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**MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON, DEBUTS NEW KUNSTKAMMER GALLERY,
A “CURIOSITY CABINET” OF PRECIOUS WONDERS**

**New Space Dedicated to European Treasures from the 16th and 17th Centuries Features
Works of Art and Works of Nature**



Diana and Stag Automaton
About 1610–20, Joachim Fries

BOSTON, MA (May 12, 2014)—The new [Kunstkammer Gallery](#) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), is an intimate space presenting finely wrought treasures, ranging from small-scale sculptures to miniature Renaissance portraits. The German word “Kunstkammer” (translated as “art room”) refers to the cabinets, or small rooms, which came into fashion across Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. Typically containing a combination of man-made and natural wonders, these princely troves featured exquisitely crafted objects made of exotic and precious materials. Opening on June 4, the Kunstkammer Gallery presents the Museum’s first opportunity to explore the masterpieces that were acquired by some of the era’s most passionate collectors, displaying 123 exceptional works. Notable for the variety of materials on view—including coconut shell, ostrich egg, coral, mother of pearl, rock crystal and more—the treasure box gallery includes many objects that have not been displayed in decades. A selection of works from the William Arnold Buffum Collection of amber is on view for the first time since the 1930s, after being recently conserved. Boasting a superior range of intricate objects, the new gallery also features iPads with videos and

interactive programs that encourage closer examination of two masterworks: a self-propelled “automaton” (wind-up or mechanical device) and a double cup with a detailed map of the globe. Set on the first floor of the Museum’s European Wing, the Kunstkammer Gallery opens on the same day as the renovated Sidney and Esther Rabb Gallery of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism in France. *The renovation of the Kunstkammer Gallery was supported in part by Achim Neuse and Volker Wurster.*

Conceived as a microcosm of the world, a *Kunstkammer*, or “cabinet of curiosities,” was intended to impress guests with the owner’s command of art and nature—and collecting prowess. In addition to objects made of exotic materials such as amber, ivory and nautilus shell, as well as paintings on copper and alabaster, the gallery features functional metalwork, such as clocks, in addition to medals, plaques and small sculptures in a variety of materials (silver, gold, bronze, porcelain and enamel). Monumental masterpieces of furniture on loan from private collections anchor the installation, including a Roman table top from the 16th century—inlaid with brightly colored marble—and a pair of cabinets veneered with tortoise shell and mounted with coral, silver and *pietre dure* (“hard stone”) panels.

“The *Kunstkammer* Gallery is a unique space containing a treasure trove of European decorative art. It is also a surprising reminder that drinking games and passionate collecting aren’t just modern fascinations—they’ve been delighting chic and enlightened party goers for centuries!” said Malcolm Rogers, Ann and Graham Gund Director at the MFA. “The *Kunstkammer* Gallery is part of our larger goal to refurbish galleries for European art throughout the Evans Wing, and we are grateful to our generous lenders and donors for making this sumptuous display possible.”

Cabinets for storing the types of small, precious objects on view in the gallery were a specialty of cabinetmakers in the south German city of Augsburg. A portable [Table Cabinet](#) (Germany (Augsburg), about 1580–1600), decorated with extraordinary marquetry designs (thin slices of wood cut into interlocking shapes and adhered to a wooden surface), displays a number of the gallery’s most diminutive works—including Sofonisba Anguissola’s smallest known [Self-Portrait](#) (about 1556), which measures 3 1/4 by 2 1/2 inches. Praised by her contemporaries as the foremost woman painter of her day, this miniature displays the artist’s meticulous technique and a Renaissance taste for puzzles: the interwoven letters at the center of the medallion form a cryptogram. The assembly of letters is likely a reference to her artistic ancestry and nobility. The work is set on the front panel of the cabinet, which opens to reveal compartments for storing bronze statuettes, cameos, exotic shells and other objects that were highly prized by collectors.



Table Cabinet, about 1580–1600

“Curiosity cabinets were precursors of modern art museums. Many of the objects in this new gallery have not been seen in years, and others are shown here for the first time” said Thomas Michie, Russell B. and Andrée Beauchamp Stearns Senior Curator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture, Art of Europe, at the MFA. “Over the past year, we have cleaned and conserved all 123 objects, and the results are spectacular—as visually stunning as these cabinets must have been in the 16th and 17th centuries.”

Elaborate silver automata were among the most marvelous works in collections of the era—a specialty of goldsmiths from Germany. A stunning example is the [Diana and Stag Automaton](#) (about 1610-20, Joachim Fries), which was part of a courtly drinking game, or “*Trinkspiel*.” Diana, goddess of the hunt, sits astride a magnificent golden stag and holds the leashes of two hunting dogs. The heads of both the stag and the largest hunting dog come off, and each can be filled with wine. Propelled by an internal wind-up motor, the automaton would zig and zag across a banquet table, and when she came to rest in front of a gentleman, he lifted the stag off the base, removed its head, and drained it dry. If it stopped in front of a lady, she did the same with the dog. The work arrived at the MFA with the mechanism corroded and defunct. Museum curators and conservators have worked with a German watchmaker (who conserved the work in the 1980s) to create a modern replica of its internal mechanism. Rebuilt in Germany, the mechanism travels to Boston with the watchmaker in May, when it will be installed in the MFA’s *Diana* in order to make the automaton move again. The project will be filmed for an interactive display in the gallery, where visitors can get a once-in-a-lifetime view of the *Diana and the Stag Automaton* moving again, after standing still for 200 years.

At the center of the room stands one of the gallery’s most distinctive pieces. An imposing *Table top (commesso)* (Rome, last quarter of the 16th century), made of inlaid hard stone, displays how connoisseurs of the era prided themselves on their familiarity with different kinds of marble. More than a dozen varieties—some excavated from Roman ruins during the Renaissance—combine to create intricate inlaid designs. The base is modern, designed to recall the type of stone supports made at the time in either Italy or England.

A number of special displays in the gallery highlight themes such as “Art and Nature” (ostrich eggs, nautilus shells, Chinese porcelain and other rarities transformed into functional forms, such as cups and ewers) and “Arts of Fire” (works in bronze, glass, ceramics and enamels). A selection of amber (fossilized tree resin) from the Buffum Collection is also on view. When heated, amber becomes soft and flexible, making it possible to manipulate and polish. This mutability added to its fascination for artists, who transformed the natural material into a wide variety of shapes and objects, including a statuette of *The Virgin* (Germany, 17th century), snuff boxes, a *Reliquary* (Possibly Italy, 16th century) and a [Game board and a set of chess pieces](#) (The Baltic or Poland (Danzig), late 17th or early 18th

centuries). In a display dedicated to “The Renaissance in France,” an earthenware *Oval dish* (about 1570–85, attributed to Bernard Palissy) features astonishingly realistic casts of a snake, fish, frogs, crayfish and leaves. Further blurring the line between art and nature, water may have been poured into the dish when placed on a table, transforming it into a representation of a marsh or riverbed teeming with aquatic life.



Oval dish, Bernard Palissy, about 1570–85

Many works on view highlight expert European craftsmen of the era. A [Covered cup \(Globuspokal\)](#) (about 1580–90, Attributed to: Abraham Gessner) from Zurich depicts an early map of the world and can be separated into two silver goblets for a toast on special occasions. A masterpiece of both Renaissance goldsmith's work and cartography, the engraving of the globe is based on the 1578 edition of Abraham Ortelius' *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (*Theater of the World*), which is considered to be the first commercial atlas. Other extraordinary works in the gallery include items such as a superb bronze casting of a nude statuette personifying *Architecture* (about 1600, Giambologna); *Ostrich egg ewer* (English (London), about 1675); *Nautilus Beaker* (Dutch (The Hague), 1659); and two paintings on alabaster by Antonio Tempesta (1555–1630). All display the incredible range of virtuoso art being made for Kunstammer collections across Europe.

The renovation of the Sidney and Esther Rabb Gallery was made possible with support from the Vance Wall Foundation.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), is recognized for the quality and scope of its collection, which includes an estimated 500,000 objects. The Museum has more than 140 galleries displaying its encyclopedic collection, which includes Art of the Americas; Art of Europe; Contemporary Art; Art of Asia, Oceania, and Africa; Art of the Ancient World; Prints, Drawings, and Photographs; Textile and Fashion Arts; and Musical Instruments. Open seven days a week, the MFA's hours are Saturday through Tuesday, 10 am–4:45 pm; and Wednesday through Friday, 10 am–9:45 pm Admission (which includes one repeat visit within 10 days) is \$25 for adults and \$23 for seniors and students age 18 and older, and includes entry to all galleries and special exhibitions. Admission is free for University Members and youths age 17 and younger on weekdays after 3 pm, weekends, and Boston Public Schools holidays; otherwise \$10. Wednesday nights after 4 pm admission is by voluntary contribution (suggested donation \$25). MFA Members are always admitted for free. The Museum's mobile MFA Guide is available at ticket desks and the Sharf Visitor Center for \$5, members; \$6, non-members; and \$4, youths. The Museum is closed on New Year's Day, Patriots' Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. For more information, visit mfa.org or call 617.267.9300. The MFA is located on the Avenue of the Arts at 465 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115.

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