

EXHIBITS

The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, MD



Jan Brueghel the Elder and Adriaen Stalbert, "The Archduke Albert and the Archduchess Isabella in a Collector's Cabinet," c.1620.

'A Collector's Cabinet': Exploring Both the Cosmos and the Soul

An exhibit on display at the Washington, D.C. National Gallery of Art May 17-Nov. 1, creates a fine tension between a celebration of the arts and sciences, including music, botany, zoology, astronomy, optics and more, in Seventeenth-century Holland and Flanders, on the one hand, and an elegant form of conspicuous consumption on the part of the newly rich Dutch burghers, on the other. The art objects, scientific and musical instruments, books, and other items found in the collections of the new bourgeoisie, were made possible by the ocean-going voyages and explorations of new worlds during the period. Thus, there are included all sorts of wonderful exotica,

from beautiful seashells, to representations of strange and delightful flora and fauna.

The exhibit recreates a Dutch "collector's cabinet," or *kunstkamer*, an intimately scaled room for displaying the private collection of the *liefhebber*, or art-lover. As the exhibit catalogue says, "the *liefhebbers* strove to assemble in microcosm all that existed in the cosmos." Unlike the grand palaces and estates of the upper aristocracy, these merchants and other middle-class collectors were unable to provide the setting for large works of art, and so their collections sought smaller items to display.

A painting by Jan Brueghel the Elder

(Flemish, 1568-1625) presents a *kunstkamer* of the period, the walls covered with paintings, musical instruments, a globe and other scientific instruments signifying voyages to the far-flung reaches of the empire, shells from the beaches of the new world, porcelains from China, flowers from Holland's prolific gardens, and every manner of sumptuous bric-a-brac [SEE detail, inside back cover, this issue].

Circulating among these treasures are elegantly attired members of the *haute bourgeoisie*, engaged in refined conversation. At the center of the painting are portraits of the guest of honor, Archduke Albert and the Archduchess Isabella, regents of the southern Nether-

lands. The painting is not so much a work of art, as a kind of “slice of life”; it is a window into a time when man’s mastery over the physical universe was taking a giant leap forward. This was the Golden Age of Holland; it was the age of Kepler and Leibniz, and, in The Netherlands, of Huyghens, Rembrandt, and Vermeer. The Renaissance had moved north to Germany and the Low Countries, and Antwerp and Amsterdam, under Venetian financial tutelage, had become the leading trading centers of the world. All the treasures of the Americas and the Orient now passed through their markets.

Portraying the ‘Inner Life’

The northern provinces, under William the Silent, had broken away from Hapsburg Spain in 1581, but it was not until 1648, when the Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years War, that the independence of the United Provinces, today known as The Netherlands, was formally recognized. Two of Holland’s greatest painters, Rembrandt van Rijn (1609-1669) and Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), lived and worked during this period, and both are represented in “A Collector’s Cabinet.”

Both Rembrandt and Vermeer, while employing in their works many of the outward manifestations of Holland’s wealth and cosmopolitan manners, were primarily concerned with man’s “inner” life: the life of the mind and of the soul. In Vermeer’s “Woman Holding a Balance,” painted in 1664, Vermeer shows us a young woman, apparently pregnant, holding the kind of balance used by goldsmiths to weigh precious metals and gems, such as those strewn on the table before her. She has a thoughtful and serene expression on her face, indicating that she is fairly

confident as she takes the “measure” of her life. As we examine more closely, we can make out on the wall behind the woman’s head, a painting depicting the “Last Judgement,” which reinforces the idea that this is, indeed, a kind of “Vanitas” painting—a popular genre intended to remind us of our own mortality. Although the question of whether or not the young woman will soon bear a child is left ambiguous, I believe Vermeer has meant her “pregnancy” to be read as a metaphor for posterity. It is another way to remind us that what we do today, will have consequences in the future for generations yet unborn.

Both Vermeer and Rembrandt actively collaborated in the scientific circles of their day. Vermeer is believed to have worked with his fellow Delft citizen Anthony Van Leeuwenhoek, the renowned microscopist, and Rembrandt may likely have collaborated with the mathematician and physicist Christiaan Huyghens, who also did important work in optics. In the National Gallery

exhibit, we find several examples of optical instruments, including both microscopes and telescopes.

A more direct reminder of the ephemeral nature of physical existence are the “Vanitas” paintings, which typically incorporate a human skull, a standard Renaissance invention for man’s mortality. In this genre we find such works as the “Vanitas Still Life,” c.1665, of Jan van Kessel the Elder—who also painted the “Study of Butterflies and Insects” shown on the inside back cover of this issue—in which the customary human skull is posed in a still-life with an hourglass, soap bubbles, and gorgeous red roses—all perfect metaphors for the fleeting nature of physical existence.

Another way of presenting this idea, was through humor—the “political cartoons,” or jokes, in the form of paintings, etchings, and so forth, of the time. These often depicted common people engaging in popular entertainments, such as drinking and gambling, and

usually looking very foolish. One artist who specialized in these paintings, and whose works were often found among the collections of Dutch and Flemish art lovers, was Adriaen Brouwer (c.1605-1638), represented in the exhibit by his hilarious “Youth Making a Face.” Despite the seemingly light-hearted subjects, these pictures were intended as ironic reminders of what happens to those who succumb to sensual pleasures.

Music and Science

Among the most interesting and beautifully crafted objects displayed, are the scientific and musical instruments. These include an armillary sphere—a schematic model of the celestial sphere, which demonstrated, according



National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

Johannes Vermeer, “Woman Holding a Balance,” c.1664.



Jan van Kessel the Elder,
"Vanitas Still Life," c.1665.

unknown Dutch craftsman; it is made of cardboard, covered with vellum with gold stampings, on a pearwood base [SEE inside back cover, this issue]. According to art historian Arthur K. Wheelock, the church fathers of Delft celebrated the discovery by the famous microscope-maker Anthony Van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723) of tiny living organisms, as contributing to the "honor of God," because they helped to reveal the fullness of His "eternal power."

The Dutch interest in the natural world extended to a love of precise renderings of insects, plants, small animals,

and so forth, which is apparent in the van Kessel "Study of Butterflies and Insects," as well as in other still-life paintings included in National Gallery exhibit, for example, the "Still Life of Shells," painted by Jacques Linnard in 1640.

In the Seventeenth century, music and science were known to be closely

to the Ptolemaic system, the motion of the Sun, Moon, planets, and stars, about the Earth. These finely wrought objects had, by Kepler's time, become scientifically obsolete, but they were treasured as reminders that the study of the heavens also implied spiritual concerns as well.

This particular armillary sphere was the creation of Caspar Vopell of Cologne, Germany, who built it in 1543. The small globe at the center shows Asia and North America as one landmass, some fifty years after Columbus's first voyage to America [SEE inside back cover, this issue].

There is also a telescope, beautifully designed and decorated around 1700 by Leonardo Sematicolo, probably for a wealthy amateur.

Moving from cosmic to microscopic realms, we find a compound monocular microscope built around 1686 by an



Jacques Linnard, "Still Life of Shells," 1640.

related disciplines: Kepler's *Harmony of the World* (1609), for example, derived the relative distances of the planetary orbits in the Solar System, from the intervals of the well-tempered musical scale. While public musical performances were frowned on by Calvinist officialdom, music played an important role in the home, where amateur ensembles would play and sing both religious and secular music. Among the exquisite musical instruments on exhibit are an Octave Spinet, which would have been used on such occasions, and an Italian viola made in 1678 by the renowned Tyrolean violin maker, Jacob Stainer (1621-1683). Among many accomplished musicians of the time was Constantijn Huyghens (1596-1687), secretary to the prince of Orange and father of the scientist Christiaan, who both played and wrote music. Huyghens was a collector as well, and owned lutes, viols, virginals (a small spinet popular at the time), harpsichords, and even guitars.

After the exhibit closes on November 1, the newly constructed Dutch Cabinet Galleries at the National Gallery will continue to display many of the works collected for "A Collector's Cabinet." Others may be seen in Washington's Smithsonian Institution, while many of

the musical instruments will return to the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Jan Brueghel the Elder's "Collector's Cabinet" is on permanent display at the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland. Visitors to any of these collections will have an opportunity to learn, first hand, why the world of Rembrandt and Vermeer was still an Age of Discovery.

—Bonnie James