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A HISTORY OF THE KUNSTKAMMER WIEN

**DIRECTOR-GENERAL
SABINE HAAG**

The history of the Kunstkammer Wien is probably the most complex among the histories of the celebrated collections assembled by the great ruling families of Europe. Its origins date back to the Middle Ages when Duke Rudolf IV (1339-1365) initiated a Habsburg family treasure. Initially an accumulation of valuable objects – in addition to gold and silver instruments and equipment, coins, precious stones and pieces of jewellery it also comprised important documents, insignia and relics – the Habsburg collection of art continued to grow. Although little is known about its origins, the 15th - and especially the 16th and the 17th century - witnessed important additions that still constitute a seminal part of the wealth of the Kunstkammer Wien: the collections assembled by the Emperors Frederick III, Maximilian I, Ferdinand I, Maximilian II and Rudolf II, as well as those of the Archdukes Ferdinand II of Tyrol and Leopold William.

Modern collecting originated in France in the 14th and early 15th century, from where, following the example of the Duc de Berry (1340-1416), the idea of collecting as an expression of princely self-aggrandizement and courtly display spread throughout Europe. Among the earliest Habsburgs to be called a collector in the narrow sense of the word is Emperor Frederick III (1415-1493). As a patron he displayed a keen appreciation of outstanding artistic quality and was especially celebrated as a connoisseur of goldsmith work. Emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519) still housed his treasures – acquired for their historical-antiquarian value – in vaults. Emperor Ferdinand I (1503-1564) was the first to have separate rooms for his valuables, making him the founder of the Habsburg Kunstkammer in Vienna. However, the first to devise a system or order for the variety and wealth of assembled objects – a kind of key to help make sense of the holdings and to understand them – and the new development this implies were his son, Archduke Ferdinand II of Tyrol, and his grandson, Emperor Rudolf II.

As a collector Emperor Ferdinand I heeded both dynastic and artistic-aesthetic considerations, and this is reflected in the interchangeable use of the terms “Treasury” and “Kunstkammer” for the same entity. In his will Ferdinand I designated his eldest son, Maximilian II (1527-1564), as the heir of the royal insignia and his important collection of coins and classical sculptures. However, the jewels and other gems were to be shared among his younger sons, Archdukes Ferdinand II of Tyrol (1529-1595) and Charles of Inner Austria (1540-1612), who laid the foundation for the Habsburg Kunstkammer-collections at Graz and Innsbruck respectively. We know with certainty that the

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major part of the collection of Emperor Maximilian II was inherited by his son, Rudolf II (1552-1612), who took it with him when he moved his capital to Prague.

In the course of the 16th century, princely *Kunst-kammer*-collections evolved into encyclopaedic *Kunst-kammer*-collections that contained not only goldsmith works, ivories and wood carvings, clocks and automatons but also natural objects, paintings and sculptures. One of the most important collections of this kind was assembled by Archduke Ferdinand II of Tirol (1529-1595) at Ambras Palace near Innsbruck. Called a “*Kunst- und Wunderkammer*” (a chamber of art and natural wonders) for the first time in his will, the collection was already a major attraction for interested princes and men-of-letters from all over Europe during the Archduke’s lifetime. From the early 17th century onwards there were institutionalised guided tours of the *Kunst-kammer*. Entries in the guest-book and various travelogues tell of illustrious visitors, among them the Augsburg patrician, Philipp Hainhofer, Montaigne, Queen Christina of Sweden, and Goethe. The collection of suits-of-armor and the portrait collection were equally famous, with the latter’s historical-genealogical focus on man as the agent of history and its particular emphasis on his own illustrious family forming an important factor of Ferdinand’s activity as a collector.

Centuries later the inventory compiled after Ferdinand’s death in 1595 still brings to life his collection and its installation. This allows us not only to reconstruct Ferdinand’s *Kunst-kammer*, making it a highly relevant historical source, but also to experience it today as a collection in which artefacts were as important as naturalia, and toys proudly took their place next to relics. The contents of the cupboards were arranged according to the apparently-simple principle of placing similar materials together. Regardless of age, importance or origins objects made of wood, stone, iron, gold and silver were displayed together. Protected from the sun by linen curtains, the interiors of these cupboards were painted and provided an ideal setting for the objects. They were installed according to the Archduke’s detailed specifications and documented his perceptive aesthetic judgement; it was also the first presentation of a collection devised as a display for visitors, its concept the very opposite of a treasury with its arbitrary accumulation of precious object. In a way, a princely *Kunst-kammer* was a reflection of the cosmos and thus also of contemporary knowledge about the world. The variety and wealth of facets of such a collection, regarded as a microcosm, marked the beginning of an evolution – *ars simian naturae* – whose origins were traced back to God Himself as the creator of heaven and earth. Just as God dominated the universe the prince - his power divinely ordained - dominated the world represented by the choice objects in his *Kunst-kammer*. The wealth and universality of this encyclopaedic body, the *Kunst-kammer*, in the form of a *theatrum mundi* comprised not only artefacta but also naturalia – exceptional products of nature – and exotica, as well as scientifica, all augmented by prints and countless curiosities – i.e. „wonders“ of nature, science and craftsmanship, the so-called *mirabilia*. A collector’s interest in natural objects that were rare and exotic was born of his scientific interests.

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Artefacts also illustrated artistic quality and virtuosity, antiquitas, preciousness and dynastic or historical aspects. Practical use was generally not an issue. One exception are scientifica - clocks, automatons and scientific instruments that were mainly admired for their mechanics. Curiosity and a desire to investigate, and especially the wish to document the breadth of a prince's political sphere of influence aided the acquisition of exotica.

The collection at Ambras is important because its inventory allows us to deduce the Kunstwollen, the artistic aims and tastes, of a whole period; its seminal terms are ambivalence (its declared aim to unsettle the viewer), alienation of forms and materials, and the distortion of the image of man.

Lacking a legal male heir, the Archduke's collection passed to his younger son from his first, morganatic marriage, Marquis Charles of Burgau, after his death in 1595, as stipulated in his will. However, the latter showed little interest in the costly upkeep of Ambras Palace and soon entered into negotiations with Emperor Rudolf II who was fascinated by the collection.

Emperor Rudolf II (1552-1612), the nephew of Ferdinand II of Tyrol, was the greatest and most important connoisseur from the Casa de Austria. He was brought up at the court of his uncle, King Phillip II of Spain, and developed a fine appreciation of artistic quality and the ability of art to project his own role and status as the future ruler of the Empire. Crowned Emperor in 1576, he moved his capital from Vienna to Prague where he amassed an fabulous collection that comprised paintings, antique sculptures, magnificent arms and objets d'art. His unmatched connoisseurship, knowledge of the world and comprehensive education helped attract the period's best goldsmiths, stone carvers, clockmakers and painters to his court in Prague to create the "style of Rudolf II". Only a select few were privileged to see the legendary collections. In 1607/11 Rudolf's antiquarius, Daniel Froeschl, compiled an inventory of the Kunstkammer that allows us to gauge the wealth and preciousness of the Kunstkammer assembled by perhaps the most important Habsburg patron.

The acquisition of the Ambras collections from the heirs of Archduke Ferdinand II – Rudolf paid 100.000 Reichstaler for the contents of the Kunstkammer alone – documents not only his appreciation for this unique Kunst- und Wunderkammer but also his desire to create a united art collection and treasury of the House of Habsburg. The collections at Ambras he left untouched. Soon after Rudolf's death, his brother and successor, Emperor Matthew (1557-1619), had the most precious objects in the treasury at Prague Palace removed to Vienna, thus saving them from falling into the hands of the marauding Swedish soldiers at the end of the Thirty Years War. A new arrangement of the Habsburgs' assets in 1621 stipulated that all family jewels and art treasures were no longer tied to "land and people" but came under the inheritance rules of primogeniture and were thus the inalienable property of the House of Habsburg. The last of these removals from Prague to Vienna occurred during the reign of Emperor Josef II.

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In the middle of the 17th century, the unified treasury of the House of Austria was again enlarged when the collection assembled by Archduke Leopold William (1614-1662) in Brussels was removed to Vienna. The younger son of Emperor Ferdinand II, he was originally destined to take holy orders and was Grand Master of the Teutonic Order. Thus his *Kunstammer* comprised primarily sacralia, such as relics and vestments, as well as clocks, cut rock crystals and silversmith works.

In addition to numerous paintings that now form a seminal part of the Picture Gallery of the *Kunsthistorisches Museum*, the inventory of 1659 lists important stone-, wood-, ivory- and especially bronze sculptures. Leopold William was able to acquire a number of seminal Italian Renaissance works from the collection of King Charles I of England, auctioned off after the latter's execution in 1649. The detailed descriptions of objects in the written inventory are augmented by the *Prodomus* (precursor) of the *Theatrum Artis Pictoriae*, the 1735 pictorial inventory of the collections housed at Stallburg Palace in Vienna. The Habsburg collection of tapestries also glories in a long history and an elevated status among the courtly arts.

In the late 19th century the structure of these 16th-century *Kunstammer*-collections was greatly, though not completely, altered in connection with the newly-built Imperial museums, with the holdings divided up according to art-historical criteria. The charm of an unusual, bizarre natural material in competition with an artistic solution, the play between harmony and disharmony has always been one of the aims of an artist's act of creation. Perhaps this is the reason for the enduring modernity of the *Kunstammer* and the strong attraction it exerts on the curious eye of the beholder.