From Marvels to Curiosity

Christian Besson
Translator: Simon Pleasance
At the 42nd Venice Biennale (1986), Adalgisa Lugli organized a contemporary art exhibition titled Wunderkammer. Jean-Hubert Martin, for his part, chose the title Curios and Mirabilia for the first presentation of the Château d’Oiron commissions programme. French normally uses the term cabinet de curiosités where German says Wunderkammer, Italian camera di meraviglie, and English “cabinet of curiosities”. In his study of 17th century French collections (Paris: Flammarion, 1988), Antoine Schnapper notes in ironic mode that Julius von Schlosser’s “stimulating” book Die Kunst- and Wunderkammern des Spätrenaissance (Leipzig, 1908) is “very in vogue in our day and age”. “There is even talk of a translation of Schlosser”, he observes in a note, as if such a thing were a thoroughly superfluous idea. He deems, in passing, that the French term says the same thing as the German expression. This is a view not shared by Patricia Falguières, for whom “chambres de merveilles [chambers of marvels] do not have to do with a history of taste. Any more than they are not to be confused with cabinets de curiosités which appeared when the former were on the wane, in the 17th century, and were enriched by the spoils thereof.” Which is tantamount to roundly distinguishing one’s object from that dealt with in the studies of Pomian, Schnapper and Bredekamp. Like the late A. Lugli, to whom we owe the noteworthy volume Naturalia et Mirabilia (Milan, 1983; French translation 1, 1998), P. Falguières is also interested in contemporary art2, and the first two chapters of her book
borrow from her contribution to the catalogue of the Feux pâles show, organized by Philippe Thomas (Bordeaux: capcMusée, 1990).

2 It is undeniable that the fortune of the Wunderkammern and other such cabinets is due to the re-reading of them from the angle of present-day artistic problem-sets. A. Lugli was interested in object and material, and included in her exhibition quite a few Arte Povera figures. In her 1983 book, she devoted a chapter to André Breton’s cabinet and likened the object in the chambre des merveilles with the readymade. It is also worth noting that translations and re-issues of Schlosser did not appear until the 1970s, that is, at the same time as those artist’s museums which were then thriving, from Oldenburg to Spoerri by way of Broodthaers, Distel and others.

3 P. Falguières takes up A. Lugli’s idea of a close link between the Wunderkammer and the art of memory, based on the work of the quintessential Frances Yates. She also stresses the notion of topic, place, otherwise put, a form of thinking which is that of the rhetorical tradition. In this respect, A. Lugli—who is never quoted—had already made some most cogent observations about the box-shaped scheme governing the spatial organization of such collections. Chapter IV, which develops the links between topic, legal thinking and princely power, is the most ground-breaking. Collections as “glorious corpuses of the monarch” remained perforce hidden, non-public, and ushered in a “new system of princely visibility”.

4 Unlike other historians such as Müntz who, in 1888, no longer understood the Medicis’ inventories, and duly excluded from them everything that was not art, Schlosser, who, from 1901 to 1922, was curator at the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna, nurtured no prejudice either against the lesser arts (he ended up with Aloïs Riegl’s chair) or against the bric-à-brac of collections, which seemed to hail from the prehistory of museums. Schlosser’s study found its place among others in the genre on the history of museography, but the archaeology which he formulated on the basis of the collections of archduke Ferdinand of Tyro in Ambras castle, those of Rudolf II of Prague, those of the dukes of Bavaria in Munich, and those of the prince elector of Saxony (not to mention the Habsburgs’ imperial treasure in Vienna, the cabinet in the Residence of Dresden, the ducal collection of Gottorf castle, and so on) did not tally with a vision of the Bildung of the German nation, associated with a monumental conception of art history which made the museum the place of beauty. By taking the mannerist period seriously, he, along with other historians, helped to undo the myth of the Renaissance as Burkhardt had monumentalized it. Whence, probably, the fact that this text had to wait until 1974 for an Italian translation, and then until 1978 for a re-issue in its original language to appear. P. Falguières, who uses an excerpt from Marcel Mauss on fetishism as the opening gambit for her essay, and lets Freud glide between the lines throughout, quite rightly pinpoints the sense of Unheimlichkeit in Schlosser. In his predilection for the “infantilism” of the Wunderkammer, he links up with the Dionysism of Aby Warburg, his contemporary. He had a hunch about the spectral nature of the objects collected...

5 Mauss’s expression, Le Douaire magique or “Magic Dower”, was first used as the title for this essay, originally conceived as an introduction to Schlosser’s book, whose publication was announced back in 1996. We have the re-titled essay Les Chambres des merveilles (with one or two addenda, and without a chapter on Gottfried Semper), but we are still awaiting the publication of Schlosser’s seminal work (to be published by Macula) as well as P. Falguières’ thesis (Aux origines de l’institution muséographique, les collections encyclopédiques et les cabinets des merveilles dans l’Italie du XVIe siècle, Paris, 1988) announced back in 1992
(to be published by Gallimard). In the meantime we may read Schlosser’s four later essays on famous objects. The compilation edited by Nadine Gomez to mark the re-opening of the Municipal Museum in Digne, renamed the Gassendi Museum, flaunts the term “curiosity”, in accordance with the past of a “mixed” museum, more oriented towards the “lesson of things”, i.e. didacticism, than the marvel (here, P. Falguières reminds us how alien Schlosser was to the educational function of the museum). In conjunction with the geological stocks of Haute Provence, the museum has been inviting artists since 1994. This year, Mark Dion follows in Hubert Duprat’s footsteps, with a most successful catalogue. The activities of artists on this theme is possibly a chance to take museography well away from political alibis. It is noteworthy that the woman whose brainchild Nouvelles Curiosités is takes a back seat among the alphabetic list of authors (the absence of any biographical notes is a pity), and that the powers-that-be, the mayor, and the chairman of the general council merely put their name to a postface–all credit to them for such discretion. Krzysztof Pomian situates the curiosity in the interregnum between religion and science. Anthony Turner retraces the history of the Digne museum. Stephen Bann comments upon the works of the invited artists, and Fabien Faure discusses the museum’s open air programme on the Promenade Saint-Benoît.

NOTES

3. Von Schlosser, Julius. Objets de curiosité, translated from the German and introduced by Bénédicte Savoy, Paris : Le Promeneur, 2002