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FIG. 8.1 The Augsburg Art Cabinet, Museum Gustavianum, Uppsala, Sweden (photograph by kind permission of and copyright University of Uppsala Art Collections)
THINKING INSIDE THE BOX: THE CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE IN A MINIATURE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY CABINET

Stephanie Bowry

Box: the Augsburg Art Cabinet. Other names: Uppsala Art Cabinet, Gustavus Adolphus’s Kunstschrank (art cupboard), Schreibtisch (writing desk). Type: miniature curiosity cabinet or Kunstschrank. Origin: Augsburg, Germany, 1625–1631. Family: one of six Kunstschränke which were designed by the Augsburg merchant and collector Philipp Hainhofer (1578–1647) between 1610 and 1635. Size and shape: the cabinet measures ca. 240 cm (height) by 120 cm (width) and has the appearance of a three-tiered box comprising pedestal, corpus, and crown. Behaviour: the cabinet’s sumptuous materials and diverse contents were designed to engage both the mind and senses. The main body of the cabinet may be rotated 360° on its axis, and all four sides may be opened and explored. It also contains a number of hidden drawers and compartments. Voice: seldom heard, but contains a virginal which may be programmed to play three melodies at particular times of day when connected to a clock in the crown. Habitat: Museum Gustavianum, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden. Migration: Augsburg, Germany, to Svartsjö Castle, Uppland, Sweden (1633), to Uppsala Castle, Sweden (early 1650s), to Library Hall, Gustavianum, Uppsala University (now Museum Gustavianum) (1694), to University Hall, Uppsala University (1887), restored to former Library Hall, Museum Gustavianum (1997) (Cederlund and Norrby 2003: 4–5) in storage (2019). Status: largely intact, some damaged and missing parts and objects, and some later additions to its collection.

Keywords: performing, entertaining, containing, juxtaposing, compressing, miniaturising, concealing, revealing, ordering, categorising, representing, monumentalising
This photograph of the front of a seventeenth-century cabinet (Figure 8.1) reveals a complex, hybrid structure. Constructed from a rich variety of materials, including wood, metal, ivory, glass, marble, shell, and coral, its intricately carved and painted surfaces showcase a diverse range of media presented through a variety of techniques. Yet despite its visually spectacular appearance and wealth of ornament, it is essentially an elaborate wooden box, tripartite in structure and comprising from bottom to top, pedestal, corpus, and crown. In this photograph, two sets of doors open outwards to reveal a virginal in the upper section of the cabinet, and a series of miniature paintings and sculptures in the lower section. Yet arguably this box does not function solely as a protective container for objects and artworks: rather, the cabinet and its contents enjoy a symbiotic relationship, together constituting a single object and work of art in its own right. Furthermore, the Augsburg Art Cabinet, as it is now known, was not merely a piece of decorative furniture, static and silent, but a miniature ‘curiosity cabinet’ whose purpose was to reflect the representation of the world performed in the great universal collections of the early modern age.

This paper explores how the Augsburg Art Cabinet was deployed as a means of constructing knowledge of the world for its seventeenth-century audience through its visual, spatial and representational practices. In particular, I examine the use of physical framing devices, including architecture, iconography, and miniature objects, and how these were both experienced and understood to relate to concepts of knowledge-building during the seventeenth century. The paper offers some reflections upon the contemporary display methods used for the cabinet and how this early modern object is undergoing a slow metamorphosis which has stimulated the creation of new objects. I argue that the practices this miniature cabinet employed are still relevant today and should give museum professionals cause to reconsider our own position with regard to knowledge production and its interpretation. I shall begin by outlining a brief definition of the term ‘curiosity cabinet’, before considering the importance of boxes as both physical structures and as rhetorical framing devices during the early modern era. I then introduce the Augsburg Art Cabinet as a specialised form of cabinet.
DEFINING THE CURIOSITY CABINET

Cabinets of curiosity may be broadly defined as privately-owned collections of ‘extraordinary’ objects – typically those perceived as rare, beautiful, ingenious, or strange – which flourished in Europe from the late fifteenth to the early eighteenth centuries. Nevertheless, the history and etymology of the term ‘cabinet of curiosity’ are problematic (Olmi 2004 [1985]: 129). While in use throughout the early modern period (MacGregor 2007: 11), the term may refer to a physical cabinet, to the space in which the collection was housed and displayed, to the collection itself, or to related spaces such as libraries and gardens. Moreover, there pre- and co-existed many alternative terms, each of which possessed its own shades of meaning, evoking the distinguishable but subtle differences in the many types of collection which existed at this time, such as the scrittoi, a small, wood-panelled study which might contain both real and painted objects (MacGregor 2007: 12–13), and the Kunstkammer, or ‘art chamber’, which denoted a collection dedicated to the products of art and artifice. Likewise, the term ‘curiosity’ describes a shifting, nebulous concept during the early modern period, which had many different meanings and could be applied in a variety of contexts, of which intellectual endeavour was but one. Barbara Benedict defines it as ‘the ambitious penetration of the unknown and the astute penetration of the untrue’ (2001: 29). This version of curiosity was the driving force behind a thirst for knowledge which had yet to acquire the naïve and credulous overtones it increasingly accrued during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (Preston 2006: 91).

Then, as now, the ‘cabinet’, like the word ‘museum’, described many different types of collecting activity (Findlen 2004 [1989]: 160), whose practitioners were drawn not only from royalty and the nobility, but also from professional and mercantile backgrounds (Meadow 2002: 184), and included women as well as men. By the early seventeenth century these collections were prolific, and while some were more specialised, they often remained diverse in their scope (MacGregor 2007: 30). Some, such as the collection founded in London by father-and-son gardeners the John Tradescants, comprised art, antiquities, natural historical specimens, weaponry, coins, tools and instruments, and ethnographic items (Tradescant 1656: fols. 13r–14r). The purpose of assembling such
a collection, as the English philosopher and courtier Francis Bacon (1521–1626) contended, was to furnish, ‘in small compass a model of universal nature made private’ (Bacon 1688: 55). Moreover, by collecting both natural and artificial objects, collectors hoped to investigate ‘the various modes of Natures admirable workes, and the curious Imitators thereof’ (Tradescant 1565: 6). The cabinet was thus perceived to function as the mirror and microcosm of the natural world.

A SPECIALISED FORM OF CABINET

The Kunstschrank – literally, ‘art cupboard’ – was a particular feature of seventeenth-century collecting practice (Baarsen 2000: 4), and was designed to function as a miniature version of the Kunstkammer, although this designation did not preclude the inclusion of items from the natural world. These cabinets typically consisted of a collection of mostly artificial objects housed within a single, ornate and complex piece of furniture, and might perform a dual role as both a stand-alone collection and as the centrepiece to a larger repository (Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 120). If the cabinet aimed to reflect the world in a room, the Kunstschrank aimed to do so in a box, illustrating how, as Susan Stewart (1993: 43) contends, ‘A reduction in dimensions does not produce a corresponding reduction in significance […]’. The Kunstschrank was also symptomatic of the early modern fascination with boxes and containers, and their symbolic properties.

CONTAINING THE WORLD IN THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

Boxes and containers were integral to the construction and organisation of knowledge in early modern collecting practice. Writing in 1565, the Flemish physician, librarian, and custodian of collections Samuel Quiccheberg (1529–1567) described an ideal collection of objects. This collection would constitute nothing less than a ‘theatre of the world’, and would contain five categories of objects – objects relating to the collector and his or her realm, artificial objects, natural objects, tools and instruments, and objects relating to the representation and documentation of history (Bowry 2015: 97–117). Interestingly, both
furniture and boxes in the form of ‘little cabinets, chests, boxes, cases, small wicker-baskets, […] little towers, pyramids themselves imitating chests’ were listed as subcategories of collectible objects in their own right, not only for their aesthetic merit, historical interest, or exotic provenance, but for their role in ‘recovering or revealing individual things in themselves’ (Quiccheberg 1565, trans. Leonardis 2013: 22). Boxes in curiosity cabinets therefore served a symbolic purpose in which an object or image was identified by and through its receptacle, while the acts of concealment, containment, and revelation were perceived to uncover or heighten an object’s significance and relationship to other objects within the collection.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE AUGSBURG ART CABINET

The Augsburg Art Cabinet represents an especially large and lavish example of a Kunstschrank. It was constructed between 1625 and 1631 in Augsburg, Southern Germany, renowned from the mid-sixteenth century as one of the chief exporters of richly-decorated furniture (Baarsen 2000: 3). The cabinet itself was probably the work of Ulrich Baumgartner (1580–1652), but approximately thirty specialist artisans worked on its decoration. When new, it housed a collection estimated at a thousand objects, many of which survive today (Cederlund and Norrby 2003: 3 and 13; Josefsson 2014: 56). These include such diverse items as a miniature human skull carved from bone, a pair of beard-curling tongs, a monkey’s claw, a strap of human skin, a pair of mechanical dolls, a chess set, and a relic of the true cross. Woven into the fabric of the cabinet are many more objects, including semi-precious stones such as lapis lazuli, and miniature paintings.

The Augsburg cabinet was one of six designed by the merchant, diplomat, and collector Philipp Hainhofer, of which three now survive. Hainhofer had cabinets made to order for wealthy clients, but others, such as this one, were constructed without a specific buyer in mind, and filled with items from his own collection (Boström 2004 [1985]: 540). The cabinet was bought by the Augsburg Council and presented to King Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden as a diplomatic gift in 1632, on his entry to the city during the height of the Thirty Years’ War. Hainhofer personally demonstrated the cabinet to the king and described how
After lunch his Maj[esty] looked at the third part of the writing desk and the summit with a coco d’India [Seychelles nut] (which I had to lift down) for one hour […] and [I] was assured [that it] is a *magister omnium artium* [teacher of all the arts]. (Hainhofer cited in Koeppe 2008: 238)

It is evidence of the sheer intricacy of construction which seems to have defined the *Kunstschrank* that it required physical demonstration in order to be understood. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2000: 129) has observed, ‘[i]t had literally to be performed to be known’. This necessity is further underscored by the Augsburg cabinet’s inclusion of an image, in inlaid wood, of a smaller cabinet on a stand being demonstrated to a client in a workshop setting (FIGURE 8.2). As the cabinet also includes images of Augsburg, this could be interpreted as a piece of civic propaganda on the part of Hainhofer, advertising Augsburg.

**FIG. 8.2** In this image, a gilded and ebony-veneered cabinet is demonstrated by the master carpenter (left) to his client (right), UUK31. The reverse of this panel bears a second image of figures in a landscape outside the city of Augsburg (photograph by kind permission of and copyright University of Uppsala Art Collections)
as a centre of artisanal genius and luxury trade. However, it is also significant that this image not only effectively miniaturises and contains the image of a cabinet, or a technique associated with cabinets (intarsia), but also documents the cultural practice associated with cabinets: their manufacture, consumption, and clientele. The miniature, Stewart (1993: 66) argues, ‘tends toward tableau rather than toward narrative, toward silence and spatial boundaries rather than toward expository closure’. The cabinet’s attempt to encapsulate the world thus included the attempt to capture and contain the essence of itself within its self-imposed physical and conceptual boundaries.

Unfortunately for Gustavus Adolphus, he did not enjoy his cabinet for long – he was killed in the battle of Lützen just six months later, and the cabinet was disassembled and transported to the royal residence of Gustavus’s widow, Queen Christina, at Svartsjö in Sweden.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CABINET

I shall now examine each of the three elements of the cabinet in turn, in order to construct a fuller picture of their nature and relationship to each other.

The pedestal, upon which the upper body of the cabinet may be rotated 360 degrees, contains objects designed to help view the cabinet, including a collapsible table which may be removed and unfolded so that particular objects can be studied in detail and in comfort, and a drawer which converts into a step-ladder so that the top of the cabinet may be easily reached.

The corpus, or main body of the cabinet, is veneered in ebony – a costly, imported wood – but its heart is composed of oak and fir. It is here that the majority of objects were housed, within an intricate and layered arrangement of drawers, compartments, and removable panels. The Augsburg Art Cabinet demonstrably drew upon the structural elements of pre- and co-existing examples of material culture such as the writing desk, casket, polyptych, and shrine. Indeed, David Phillips suggests that the original meaning of the word Kunstschrank is ‘art shrine’ (Phillips 1997: 16). The cabinet’s appearance is also comparable to a stepped tabernacle with architectural features such as swags and Corinthian columns, and reflects the argument that Baroque furniture pieces tended to be conceived as ‘small monuments and were subject to the same architectural
and aesthetic conventions as buildings’ (Bussagli and Reiche 2009: 32). As a monumental structure (Argan 1989: 43), the cabinet sought to immortalise a particular mode of viewing and representing the world and time. Yet its theatricality of presentation was comparable to the Baroque Bel Composto or seamless integration of diverse media and themes, seen in seventeenth-century church interiors, which ‘inspired devotion and conveyed a sense of mystery through illusion, surprise and sensual richness’ (Bailey 2012: 158).

Finally, the cabinet is crowned by a mountain of naturalia – natural items from the earth and sea – including shells, coral, minerals, and crystals. On top of this sits half of a gilded Seychelles nut, or coco de mer, fashioned as a ewer balanced on the shoulders of Neptune, and in which sits a figure of Venus. The coco de mer was a highly-prized rarity in Renaissance Europe, and this element of the cabinet is designed partly as a piece of spectacle, but it also possesses strong symbolic connotations. The components of the mountain, while natural, have been assembled by human skill and ingenuity, therefore revealing the universal scope of the collection as a cabinet of art and the natural world, and the intersection, or joining, of these two categories. Moreover, the addition of Venus suggests a central theme of love, which arguably governs the symbolic and allegorical content of the cabinet (Boström 2004 [1985]: 548).

**ICONOGRAPHY**

The cabinet is richly decorated with miniature paintings, sculptures, plaques, and reliefs in which a large variety of artistic techniques are represented, from pietra dura to oil painting on alabaster. Even functional elements such as key-holes are festooned with Baroque imagery, and metamorphose into cherubim or the yawning mouths of grotesques. Images are often framed within individual cartouches, but when considered together they often tell a particular story or invite the beholder to reflect upon a certain theme. The inner doors at the front of the cabinet, for example, depict scenes from the Book of Genesis, portraying the creation of the creatures of the sea on the central panel on the left, and those of the land on the right (Figure 8.3). Smaller images representing allegories of the four elements and the four seasons appear on the silver plaques in the central section of the corpus, while the reverse of the cabinet contains images of
the Last Judgement. The cabinet’s iconography thus informs the beholder that the cabinet is designed to represent all of the world and all of time.

Beneath the double doors of the front side of the cabinet lie several more doors, compartments, and panels. An image of Christ crowned with thorns is located behind the first door, and beneath this lies another removable panel which offers a view of Augsburg. If this final panel is removed, one reaches the heart of the cabinet, which contains seventeen secret drawers each individually decorated with images of courtly love, forming a conceptual link with the ‘Ship of Venus’ at the top of the cabinet. Thus seamlessly combined within the same side of the cabinet are images relating to change and metamorphosis, the earthly and the sacred, and spiritual and temporal love, in which a multitude of interrelated meanings are possible.

Rather than view this object as the product of ‘an obsessive *horror vacui*’ (Rieder 1970), then, it is best to understand it as conveying a ‘lost language of
ornament’ (Domeisen 2008), which functions as a framing device. As Domeisen argues,

In picture frames and in the border of the illuminated manuscript, ornament negotiates between the real world outside and the fictional world of the text or painting. Ornament is containment. It is the home of metamorphosis uniting and transforming conflicting worldly elements. It is an image of combination and a spectacle of transformation. Ornament is a method to subsume almost anything into the architectural idiom: human bodies, plants, militaria, geometric patterns, fantastical beasts – it is the realm of monsters and hybrids. Ornament is transgressive. (Domeisen 2008: 119)

Cabinets such as this one arguably employed certain fluid categories of things, such as naturalia and artificialia – natural objects and the products of craftsmanship – in which objects might inhabit more than one category simultaneously. The Seychelles nut, for example, is a natural object manipulated by human artistry. Collectors delighted in objects which blurred the boundaries between the natural and the artificial, and Philipp Hainhofer actively sought out objects in which, as he put it, ‘Art and Nature play with one another’ (Boström 2004 [1985]: 551). The purpose of the cabinet was not to segregate things, although each object had its proper place, but rather to demonstrate the relationships between objects and ideas.

MINIATURE OBJECTS

Boxes and box forms are not only integral to the anatomy of the Augsburg cabinet; the cabinet also houses a large number of miniature boxes, containers or micro-encapsulations of a particular aspect of the cosmos.

If the notion of the box is extended to include miniature objects such as the tiny book (4 cm in height and 2.6 cm in width) produced in Munich in 1599 (Figure 8.4), it may be observed that this artefact was proof of human virtuosity and ingenuity, but it also reflects the fact that the Kunstschrank served to compress knowledge into as small a container as possible (Rieder 1970: 33).
The book contains two texts: the first, in Spanish, is a reflection on *conscientia*, or conscience, and the second, in Latin, comprises a litany, or prayer for the safeguarding of the Spanish realm. If the physical object was a repository of knowledge, the miniature object not only captured a form of situated knowledge but also drew attention to its representation within the allegorical sphere of knowledge that the cabinet enshrined. Knowledge of other worlds, both earthly and spiritual, might be held in the palm of the hand, and so through the conduit of the miniature, ‘a narrow gate, opens up an entire world’ (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 155). Princely cabinets such as these thus physically demonstrated a temporal ruler’s mastery or dominion over a geographical territory. Indeed, Quiccheberg recommended that his princely client install images and genealogical charts showing ‘in exact order’ the progression of significant persons ‘in his universe’ and his relationship to them all (Quiccheberg 1565, trans. Leonardis 2013: 3).

Furthermore, other box-like forms within the cabinet, such as the virginal, the miniature paintings, and the clock, are designed to contain supposedly uncontainable, intangible elements such as Music, Genius, and Time, and in this sense provide a microcosmic rendition of the *Kunstschrank* itself and a sense

![Figure 8.4](image_url)
of worlds within worlds. The miniature book, Stewart writes, ‘speaks of infinite time, of the time of labor […] and of the time of the world, collapsed within a minimum of physical space’ (Stewart 1993: 39).

The cabinet in its miniature form can therefore be understood as a matter of complex and interwoven layers which gradually transport the beholder to smaller, larger, or different types of encapsulations of the world in its various aspects. It is in this sense more rightly a collection of lenses for looking at the world through material objects and their containers, in which the container, for perhaps the first time, enjoys a certain pre-eminence over the object.

**CONTEMPORARY DISPLAY METHODS**

Today, the Augsburg Art Cabinet is housed in the University of Uppsala’s Museum Gustavianum, constructed with money donated by Gustavus Adolphus and situated opposite the cathedral in which the king lies buried. Until 29 September 2019, when the Museum closed for renovation, the cabinet formed the centrepiece of a gallery dedicated to the history of Uppsala University, and was displayed partially open but sealed within a cylindrical glass display case as an art object - and a curiosity - in its own right. In order that the objects it contains could be examined closely, many of them were removed from the cabinet and displayed thematically in a series of six wall and freestanding glass cabinets nearby. This method of display allowed the visitor to visually appreciate the cabinet and its contents from every angle. As a result, however, and despite its physical proximity to its seventeenth-century setting, the cabinet is in some sense alienated from its original context, which impacts upon its ability to function as a producer of knowledge. Thus, there has been what the artist and critic Paul Carter (2004: 24–5) calls a de-framing and a subsequent re-framing of the original seventeenth-century mode of display and interaction, in which touch was allied with vision. A digital interactive model mitigates this difficulty somewhat by enabling the viewer to rotate and disassemble the cabinet and explore some of its individual objects (Uppsala University 2008). Yet through this very different means of navigating the collection, and in the absence of a human demonstrator, ‘Gone is the cloak of knowledge that once warmed the objects’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999: 132).
CONCLUSION

The Augsburg Art Cabinet provided a visual, tactile and powerfully theatrical performance of the key forms of knowledge production in the seventeenth century, in which the frame or means of containment surpassed the contained object(s) in importance. For historians of the museum such as Arthur MacGregor (2007: 17), the cabinet numbers ‘among the most perfectly resolved expressions of the Kunstkammer ideal […] in which every dimension of the standard curiosity collection was represented in miniature’. This cabinet not only comprises a complex ‘family’ of objects, but it also embodies a complex means of representing and understanding the world through specialised practices of collecting and display. Ultimately, it endures as a representation of the entanglement and manipulation of things, both material and conceptual, including systems of knowledge.

The cabinet’s remit is to explore knowledge itself, but it is also to entertain, to be useful, to be a thing of beauty and an object of religious contemplation. The cabinet thus delights in what may seem to our taxonomic age incongruous juxtapositions. The intricacy of the Augsburg Cabinet, and its delight in not only encapsulating but also in subverting the world through objects neither wholly natural nor artificial, by blurring the boundaries between things, by hiding them from the gaze as well as overtly displaying them, also points to this. More importantly, it seeks to explore the limits of representation, and despite its sensuality and the manner of its operation – in which hidden things are slowly unveiled to the beholder – actually directs its audience to the possibility of worlds beyond the senses, and hence to worlds unknown. The existence of worlds invisible to human senses was of great interest to seventeenth-century philosophers, including Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673) who reflected that

For many things our Senses dull may escape,
For Sense is grosse, not every thing can Shape.
So in this World another World may bee,
That we do neither touch, tast, smell, heare, see.

(Cavendish 1653: 43)
Moreover, the monumental quality of the cabinet offers, as Carlo Giulio Argan contends, ‘a visible and plausible view of the world beyond the horizon of experience’. For, he argues,

[…] to perceive something is not just to register it mentally, but to be solicited by it; the mind must create new systems of reference adapted to the perception of objects which are no longer “natural”, but artificial products of man. (Argan 1989: 55)

The cabinet represents the fusion of different materials, techniques, cultures, geographies, ideologies, and themes. Its organic naturalia crown destabilises the rectilinear forms below, and makes the cabinet itself appear to be in the process of a mysterious transformation, hovering between the natural and the artificial, the temporal and the spiritual, the ancient and the modern worlds. The Augsburg Cabinet is thus also a persuasive rhetorical object which speaks of worlds beyond worlds as well as worlds within worlds.

There is also an element of poignancy in that this, the richest and most elaborate Kunstschrank to survive from the seventeenth century, now exists as a kind of time capsule for a particular way of looking at the world through material things. This should remind us all, in the best tradition of the vanitas, that it is not only material objects which disintegrate, it is also systems of knowledge, a phenomenon from which we ourselves, and our own knowledge paradigms and associated practices – museums, galleries, libraries, universities – are not immune. Doubtless in 380 years’ time, our own systems and modes of knowledge construction will come under scrutiny and be consigned to a box.

Yet, paradoxically, this cabinet is far from a static relic of a past era: in fact, it has been continually translated and understood in new ways during its near-four-hundred-year history. Its collections served as teaching tools for university students as late as the nineteenth century (Josefsson 2014: 40), and in the early twenty-first century, the digital version of the cabinet located on the University of Uppsala’s website allows visitors to view and manipulate a facsimile of this cabinet by turning it, removing panels, examining its components, or sorting objects into categories. Its music has also
been digitally recorded, forming new objects of sound, including the sound of the virginal’s mechanism being wound. To continue the natural metaphor, the cabinet has given birth to new versions of itself, which exhibit both reflections of and digressions from their parent. Far from being emptied of its secrets, this box possesses an undiminished power to beguile and to transgress boundaries. As its creator Philipp Hainhofer once observed, it remains ‘a teacher of all the arts’ (cited in Koeppe 2008: 238). It would be fascinating to explore these complex examples of cultural practice further, perhaps with a view to understanding their spiritual as well as temporal import, and how they were intended to concretise as well as to transcend time through the articulation of a space of ‘intimate immensity’ (Bachelard 1994 [1958]: 183).

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FIG. 9.1 Tartöltén in their case, SAM 208 – SAM 212 (photo copyright KHM)