INTRODUCTION

The Kunstkammer Wien evolved from the treasuries and Kunstkammer collections assembled by the Habsburgs in the late Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Baroque. Over the centuries, individual collectors from the House of Habsburg augmented these holdings. The foremost among the latter are the Kunstkammer assembled at Ambras Castle by Archduke Ferdinand II († 1595), and that of Emperor Rudolf II († 1612) at Prague, the Kunstkammer of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm († 1662) in Brussels and Vienna, and the Imperial Treasury in Vienna. It was, however, Emperor Franz Josef who reorganised the imperial collections by amalgamating the various holdings and displaying them together for the first time in the newly-erected Kunsthistorisches Museum, which was opened to the public in 1891. Initially called „Sammlung kunstindustrieller Gegenstände“ (Arts and Crafts Collection), it was renamed „Sammlungen für Plastik und Kunstgewerbe“ (Collection of Sculpture and Decorative Arts) in 1919; since 1991 it is called “Kunstkammer”; the historical term is a reflection of the fact that almost all of the holdings of goldsmith work and carved stones, of bronze statuettes and ivories assembled here were never intended for practical use but solely for display in a princely Kunstkammer, with large sculptures and practical objects made by craftsmen playing but a minor role.

A Kunstkammer was regarded as a reflection of the cosmos and of the world that could be experienced in the microcosm of its holdings, as well as a depository of contemporary knowledge, its aim to elicit surprise and amazement. In addition to artefacts in the narrow sense of the word, Kunstkammer collections also included Naturalia (curious manifestations of flora, fauna or minerals), objects produced by strange civilisations or in distant lands (Exotica), scientific instruments for studying the cosmos or charting the world (Scientifica), books, and artworks from classical antiquity. However, only a fraction of this former wealth of objects has remained in today’s Kunstkammer. Since the late nineteenth century efforts to structure and re-organise them have greatly altered the former Habsburg collections. New museums such as the Natural History Museum or the Museum of Ethnology were founded to house parts of the holdings that once made up the Kunstkammer collections. However, the Kunstkammer Wien of the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien remains one of the most important collections of this kind in the world. The personalities of the collectors who assembled it were scions of one of Europe’s most powerful and influential ruling families, blessed with wide-ranging contacts and deep pockets. The
patron's high rank is reflected both in the outstanding quality and artistic merit of the artefacts he collected and their sheer numbers – which is why the holdings in the Kunstkammer Wien are so important and spectacular.

PROJECT DEFINITION

The Kunstkammer Wien has been closed to the public since 2002. Around 2,200 important artworks have been selected for the new installation, which presents them on 2,700 m² adapted to conform to international conservation and safety standards without exceeding either our budget or the schedule. Using traditional and new media, we present political history and the history of ideas, techniques and craftsmen's skills, and art-historical developments and connections.

STRUCTURE OF THE COLLECTION

Reflecting the collection's history, the pivotal theme of the new installation of the Kunstkammer Wien is “the Habsburg collectors and their collections”. It comprises everything from a mediaeval treasury to a collection of heterogeneous objects frequently imbued with symbolic and mythical meaning to various “systems” or taxonomies that reflect the world-views of the different mannerist or early baroque collectors to the abandonment of this desire for order in the context of the primarily dynastic-political aim to impress and document authority to a permanent collection displayed in a public museum. Of seminal importance are the extant holdings that have come down to us from the Kunstkammer collections assembled by Habsburg Emperors and Archdukes in the 16th and 17th century. Forming the heart of the new installation, their highlights are the Saliera and the collections of Emperor Rudolf II.

The presentation of the Kunstkammer Wien within a nineteenth century museum building and its inherent structure – it originated in different periods and comprises the collections assembled by a number of related collectors and connoisseurs - differentiates the Kunstkammer Wien from the Green Vault in Dresden. That collection is primarily the work of a single dominant collector (and thus dates mainly from one period); it is also not presented in a museum but at its original location, a palace. In contrast, the Kunstkammer Wien is not conceived as a sumptuous setting for showcasing these artefacts. The present concept develops a discourse based on both formal and stylistic and cultural and political-historical ideas, and is informed by a concept for transmitting knowledge that relies both on texts and various audio- and visual media. The unique character and identity of the Kunstkammer Wien is based on this.
During the last few years, the curators of the Kunstkammer Wien have devised the scholarly concept for the focal points of the installation, the order and arrangement of the galleries and the distribution of the objects. In collaboration with the team from "bogner-cc" this concept has now been reworked with a new emphasis on didactics and the transmission of information. The potential – i.e. the objects and groups of objects - is now arranged in three sections and three parallel narratives that focus on art and art-history, political history and the history of the collection. These narratives have been fine-tuned to offer visitors different ways of seeing, understanding and experiencing the collection and the artworks. Galleries are arranged in a chronological order based on formal and stylistic criteria, forming a “ground” that provides a basic order.

The twenty galleries are organized into three large sections, each defined by its content and ambience (plan I).

The first section focuses on a number of art- and cultural-historical assumptions concerning the evolution of the Habsburgs’ sixteenth-century Kunstkammer collections. It comprises the first six galleries; arranged in art-historical order, they showcase princely connoisseurship from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, and focus on artistic exchanges between the countries north and south of the Alps.

The second section features the most important Habsburg Archdukes and Emperors of the sixteenth and seventeenth century who are represented by paintings and/or busts among their collections, each the result of its founder’s individual obsession. This central section – which includes the Saliera, the Kunstkammer of Emperor Rudolf II, and the magnificent Exotica holdings, displayed here as a distinct group for the first time – comprises numerous outstanding highlights.

The third section showcases Habsburg collectors from the Baroque: focused on displaying their dynastic and political authority, they were less interested in continuing the Kunstkammer-concept propagated by their ancestors.
THREE NARRATIVES

Within each gallery objects are placed to reflect three parallel narratives (plan II).

Each gallery features a centrally-placed „lodestar“ to set the theme - each one a major first-rate work. Their location has been selected to create an exciting dramaturgy and provide a guideline through the whole collection. In the second and third section most “lodestars” depict members of the House of Habsburg, whose collection-philosophy is reflected in various ways in the objects they amassed.

The central area of each gallery showcases artworks arranged in formal-stylistic or cultural-historical ensembles, each of which focuses on a different subject or theme. Carefully-structured texts and additional information provided by audio- and visual media present the history of the different collections and their concepts and provide information on artists and the conditions under which the objects were produced, as well as on materials and techniques.

By focusing on princely concepts for collecting from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era, the smaller side rooms offer a third narrative. The content of each of these smaller galleries determines its design and individual ambience, which differs both from the other smaller side rooms and the main galleries. This does not mean, however, that their content and that of the adjoining galleries have not been carefully coordinated.

However, this adaptability is also reflected in the plan for the decorations and furnishings that was developed by the architects of “hg merz”. By basing the final version not on rigid architectural elements but subdividing a room to reflect the sections of the vault, they created an elastic relationship between the various units. This “freedom within a stable system” – both in regards to content and the decorative concept – has allowed us to highlight selected objects, create rhythms, or distribute groups freely within a gallery – important factors that introduce a subtle dramaturgy and generate a multi-layered perception that engages the visitor.

TRANSMITTING KNOWLEDGE

Texts
We have developed a hierarchy of texts comprising wall panels, labels and additional information on tablet computers.

Portraits
Throughout the collection portraits – both paintings and busts – have been
incorporated into the new installation, bringing the different subjects „to life“ and placing them in their political and historical, and collection-historical context.

**Audio Guides**
The use of Audio Guides provides both additional information and helps to limit the amount of printed texts in the galleries.

**Media Concept**
Objects or groups of objects that require visual information over and above that available on the Audio Guides and in printed texts have integrated interactive media stations. Among them are explanations of different techniques (e.g. bronze casting, textile production or hard-stone carving), objects with mechanisms (automatons), and objects whose fragile condition makes it impossible to display them permanently (e.g. playing cards).

**Visitor Flow**
The galleries’ carefully-devised lay-out and arrangement – regarding both content and design – feature spatial links and visual axes, while the “lodestars” principle emphasizes the installation’s unobtrusive yet clear systematic concept.