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34. MUSEUMS & COLLECTIONS

The cabinet of curiosities, or Wunderkammer, was designed to facilitate an encyclopaedic enterprise, the aim of which was the collection and preservation of the whole of knowledge. The earliest encyclopaedic practices were set within a classical framework. Over time, however, they began to reveal new truths in conflict with the tenets of classical doctrine. The cabinet remained consistent in its role as a site of collection and display, where the whole of nature could be brought together in microcosm, for the benefit of closer

and more detailed analysis. Within the structural parameters of the cabinet space, the collector set out to comprehend nature through the control of its various parts. The control of nature was the goal of the early collecting practice, and was the driving force behind the ordering and cataloguing of objects and artefacts. Collectors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries devised strategies which included the systematic categorization of the objects in their possession. Regardless of their variations, the strategies adopted by early collectors

enabled them to impose an order on the natural world. Their ability to do this was considered a form of power, which, in turn, was held as a characteristic unique to mankind. In this context, the collecting and controlling of material objects was not an end in itself, but was an integral part of a continuing process of self-discovery; of the shaping of man's identity as part of the greater universe, yet distinct as cognitive among the other creatures of divine creation.