

Course Number

ART_HIST 395

Course Title

Museums: Collecting the World in Early Modern European Cabinets of Art and Wonder

Quarter/Year

Spring 2022

Day/Time

F 1p-3:50p

Instructor

Sandra Racek

Distro Fulfillment

1400 CE-1800 CE



Course Description

What do the ostrich egg cup, agate pomander, coral, and other objects laid out on the table in this painting have to do with one another? Their luster, rarity, and highly worked surfaces and combinations of material signal their appeal as unusual things, attractive to early modern European collectors of cabinets of curiosities, also called Kunst- and Wunderkammern. Assembled across Europe from the mid-16th century through to the early 18th century, collections encompassed such varied items as natural specimens, art works, foreign goods, and sometimes musical and scientific instruments. The wide-ranging variety of objects in van Roerstraeten's, *Still Life with Ostrich Cup and the Whitfield Heirlooms* may seem random to our eyes today but allude to a culture

of collecting in which a microcosmic scope was the ideal.

This seminar will offer an opportunity to explore the types of objects, practices, and motivations that shaped early modern collections, primarily in northern Europe, through a series of case studies anchored in objects at the Art Institute and will meet primarily at the museum. We will address the roots of early modern Kunst- and Wunderkammer collecting practices, and examine several of the best-preserved records, including treatises, catalogues, and inventories (in modern editions). Objects at the Art Institute will afford first-hand observation and inquiry into the structure and aesthetics of early modern collections in addition to investigation into material and display. We will also examine representations of collections and of the sorts of objects they encompassed as well as the legacy of early modern collections in the origins of public museums. Through discussion and individual research, we will consider how cabinets, the objects and images of the type that would have been collected for cabinets, and their materials were enmeshed in a variety of social and political contexts including networks of collectors, diplomacy, and colonial projects.

Pieter Gerritsz. van Roestraeten, Still Life with Ostrich Egg Cup and the Whitfield Heirlooms, 1660–1680, oil on canvas, 65.4 x 75.6 cm (25 3/4 x 29 3/4 in.). European Decorative Arts Fund, Art Institute of Chicago

Required Textbooks

Mark A. Meadow, ed. *The First Treatise on Museums: Samuel Quiccheberg's Inscriptiones*, 1565. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2014. ISBN: 9781606061497 1606061496

Assessments

Attendance, Class Participation, Project, Final, Writing Assignments