The Wonders of the Kunstkammer: Habsburg Collections Come to Cambridge

After centuries of having dazzled Holy Roman Emperors, wealthy princes and powerful diplomats and, more recently, tourists, the legendary Kunstkammer of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, closed for a decade of renovations in 2002. Building up to its highly anticipated reopening in December 2012, the exhibition ‘Splendour & Power: Imperial Treasures from Vienna’ at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, brought dozens of highlights from the collection to the UK for the first time. This was an opportunity to be seized; once the Kunstkammer reopens, it is extremely unlikely that so many tremendously precious objects will be loaned again.

Like all Kunstkammern, or curiosity cabinets, the Habsburgs’ personal collection formed a microcosm of the known universe, a collection of extraordinary treasures that represent the wonders of nature (naturalia), prowess of man (artificialia), the heights of knowledge (scientifica) and the thrillingly foreign (exotica). But this display of intellectual force also showcases the power the Holy Roman Empire. The five dozen exhibits were chosen to form, in turn, a microcosm of the Kunstkammer from which they came. Although the objects span the fourteenth through the very early nineteenth century, the focus is on Renaissance and Mannerist art, mainly acquired by Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II (1576-1612). The functions of the objects range from the amusingly practical (Empress Maria Theresa’s golden ear spoon and tongue scraper, cat. 49) to the devotional (a tiny reliquary of the True Cross in the form of a triptych, cat. 35) to the ostentatious (a rock crystal lamp with wick holes too horizontal to be used, cat. 53).

Many exhibits contain or were made from precious materials, like a ring carved from a single giant sapphire (cat. 19), but all are, by definition, tours-de-force of artistic skill. An inseparable link chain carved from a single piece of ivory reaches almost a metre and a half (cat. 26). A gold hat jewel depicting two knights in combat, which appears to be cast due to its complexity, was actually chased in relief so high that the two knights fight completely in the round (cat. 36). But the most stunning manipulation of materials is in the stone cutting, particularly the late sixteenth century-work by the Misernoni workshop. The designs incorporate colourful veins in the jasper that would ruin the stone for a lesser talent; the cameo of Omphale claims a yellow streak for the headdress, a gray streak for her drapery, and red for her skin (cat. 4).

Of these, the mastery displayed in the unknown agate cup cover of Venus and Cupid on a shell by the Misernoni workshop, which emerged when it was sold to a private collector at Sotheby’s one month before the exhibition opened, is particularly remarkable. (Fig. 1) Like the statuette of Venus and Cupid in chalcedony (cat. 56), the blending of the colours determined the position of the figures. Although the colours merge unpredictably, rather than falling into sharp or layered veins, the figures are arranged so that Venus has yellow hair and white skin and sits on pink drapery on a red ground. In the statuette, a small area of red even becomes a flower in Venus’ hair. The design of the figures, like the use of the colours, is surprisingly naturalistic for stone cutting.

Although many of the exhibits were produced within the Holy Roman Empire and neighbouring lands, some come from farther afield. These include multicultural amalgams such as a sixteenth-century Chinese dish carved in nephrite jade with slightly later Ottoman embellishments of gold and rubies (cat. 59); first described as ‘Persian’ in the Imperial Treasury inventory of 1750, it testifies both to the imperial taste for the exotic and the extent of international trade networks. Similarly, a cup carved from a Javan rhinoceros horn from the Ming dynasty on a slightly later Goan filigree base attests that seventeenth-century Chinese and Indian workmanship was represented in the Kunstkammer by 1750 (cat. 39). (Fig. 2)

The generously illustrated 200-page catalogue accompanying the exhibition is divided into two sections: three essays about the history and development of the Kunstkammer and scholarly entries about the sixty-three exhibits. Given the intricacy of the craftsmanship, enlarged photographs and details are particularly valuable complements to the displays. A coral and turquoise tusk ring carved in Germany ca. 1650 (cat. 24) is stunning in person, but the 6x magnification in the catalogue makes the politically significant but minute details of the portrait of Emperor Ferdinand III easy to see. (Fig. 3) Similarly, the enlargement of the ivory micro-carvings by brothers Sebastian and Paul Hess, ca. 1750, emphasises their complexity and fragility; because miniscule details, like the in-the-round flower stamens, may have been carved under a microscope, they can be best appreciated with magnification that is impossible in the exhibition (cat. 28-29).
Across the diversity of the exhibits, one theme emerges: the consistent collecting interests of generations of Habsburgs. The emperors (and the empress) did not simply amass the finest works from the finest materials by the finest craftsmen to showcase the power and wealth of their empire, they also acquired evidence of their claim to the throne. Whether implicit (the unmarked sapphire ring stayed in the family after it was made for Duke Ernest the Iron around 1400) or explicit (in the coral and turquoise tusk ring, the busts of twelve predecessors of Ferdinand III are each named a Holy Roman Emperor although three were kings), the objects have a far more politically charged function than showcasing wealth or representing a microcosm of the world; they argue for the Habsburgs’ right to rule.

L. Elizabeth Upper
University of Cambridge

’Splendour & Power: Imperial Treasures from Vienna’ was open 16 August 2011-15 January 2012 in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, with free admission. As ‘Glanz der Macht: Kaiserliche Pretiosen aus der Wiener Kunstkammer’, the exhibition previously travelled to the Schmuckmuseum Pforzheim (3 December 2010-13 March 2011) and the Kunstmuseum des Landes Sachsen Anhalt, Halle (16 April-24 July 2011).


CAPTIONS
Fig 1. Cup Cover with Venus and Cupid Sleeping on a Shell being observed by Jupiter in the form of a Swan, attributed to Giovanni Ambrogio Miseroni (1551-1616), Milan, late 16th century, private collection

Fig. 2. Drinking Vessel made from Rhinoceros Horn, goblet: China, Ming dynasty, early 17th century, mount: Goa, 1650-1700, Javan rhinoceros horn, gold filigree mount, © Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Fig. 3. Coral ring with the Bust of Emperor Ferdinand III, German, c. 1650, coral and turquoise tusk, © Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

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