



Cabinet of Treasures, or Treasured Cabinet?

Notes from Ghenete Zelleke's lecture on Thursday, April 25, 2019

Join Ghenete Zelleke as she unlocks doors, opens drawers, and explores secret compartments of a magnificent marquetry cabinet made in Augsburg, Germany, in about 1560. Once it held a treasury of costly and prized objects; today, its value lies in its dazzling surfaces and impressive scale that proclaim the wealth and sophistication of its former owner and the talent of its maker.

Ghenete Zelleke is Mia's James Ford Bell Curator of Decorative Arts & Sculpture and head of the Department of Decorative Arts, Textiles & Sculpture.

Table cabinet, c. 1560-1570 G340

Unknown artist, Germany 2018.15a-x

Oak and pine veneered with partly stained and ebonized maple, plum, ash, with etched, blued, and parcel gilt iron fittings

The John R. Van Derlip Fund, the John and Ruth Huss Fund for Decorative Arts, and the Walter C. and Mary C. Briggs Trust Fund

Dimensions: 26 5/8 × 38 7/8 × 16 7/16 in. (67.63 × 98.74 × 41.75 cm) (closed)

Label Copy:

Elaborately veneered cabinets were a specialty of 16th and 17th century German cabinetmakers. Those made in Augsburg—a city of wealth and sophistication—were the most sumptuous for the materials used and the scale and complexity of decoration. Every surface of this cabinet is veneered with varieties of wood cut and pieced together in the manner of a puzzle. Their subjects are based on imagery taken from 16th century engravings and include armored figures in close combat, slaying mythical creatures—including a unicorn and a dragon—and hunting wild animals, each set against a dense ground of scrolling strapwork and foliage inhabited by fruit, flowers, military trophies and birds and other creatures.

From Ghenete's lecture:

Mia's table cabinet is the finest table cabinet in the country, much better quality than the examples in the Met's collection or the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, or the ivory and ebony table cabinet in the Art Institute of Chicago.

Ghenete first saw Mia's table cabinet at the 2017 European Fine Art Fair held in Maastricht, the Netherlands, one of the leading art events in the world, which encompasses the fine arts, antiques, and design. Over 10 days, curators, colleagues, connoisseurs, and collectors assemble to view an abundance of museum-worthy art showcased by European dealers.

Ghenete remarked that when she first laid eyes on this table cabinet, the hairs on her arm stood up, and her heart raced! **SHE HAD TO HAVE IT!** She listens to her instincts and physical reactions first, and then learns about the history and documentation second. This piece does not have a verifiable provenance, having been in a private French collection prior to the sale to Mia. The dealer agreed to hold onto the cabinet without showing it to anyone else for a full year until Mia's financing was in place, primarily due to Ghenete's and Kaywin's relationship with him which extended back 25 and 20 years, respectively.

Cabinet created in Augsburg, an extremely wealthy town in southeastern Germany, in the mid-16th century. The finest craftsmen in Europe from the mid-1500s through the 1600s worked in Augsburg -- metalsmiths, gold- and silversmiths, armorers, and woodworkers. Town was filled with many strict guilds where artists studied and trained as apprentices and journeymen for many years before creating a "master" piece for acceptance into the guild. Artisans were very specialized in their fields, but there was also collaboration among them. They could ask other craftsmen for help in creating their art -- i.e. cabinet makers asked metalsmiths to create hinges and locks, textile workers lined drawers, etc.

Extraordinarily skilled cabinet makers in Augsburg specialized in marquetry. **Marquetry** is the art of creating intricate pictures and elaborate designs on furniture by skillfully cutting and fitting together thin pieces of domestic and exotic woods, horn, ivory, metal, shell, and other precious materials. Marquetry is called "painting in wood." Skilled craftsmen could use the grains of the wood to create pictures and scenes. By using fret saws, they could cut through layers of wood, almost like shaving. It was a refined and precise process, much like German engineering today (hat tip to David Fortney for this analogy)!

Many different skill sets involved with the creation of the cabinet -- a true division of labor. Required someone to design the pattern, cut the wood along the lines of the design, someone to treat the wood, someone to dunk wood pieces in hot sand, others to fit it together in a symmetrical ornamentation. Metalsmiths were needed to create the locks, hinges, and handles. Steel and gilded brass ornamentation were techniques perfected by armorers in Augsburg. The perfection of the metal mounts is as fine as the marquetry on this cabinet.

Hot Sand: wood pieces dipped in hot sand would darken and give a sense of three-dimensionality; it appears as gradual shading from lighter to darker on the individual pieces of wood. Artist would have to know how long to hold the wood piece in the sand to achieve the desired shade.

Ghenete showed a video of the changing colors/shades of the grains of the wood as you walked from one side of the cabinet to the other. It is based on perspective as you walk past the front doors. Focus on the white horse on the outside left door panel, and the horse will darken as you walk past. (Exciting optical illusion to share with visitors.)

There are no pigments or stains added to the cabinet -- it is all contrasting grains of wood. **Green color** is actually a fungus or bacteria that grows on certain woods. It is resistant to light and does not fade. Stains added to wood will fade over time; the green wood with the fungus is just as bright today as the day the cabinet was assembled. (Look for the frogs on either side of the cabinet -- their green spots are amazing!)

The grains of different colored woods create a "marbled" effect on the frames of the pictorial scenes on the interior doors. Little putti with wings are found in the triangular cornerpieces of these frames. The meticulous attention to detail is truly amazing!

We do not know who the original owner of the cabinet was. Typically there would be a unified iconography that would point to a particular owner, but there is no coat of arms or any other identifying mark that would solve that mystery.

Most figures on the cabinet reflect military prowess -- Roman warriors and foot soldiers engaged in battle with other men and with both real and mythical animals. We see a bear, boar, and monkey, but also a dragon, a unicorn, and a griffin (mythological beast with the head and wings of an eagle and the body of a lion).

On the interior front door panel of the cabinet are two depictions of Roman warriors who sacrificed their lives to defend Rome. (Information about legends from Wikipedia.)

On the left is **Marcus Curtius**, a mythological young Roman who sacrificed his life by jumping on horseback into a fiery pit in Rome. The hole closed behind him and Rome was saved. On the right interior front door panel is **Horatius Cocles**, an officer in the army of the early Roman Republic who famously defended the Pons Sublicius (bridge) from an invading Etruscan army in the late 6th century BC. By defending the narrow end of the bridge, Cocles -- along with two other officers -- was able to hold off the attacking army long enough to allow the other Roman soldiers to cross and subsequently destroy the bridge behind him, blocking the Etruscans' advance and saving the city. Although this plan seemed suicidal, Cocles did in fact survive when he leapt fully armed into the Tiber River and swam to safety on the Roman side.

Story of Marcus Curtius: after an earthquake in 362 BC, a huge deep pit suddenly opened in the Roman Forum, which the Romans attempted to fill in vain. Despairing, they consulted an augur who responded that the gods demanded the most precious possession of the country. The Romans doubted the warning, and struggled to think of what that was. However, a young soldier named Marcus Curtius castigated them and responded that arms and the courage of Romans were the nation's most precious possessions. Astride his horse, fully and meticulously armed and decorated, Marcus rode and leapt into the chasm. Immediately, the deep pit closed over him, saving Rome.

*The story of Marcus Curtius, sacrificing himself for the cause of the commonwealth, became a well known theme during the Renaissance. The story of Horatius at the Bridge also began to be depicted in art during the Renaissance, but was never an especially popular theme.

Every surface of the cabinet is covered with beautifully designed scenes and geometric patterns, fitted so closely together that you can barely see lines between them. Ghenete calls it "an embarrassment of riches." The more geometric decoration of the back and top appears restrained in comparison to the pictorial depictions on the front. The patterns on the back panel remind her of the shimmering effects of watered silk. There are beautiful handles on each side, emphasizing its portability. This cabinet was meant to be seen from all sides, not pushed up against a wall. It is a showpiece, indicating wealth,

sophistication, and taste.

The two exterior doors open to reveal twelve smaller drawers, and two more interior doors, all decorated with scenes of warriors fighting each other and the real and imagined animals. The four top panels are decorative to account for the shallow top compartment under the lid, which appears to be about four inches deep. Behind the two smaller interior doors are two recesses for holding objects too large for the drawers. If you remove the wooden shell or lining from the right compartment, and feel around the back outer corner of the unfinished wood, there is a secret compartment that reveals four small drawers that pull out sideways from the niche. They were empty when Ghenete discovered them. She said these drawers are unlined, and they smell so good!

*Ghenete has a short video disclosing the secret compartments, but currently there is no source of electricity to have an iPad set up nearby to reveal the secrets of the chest. They are trying to figure the technology out.

These cabinets typically contained natural curiosities from around the world, like coral and nautilus shells, some embellished by man with gold and silver -- treasures that together would form an encyclopedia of the world. A cabinet can be a room filled with curiosities (kunstkammer) or a table cabinet like ours filled with precious and semiprecious objects.

Ghenete plans to create Mia's own Cabinet of Curiosities in a recessed nook between the Baroque gallery G330 and G313 later this year.