

Nature, Art and Science in the Cabinets of Curiosities

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Science-related collections appeared in Italy yet in the Middle Ages. Their number risen significantly in the 16th century due to activities of the so-called *virtuosi* (or afterwards *dilletanti*). Their search for rare and intriguing objects and phenomena was accompanied by alchemical and mechanical experiments performed using a wide variety of collected instruments¹.

The Renaissance was conducive to natural-science related collections, what was caused by the then considered equality of art and science. Thus the collections incorporated works of those both branches of human activity. The efforts to reconstruct the ancient world made by antiquity-fascinated Italian humanists led to creation of collections of cosmological nature. The exhibits included as well natural specimens obtained through then ongoing exploration of the world. The common aim of

¹Particularly Padua abounded in natural-science related collections

both collectors and naturalists of the time was the cognition of the surrounding reality.

The development of the sciences and broadening of natural science expertise as well as coming into being of the new middle class brought about presence of the collections also in bourgeoisie, besides aristocracy.

Chemists and physicians were represented, not by chance, in large numbers among the naturalists who were the firsts theoreticians of museology and experts in curiosities. They held the positions of advisers for the aristocracy, not infrequently developing their own rich collections.

The Netherlandish humanist and physician Samuel Quiccheberg is regarded to be the first theoretician of museology. He authored the *Inscriptiones vel tituli Theatri Amplissimi* dated 1565. The first definition of museum: *promptuarium artificiosarum miraculosarumque rerum* is attributed to him as well.

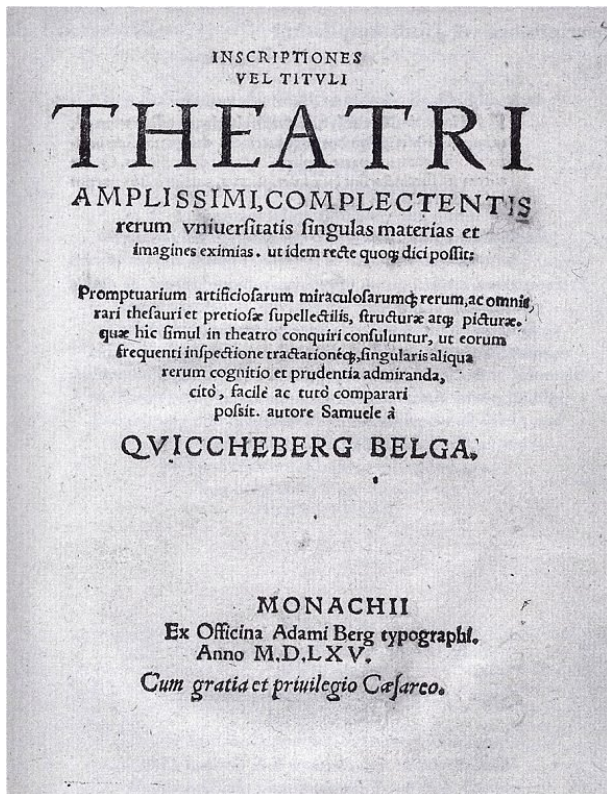


Figure 1: Samuel Quiccheberg, *Inscriptiones vel tituli Theatri Amplissimi*, Munchen 1565, [B. Gd., 5 in Cc 3347 8*]

Many of the cabinets of curiosities established in 17th century played afterwards the role of embryos of scientific museums. It was the case of the English *Tradescant* family collection bought in 1683 by Elias Ashmole and made available to scholars and students of Oxford.

The Royal Cabinet of Natural History, created in 1771 by Charles III, has been displayed in the *National Museum of Natural Sciences* up to this day.

It is worth to mention the similarities in the appearance of the then pharmacies and cabinets of curiosities. Pharmacies profited as well

from the exploration of the New World however, the novelties were treated in strictly utilitarian way. An example of a literary description of such similarity can be found in William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* where exotic plants and animals appear as part of a *officina sanitatis* decor.

On the other hand, exhibit captions found in cabinets of curiosities resemble those used on pharmacy shelves what was depicted by Ole Worm (1588 – 1654) in his *Museum Wormianum* catalogue of *naturalia* and *arteficioza* compiled for the University of Copenhagen. The catalogue contained a print presenting layout of exhibition comprising of characteristic single window and three walls furnished with shelves. The exhibits filed in boxes or presented loosely where accompanied by Latin captions attached beneath, specifying displayed species. Frederic III of Denmark, according to the will of Worm, bequeathed the collection and subsequently continued to expand it after ascending the throne. The words inscribed over the entrance to the collection room in the castle of Copenhagen informed the visitor to observe the objects instead of touching – *Oculis non manibus*. In the beginning of 19th century the collection was split laying the foundations of numerous specialised museums.

The Low Countries played a great role in process of compiling cabinets of curiosities, while the city of Gdańsk had particular sig-

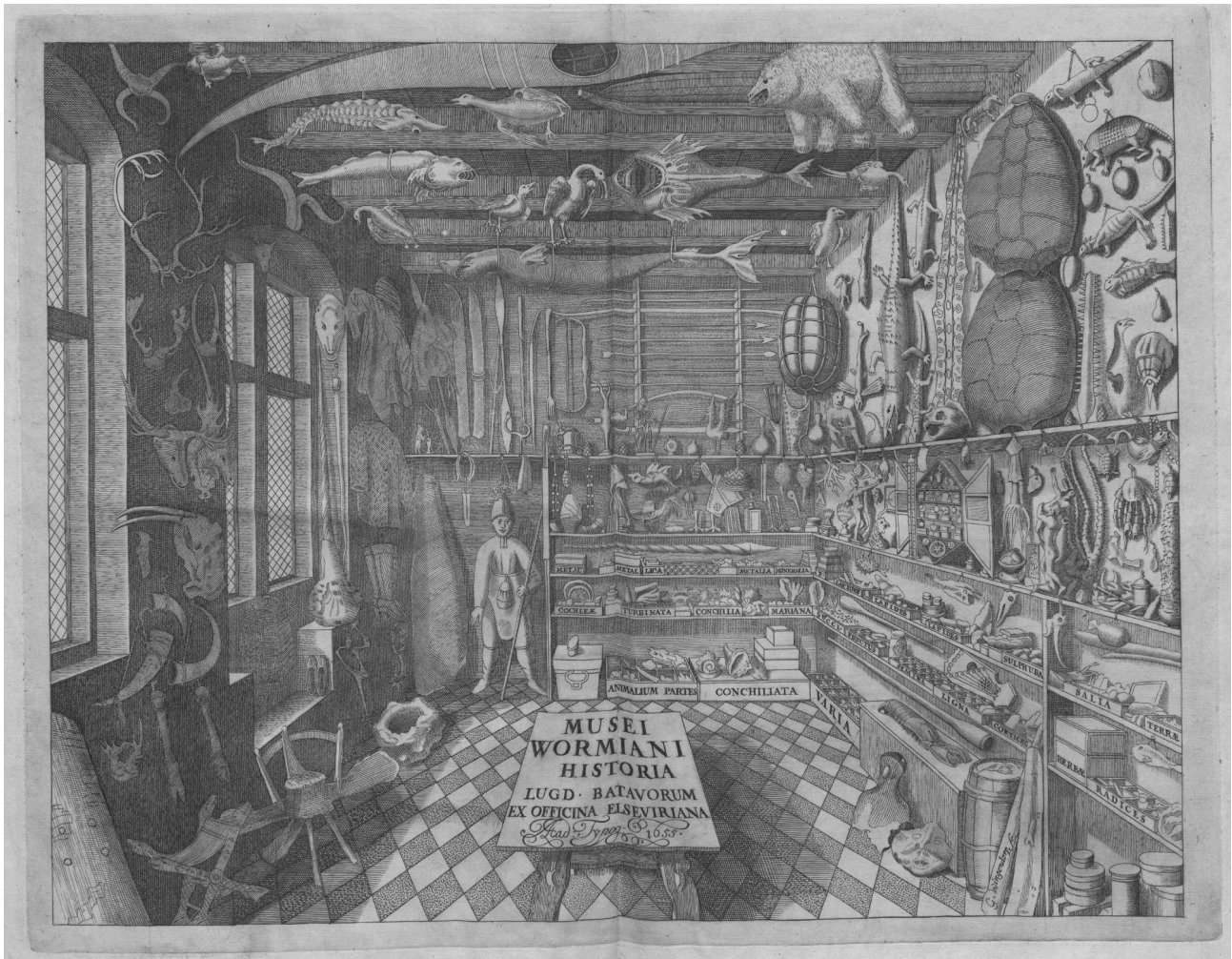


Figure 2: Ole Worm, Cabinet of curiosities, Amsterdam 1655, [BGd. Uph f 1204, 2*]

nificance in the Baltic Sea region in 17th century. The city gained a monopoly on trade of imported seeds and natural decorations. It allowed the development of both commercial and collectors' activities in the field of herbs what facilitated creation of botanical gardens and cabinets of curiosities. Yet in the 16th century Jan Plactomus – a physician and chemist from the city of Gdańsk was suggesting a medicinal plant garden should accompany every pharmacy in order to supply chemists with fresh herbs and exotic plants. Three most fa-

rious botanists of Gdańsk: Jakub Breyn (1637 – 1697)², Jakub Teodor Klein and Gotfryd Reygel (1704 – 1788) followed his suggestion. Two of them established cabinets of curiosities as well. Jan Filip Breyn (1680 – 1764), son of Jakub Breyn, an outstanding physician and naturalists, expanded the library and natural-science related cabinet inherited from his father. He was a member of *The Royal Society of London* and the *Academia Naturae Curiosorum* society based in Halle (predecessor of *The*

²Aleksander Maciesza, *G. Rzączyński pierwszy fizjograf polski*, Sandomierz 1921, pp. 14 – 15

German Academy of Sciences Leopoldina). His museum gained wide publicity (Tsar of Russia, Peter the Great was among the visitors). Contents of the exhibit list dated 1765³

prepared for an auction and kept in the Gdańsk Library can be regarded as a proof of richness of the collection. Natural exhibits occupied ten spacious cabinets and contained: various mineral samples and a rich set of ambers with inclusions, shells and fossils. Herbaria of significant volume regarding plants from India, America, Africa, Syberia and Europe constituted the basis of botanical collection. The library contained a set of essential works of the then contemporaries and ancient authors⁴. The Breyn collection, after Jan Filip had passed away, was bought by Catherine II of Russia and transferred to Saint Petersburg.

Jakub Teodor Klein (1685 – 1759), another collector and botanical garden owner from Gdańsk, kept his collection growing not only by means of his numerous voyages, but also by buying and merging other scientists' collections. His collection and library was housed in

³Bibliothecae Breynianae..., see. Przemysław Szafran, *Katalog Aukcyjny i aukcja biblioteki Fryderyka Fabriciusa w 1727 roku na tle aukcji bibliofilskich w Gdańsku do końca XVIII wieku*, Libri Gedanenses, Rocznik Biblioteki Gdańskiej Polskiej Akademii Nauk za rok 1967, Gdańsk 1968, pp. 55-106.

⁴Jakub Breyn founded a private printing house equipped with machinery imported from the Low Countries in order to print his own works, see Zofia Szwarc, p. 418.

a purpose-built edifice. Klein collection was in due course split and bought partly by Augustus III of Poland (and finally relocated to Dresden) and Margrave of Brandenburg-Kulmbach, whereas the remaining part formed the basis of the Gdańsk Museum.

One of the richest libraries in Prussia as well as precious collection of amber, bird's eggs and fossils belonged to Jerzy Andrzej Helwing (1688 – 1748), rector of Węgorzewo, member of The Royal Prussian Society of Sciences and The Free Society in Königsberg (presently Kaliningrad). Part of the collection (fossils) was bought afterwards by Stanisław Leszczyński, The King of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Helwing, assisted by Maciej Borecki, worked out five copies of a herbarium in Latin, German and Polish⁵.

The then close relation between a museum and science is testified by the interest in mentioned collections and their role of knowledge source presented by Gabriel Rzączyński (1664 – 1737)⁶, known for his outstanding contribution to physiography of Poland as well as a representative of the *scientia curiosa* conception. The desire to cover the whole range of accessible knowledge present in the then cre-

⁵See Zofia Szwarc, *Prywatne ogrody botaniczne a rozwój nauk przyrodniczych w ośrodku gdańskim w XVI-XVIII wiekach*, Kwartalnik Historii Nauki i Techniki 1986, pp. 440-441.

⁶G. Rzączyński, *Auctuarium historiae naturalia Poloniae*, Gdańsk 1742 r

ated works beared a strong resemblance to the concept of cabinets of curiosities.

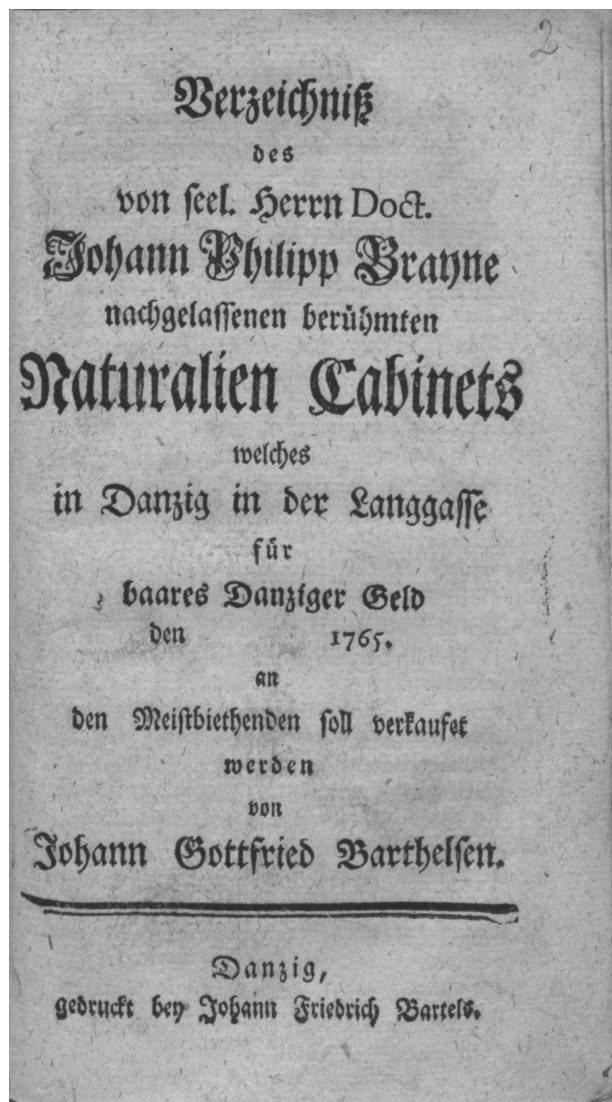


Figure 3: Bibliothecae Breynianae... , Katalog Aukcyjny, Gdańsk 1765, [B.Gd. 20009 8*]

Polish aristocratic houses were no stronger to the ideas of the natural-science related collections. Anna Paulina Jabłonowska neé Sapieha (1728 – 1800), Bratslav Voivode’s wife, imported a significant part of her collection by sea from The Low Countries via Gdańsk. She founded a natural history cabinet, in compliance with the model Medici and Habsburg

ones, in the town of Siemiatycze. Her collection acquired appreciation among international visitors.

A description of the cabinet survived in the 1895 article of Paulina Wilkońska⁷, where the venue is accounted to be comprised of five spacious halls. The first, oval room housed a library. Fine art, numismatic, bark-produced and other most subtle exhibits occupied the second hall. The third one housed a collection of ores, minerals and other solid-earth products and the remaining two were filled with conserved specimens of flora and fauna of both foreign and local origin.

In 1788 Jabłonowska decided on donating the collection, reportedly surpassing in value the one gathered in royal gardens in Paris which laid the foundations of the *Musée National d’Histoire Naturelle* brought into existence in 1793, to public domain. Perhaps her decision was taken in reply to the proposal of founding *Musaeum Polonicum* stated by Michał Mniszch in 1775. Guidelines of this country-wide venture, of which fourth part was supposed to be devoted to natural collections, were published in the *Zabawy przyjemne i pożyteczne z różnych autorów zebrane* journal.

⁷P. Wilkońska, *Księżna Jabłonowska Wojewodzina Raclawska*, Czas, 1859, nr 232, pp. 1-2 & nr 234 pp. 1-2. according to Z. Wójcik, p. 119.

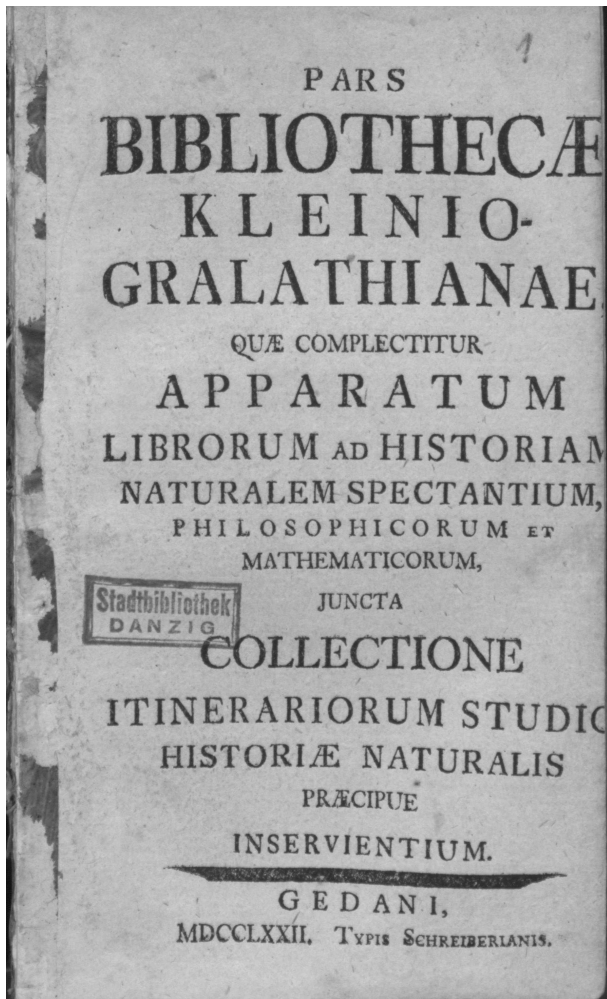


Figure 4: Bibliothecae Kleinio-Gralathianae... , [B.Gd. Aa 14421 8*]

The initiative was inspired by Stefan de Rieule⁸. The plan was finally realized by Stanisław Staszic in the beginning of 19th century, when he established the collection of *The Society of Friends of Science*.

Jabłonowska's gift was not accepted whereupon, after her passing away, the collection was bought out, in exchange for debts, by Alexander I of Russia and moved to Saint Petersburg and Moscow where the majority of

⁸Projet pour rassembler Sans aucune depense toutes les Richesses naturelles la Polotne, Berlin 1766.

it burnt during the Napoleonic Wars⁹. The only remnant of the collection, a list of exhibits drawn up by St. Petersburgian Academician Vasily Michailovich Severgin, is a proof that the legacy of Jabłonowska was a showcase of Polish culture.

Gdańsk cabinets alike, collection of Jabłonowska was also a source of knowledge for Polish 19th century naturalists.

⁹Jerzy Dzik, *Dzieje idei narodowego Muzeum przyrodniczego* in *Materiały Sesji Naukowej 200 lat muzealnictwa warszawskiego, Dzieje i perspektywy, Zamek Królewski w Warszawie 16-17 listopada 2005 r.*, Warszawa 2006, p. 433.