

HISTORY | NOVEMBER 16, 2023

How Cabinets of Curiosities Laid the Foundation for Modern Museums

An exhibition at LACMA examines the legacy of Dutch colonization through a fictive 17th-century collector's room of wonders



"The World Made Wondrous: The Dutch Collector's Cabinet and the Politics of Possession" takes a 17th-century Dutch cabinet as its starting point, tracing the threads of Dutch colonization through each object on view. © Museum Associates / LACMA

What's in a shell? Beyond capturing the sound of the ocean, shells hold layers of meaning. They are homes for marine life, forms of currency, objects of scientific study and wonders of aesthetic beauty. In the early modern era, shells were also one of the many items extracted and shipped to Europe as part of colonial trade routes, where they entered private collections known in German as *Kunstkammer* or in English as cabinets of curiosities. From the mid-16th century onward, collectors combined and categorized many kinds of art and natural objects in these cabinets in ways that reflected their worldviews, knowledge and wealth, prefiguring the development of modern museums.

Today, as cultural institutions around the world unravel their legacies of colonial acquisition, looking back at the origins of collecting provides important context on how objects arrived in their current locations. In recent years, says Jeffrey Chipps Smith, an art historian at the University of Texas at Austin, experts have started asking, "What are the consequences of collecting? What is the human equation involved?"



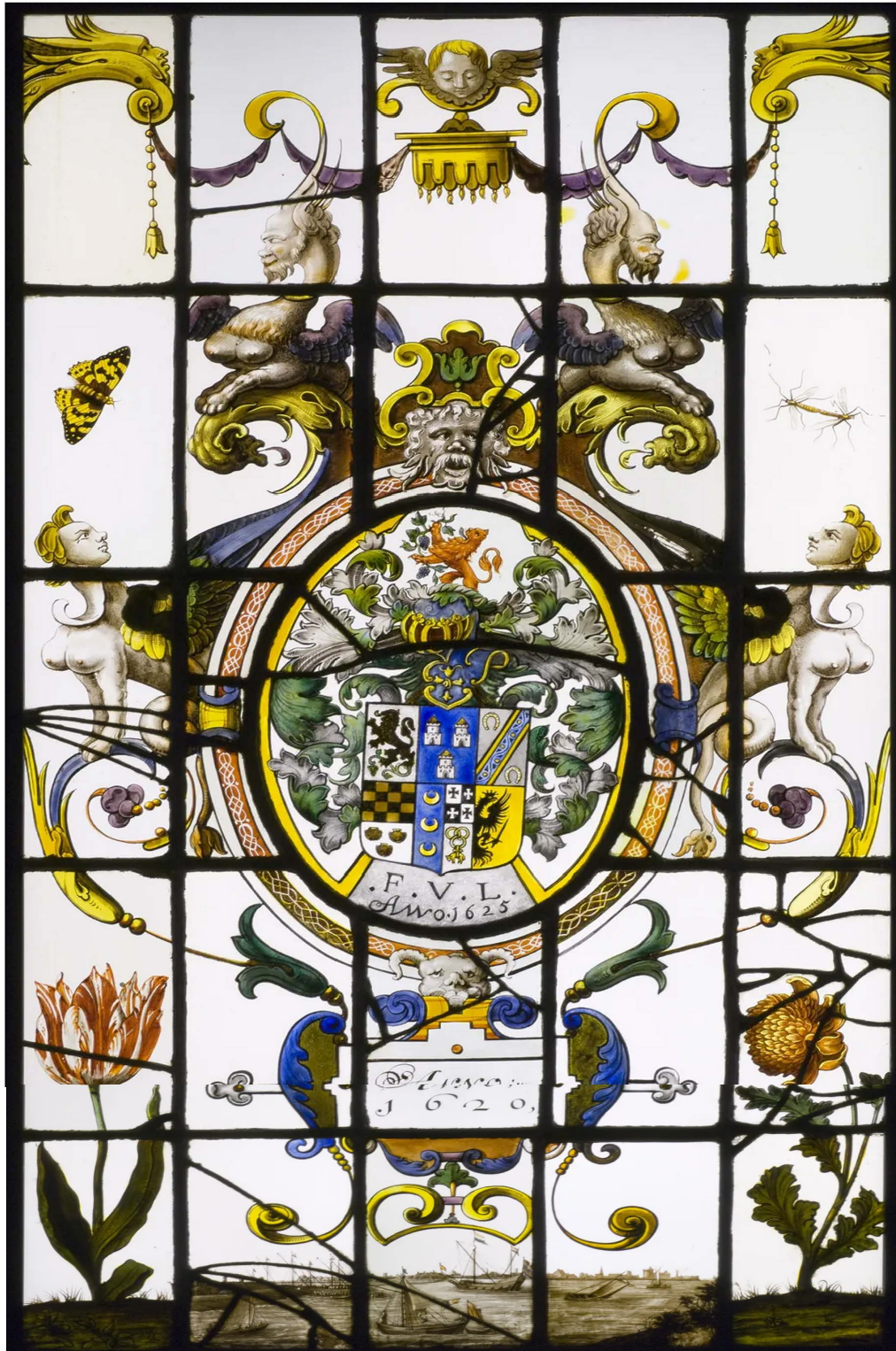
The LACMA exhibition features more than 300 objects, including shells, paintings, prints and gems. © Museum Associates / LACMA

An ongoing exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), titled "The World Made Wondrous: The Dutch Collector's Cabinet and the Politics of Possession," asks those questions and more. Curated by Diva Zumaya, the show takes a 17th-century Dutch cabinet as its starting point, tracing the threads of Dutch colonization through each object on view. Zumaya juxtaposes the meanings these items held in cabinet collections with the meanings they held in their countries of origin.

As their name suggests, cabinets of curiosities aimed to capture and define new knowledge of the world, prizing anything rare, unusual or unique. In 1565, Belgian physician Samuel Quiccheberg's treatise on collecting expressed the cabinet's ambitious aims, describing it as "a theater of the broadest scope, containing authentic materials and precise reproductions of the whole of the universe."

The treatise also emphasized the importance of display and order. Collectors imposed their own systems and hierarchies on the art, antiques, plants and animals within their cabinets in an attempt to create an encyclopedic framework of the world's knowledge. Objects were often grouped by material or combined for particular purposes, like nautilus shells decorated with gilded metalwork to contrast human artistry with nature's. Many valuable items came from distant places in rapidly expanding global trade networks; they represented both the limits of collectors' knowledge of the world and the colonial dispossession of each source.

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A 17th-century heraldic panel
© Museum Associates / LACMA



Abraham Gessner, *Globe Cup*, circa 1600 © Museum Associates / LACMA

“The Dutch were a global, seafaring, mercantile nation, [with] particular footholds in Brazil and in Japan, ... and the way in which they collected was related in no small part to their financial interest in establishing trade relations or trading outposts or colonies in these various places,” says Mark Meadow, an art historian at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Before cabinets of curiosities, European collecting was largely religious or royal, from the treasuries of the Catholic Church to the collections of Burgundian courts. Increased travel and trade networks fed directly into cabinets, including those created by the rising merchant class in Germany and the influential Habsburg dynasty. Meadow points out that the displays were not “simply places of extravagant wealth and strange, weird things,” but served practical research purposes, too.

Today, scholars are also examining how cabinets of curiosities—specifically, the ways they were compiled and displayed—are tied to colonialist worldviews. Zumaya explains that choosing to create a cabinet representative of a 17th-century Dutch merchant was both practical, based on the strength of LACMA’s collections, and methodological, to explicate global trade and colonialism through the example of the Dutch merchants who “set the model” for the Portuguese and British colonialism that would follow.



Engraving from Ferrante Imperato's *Dell'Historia Naturale*, 1599 Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

Here, the Dutch “Golden Age” is described not as an embarrassment of riches so much as the shame of them: The flowering of art and luxury in the 17th century Netherlands is reframed and understood as the profit of colonial extraction. Four contemporary works by artists **Jennifer Ling Datchuk**, Todd Gray, Sithabile Mlotshwa and Uýra Sodoma hang in conversation with the historic ones to underscore this point, in part through commentary from their creators. “The Dutch example lets us look really critically at some present-day issues” and the ongoing legacy of colonialism, Zumaya says.

Cabinets were studies in juxtaposition, and the exhibition operates on the same principle. It's a treasure trove of varied textures, colors and media, including books, engravings, paintings, jewels, taxidermy animals, seashells and textiles. The majority of its 300-plus objects came from LACMA's own "cabinets," as well as other local collections. True to the principles of early cabinets, paintings by even the most recognizable artists of the era—like Rembrandt and Rubens—are displayed next to works by lesser-known figures rather than organized according to a modern conception of artistic hierarchy.

The exhibition opens with a "world-ordering" introduction that includes European portraits and maps of the early modern world to represent the perspective of the imagined Dutch collector. It continues with a maze-like meander through visual riches related to water (maritime trade), earth (animals and plants), and fire (glinting gemstones and precious metals).



A stuffed crocodile looms over display cases at LACMA. © Museum Associates / LACMA

The show includes little in the way of wall text to guide the visitor, but early cabinets would also have been viewed only in guided tours provided by the collector or staff. The accompanying audio guide features the voices of scholars, artists, scientists and experts from a variety of fields. "I wanted to decenter the voice of the collector and also the voice of the curator," Zumaya says, prioritizing "a greater breadth of expertise and knowledge and ... voices that are not typically heard in art history or museum exhibition contexts." These voices focus on the legacies of colonialism and slavery, and the stories behind the creation or transport of the images and artifacts, continually emphasizing the value of human and animal lives over objects.

A showpiece stuffed crocodile hanging from the ceiling recalls similar displays in famous cabinets like the one owned by apothecary Ferrante Imperato and depicted in a 1599 engraving. It also nods to the renewed interest in cabinets of curiosity in the early 20th century, when French writer Alfred Jarry famously made the disparaging remark that “the work of art is a stuffed crocodile.” (Jarry also painted a macabre twist on a cabinet of curiosities—crocodile included.) The layered meanings in the show’s objects allow wonder to quickly switch into horror, making the viewer examine their accustomed ways of seeing.



Rembrandt van Rijn, Portrait of Marten Looten, 1632 © Museum Associates / LACMA



Dirck de Bray, *Flowers in a Glass Vase*, 1671 © Museum Associates / LACMA

Zumaya says she hung Indigenous Brazilian artist Sodoma's photograph of a deforestation site in the Amazon next to Frans Post's propagandistic 1655 painting of a plantation in Brazil "to communicate the visceral horror of where we're at now with colonialism." Post's work shows the start of the colonial process; Sodoma's acknowledges "the legacy [of colonialism] today." The other contemporary works perform similar functions, delving into the trade routes of Chinese porcelain and the wealth amassed through enslaved labor and loss of life. Each is contrasted with a lush, peaceful vision of prosperity through art or exquisite artifacts.

Seventeenth-century cabinets of curiosities explain "the beginning of how museums and collecting [become] tied up with, and in the service of, colonial agendas," Zumaya says. In the 18th century, the Enlightenment era's continued pursuit of knowledge ushered in an increased division of the arts from natural sciences, and the reorganization of knowledge and object hierarchies in collections followed. But artifacts continued to be sourced from colonized countries and with exploitative wealth. The most extensive cabinets provided the kernel for new institutions, such as Hans Sloane's collection, which shaped the British Museum, the London Natural History Museum and the British Library, and the Habsburgs' dynastic collections, which fed into the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.



Frans Post, *Imagined Landscape of Dutch Colonial Brazil*, circa 1655 © Museum Associates / LACMA

Modern museums thereby inherited the concept of the global, comprehensive collection—purchased and looted treasures of the world—from cabinets of curiosities. By unpacking the cabinet, “the museum [is] critiquing itself, examining its origins in those collections,” Meadow, who was not involved in the LACMA exhibition, explains. “The point of the [show] is to make visible the European colonial past that relates to the collecting of materials from around the world.”

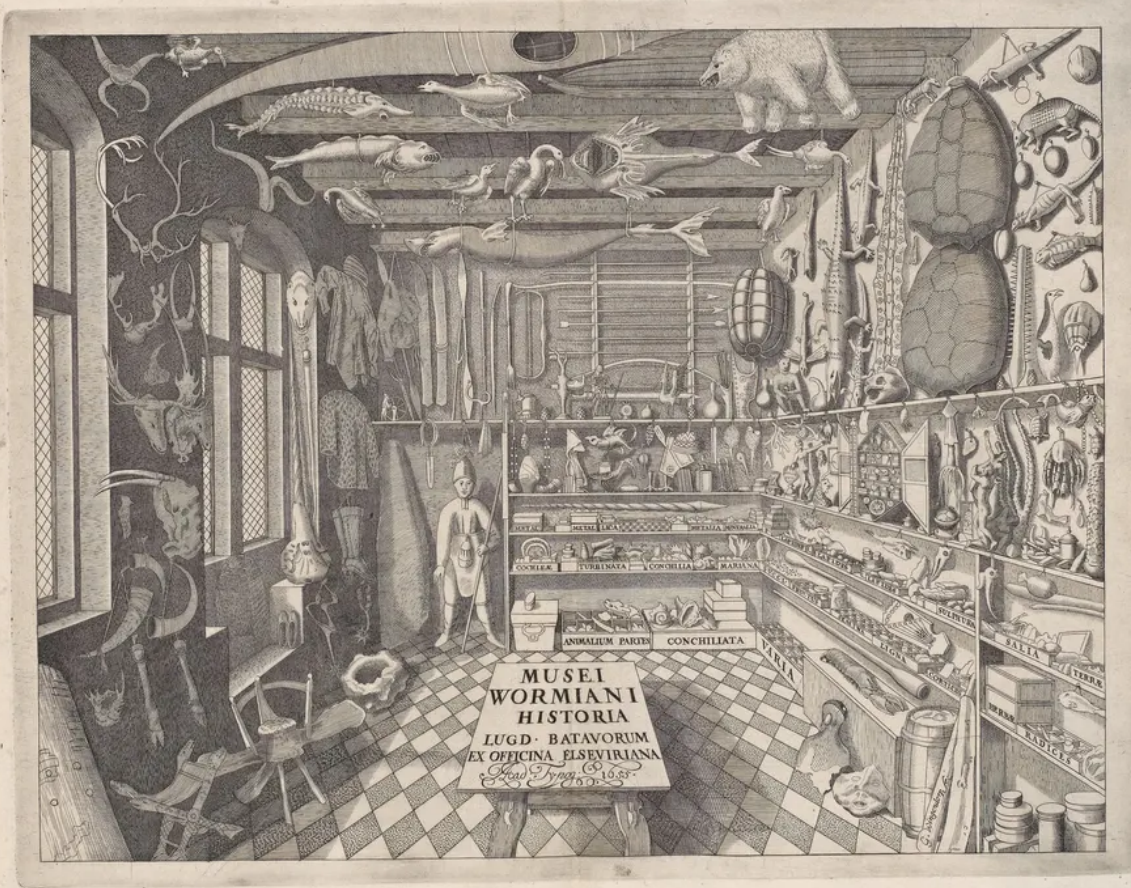
Museums are a reflection of their eras and cultures, evolving over time to reflect dominant worldviews. “Museums across the United States and all over the world are now rethinking their colonial origins and making efforts to at the

very least acknowledge those points of departure for the museum,” Meadow says. “This [exhibition] is absolutely in line with what museums are doing and what museums should be doing.”

In a 1587 set of guidelines, Gabriel Kaltemarckt advised that collections should be established “in order to encounter the events of history and those who ... created them ... as a delight to the eye and a strengthening of memory, as a living incitement to do good and avoid evil, and also as a source of study for art-loving youth.” The idea of the museum continues to evolve, but some aspects—learning, preservation and enjoyment—remain throughlines.

Cabinets of curiosities encompassed the pursuit of power, beauty, learning, wealth, wonder and prestige. According to Meadow, “It’s both taking delight in the materials and then asking you to think very, very seriously about what their implications are.”

“The World Made Wondrous: The Dutch Collector’s Cabinet and the Politics of Possession” is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art through March 3, 2024.



A 1655 engraving of a cabinet of curiosities Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles



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