

Book Review

Dominik Collet, *Die Welt in der Stube. Begegnungen mit Außereuropa in Kunstkammern der frühen Neuzeit*. Göttingen, Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009. ISBN 978-3-525-35888-7. 403 pp., 22 col. illus., 27 b. & w. illus. €71.

This overhauled version of a doctoral dissertation tackles a theme that has been rather neglected in the *Kunstkammer* literature so far: To what extent can objects from outside Europe be said to have conveyed useful information about those regions to their European visitors? The author bases his findings on three case-studies: the Gotha *Kunstkammer* in Schloss Friedenstein, William Courten's cabinet in London, and the Repository of the Royal Society in the same capital, thus spanning the period from the middle of the seventeenth to the early eighteenth century. At first sight the decision to compare collections in England and Germany may seem surprising, but all three adhered to the Danish model of the Museum Wormianum and participated in the same networks of donors, merchants and (distinguished) visitors.

The documentation on the Gotha collection in the form of diaries, correspondence and archival sources is particularly rich, and the author ably draws on all this material to provide an in-depth analysis of the *Sammlungspraxis*. This includes an excellent discussion of the figure of Caspar Schmalkalden, who travelled in Dutch Brazil and Chile as well as in the East Indies before entering the court as an agent; an appendix includes the 'shopping list' with which he was dispatched to Amsterdam to purchase 'Indian rarities' for the collection in his native Gotha, though it should be borne in mind that Schmalkalden probably compiled the list himself, and thus exerted a significant influence on the composition of the collection. Another figure, Johann Michael Wansleben, mediated between the court in Gotha and Ethiopia, where the duke vainly hoped to form a common front against the Turks. Closer to home, Wilhelm Ernst Tentzel played a similar mediatory role between the collection and the discovery of the fossil remains of a prehistoric forerunner of the modern elephant near

Gotha (fascinating though this case is, its link with the world outside Europe is nevertheless rather tenuous). In each case, the way in which objects from these regions entered the collection, not as independent sources of information, but to illustrate the canonical knowledge contained in travel accounts, is meticulously documented.

In the light of the already substantial literature on the British collections, the author is able to deal with them with more brevity (the discussion of the Gotha collection occupies half the book). The collection of William Courten (who later changed his surname to Charleton for financial reasons) passed into the hands of Sir Hans Sloane before entering the British Museum, though most of the individual items, except for some drawings and dried plants, can no longer be traced there. Unlike the *Kunstkammer* in Gotha, Courten's collection was notably accessible to researchers. Even so, it is striking that Courten relied on considerably outdated travel and other literature rather than on more reliable, contemporary eye-witness accounts. So here too, the objects served to illustrate pre-existing narratives rather than functioning as a source of knowledge.

A similar picture emerges from the discussion of the Repository. When John Winthrop dispatched items from the Americas to Henry Oldenburg in London, his choice matched expectations of what such a collection was supposed to contain. The persistence of such stereotypes also characterized the list of 'Inquiries for Brazil' that the Fellows of the Royal Society compiled and sent to Winthrop. And in spite of the bold motto 'Nullius in Verba', the Repository did indeed function as a repository – a collection of rarities brought together for purposes of representation – rather than as a house of experiment. Indeed, those Fellows who contributed to the Royal Society's project of a global natural history conducted their private researches in their own homes and only rarely drew on the objects in the Repository.

Unlike the private retreat of the Renaissance *studiolo*, all of these three collections were very much public installations, intended to be visited, seen and

admired. In the case of Schmalkalden and others, they served as stepping-stones of upward social mobility. But when it comes to the question with which we began – what kind of information did they convey about the non-European world? – the author’s conclusion is generally negative. At a time when the criteria for what did or did not belong in a *Kunstammer* had been more or less established by common practice, he argues, there was little thirst for new information. The objects in these representative collections were accommodated within perspectives on the non-European world (and finer geographical precision than ‘Indian’ was often lacking) that were characterized by the presence of stereotypes. Collet concludes:

‘The exotica in the *Kunstammern* served their observers not as a window on the remote world, but as a mirror’ that reflected their own preconceptions about that world.

This is an excellent, thought-provoking study that deserves a place beside – and in dialogue with – the recent work of Elke Bujok (reviewed in *Journal of the History of Collections*, 18 (2006), pp. 90–1) on non-European objects in European collections. Consideration of the different accents placed by the two authors is rewarding.

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