

by Lela Nargi



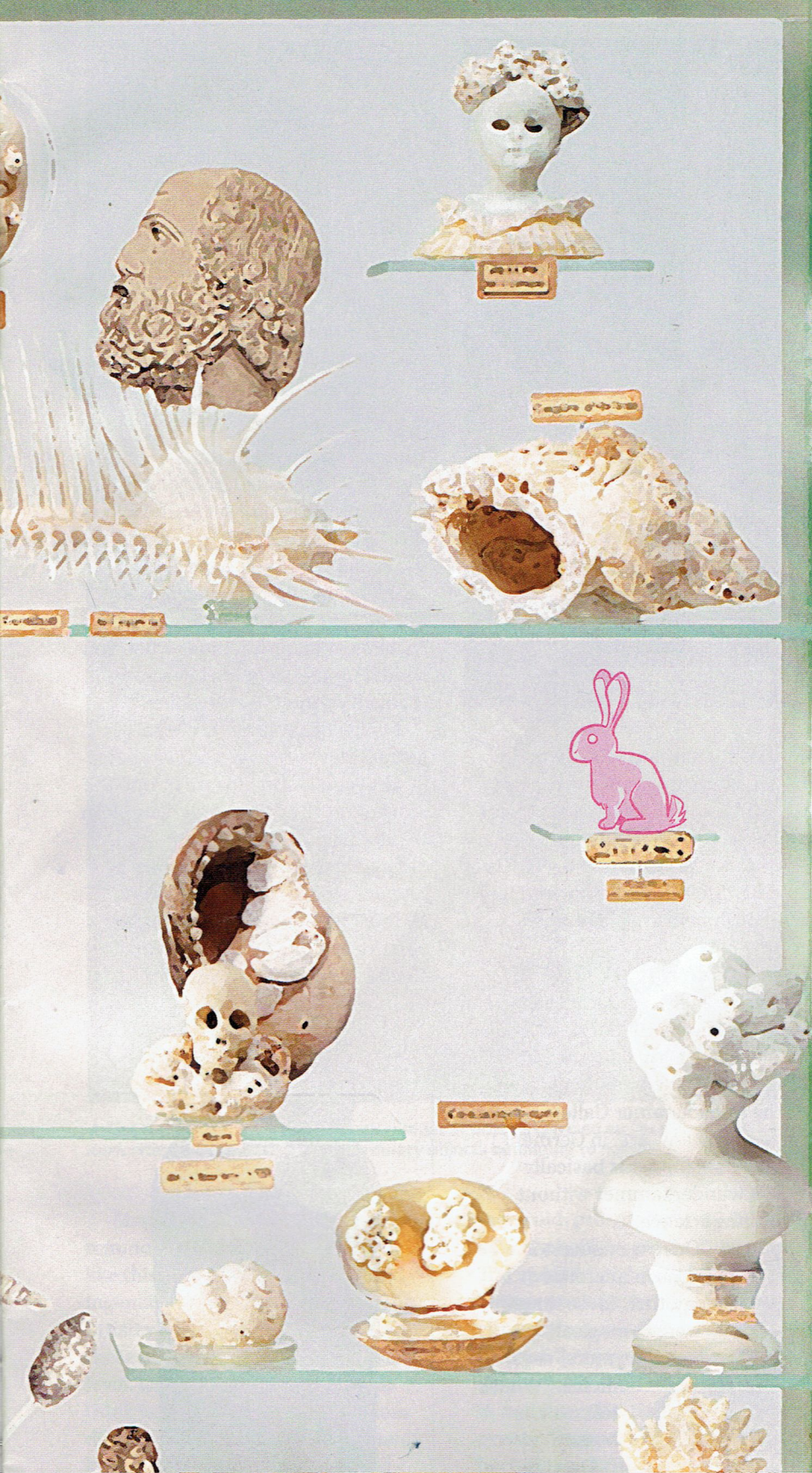
Reinventing Wonder

WUNDERKAMMERN
ARE THINGS OF THE
PAST. OR ARE THEY?



in it.

At her studio in Paris, France, artist Maïssa Toulet organizes what she calls "miniature museums" of objects: doll heads, jars of colored beads, stuffed birds, tiny starfish. "Each object has its place," Toulet writes on her website, and together they tell stories.



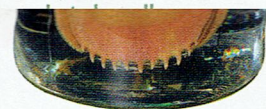
Once upon a time, there was

wonder in the world. Wonder about things we knew were there but could not see. Wonder about how things as different as plants, sea life, and stars fit together. Wonder for what role humans played in the whole giant puzzle.

In the fourteenth century, some collectors expressed their wonder by gathering objects together into intricate display cases known as *Wunderkammern*—a German word meaning “curiosity cabinets.”

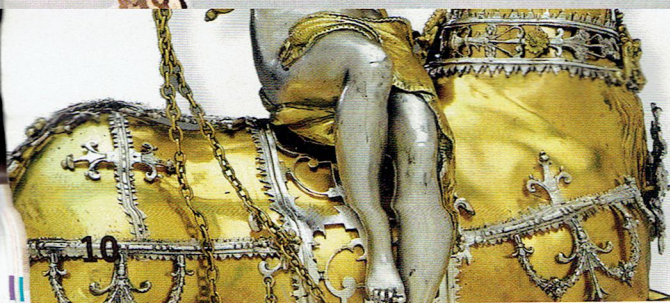
Wonder cabinets inspired collectors to put groups of related, and also seemingly unrelated, objects together. Like pieces of coral, and unicorn horns, and complicated clocks, and landscape paintings. (The unicorn horns were actually narwhal tusks.) People thought that if they could understand how these things were alike, they could understand how the world worked and their place in it.

At her studio in Paris, France, artist Maïssa Toulet



A giant isopod floats in a jar at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History.

in the MFA's *kunstkammer* are manmade things like complicated mechanical robots, a drinking



The *Kunstkammer* Gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston displays some of the museum's greatest treasures.



CURATED CABINETS

In the past, *wunderkammern*, or curiosity cabinets, were personal (and sometimes eccentric) collections of scientific, historical, or unusual objects. Scholars and aristocrats also arranged *kunstkammern*—cabinets full of art—and *schatzkammern*—cabinets full of treasures. What do you imagine the difference between the objects in these three kinds of cabinets would have been?

These days, we humans believe we're well on our way to understanding much about how the universe works. So maybe it's no surprise that we don't have as much use for *wunderkammern* anymore. Instead, we have art museums. And scientific collections. And Wikipedia. Weirdly, though, we have just as many questions about how we fit into the puzzle as we did 700 years

ago. Traditional cabinets of wonder may largely be things of the past. But we're still using collections of objects to look for answers about ourselves. When do we feel wonder now? Often, when we think of all the ways human accomplishments rival nature's.

Big, Beautiful Bling

Thomas Michie is a curator at the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston. Several years ago, he put together a collection there called the *Kunstkammer* Gallery. *Kunst* means "art" in German. A *kunstkammer* is basically a *wunderkammer* without the science.

"Once we understood patterns in microbes or geology, then those things weren't magical anymore," says Michie. "What's left, now, is beauty."

become the British Museum in London. Another example is the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History in New Haven, Connecticut. It was founded in 1866 with a professor's mineral collection. Over the years,

cup made from a nautilus shell, and a chess set fashioned from amber. They represent some of the museum's greatest treasures. When you walk into the room, "you're slack-jawed at the dazzling quality" of the display, says Michie. "We've got a German clock that has so many functions when you wind it up that I couldn't describe them all on the 150-word label."

Michie believes all this beauty is just as relevant to our understanding of who we are and how we fit into the universe as the first *wunderkammer* in the 1300s. "Collecting and organizing beautiful objects lets us find our own sense of order," says Michie. "But it's also a [personally] creative act, one that lets you take stock of the world around you."

The MFA's *Diana and the Stag* figurine is actually a motorized automaton. It can zoom across a table.



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Changing the Future

The Museum of Fine Arts re-created an old-style curiosity cabinet. But



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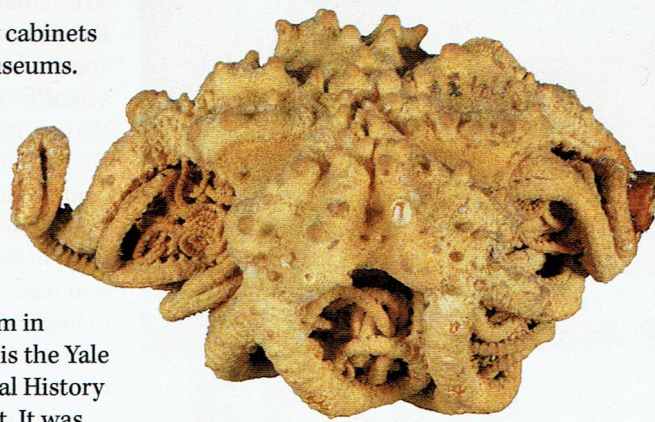
Artist Mark Dion's glow-in-the-dark cabinet of objects is based on illustrations of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cabinets of curiosities—collections of extraordinary objects belonging to natural history, geology, archaeology, science, and history.

Maybe the most important reminder tucked into a collection like this is that human inquiry and ingenuity never go out of style. “The artistry and technical wizardry of these objects are triumphs on every level. Like an iPhone, which I still think is one of the most miraculous devices I own,” says Michie. “Who knows where the next *wonder*-ful discovery might come from?”

Changing the Future

The Museum of Fine Arts re-created an old-style curiosity cabinet. But

many old, private curiosity cabinets actually became public museums. The apothecary James Petiver put together a curiosity cabinet. After he died, Sir James Sloane purchased it, and the collection eventually grew to become the British Museum in London. Another example is the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History in New Haven, Connecticut. It was founded in 1866 with a professor's mineral collection. Over the years,



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The City Reliquary in Brooklyn, New York, displays photos of baseball legends, seltzer bottles, and miniature Statues of Liberty, among other everyday treasures.



other collections joined it, like corals from the first United States Exploring Expedition in the mid-1800s. It now houses around 13 million objects.

The Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History recently exhibited a sort of curiosity cabinet of its own to celebrate its 150th anniversary. Every department contributed specimens such as skulls, fossils, and scientific instruments. Eric Lazo-Wasem is collections manager for the Division of Invertebrate Zoology. He contributed a giant beef tapeworm that doctors removed from a Yale student in 1896. It's the kind of object that would have looked right at home in historical wunderkammern.

But while a lot of the museum's objects were collected decades or even centuries ago, they're hardly irrelevant. "They are sitting on shelves with important stories to

tell," says Lazo-Wasem. All they need is someone to listen. Lazo-Wasem tells his own story about his early years as a scientist and the first new species he "discovered." Among all the thousands of jars in the invertebrate zoology lab, he found a sample labeled "new species" that had been collected from Atlantic City, New Jersey, in 1871. It had never been identified, because the scientist who discovered it went blind before he could investigate it.

Lazo-Wasem, too, has collected many specimens on trips to the Caribbean and Antarctica that he knows he'll never have the time to identify. "All I can do is try to get new generations interested in these discoveries, because there are always going to be curiosities, and the wonder is still there." The difference? We know now that these collections



Artist Steffen Dam depicts imaginary specimens. "Real is boring," he says.

NEW (ARTISTIC) SPINS ON OLD CURIOSITIES

Many modern artists have been inspired by curiosity cabinets. So much so that they've made their own versions of wunderkammern.

Steffen Dam is a Danish artist who works with glass. He blows specimens that look like things you might find in the jars of Eric Lazo-Wassem's invertebrate collections at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History. But whereas the Yale Peabody specimens are all from the natural world, Dam's specimens are all imaginary. He thinks making a copy of a real thing is not art and may even look kitschy instead—like an ornament you could buy in a souvenir shop. "A copy can only be art if another dimension is added in a talented way." By focusing on the art and science of how glass works as you blow it, he says he's creating something "plausible." He adds, "I'm interested in the wondering point, the place where your brain says, 'no match found.' Real is boring."

British artist Mark Dion is also intrigued by curiosity cabinets. He has led archaeological digs along the banks of the River Thames to collect everyday items that wash up on the shore—and then displayed them in the prestigious Tate Museum. The Tate museum's website quoted him: "Garbage from the beach is gaining meaning as we take it through a process of selection . . . [It] become[s] something else." Dion also makes treasure boxes that look like Renaissance curiosity cabinets, but with a new spin. "The Phantom Museum" (page 11) shows old-school curiosities arranged in a walnut cabinet. Only, they've all been painted with glow-in-the-dark paint so they appear as ghosts from a bygone time.

—Lela Nargi

"are the keys to the change that has happened" over many millennia on Earth, says Lazo-Wasem. "They'll allow future generations to interpret what happened" as our planet and its climate transform over time. And perhaps, someday they'll help us figure out how to reverse the damage humans have done—and prevent it from happening again.

Totally Ordinary

In a busy, dusty neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, the City Reliquary is putting a different spin on why collecting is important to understanding who we are and how we fit into the world around us. Its collections aren't precious, like the treasures in the MFA's *Kunstammer Gallery*, or scientifically important, like the collections at the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural

History. Instead, they're completely ordinary.

Squeeze through an old subway turnstile and find yourself in a small room jam-packed with junk. But perhaps you've heard this saying: one person's junk is another person's treasure. For New Yorkers, and people interested in New York City, the junk on display here is really a treasure trove of historical objects.

There are groups of old-fashioned seltzer bottles. Photographs of baseball legends. Stacks of subway tokens. Tiny Statues of Liberty. Geological samples taken from Manhattan's rocky crust. Maps—lots and lots of maps.

New Yorkers of all ages can pop into the Reliquary from streets that don't necessarily match their memories. Buildings get torn down.

New, taller ones rise. The faces of strangers replace familiar ones.

Cities change all the time. But sometimes, those changes leave people longing for a past they can recognize. If you no longer understand your environment—the world around you—you are no longer sure how you fit into it.

Objects displayed inside the Reliquary hark back to times some visitors remember. Seeing these things can remind people that although things do change, your past does not disappear along with demolished buildings. It's just in storage, and you can visit it, and remember, whenever you want.

Lela Nargi is a writer who lives in a collections-filled apartment in Brooklyn that looks suspiciously like a curiosity cabinet. Visit her at lelanargi.com.