
**KUNST
HISTORISCHES
MUSEUM
WIEN**



DREAM VISION

Albrecht Dürer

1525

Watercolour on paper, inscribed and signed

In the Albrecht Dürer »Kunstbuch«

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstammer

Sometime during the night of 7 June 1525, Albrecht Dürer awoke from a frightening nightmare. The following morning, deeply agitated, he recorded what he had seen in a watercolour and added a detailed description. This work is his popular Dream Vision: a massive deluge of rain is seen descending upon a wide landscape in which we can make out the faint outlines of tiny houses and trees. Dream Vision is part of the so-called Kunstbuch (»Art Book«), a collection of 216 woodcuts and prints from metal plates by Albrecht Dürer. It also contains thirteen drawings, eight of which are by Dürer himself.

Edmund de Waal: *You wake up and don't know where you are. A plain, low hills and fields. Somewhere from childhood. And the heavens have opened and the waters are coming down, the waters are coming towards you. It is the apocalypse. The world is turned upside down. You can hardly breathe. During the night you are exposed. In the Kunsthistorisches I feel exposed. These are the last days of mankind.*

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»SHAKE-BOX«

South German (Tyrol?), after 1550

Wood, cardboard, clay, all painted, lead weights with wire, moss, poppy seeds, snail shells
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstkammer (Ambras Castle Innsbruck)

This wooden box contains a perfect imitation of a forest floor in moss that acts as the »habitat« of countless small creatures made of painted cardboard, including snails, snakes, tortoises, spiders, beetles, a scorpion and even a dragon-like winged creature of fable, some gazing out from small niche-like caves. Balanced by lead counter-weights and loosely attached to eyelets and small wooden pegs, these tiny cardboard creatures begin to shake and jiggle whenever someone touches the box, creating the impression that they are alive. A typical *Kunstkammer* object, the »shake-box« (»Schüttelkasten«) combines the imitation of nature with outstanding artistry and technical skill.

Edmund de Waal:

When considering the Wunderkammer, the room of wonders, Francis Bacon talked of the possibility of having »in small compass a model of universal nature made private«. Everything, he says, is possible here. There should be a »goodly huge cabinet, wherein whatsoever the hand of man by exquisite art or engine hath made rare in stuff, form, or motion; whatsoever nature hath wrought in things that want life and may be kept; shall be sorted and included.« Here is the shuffle and shake of things. How much control do you really have?

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**BEZOAR MOUNTED
IN GOLD FILIGREE**

Goa, 17th century

Bezoar, gold filigree

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstkammer (Ambras Castle Innsbruck)

BEZOAR GOBLET

Jan Vermeyen

Prague, c. 1600

Bezoar, gold, partially enamelled

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstkammer

A bezoar is an indigestible mass found in the intestinal system of bezoar goats, lamas and other ruminants. The term derives from the Persian word for antitoxin, bād-sahr. During the Middle Ages and the early Modern Era popular superstition regarded the bezoar as a »health stone« and ground bezoar mixed with some liquid was therefore prescribed by doctors for such ailments as the plague and depression; Emperor Rudolf II, for example, set great store by it as a remedy for his melancholy. Elaborately mounted bezoars were used at princely banqueting tables and were frequently dipped in food and drink in order to detect the presence of poison.

Edmund de Waal:

Look at them again. Their shape is ungainly. Wrap them up, hold them tight, try to keep their power safe.

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NATURA FORMATRIX CRUCIFIX (MANDRAKE)

German?, 16th century, Wood, grasses
Innsbruck, Ambras Castle

HANDSTONE WITH A BEARDED MAN

Workshop of Caspar Ulich Sankt Joachimsthal (Jáchymov), second half of 16th century
Acanthite, silver gilt, minerals
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstammer

EPPENDORF MANDRAKE

Hamburg, before 1480; 17th century (crown of pearls)
Cabbage stalk?, pearls
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Ecclesiastical Treasury

Mandrakes (*Mandragora officinalis*) were regarded as magical plants and the shape of their roots made them especially susceptible to interpretation as humanoid figures. Both the »Eppendorf mandrake« and the mandrake crucifix, however, are carved from a different, as yet unidentified wood. Their »wondrous« character earned them a place in the *Kunstammer* collections of Emperor Rudolf II and Archduke Ferdinand II. The handstone with a bearded man also features a deliberate blurring of distinctions between Art and Nature: various ores have been worked into a figure that at first glance appears to comprise a natural unworked body and an artificial head.

Edmund de Waal:

These scare me. They are barely human. They are totemic, their strangeness increased by the crown of pearls, the gilded stand.

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MASK-SHAPED VISORS (»Hussar« and »Moor«)

Court Armoury at Prague, c. 1557

Iron, decorated with oil paint, leather, horsehair

Innsbruck, Ambras Castle

Chased and decorated with oil paints, these exchangeable iron visors were worn by jousting participants in the »Hussars' tournaments« hosted by Archduke Ferdinand II at Prague in 1557. The »eyebrows« are cut out to function as eye slits; below them, the painted eyes have air holes to facilitate breathing. The masks' shapes, colours and horsehair moustaches were designed to reflect the physiognomy and complexion of the »Hussars« and »Moors« who confronted each other in these tournaments, a reminder of the war against the Ottoman Empire still being fought in Hungary. The mask-shaped visors were produced in the court armoury of Archduke Ferdinand II at Prague.

Edmund de Waal:

When you put on a mask, it is not clear what happens, who you become. These masks are uncanny. You are »robbed of your eyes«, says Freud.

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RED CORALS

Southern Italy (Trapani), third quarter of 16th century; presumably 18th century (base)
Corals, plaster, wood
Innsbruck, Ambras Castle

BLACK CORAL

Southern Italy (Trapani), third quarter of 16th century; presumably 18th century (base)
Corals, plaster, wood
Innsbruck, Ambras Castle

BLACK CORAL

Origin unknown, presumably 18th century, Corals, wood
Vienna, Natural History Museum, Old Collection

Renaissance collectors loved corals, presumably because scholars were still debating whether coral was animal, vegetable or mineral. Even in antiquity corals had been harvested off the coasts of Sicily and Liguria, as well as off Corsica and Sardinia, which still boasted large stocks in the sixteenth century. At Ambras Castle Archduke Ferdinand II (1529–1595) assembled the period's largest and most fantastic coral collection, rivalled only by the *Kunstkammer* in the Residenz in Munich: it comprised corals in all shapes and sizes, from unworked pieces to carved figures, all of which were arranged in display cabinets constructed like little theatrical stages.

Edmund de Waal:

Ovid tells the story of coral. Perseus has killed Medusa. After his victory he washes his hands in seawater drawn for him and, »so that Medusa's head, covered with its snakes, is not bruised by the harsh sand, he makes the ground soft with leaves, and spreads out plants from below the waves and places the head on them. The fresh plants, still living inside, and absorbent, respond to the influence of the Gorgon's head and harden at its touch, acquiring a new rigidity in branches and fronds. And the ocean nymphs try out this wonder on more plants, and are delighted that the same thing happens at its touch, and repeat it by scattering the seeds from the plants through the waves. Even now corals have the same nature, hardening at a touch of air, and what was alive under the water, above water is turned to stone.«

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MAGICAL GEMSTONES

Roman, 2nd century

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Collection of Greek and Roman Antiquities

HARPOCRATES ON A LOTUS FLOWER

Medium-brown sard

A RIDER WITH A DOUBLE AXE VANQUISHING AN ENEMY

Heliotrope

A SERPENT AND THE INSCRIPTION »ABRAXAS«

Light-grey chalcedony, mounted in a modern gold ring

In classical antiquity, precious and semiprecious stones credited with special powers were worn as amulets and talismans; it was believed they would protect or cure the wearer, or ensure the assistance of the gods. They were decorated with hybrid creatures combining elements taken from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Jewish (less frequently Christian) images as well as magical inscriptions and signs or symbols. For example, the seven letters of the name Abrasax (or Abraxas) allude to the seven days of the week and the seven planets then known; furthermore, their numerical values amount to 365, the number of days in a year.

Edmund de Waal:

Condensed power: a snake, a lion, a horseman with a double axe, some numbers and letters, all the years.

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ADDERS' TONGUES CREDENCE

Nuremberg?, c. 1450

Silver gilt, fossilized sharks' teeth, citrine

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstammer

This piece of late medieval tableware, crafted as a bouquet of flowers spiked with fossilized sharks' teeth, bears witness to an ancient superstition: the petrified teeth were long thought to be adders' tongues, which were credited with the power to identify poison in food. These precious artefacts were placed on a prince's banqueting table to warn him should his food or drink be tainted. Their use declined once the true nature of these petrified objects gained acceptance. Only two other such pieces have survived: one in the Grünes Gewölbe in Dresden, and one in the Treasury of the Teutonic Order in Vienna.

Edmund de Waal:

This is a strange flowering. The blooms are tongues. It is speaking of the dense secrets of poison. Every day at court, every evening at the table, there is a press of people. How do you protect yourself when you are surrounded by so much talking, so many people who wish you ill?

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VANITAS HEADS (MEMENTO MORI)

German, first half of 17th century

Ivory

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstkammer

The human skull has always been regarded as the symbol par excellence of life's transience. The Baroque loved virtuoso artefacts that functioned as a reminder of death. Perhaps the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' ever-present vanitas allegorising was but the converse of their frequently noted sensuality and joie de vivre. Particularly terrifying are heads with faces half-preserved and/or crawling with serpents that remind us of man's certain death and ultimate decay. The intention here is to appeal directly to the beholder's emotions.

Edmund de Waal:

»When you have lost your closest human being every thing seems empty to you, look where ever you like, everything is empty, and you look and look and you see that everything is really empty and, what is more, for ever.« (Thomas Bernhard)

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SCREAMING MAN

Trophême Bigot

c. 1615/20

Canvas

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Picture Gallery

This exceptional painting was only recently identified as a work by Trophême Bigot, not least on account of the watermark visible in the paper of the lampshade, which functions as his trademark in a number of his compositions. Celebrated for his Caravaggesque nocturnal scenes, Bigot was known as »Trufemondi« – someone adept at deceiving or fooling people with his compositions. The panicstricken reaction depicted here has been caused by a harmless but effective illusion: a candle placed in a hollowed-out pumpkin so scares a man that he is taking to his heels. The spectator becomes the accomplice of the boy playing the trick and is invited to share his enjoyment in having successfully pulled it off.

Edmund de Waal:

The artist Bigot paints Judith and Holofernes, Saint Laurence Condemned to Torture, Saint Sebastian. Everything he paints is night-time, a guttering candle, lit by a lantern. His speciality is shock. Just how funny is a screaming man?

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ALLEGORY OF VIRTUE («MOUNT OF VIRTUES«)

Lucas Cranach the Younger

Dated 1548

Limewood panel

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Picture Gallery

»The journey is arduous but an inestimable reward waits at the summit.« While this uplifting Latin inscription on the giant's coat-of-arms is primarily aimed at the representatives of secular and ecclesiastical authority assembled at the foot of the mountain, it is also addressed to the viewer. The sheer cliffs in Cranach's composition symbolize the travails of acting in a virtuous and God-fearing manner, the pursuit of which will ultimately be rewarded. This allegorical call for perseverance painted in 1548 was almost certainly informed by the religious struggles of its time: the Catholics' defeat of the Protestants in 1547 had brought on a profound crisis for the new Christian faith.

Edmund de Waal:

How do you get up this fissured rock? There is something billowing out from the tree, something written on a banner. There is an angel offering benediction. It promises well. But the gate is narrow and the path disappears. I see a falling man.

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DEVIL IN A GLASS

German, first half of 17th century

Glass, iron?

Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstammer
(Ambras Castle Innsbruck)

This small figure of a devil incorporated into a solid glass prism was originally in the collection of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm (1614–1662); the 1659 inventory lists it as a »small square glass, with a pointed top, that contains a black figure in the shape of a devil« (»klein viereckendte[s] Glasz, oben gespitzt, war in ein schwarcze Figur in Gestalt eines Teüffels«, fol. 472v). By 1720 it was in the Treasury in Vienna and was described as a »*spiritus familiaris* in a glass that was driven out of one possessed and banned to this glass« (»spiritus familiaris in einem Glas, so ehemals von einem Besessenen ausgetrieben und in dieses Glas verbannet worden«). In the Middle Ages it was widely believed that the Devil could take possession of a human body. This artefact was regarded as evidence of a successful exorcism.

Edmund de Waal:

As Freud reflected, »No one who, like me, conjures up the most evil of those half-tamed demons that inhabit the human beast, and seeks to wrestle with them, can expect to come through the struggle unscathed.« Keep your devils in close sight.

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SERPENT

Italian- or Germanspeaking lands, 16th or 17th century

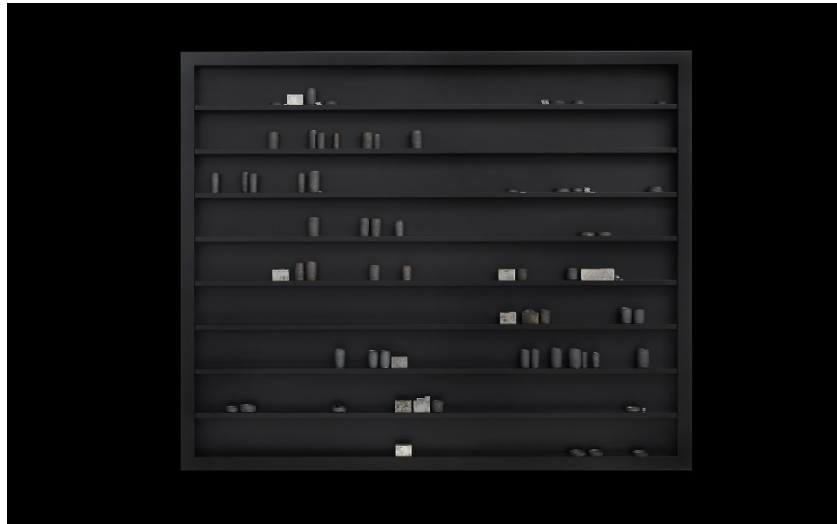
Lightweight coarsefibred wood stained brown, leather, brass, ivory mouthpiece
Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Collection of Historical Musical Instruments

The name of this bass wind instrument derives from its sinuous, serpent-like shape, which allows the player to reach all six fingerholes. In addition to the usual cup-shaped mouthpiece, the present instrument has a blowpipe in the shape of a snake's open mouth; this feature, however, is purely decorative and does not affect the sound. The serpent's conical resonator is composed of several hollowed-out wooden segments, which after being glued together were encased in black leather to make them stabler and more airtight. Both the blowpipe and the ivory mouthpiece are later additions.

Edmund de Waal:

Blow this great horn. The walls of the city wait.

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DURING THE NIGHT

Edmund de Waal

2016

55 porcelain vessels, porcelain shards, tin boxes, lead shot, lead and COR-TEN steel elements in an acrylic glass and aluminium vitrine

Courtesy Gagosian Gallery

Edmund de Waal:

Not all objects give solace. They metamorphose in the passages of the night, they bring anxiety with them. In this vitrine are broken pieces of porcelain, silver aluminium boxes, lead shot, cut pieces of lead sheet and black vessels glazed with oxides. This is my own kind of Kunstkammer, my site of wonder, beauty and danger.