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ART AND CURIOSITY CABINETS OF THE LATE RENAISSANCE

Julius von Schlosser

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Thomas Dacosta Kaufmann

INTRODUCTION

Julius von Schlosser's *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance* broke ground in several fields when it was published in 1908. It was a landmark in the study of what are often referred to in English as the applied or decorative arts, and it was the eleventh monograph in a series devoted to what are known in German as *Kunstgewerbe*. The series was edited by Jean Louis Sponcel (1858–1930), a professor at the Technische Hochschule (now the Technische Universität) in Dresden. Sponcel later became director and historian of the Grünes Gewölbe (Green Vault), Dresden's treasury of objects of this kind.¹ Schlosser (1866–1938) dealt with *Kunstgewerbe* as part of the princely collections in central Europe that contained such artifacts as goldsmithery, ivories, clocks, and cut-stone vessels along with jewels, sculpture, paintings, books, animal skins, shells, and other natural specimens, scientific instruments, items of popular culture, objects from places far away from Europe, and much more. He situated *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* within a more general history of collecting. More recently, the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century phenomena that Schlosser discussed have had an impact on special exhibitions; the display of objects in American, British, and continental collections; and works by contemporary artists.²

Schlosser's title employed the notion of *Spätrenaissance* (late Renaissance). In so doing, Schlosser also contributed to a discussion of how to categorize European art and culture of the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, while resonating with the fascination with "late styles" that was prevalent circa 1900.³ His treatment of *Kunst- und Wunderkammern* as late Renaissance marvels represents a distinctive characterization of a period that called to mind other styles, such as the baroque and mannerism.⁴ But his book went far beyond one historical period. It began with observations about animals, children, and "primitive" peoples and ended with reflections on contemporary (early twentieth-century) culture. Schlosser's subtitle, *Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens* (*A Contribution to the History of Collecting*), and the appearance of the word *Sammelwesens* (collecting) in his first sentence indicates that he aimed at an understanding of a broader history of the essence of collecting.

Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance ranges across many disciplines. Starting with a brief discussion of the historiography of art, on which Schlosser was soon to compile a fundamental handbook, *Die Kunstliteratur, ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der neueren Kunstgeschichte* (1924), it deploys insights



Fig. 1.
 Photograph of Julius von
 Schlosser, March 1927.
 Photo courtesy
 Österreichische
 Nationalbibliothek,
 Bildarchiv und
 Grafiksammlung.



Fig. 7.
The *Heiltumstuhl* in
Vienna, from the *Wiener
Heiltumbuch* of 1502.

The church treasures of the Middle Ages will certainly have been accessible to pious pilgrims and, on special occasions, perhaps also to others, just as they are now. There was a vast body of literature associated with them, particularly in Germany: the so-called *Heiligtumbbücher* (reliquary books). These truly populist guides—some of which count among the earliest products of the letterpress—took the form of broadsheets and short books adorned with woodcut illustrations. And though their *raison d'être* was the relic, in many respects they have to be seen as the northern, medieval Christian counterpart to the primitive periegetic literature of Greece.²⁴ The oldest are those from Maastricht and Aachen (1460–1470), Kloster Georgenberg in the Tyrol (1480), Würzburg (1483), the Basilica of Saints Ulrich and Afra at Augsburg (around 1483), Bamberg (1493), Nuremberg (1483), and Vienna (1502) (fig. 8).

The church treasures from the end of the German Middle Ages already give quite a clear outline of the character of the later *Kunst- und Wunderkammern*; indeed, they are the continuation—albeit in secular guise—of the same mentality that produced the great private princely collections of the North from the fourteenth century onwards. As in so many fields, the North adhered to an indigenous medieval “Gothic” tradition, whereas Italy built upon impulses derived from its own national past: antiquity. These impulses are the direct predecessors of more modern ideas.

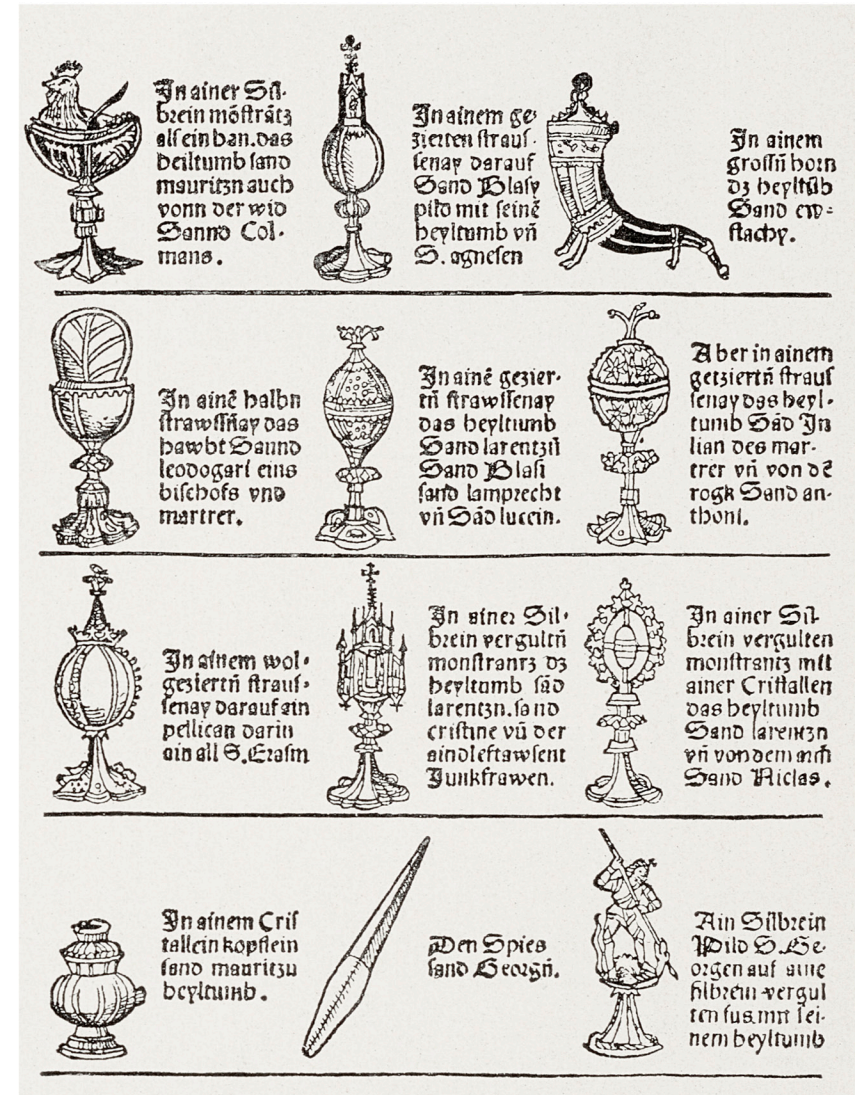


Fig. 8.
A page from the *Wiener
Heiltumbuch* of 1502.

From left to right and top to bottom:
In a silver monstrance, as a cock, the relic of Saint Maurice and that of the rod of Saint Coloman.

A decorated ostrich egg with an image of Saint Blaise and his relic with that of Saint Agnes.

In a large horn the relic of Saint Eustace.

In a half ostrich egg the head of Saint Leodegar, a bishop and martyr.

In a decorated ostrich egg the relics of Saint Lawrence, Saint Blaise, Saint Lamprecht, and Saint Lucia.

Again in a decorated ostrich egg the relics of Saint Julian the Martyr and the robe of Saint Anthony. In a finely decorated ostrich egg with a pelican, inside an awl of Saint Erasmus.

In a silver gilded monstrance the relics of Saint Lawrence, Saint Christina, and the eleven thousand virgins.

In a silver gilded monstrance with a crystal, the relics of Saint Lawrence and the arm of Saint Nicholas.

In a little crystal cup the relic of Saint Maurice.

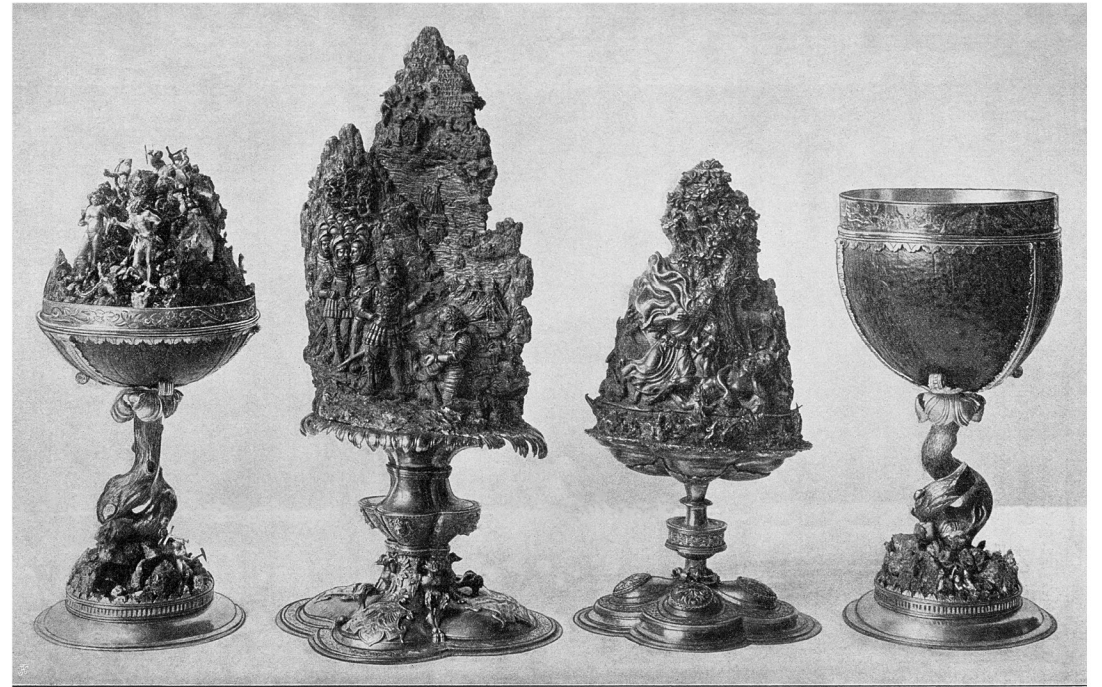
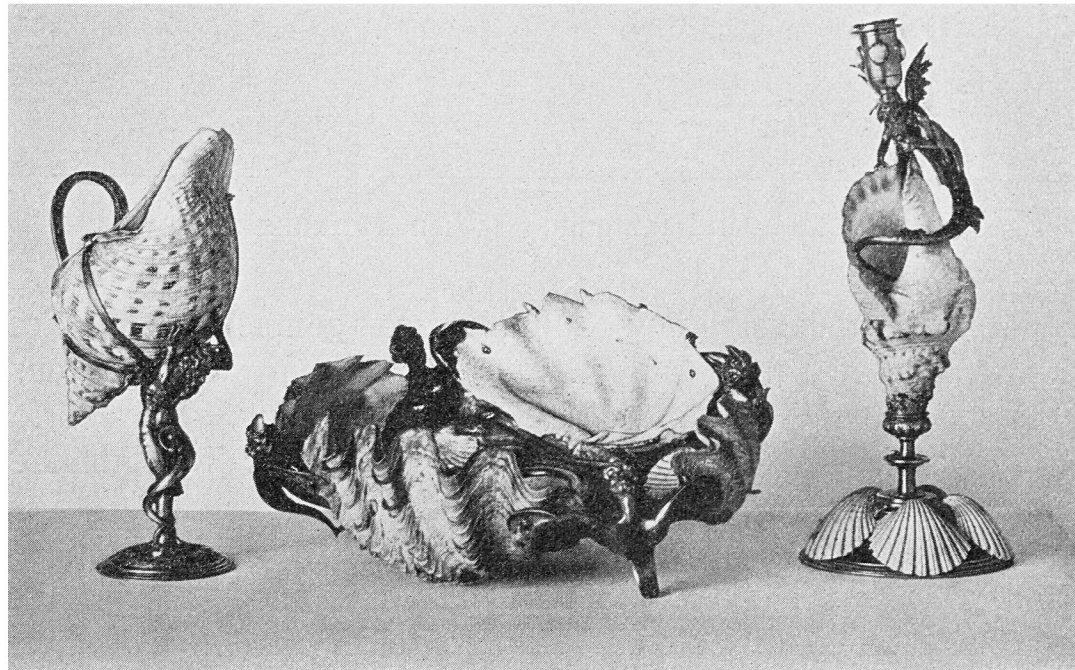
The spear of Saint George.

A silver image of Saint George on a silver gilded base with his relic.

Fig. 27.
Jester's cap.
Vienna, Hofmuseum.



Fig. 28.
Seashell utensils from
Ambras.
Vienna, Hofmuseum.



Jamnitzer or even Bernard Palissy); a complete set of gilded silverware encrusted with seashells; and Augsburg pieces from Ferdinand's era, namely the handsome and original combination of a lamp and a sea devil (fig. 28).

Fig. 29.
Tyrolean *Handstein*
from Ambras.
Vienna, Hofmuseum.

The third (red) chest was almost entirely taken up by a very peculiar collection, which is unique in its class: the so-called *Handsteine**. Though these do occur elsewhere, they nevertheless have something specifically Tyrolean about them and are quite typical of the spirit of that era. *Handsteine* were particularly fine mineral samples, usually of argentite and predominantly originating from the pits in Schwaz. They were given to regional rulers on special occasions as gifts from the miners' guilds (fig. 29). One still sees such samples immured in the old miners' buildings in the Tyrol. Those from Ambras, almost all still extant, are very skillfully carved into all sorts of histories showing Calvary, the Mount of Olives, and so on, while some take the form of little mines and castles; this and their often quite splendid silver gilding lends them considerable artistic value. The most outstanding and art historically interesting piece is unfortunately lost; like so many of these things, it probably found its way to the furnace. This particular *Handstein* took the form of a little mountain with a number of wild and tame creatures frolicking on its slopes, artfully crafted in silver. Its loss is all the more regrettable for that fact that it was probably identical with a large silver centerpiece that Archduke Ferdinand had ordered from Wenzel Jamnitzer in 1556.⁴⁵

These *Handsteine* show the character of the *Kunstkammern* of that era in particularly sharp relief, for they combine an interest in the products of nature with a pleasure in seeing them artistically shaped and presented. There are clear echoes of

Fig. 34.
Mechanical bell tower
from Ambras.
Vienna, Hofmuseum.



Fig. 35.
Galleon with mechanical
fanfare, possibly from the
collection of Rudolf II.
Vienna, Hofmuseum.



Fig. 39.
Cabinet with figurine
of Death.
Vienna, Hofmuseum.



The next, sixth or “ashen,” chest is an even better reflection of contemporary collecting. It contained nothing but works in stone, little sculptures in alabaster, Kelheim stone, and the like, including the extant figurine of Death in his ebony casket (fig. 39), carved after Andreas Vesalius’s anatomy (1543) and belonging to a long and popular tradition of morbid imagery that stretches all the way from Spain to the North. There was a “carved Venetian duke,” that is, Doge Pasquale Cicogna († 1595) with his heraldic animal, the stork (fig. 40); several mosaics; and finally, a mixed lot of curious minerals, both raw and finished. Among these there were bowls of

Fig. 40.
Doge Pasquale Cicogna.
Vienna, Hofmuseum.



serpentinite stone “like those from Meichsen (Mexico),” “toadstones, eagle stones, and star stones,” stone from Mount Lebanon, and lastly animal and plant fossils.

Curiosity and ingenuity are also prominent in the next, seventh chest. It contained all manner of ironware: strangely decorated and ingenious locks [*Kunstschloss*] “that no key can open” (fig. 41), two iron “choke pears” (extant), and all sorts of tools “laid out on black boards” (three of them, sculptors’ and gunsmiths’ tools, are extant). The “full metal seat made of ornate little pieces” could be the famous *Fangstuhl* from the Bacchus shrine at Ambras; it is mentioned in a number of historical travel journals (fig. 42).

Fig. 52.
Venetian bronze from
Ambras, late 15th century.
Vienna, Hofmuseum.

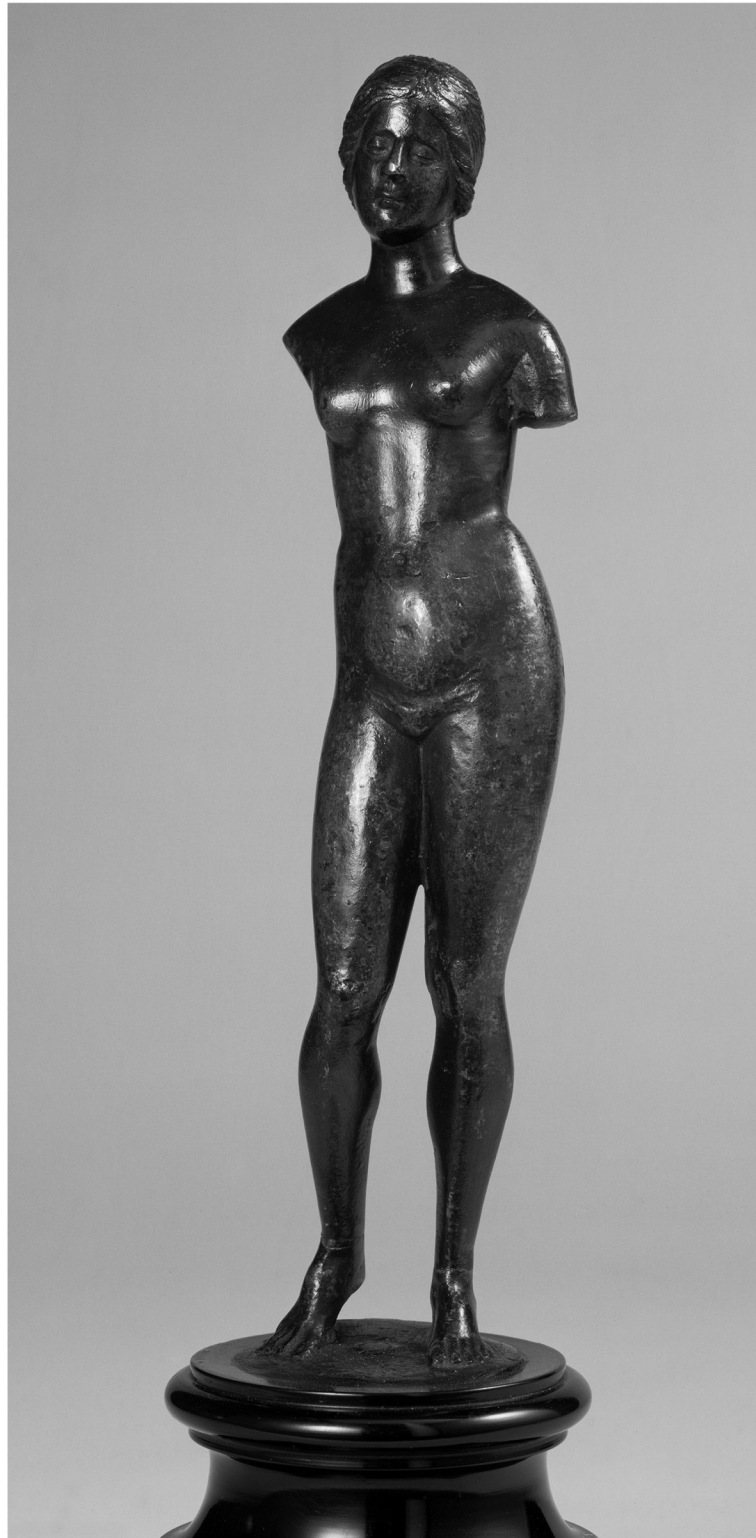


Fig. 53.
East Asian objects
from Ambras.
Vienna, Hofmuseum.

Viennese collection of bronzes. For instance: the delightful and almost modern-looking statuette of Venus without arms (fig. 52), created for lovers in imitation of antiquity; an intoxicated young satyr; an original by Giambologna; an outstanding German door pull with a Lucretia Romana as well as one of the rare German tin casts from the sixteenth century, again depicting Venus; and finally the female nude on a mat, probably a Paduan bronze from the workshop of Andrea Riccio.

The fourteenth chest was devoted to ceramics. Of particular interest here are a large number of “porzelanaschisselen” (porcelain dishes). To go by the description in the inventory, these must have been pieces of East Asian porcelain, which had become quite familiar by that point and were even being imitated in Italy. Indeed, from the seventeenth century on, porcelain was a regular export to Europe, especially via the Dutch factories. And in fact the imperial collections have a small number of very fine dishes and bowls (along with several remarkably old enameled pieces and such like) from the former Ambras collection (fig. 53). As a highly unusual example of the early imitation of East Asian decoration, the inventory mentions a tabletop that was given to Ferdinand by his son Cardinal Andreas, though by 1596 this was kept in the library next door and no longer in the *Kunstkammer* itself

Fig. 6.
Portrait of Ferdinand II.
 Wax, Vienna
 Kunsthistorisches
 Museum, Inv. No. KK
 3085. Vienna
 Kunsthistorisches
 Museum.



original edition of Schlosser's book is a reproduction of an anonymous portrait of the archduke circa 1575. The choice of this image seems deliberate, as the portrait contains many references to the Habsburgs and to Ferdinand's status. Ferdinand appears inside an illusionistic frame of garlands tied together with red-white-white ribbons, the colors of the House of Austria. He is wearing a chain with the Golden Fleece, the emblem of the chivalric order that the Habsburgs inherited from the Burgundians and adopted as their House order in the sixteenth century. As second son of Emperor Ferdinand I (ruled 1556–64), and with the death of his older brother, Emperor Maximilian II (reigned 1564–76), the archduke became head of the order. Ferdinand holds a club in his hand, an allusion to the Habsburgs' identification with Hercules and Ferdinand's role as leader of imperial forces in wars fought against

the Turks in the 1550s. These events figured greatly in the creation of Ferdinand's self-image as a war hero: they appear, for example, in two reliefs carved by Alexander Colin on the archduke's tomb in the Silberne Kapelle (Silver Chapel) of the Hofkirche (Court Church) in Innsbruck.⁸⁰ In the painting, Ferdinand stands before a column that symbolizes fortitude, underscoring the virtue that it was claimed he had demonstrated in his feats of arms. The laurel wreath on his head is that of a victor. The mountainous landscape in the background likely refers to the Tyrol, over which Ferdinand ruled, along with Vorderösterreich (Austrian Forelands west of the present Republic), from 1564 onward. Three years later, Ferdinand began to reside in Innsbruck, the capital of the Tyrol, where this picture was most likely painted. It has also been suggested that the juxtaposition of columnar framing with floral garland is apposite to Ferdinand's interest in both art and nature as a universal collector.⁸¹

The frontispiece of *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance* was moreover not the first portrait of Archduke Ferdinand that Schlosser illustrated. The publication of a portrait of Ferdinand in a significant place in an earlier book further illuminates the important role Schlosser granted to the Habsburgs in the history of the collections. Schlosser used a small portrait of the archduke in wax (fig. 6), now attributed to Francesco Segala, as the frontispiece for the album mentioned above that was published in 1901 to illustrate the *Sammlung für Plastik und Kunstindustriellen Gegenständen*, of which he had just been named director.⁸² (Schlosser used the same picture again in *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance*, as figure 63.)⁸³ Schlosser may have mulled over this wax portrait for a decade, during the years when he was probably thinking about issues presented in *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaissance*. In 1910, two years after the appearance of his book on collecting, he published an important lengthy essay on wax portraiture.⁸⁴

The wax portrait of the archduke presents even clearer references to the House of Austria and to Ferdinand's status. The version of the Order of the Golden Fleece Ferdinand is shown wearing is more noticeable because it contains more than the medal of the fleece depicted in the painting: it includes the full chain of the order, which consists of striking irons interspersed with bursts of flame. The soft crown of an archduke, a symbol of their estate worn only by members of the House of Habsburg, lies on a table to his right. The helmet behind it bears red and white plumes, the colors of the House of Austria. Ferdinand is holding a baton or staff of command, which again is red and white. The cloth of honor before which he stands is green, the color of the Tyrol, over which he ruled. His armor bears a cross, a sign of his self-image as crusader.

A laurel crown like that seen in the painted portrait was likewise given to poets, a reference to Ferdinand's support of the arts. Ferdinand is better known as a collector than as a warrior. When he moved to Innsbruck, Ferdinand had Schloss Ambras adapted both as a residence for his morganatic spouse Philippine Welser and to house and display his collections. He built an entire building at Ambras for the latter purpose, where he had his library and *Kunstkammer* placed. This was one of the first edifices built in post-medieval Europe explicitly to house collections; previously, spaces in already existing buildings were used for this purpose. In the case of new

Fig. 68.
Title page of Tobias
Beutel's *Cedretum* (1671).

The Elector of Saxony's ever-green forest of high cedars on the vale of green checkerboard, or:
a brief introduction to the high regalia of the Elector of Saxony /

namely:

The outstanding Kunstammer and other extremely valuable and incomparably important things belonging to the Serene Elector here at the Residence in Dresden, In indebted gratitude to God for the benefactions and treasures bestowed on the Serene House of the Electors of Saxony

and

Humbly dedicated to my most gracious lord the Serene Elector of Saxony / and in the service of noble travelers from home and abroad. All briefly described in the Latin and German languages / and placed in the *Arboretum mathematicum* under the protection of the ever most gracious and most graciously attained imperial and electoral privileges /

by
Tobias Beutel, Art Chamberlain to the Supreme Elector of Saxony.

Printed in Dresden by the heirs of the Berg family in the year 1671



From 1834 the Kunstammer was called the Königliches Historisches Museum, but in official parlance the individual sections are still referred to as the armory and the Kunstammer, their departmental titles. The collections isolated at the beginning of the eighteenth century still exist in Dresden even now: the Königlicher Mathematisch-Physikalischer Salon, the famous Grünes Gewölbe, the Gewehr-Galerie, and the Mineralien-Kabinet, though the latter has also modernized its title somewhat.

The Berlin Kunstammer dates back to the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁶² With some modifications it too survived right up to recent times and was only completely disbanded in 1875. Then we should at least mention the collection at Schloss Salzdahlum, which forms the foundation of the present ducal museum at



Fig. 69.
Frontispiece from the
Gottorffische Kunst-Kammer (1674).
Gottorp Kunstammer.
Schleswig, at the Gottfried
Schulze bookshop.
1674
H. von Hensberg. Printed
at Hamburg.

Brunswick,⁶³ as well as the Kunst- und Naturalienkabinett at Kassel, described by Valentini (*Museum Museorium* II, 14) and owned by the Landgraves of Hessen. The ducal Gottorp Kunstammer also enjoyed a certain regard. It was founded by Duke Friedrich of Schleswig-Holstein and installed in 1651 by his court antiquarian, the well-traveled Adam Olearius from Holland, who published a detailed description of the collection under the title *Gottorffische Kunst-Kammer* (Gottorp Kunstammer), a second edition of which appeared in Schleswig in 1674 (fig. 69). For the most part it contains details of the ethnographic and natural rarities collected by the physician Paludanus at Enkhuysen on his travels through the Orient: costumes, implements, foreign idols from Egypt to China, and so on. At this point it is little wonder that attention was also turned to *Nordic* antiquities and curiosities. Thus