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Researched Blog Post

The WunderCabinet: A Wonderous (And Weird) Experience

A Wunderkammer (German) or Cabinet of Curiosities, is a place, be it a cabinet or an entire room, where a collection of rarities and oddities is exhibited. Popular in Renaissance Europe, such places were pre-cursors to modern museums, or if you will, 21st century Pinterest boards or even this very blog post. In every drawer (or link) you open (or click) you will find thoughtfully categorized natural history or man-made objects (webpages) that tell stories about the world and add to your understanding of life. In short, such objects are wonders and marvels of the New World (the World Wide Web).

Like its hybrid German/English name, *The WunderCabinet* (2011) is a hybrid of the past and the present (see Figure 1). Created in the 21st century by artists Barbara Hodgson and Claudia Cohen, it is their “attempt to replicate—in spirit—the 16th-to-18th century cabinet of curiosities.”¹ That said, only thirty copies exist—no two with the same assortment of timeless trinkets. The one in front of me, number 23, belongs to the University of British Columbia Rare Books and Special Collections ([here](#) is a partial location list of the others).

The box is decorated with pieces of wood veneer that form sharp geometric patterns. Opening it, I feel awe-inspired. Inside is a matching full-leather bound artist book that Hodgson and Cohen call a “cabinet encyclopedia.”² A true artist book, it contains handmade paper and is filled with delicate hand-coloured illustrations, embellishments, and handwritten notes that explain the types of natural objects (from sea life to crystal structures) and man-made objects (from labyrinths and mazes to timepieces) you may find in a 16th to 18th century cabinet of curiosities (see inset of Figure 1). *Interesting Fact: It took Vancouver-based paper artisan Reg

¹ Barbara Hodgson and Claudia Cohen, *The WunderCabinet: The Curious Worlds of Barbara Hodgson and Claudia Cohen* (Vancouver: Heavenly Monkey Editions, 2011), 7.

² Hodgson and Cohen, *The WunderCabinet*, 8.

Lissel 10 months to make over 1,000 foolscap sheets of paper for all thirty copies of *The WunderCabinet*.



Figure 1. An overall image of *The WunderCabinet: The Curious Worlds of Barbara Hodgson & Claudia Cohen* (2011), No. 23. Inside the box is a unique assortment of two dozen tiny natural and man-made objects, a three-page handwritten catalogue, and a full-leather bound artist book or “cabinet encyclopedia” (pictured under the catalogue). The top left inset shows the handwritten notes and hand-coloured illustrations of pages 16 and 17 of the artist book. UBC Rare Books & Special Collections (AM221. H623)

Inside the Box

Inside the box there is an assortment of tiny objects, each one from Hodgson’s and Cohen’s own collections. Using the handwritten catalogue as my guide, I carefully begin my scavenger hunt. A couple of objects, one wonderful and one weird, immediately beg for further explanation:

“1. Six-panel tunnel book of the studiolo of Neapolitan apothecary, Ferrante Imperato, 1599. From his catalogue Dell’historia naturale, 2nd ed, 1672.” (see Figure 2)

Sitting in the centre compartment of the box, this treasure is tucked carefully inside a grey, custom-made folder with a round-cut out at its centre— a sneak-peek that is just enough to lure me in. A fitting edition to *The WunderCabinet*, the tunnel book structure dates to the mid-18th century. Influenced by movable theatrical stage sets, these accordion-like books were originally called “peepshows.” They became known as tunnel books in the mid-19th century when numerous of them were crafted to celebrate of the long anticipated completion of the tunnel under the Thames River in London. Currently, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London has the largest and most expansive collection of paper peepshows.



*Figure 2. One of the 24 objects featured in *The WunderCabinet* and listed as the first object in the handwritten catalogue: “1. Six-panel tunnel book of the studiolo of Neapolitan apothecary, Ferrante Imperato, 1599. From his catalogue Dell’historia naturale, 2nd ed, 1672.” Note the form and construction of the tunnel book seen in the top left inset.*

The WunderCabinet tunnel book is made up of a series of six panels that are joined together on each side using a folded piece of paper (see Inset of Figure 2—DIY tunnel book tutorials can be found [here](#)). Each of the panels contains precise cut-outs. Together the remainder of the panels three-dimensionally recreate the [first published pictorial representation](#) of a Renaissance cabinet of curiosities, the Naples museum of Ferrante Imperato (1550-1625).

The representation was featured as the [frontispiece](#) of his catalogue *Dell'istoria naturale* (1599). Upon closer inspection, the bottom edge of front panel reads: “with apologies to Ferrante Imperato, 1599.” Why apologize? A note in the back of the encyclopedia by Hodgson and Cohen and an investigation of [the original 1599 frontispiece illustration](#), confirm that Imperato’s son, Francesco (he is also [one of the authors](#) of *Dell'istoria naturale*), who is pointing out some of the marvels of his father’s museum to visitors in the original representation, has been omitted from the tunnel book.

Francesco was pointing at some of as many as 35,000 animal, plant, and mineral specimens in his father’s cabinet. An apothecary and scholar, Imperato used his collection not only for show, but also for research and experimentation of new substances. In fact, he was oddly obsessed with asbestos as seen in [this illustration](#) of one of his experiments. The showstopper though was the [giant crocodile suspended from the ceiling](#) (as seen in the tunnel book). For even more information and intrigue about Imperato, visit [here](#).

“15. Glass eyeballs” (see Figure 3)

When I read “15. Glass eyeballs” in *The WunderCabinet* catalogue, I was relieved to find hidden, in a small compartment, what looks to be a plastic doll eyeball. This use of a doll eyeball could a reference two types of curiosities, the anatomical or [automata](#).

The inclusion of body parts (of those who passed of natural causes) in cabinets of curiosities became common by the end of the 17th century to create [anatomical art](#). One of the most notable was that of Dutch anatomist and doctor Frederik Ruysch (1638-1731), who used his preparations (like the one in [this engraving](#)) as educational art to teach his classes. The amazement that his preparations produced led to his creation of a museum. There he would show off his collection to the public, who had largely never seen internal organs. And as any proper cabinet of curiosities extraordinaire does, he provided visitors with [guidebooks](#). Like *The*

WunderCabinet's catalogue and encyclopedia, these provide descriptions and explanations of each object.

Ruysch and other collectors thought their preparations should not only be educational, but also beautiful and added lace, jewels, and pearls to their preparations to theatrically bring them back to life. The use of the doll eyeball in *The WunderCabinet*—perfectly round, green, and complete with a set of luscious lashes, is reminiscent of this idea.



Figure 1 One of the marvels of *The WunderCabinet*, “15. Glass eyeballs” appears to be a doll eyeball and perhaps a reference to anatomical and/or automata cabinets. Even though it is listed as plural in the catalogue, there is only one glass eyeball. Here it sits on top of the pill container that contains “17. Cryptic saying intended to provoke paradox.”

The other reference could be to automata, that is non-living things that move, or in short, robots. Such cabinets became popular in the mid-18th century, with one notable automaton being that of a doll playing a dulcimer. Known as *La Joueuse de Tympanon*, it was created in 1784 by German cabinetmaker David Roentgen and German clockmaker, Peter Kintzing. The following year, Roentgen presented the automaton, which bears a striking resemblance to Marie

Antoinette, to King Louis XVI. The King then gifted it to his wife, Antoinette. Playing one of eight melodies, demonstrations of the Marie Antoinette's Automaton can be seen [here](#) and [here](#). Watching these videos, the automaton comes to life with her movements, even with the shifting of her eyes—a parallel to the movable eyelid of the glass eyeball of *The WunderCabinet*.

Both a select number of Ruysch's preparations and the Marie Antoinette Automaton still exist today. Yes, you read right. Over 300 years later, numerous of Ruysch's preparations are still intact in Saint Petersburg (**advisory: this content is disturbing**). As for the Marie Antoinette Automaton, she is (eerily) [seated in a dark room at the Musée des Arts and Métiers](#) in Paris, waiting to play for you. Interesting Fact: The famous illusionist, Robert Houdini, restored the Automaton in 1864!

These two objects are only a fraction of the curiosities that lie in *The WunderCabinet*, waiting to be “rediscovered” with your 21st century eyes (no pun intended). As for which one is wonderous and which one is weird (or perhaps each are both), I'll let you be the judge.

KEYWORDS: wonder; materiality; natural history; science and technology; man-made; artist book; curiosity

Additional References:

Hodgson, Barbara and Claudia Cohen. *The WunderCabinet: The Curious Worlds of Barbara Hodgson and Claudia Cohen*, Vancouver: Heavenly Monkey Editions, 2011.

Onians, John. “‘I Wonder...’: A Short History of Amazement.” In *Sight and Insight: Essays on Art and Culture in Honour of E.H. Gombrich at 85*, edited by John Onians, 10-33. London: Phaidon Press, 1994.

Mauries, Patrick. *Cabinets of Curiosities*. London, England: Thames & Hudson, 2002.

Further Reading:

“Aaron Mahnke's Cabinet of Curiosities,” *Stuff Media LLC*. Accessed April 1, 2019. <https://www.curiositiespodcast.com/>

Jackson, Shelley. “My body a Wunderkammer.” 1997. Accessed April 7, 2019. <http://www.altx.com/thebody/>.

Hansen, Julie V. “Resurrecting Death: Anatomical Art in the Cabinet of Dr. Frederik Ruysch.” *Art Bulletin*, 78, no. 4 (1996): 663-680. DOI: 10.2307/3046214

Voskuhl, Adelheid. "Motions and Passions: Music-Playing Women Automata and the Culture of Affect in Late-Eighteenth-Century Germany." In *Genesis Redux: Essays in the History and Philosophy of Artificial Life*, edited by Jessica Riskin, 293-320. Chicago: University of Chicago Press Online, 2007. DOI:10.7208/chicago/9780226720838.003.0014.

Weschler, Lawrence. *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Five Tweets³

Tweet #1: “16th to 18th century Pinterest board”



Nicole Mulder 

@nicimulder



A 16th to 18th century Pinterest board:
[#TheWunderCabinet](#) by Barbara Hodgson
 and Claudia Cohen compartmentalizes tiny
 marvels and oddities of the natural and man-
 made worlds that provoke wonder and awe
 (@ubclibrary RBSC: AM221 .H623 2011)



³ Images for tweets are the Appendix.

Tweet #2: “#CabinetOfCuriosities encyclopedia”

“More info” link [here](#).



Nicole Mulder 🔒

@nicimulder



A #CabinetOfCuriosities encyclopedia:
#TheWunderCabinet includes a decorative,
full-leather bound artist book of spectacular
hand-coloured illustrations and
embellishments of the marvellous (and the
bizarre) (@ubclibrary RBSC: AM221.H623).
More info:
heavenlymonkey.com/Cabinet.html



Tweet #3: “Little glass eyeball”

YouTube link [here](#).



Nicole Mulder 🔒

@nicimulder



I spy with this little glass eyeball: decorated body parts and robots that animate the nonliving ([#TheWunderCabinet](#), [@ubclibrary](#) RBSC: AM221.H623). Robots such as this 18th century music-playing one, were popular in [#CabinetsOfCuriosities](#): [youtube.com/watch?v=nITEU4 ...](https://youtube.com/watch?v=nITEU4...)



Tweet #4: "Cryptic saying"**Nicole Mulder** 🔒

@nicimulder



Your daily brain exercise brought to you by one of the hidden treasures of [#TheWunderCabinet](#): a "cryptic saying intended to provoke paradox" hugging the sides of a tiny pill box (zoom in to read) ([@ubclibrary](#) RBSC: AM221.H623).



Tweet #5: “‘Spe-shell’ collections”

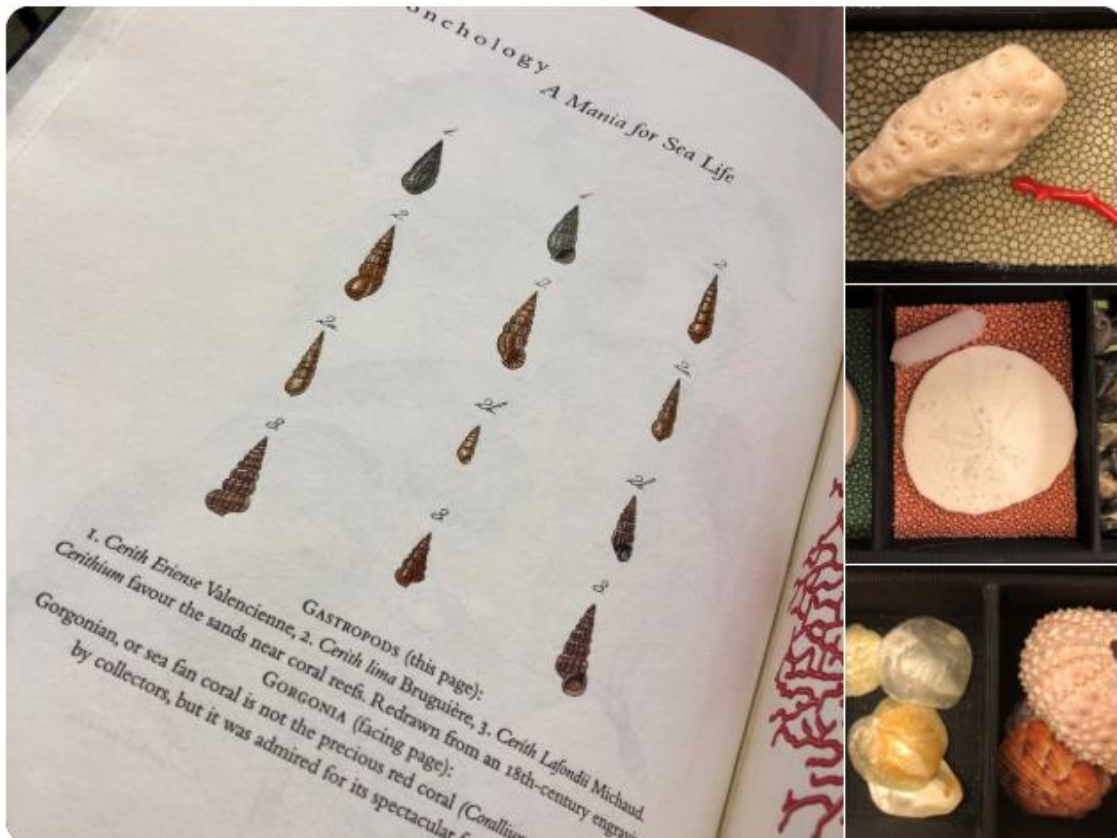


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"Spe-shell" collections: intrigued by other worlds, many 16th to 18th century owners of [#CabinetsOfCuriosities](#) included artfully arranged trinkets from under the sea in their collections. [#TheWunderCabinet](#) recreates this timeless fascination ([@ubclibrary](#) RBSC: AM221.H623)



Appendix: Images for Twitter



Figure 1. First image from “16th to 18th century Pinterest board” (Tweet #1)



Figure 2 Second image from “16th to 18th century Pinterest board” (Tweet #1)



Figure 3 First image from “#CabinetOfCuriosities encyclopedia” (Tweet #2)

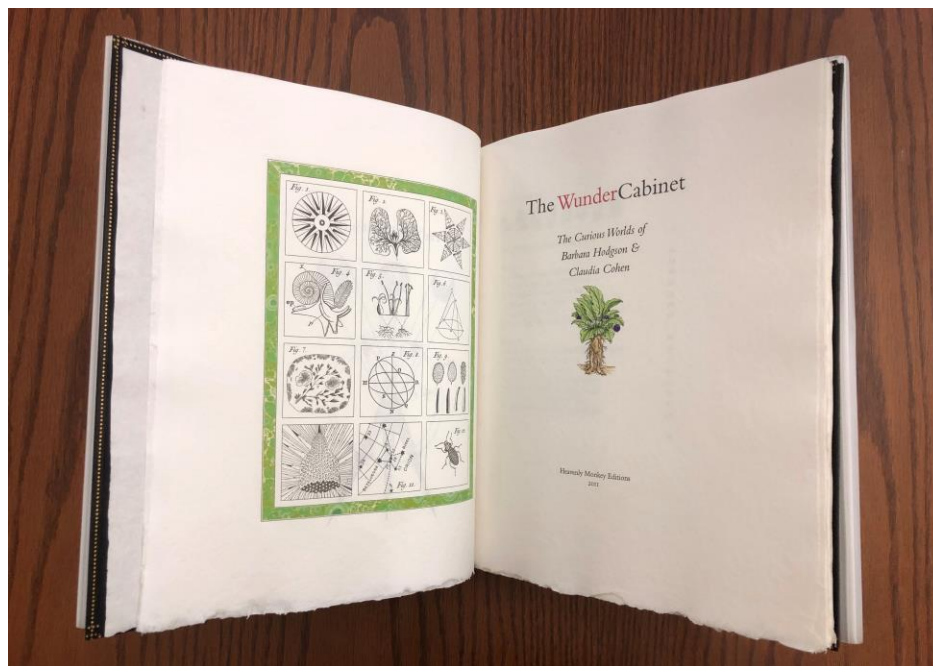


Figure 2 Second image from “#CabinetOfCuriosities encyclopedia” (Tweet #2)



Figure 3 Third image from “#CabinetOfCuriosities encyclopedia” (Tweet #2)

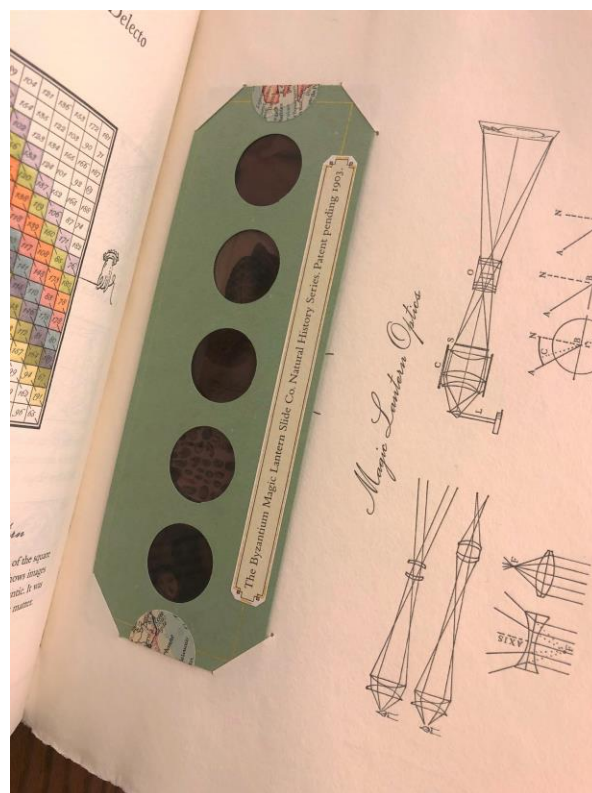


Figure 4 Fourth image from “#CabinetOfCuriosities encyclopedia” (Tweet #2)



Figure 5 Image from “Little glass eyeball” (Tweet #3)



Figure 6 First image from “Cryptic saying” (Tweet #4)

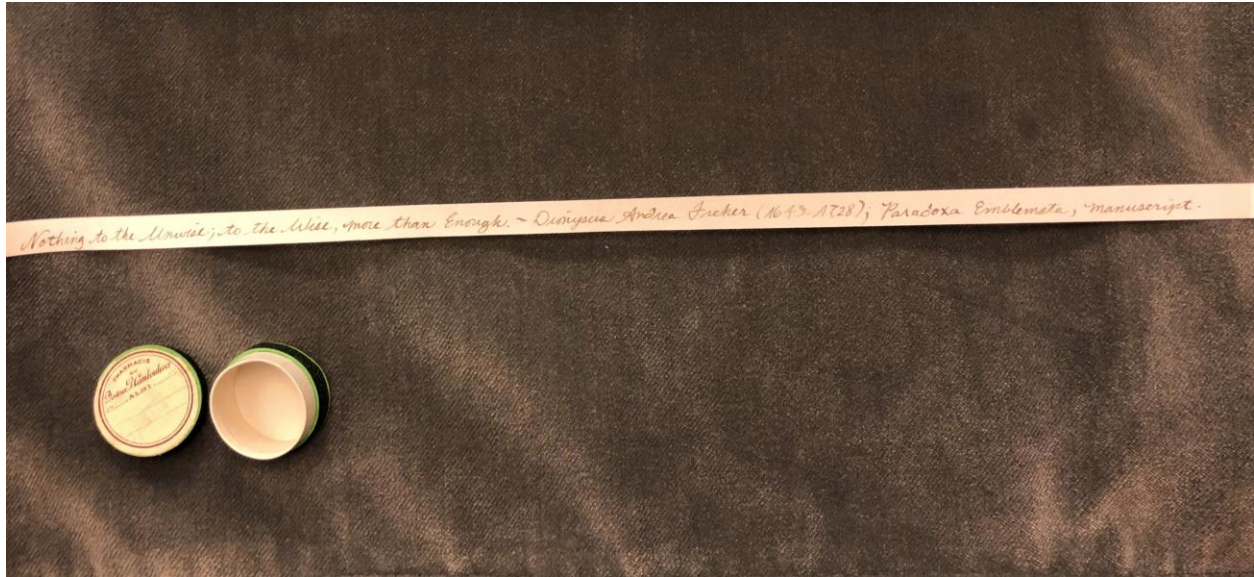


Figure 7 Second image from “Cryptic saying” (Tweet #4), reads: “Nothing to the Unwise; to the Wise, more than Enough. ~ Dionysus Andrea Freker (1649-1728); Paradoxa Emblemata, Manuscript”



Figure 8 Third image from “Cryptic saying” (Tweet #4)

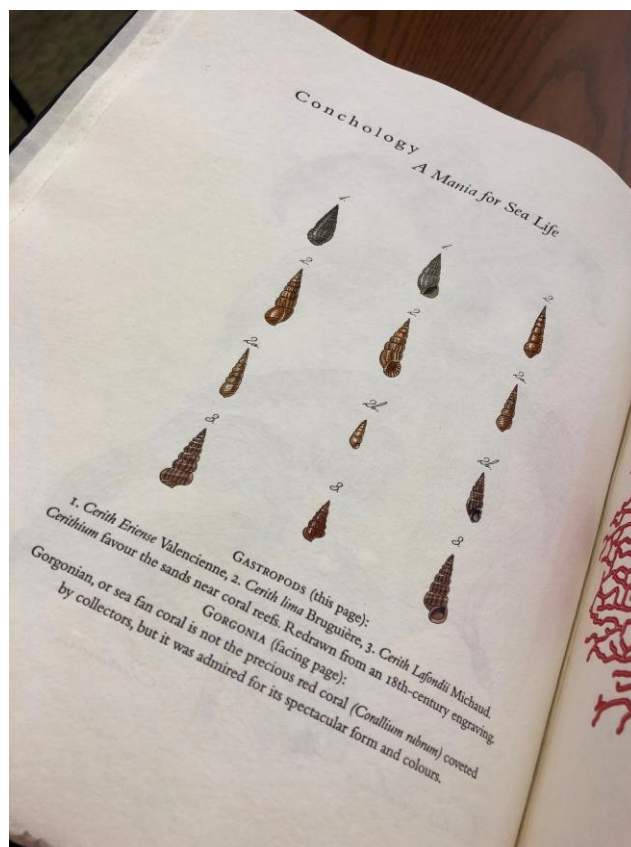


Figure 9 First image from “‘Spe-shell’ collections” (Tweet #5)



Figure 10 Second image from “‘Spe-shell’ collections” (Tweet #5)



Figure 11 Third image from “‘Spe-shell’ collections” (Tweet #5)



Figure 12 Fourth image from “‘Spe-shell’ collections” (Tweet #5)