from the Royal Collection – giving away items of plate to foreign ambassadors, godchildren and on the marriages of courtiers or offering them as perquisites to the officers of the court.

Small glimpses into the 17th century closet however give a hint of continuing princely collecting. It was Henry, Prince of Wales, James I's elder son, who persuaded the coin and medal specialist Abraham van der Doort to come to England from the Netherlands in 1612, apparently on the promise of employment in cataloguing and curating the Prince's cabinet of curiosities. In fact, Henry died shortly afterwards but van der Doort remained in the court until the accession of Charles I when he was finally appointed Keeper of the Cabinet Room. Van der Doort claimed to have suffered several difficulties with the Cabinet Room, reporting that at least one of the court removed various medals, agates and other objects from Henry's collection. It is however just possible that at least one or two of the cameos from

Henry's closet survive. Among them was an extremely large cameo of the Emperor Claudius, dating to around AD 43-5 (fig 3).

Henry's younger brother Charles used his private cabinet rooms at Whitehall for the collection of small sculptural works especially bronzes and relief plaques, medals and coins, if not for the showier items of the Wunderkammer. An inventory drawn up by Elias Ashmole <sup>6</sup> offers some insight into these objects, and wax impressions of the intaglios survive, if not the works themselves. These items were clearly intended purely for private use and contemplation, in the manner of the studiolo of Italy – an intellectual closet of small paintings, miniatures and drawings, small carvings and sculpture. Intriguingly van der Doort catalogues an ivory carving of Neptune in Charles' closet, noting 'this is said to have come from Emperor Rudolph's cabinet' <sup>7</sup>. The attribution is given to the Imperial court's ivory carver Nikolaus Pfaff and the object was presented to Charles I by Edward Sackville, Earl of Dorset, who was Lord Chamberlain to Henrietta Maria. The carving does not reappear in later inventories and was presumably one of the objects sold off by Cromwell.

The list of Charles I's goods, drawn up in 1649 after the execution of the King <sup>8</sup>, includes a nugget of Irish gold split in half by a hammer, a lodestone, a royal spur, crystals, a magnifying lens, and a jewel inset with diamonds and rubies representing figures at an altar (perhaps an Adoration scene) together with an unknown 'musical instrument'. The fact remains however that the Stuart monarchs showed little of their fellow European princes' keenness for the collecting of wonders for the closet. Charles I's enthusiasms lay with paintings, Charles II was more of a supporter of great scientific works. Where James I had had three possible spaces to house his collections off the Privy Gallery in Whitehall – a closet, a green room and a coffer, Charles II only retained one such space – preferring to give greater allowance to his own bedchamber and converting the bathing room into a laboratory.

The most important royal collector before George IV was Caroline of Ansbach, the consort of George II. An educated and enlightened figure who enjoyed philosophical discussion and artistic patronage, Caroline had grown up in the courts of Berlin and Dresden.



She was well aware therefore of the great Grünes Gewölbe with its rooms of amber, ivory, silver, minerals and insignia. Other relations such as Anton Ulrich in Brunswick and her mother-in-law, the Empress Sophia were also great collectors. Caroline was the first member of the royal family to introduce a regulated series of closet rooms into a British royal residence. Two inventories of these rooms exist – one drawn up in the 1750s by Caroline's dresser Mrs Purcell, the other by the great antiquary Horace Walpole <sup>9</sup>.

These closet rooms were situated in the private apartments of Kensington Palace. Among the apartments were spaces dedicated to British royal history, in part to establish the Hanoverian claim to throne and to emphasise the credentials of George II and Caroline themselves. These included extensive

**Figure 5.** French, Pendant with thirteen cameos, early 17th century; mounts 18th century. Gold, enamel, sardonyx, turquoise, onyx, sard, agate, nicciolet. RCIN 65256



**Figure 6.** Attributed to Johann Gottfried Frisch (active 1689-1716)?; mounts South German, with later additions by Rundell, Bridge & Rundell, Cup and cover, c. 1700 with later additions. Ivory, silver gilt, emerald, ruby, turquoise. RCIN 50554

runs of miniature portraits of the royal families of Europe, together with carved waxes, ivories, drawings, watercolours, small paintings, and carved stone reliefs. In particular the Queen is said to have mounted and framed the drawings of Holbein, which had been in the Collection since the Restoration and which she claimed had lain unattended in a cabinet in Kensington. Whether or not this was the case, Caroline certainly had the drawings displayed in full series on the walls of the closet rooms (fig 4). George Vertue, who knew these rooms well, described them as 'the greatest store of portraits of the English' <sup>10</sup>.

Alongside these was a library, harking back to Bacon's treatises on the best practice for such spaces. This room was packed with atlases, books of history and philosophy and works in a wide range of languages. It also contained various cabinets used to hold what might be termed the *naturalia* – branches of red and white coral, shells and a stuffed humming bird. She is also known to have received a number of tortoise eggs from her friend Elizabeth Charlotte of the Palatine. Works of art were well represented – cups and boxes in crystal were especially common but agate, bloodstone, amethyst, onyx, lapis lazuli, garnet and aventurine quartz also appear. There was a small bust of Charles I carved in rock crystal. Other drawers in the cabinet contained rings, seals and cameos. Among these was a distinctive 'hanging jewel of onyxes containing 12 heads and a piece of figures in the middle' (fig 5) <sup>11</sup>.

In another cabinet were works from the wider world – a collection of daggers, listed as Turkish and Indian, with tortoiseshell or jewelled handles, a belt set with pearls, a cat's head of serpentine, Chinese porcelain figures of a man and a monkey and as a nod to the scientific – a portable brass sundial. A third cabinet held the wide selection of bezoar stones – the natural accretions formed in the stomachs of ruminants which were said to have miraculous anti-venomous properties. Caroline collected such stones from all sorts of animals including goats, deer, stags, and one described as a 'serpent' bezoar. In the drawers below were the minerals – uncut onyxes, pieces of silver ore, a lode stone, an amber box, an ivory box containing gold dust and a case of Venetian perfumes. In the same cabinet were around 1,000 medals.

Walpole's inventory of the Closet also includes 'precious vases, several flagons of ivory, carved and a very fine shock-dog in marble', as well as silver relief housed in an ebony frame – probably a portable altar of the type produced in Augsburg in the 17th century. The most specific description lists 'a vase made of a unicorn's horn & supported by unicorns'. In a later memorandum, Walpole noted other items of porcelain, an agate font and ewers. In 1821 many of these items reappeared in the royal inventories. The clerk at George IV's Carlton House noted the receipt of a group of objects including a group of daggers, an agate vase and canister, a jewel casket, crystal bottles and 'a vase made like a horn mounted in silver gilt with chimera handles and four unicorn feet'. The branches of coral, red and white, were still intact as was a crimson glass vase, two agate goblets and an ancient powder horn. One object was listed as a quartz crystal jug 'flaw'd' with gilt rim, sent from Buckingham House with a crystal goblet and a small crystal ewer with a chimera-head spout. These descriptions may refer to three items which seem to have been remounted for George IV by the royal goldsmiths Rundell, Bridge & Rundell.





At Queen Caroline's death her cabinets do not appear to have been dispersed although it has been difficult to trace with certainty what remains of her collections. There is a record of some of the items being in Buckingham House under Queen Charlotte. Charlotte appears to have added to Caroline's collections herself, and the sale of the latter Queen's goods after her death suggests that although not an avid collector of such curiosities, she did own several coconut cups, a cup described in the sale catalogue as 'beautiful semi-transparent agate, on stem and foot of the same, with enamelled mountings, set with pearls and turquoises, and a small vase composed of emeralds, rubies and pearls, gold mounted', and a baroque pearl mounted as a figure of Harlequin. She also owned a rhinoceros horn cup and a casket of mother of pearl. Among the items sold after her death was a mahogany wardrobe

containing items of natural history, a large assortment of shells, ores, minerals, exotic birds and frames containing preserved butterflies.

It appears to have been Queen Charlotte who put her eldest son on the route to antiquarian collecting in the style of his forebears. From Queen Charlotte came gifts of several sideboard dishes, which were presented to her son while he was Prince of Wales. Otherwise George had little precedent for his cabinet of curiosities, with the possible exception of William Beckford's great collections at Fonthill. In many ways, William Beckford used the entire building of Fonthill as a great cabinet of curiosities, packing every space with treasures and works of art. Indeed, the Prince acquired one or two of Beckford's works for himself later in life – a silver-gilt jewel coffer which he later gave away, and a carved ivory cup (fig 6). The cup, which dates to around 1700,



**Figure 7.** John Bridge (1755-1834), Tankard, 1823/4. Silver gilt, agate, onyx, sardonyx, jasper, amethyst, chrysoprase, emerald, ruby, aquamarine, beryl, sapphire, turquoise. RCIN 50608

**Figure 8.** Lorenz Biller II (1649-1720), Nautilus cup, late 17th century with later additions. Nautilus shell, silver gilt, diamond, ruby, emerald, garnet, sapphire, quartz, turquoise. RCIN 50610



**Figure 9.** Nikolaus Schmidt (c.1550/5–1609), Nautilus cup, c. 1600. Nautilus shell, silver, partly gilt. RCIN 50603

is thought to be southern German. The early history of this piece is not known although it arrived in England from Vienna in around 1788 and was later acquired by Beckford, where it was illustrated on show in Fonthill Abbey, on display in King Edward's Gallery. Beckford's collection was largely sold by auction in 1823, when George IV purchased the work for 90 guineas.

George IV's Wunderkammer objects were always intended to be seen. The plate pantry at Carlton House was designed specifically so that visitors could view the curiosities on display. Many of the works were sold with accompanying turntables and glass domes so that they could stand alone on table tops and be admired from every angle. George would readily remount works on larger bases to make them more visible or jewels would be added from Rundells' own stock or the royal coffers to increase the opulence and spectacle of individual works of art. The best example of this was perhaps the tankard created by Rundells in 1823 which is inset with gemstones and numerous cameos (fig 7). Tankards of this type were produced in 17th-century France and Flanders and more rarely in Dresden in the early-18th century. Rundells' 19th-century re-working was a handsome version of the same type. Some at least of the stones date from the 16th century and it is likely that they were drawn from existing stock in the Royal Collection.

In his lifetime George IV acquired 71 cups including two nautilus shells (fig 8), and 14 of mounted ivory, as well as 46 dishes and salvers, and six ewers and basins. It cannot be claimed that George IV was trying to copy Baconian principles in amassing the knowledge of the world. For the King, the craftsmanship, theatricality and opulence of the work was paramount. In 1818 for example he received at Carlton House 'a chalice or cup and cover in gold, enamelled in flowers and mounted in pearls, in the shape of a unicorn and figures on its back – the cup ornamented with diamonds and precious stones'. The cup stood at 16 inches high and must have been spectacular. However, a note from Benjamin Jutsham, the inventory clerk, suggests that the cup was returned to Rundells with a simple addition 'not approved of'. The King's two greatest acquisitions





might be considered the nautilus cups. One of these is the work of Nicholas Schmidt of Nuremberg and dates to around 1600 (fig 9). When it was purchased in the early 19th century for the vast sum of 250 guineas it was thought to be the work of the most celebrated goldsmith of the period, Benvenuto Cellini.

Minor hints are found of other strands of Wunderkammer collecting. When George IV died, vastly in debt to the royal goldsmiths, a large group of works of art were presented to Rundells to offset the debt. The collections included at this date examples of mineral ores and lodestones, pieces of petrified wood, specimens of agate, musical instruments and drawing equipment as well as quantities of snuff boxes, cups, items of insignia, dress and jewellery.

To conclude it is worth considering Prince Albert's great scheme for a Universal Exhibition to be held

in 1851 in London. This was in essence a recreation of Quiccheberg's theatre of wisdom on a vast and glorious scale. The Crystal Palace was itself a cabinet of curiosities where the knowledge of the day could be encompassed within one room (fig 10). Albert's vision was to show the fruits of the earth – its minerals, plants, fauna and anomalies, alongside the works wrought by man – both artistic and scientific. The Great Exhibition, which in turn spawned the group of museums in South Kensington, showed exactly what Bacon had written of two centuries earlier. It was 'a goodly huge cabinet wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine hath made rare in stuff, form or motion; whatsoever singularity, chance and the shuffle of things hath produced; whatsoever nature hath wrought in things that want life and may be kept, shall be sorted and included'.

**Figure 10.** Joseph Nash (1809-1878), *The Great Exhibition: France, no. 4, 1851*. Watercolour and bodycolour on paper. RCIN 919961

- 1 TNA, LCI/5, 15 January 1813
- 2 Francis Bacon, *Gesta Grayorum*, first printed 1688
- 3 Samuel Quiccheberg, *Inscriptiones vel tituli theatri amplissimi*, 1565
- 4 Inventory of Henry VIII, 1547, Society of Antiquaries, Ms 129A&B and British Library Harley Ms 1419. Transcript edited by David Starkey, published London, 1998.
- 5 A.J. Collins, *The Jewels and Plate of Elizabeth I: the inventory of 1574 edited from Harley Ms.1650 and Stowe Ms.555 in the British Museum*, London, 1955
- 6 Oxford Ms.Ashmole 1138, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford
- 7 See Oliver Millar; *Abraham van der Doort's Catalogue of the Collections of Charles I in Walpole Society*, XXXVII, London, 1960
- 8 See Oliver Millar (ed.), *The Inventories and Valuations of the King's Goods, 1649-1651 in Walpole Society*, XLIII, London, 1972
- 9 *The inventory of the Curiosity and Medals [from the collection of Queen Caroline] in the Cabinet in His Majesty's Library of wch Mrs Pursell had the original*, before 1755, BM.Add.Ms.20101. and Horace Walpole, *Other pictures & curiosities at Kensington*, 2 June 1763, added at the back of his copy of *A catalogue of the collection of pictures &c. belonging to King James the Second; to which is added, A catalogue of the Pictures & Drawings in the Closet of the late Queen Caroline...* printed for W. Bathoe, London 1758, RCIN 1112557
- 10 George Vertue, Note Books, 5 volumes, published by the *Walpole Society*, XVIII, XX, XXII, XXIV, XXVI and XXX between 1929 and 1952, vol.V, p. 23
- 11 Mrs Purcell's list, before 1755, BM.Add.Ms.20101
- 12 Benjamin Jutsham, *An Account of the furniture &c received at Carlton House, June 1816-December 1829*, manuscript, RCIN 1112775, 1821
- 13 Sale, Christie's, London, 17-19 May 1819
- 14 Royal Archives/GEO/26327
- 15 See K. Aschengreen Piacenti and J. Boardman, *Ancient and Modern Gems and Jewels in the Collection of Her Majesty The Queen*, London, 2008, pp.260-3
- 16 Jutsham as at note 12
- 17 *An inventory taken of sundry Jewels etc at Windsor Castle – 16 Sept. 1830 and following days*, by Messrs Bridge... Manuscript copy made for Queen Mary after an original document in the collection of Mrs Bridge, November 1911. RCIN 1114749

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