A Curious Group: A Cabinet of Curiosities

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A CURIOUS GROUP

a cabinet of curiosities

in celebration of ten years of the graduate group in archaeology, classics, and history of art at bryn mawr college
Foreword

The Graduate Group is, like so much else at Bryn Mawr College, a brilliant anomaly. It was already an anomaly in 1885 to found a women’s college that would award doctoral as well as undergraduate degrees; it remains an anomaly that in 2014 this proud representative of women’s education in the liberal arts should still be awarding doctorates to women and to men.

The brilliant anomaly of the Graduate Group itself consists in the no/t.cal—formulated ten years ago by Professor Emerita Dale Kinney—that we should embark on a novel experiment: actively to bring the disciplines of Archaeology, Classics, and History of Art into conversation with each other. Thus seminars would be taught and conversations fostered which brought together students of cultures both material and textual, oral and literate, prehistoric and contemporary and everywhere in between. Ten years on, the brilliant and anomalous juxtapositions that have ensued have been a source of tremendous intellectual expansion, for students and faculty alike.

When I began planning the tenth anniversary celebrations of the Graduate Group, I wanted somehow to celebrate the intellectual fruitfulness of these juxtapositions in visual form. Carrie Robbins, whom I invited to curate this exhibition, had the inspired idea that they could be captured in the form of a Wunderkabine/t.cal, a cabinet of wonders. An eclec/t.cal array of objects garnered from our own collections would be displayed in a fashion at once time-honored and novel, clustered in cases and vitrines, with a heuris/t.cal that proposed some classi/f.cal/classifications while inviting the viewer to respond, even to contradict, with her own. This invitation to active participation, to intellectual discovery, and yes, to wonder, typifies the Graduate Group itself.

Our relationship with Special Collections—both the collections of art and artifacts, and of rare books and manuscripts—has been crucial to the Graduate Group from its foundation; our collaboration with colleagues in Special Collections, in the classroom and in administering our Curatorial Internships, constantly enriches and expands the scope of the Graduate Group. This exhibition is in some part a tribute to the richness of this collaboration.

We are also very grateful to Camilla MacKay, the head of Carpenter library, and to the denizens of Carpenter for allowing us to take over the Kaiser Reading Room for the show. If there is a topography of the Graduate Group, Carpenter library is its metropolis, for that is where our graduate students most regularly meet, read, think, and share ideas. The unexpected and happy juxtaposition of ideas is what this exhibition, and the Graduate Group itself, are all about.

Finally, I am utterly indebted both to Carrie Robbins, the curator, and to the exhibition designer, Nathanael Roesch, for working so hard amid their many other obligations to bring this show to fruition. We hope that its viewers, especially our alumnae and alumni and our current students, will see represented here the brilliant anomaly that is the Graduate Group.

Catherine Conybeare
Professor of Classics
Director of the Graduate Group in Archaeology, Classics, and History of Art
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In Renaissance Europe, a cabinet of curiosities was a vast collection of all kinds of objects—artificial and natural, extraordinary and ordinary—displayed in an overwhelming and immersive manner meant to entertain and impress the guests of its wealthy owner. Emerging from a context of imperialist world exploration, such encyclopedic displays also aimed to organize the material world into discrete categories, so as to enable comparisons and to facilitate knowledge.

As a site of knowledge production, the cabinet of curiosities becomes an apt metaphor for the aims of the Graduate Group. The cabinet, like a seminar or exhibition, frames its subject according to select criteria. But its shelves or structuring principles are also on display, offering themselves to our scrutiny. This exhibition uses nine intentionally arbitrary categories to organize a selection of objects that could be grouped differently by each visitor. The display cases are ordered, but the objects contained within them also resist this ordering. Some organizing principles, such as shared materials, might seem self-evident, but their use often reveals more variety than unity among the objects grouped accordingly. Others, such as the theme of violence, are perhaps less readily apparent and are meant to demonstrate the interpretative aspect of categorization. Still others, such as “Cat.,” are deliberately playful, reminding us of the way that categorical abbreviations can cut short the opportunity to understand something differently.

Much as Carpenter Library architecturally reframes the space of the library as an archaeological site, this exhibition unearths the display mode of the cabinet of curiosities to prompt interaction with objects otherwise hidden away in the storage cabinets of Bryn Mawr College’s Art and Artifact Collections. Each visitor is encouraged to compare objects not only within a given cabinet, but also between them, producing meanings through individual association and multidisciplinary comparison. Moreover, just as in a seminar, it is hoped that these individual readings will be exchanged and developed in the gathering space of this Reading Room in the library that is home to our curious Graduate Group.

Carrie Robbins
Ph.D. ’13, History of Art
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Organization of Cabinet(s)*

This exhibition is formed of nine intentionally arbitrary categories of objects, defined and illustrated on the facing page. The map below uses color to indicate the category to which a given cabinet corresponds. These categories serve as one way to group the objects, however the insufficiency of any category to contain its objects entirely is also meant to be revealed. The meanings of these objects exceed and resist the effort of containment, and in some cases an object has escaped its cabinet and fled to another. Each visitor is invited to make her own curious connections across categories and to imagine other arrangements.

*Organize cabinet a small chamber or room, sometimes devoted to the arrangement or display of works of art. 2. a case for the safe custody of valuables, often itself an ornamental piece of furniture fitted with compartments or shelves. 3. to enclose in or as in a cabinet.

china a fine white or translucent vitrified ceramic material originally manufactured in China, re-named porcelain when brought to Europe in the 16th century. China Ware. 2. a country so-called in Asia. China. 3. of furniture a manifestation of a Western worldview that objectifies its Eastern "other" as exotic items meant to be looked at, protected, and tidily contained. China Cabinet.

fauna a collective term for the animal life of any particular region or epoch. 2. used to distinguish animals from non-animals.

metal a hard, shiny, malleable material. 2. adj made or consisting of metal. Metal, Metallic.

reproduction the action or process of bringing into existence again. 2. n a copy, an exact equivalent, esp. a copy of a picture or other work of art by means of engraving, photography, or similar process. 3. the designation of an item as a replica. 4. n a good produced in large quantities. Mass Reproduction.

violence the infliction of harm or injury upon someone or something. 2. n a treatment causing bodily injury or interference with personal freedom.

wood the fibrous material that forms the substance of roots, trunks, and branches of trees or shrubs. 2. adj made of wood. Wooden.

*phrase escaped from a difficult situation. Out of the Woods.
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* cabinet

1 n a small chamber or room, sometimes devoted to the arrangement or display of works of art.
2 n a case for the safe custody of valuables, often itself an ornamental piece of furniture fitted with compartments or shelves.
3 v to enclose in or as in a cabinet.

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* china

1 n a fine white or translucent vitrified ceramic material originally manufactured in China, re-named porcelain when brought to Europe in the 16th century.
2 n a country so-called in Asia.
3 of furniture a manifestation of a Western worldview that objectifies its Eastern “other” as exotic items meant to be looked at, protected, and tidily contained.

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* cupboards

1 n a piece of furniture used for storage, usually for kitchen storage of food, crockery, utensils.

---

* display

1 v to unfold to view, exhibit, show.
2 n a selection and arrangement meant to indicate importance.
3 n a case in which items are displayed for inspection.

---

* fauna

1 n a collective term for the animal life of any particular region or epoch.

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* metal

1 n a hard, shiny, malleable material.
2 adj made or consisting of metal.

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1 n the fibrous material that forms the substance of roots, trunks, and branches of trees or shrubs.
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3 n a block used for engraving or printing.
4 biblical material of an idol, icon.
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The following list is meant to serve as a guide through the exhibition, helping each viewer to begin the process of identifying the objects on display. The number and color of the pin nearest an object in the case represents an entry in the viewer's guide. The color also designates a theme or category to which the object belongs. Of course, this theme is not the only category to which an object might belong, and this is sometimes playfully indicated by a seemingly misplaced pin. The viewer is invited to locate additional opportunities for cross-categorization, as well as entirely new themes that could be used to organize these objects.

**CAT.**

1. Chimu Stirrup-spouted Vessel Depicting a Cat c. 1450–1550, Peru Clay, Vase with a Cat c. 1580, Japan Color woodblock, Vase with a Cat c. 1880, China COVERED VASE Knob Base, Cat Figurine c. 1965, France Tile, China Cat Figurine c. 1970, England Porcelain, China Cat (tri-color) glaze c. 1975, California Terra-cotta, China Cat Vase c. 1980, Japan Porcelain, China Cat Figurine c. 1990, California Porcelain, China Cat Figurine c. 2000, Japan Porcelain, China Cat Figurine c. 2005, Japan Porcelain, China Cat Figurine

2. Green-Roman Terracotta Hen and Cat Egypt, 500–1000, AD Clay, Vase with a Cat c. 1950, Japan Porcelain, China Cat Toy c. 1950, Japan Porcelain, China Cat Figurine c. 1950, Japan Porcelain, China Cat Figurine

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4. Mexican-Maya Chalice 500–800, Mexico Ceramic, Mexico Chalice c. 1000, Mexico Pottery, Mexico Chalice c. 1500, Mexico Pottery, Mexico Chalice c. 1500, Mexico Pottery, Mexico Chalice

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