
Notes on the history of collecting and of museums

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Schulz's paper reflects on the early development of collections and on the history of collecting, with particular reference to the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, the period in which modernist approaches to knowledge and understanding crystallized and in which appropriate institutions developed, the modern museum among them. Four key texts – by Quiccheberg, Major, Valentini and Neikelius – dating from this time are chosen to shed light on the purpose of, and approach to, collecting as it was perceived during the period. The implications of this historic collecting practice shape many collections and museums in the modern world.

Since the sixteenth century, collections have been amassed with the aim of transmitting information by means of a systematic arrangement of objects.¹ The wish to perpetuate and to disseminate this information gave rise to a particular kind of publication. These museological tracts provide insights into the preoccupations of collectors from the sixteenth to eighteenth century, although they tend to contain only rather vague statements concerning the appearance and the function of the collections themselves.²

On the other hand, our knowledge of the materials which feature in such collections towards the end of the fifteenth century and more especially from the beginning of the sixteenth century is steadily becoming more concrete. Changing perceptions at this time had the consequence that the scholar emerged as a third leading power in society alongside the 'sacerdotium' and the 'regnum'. The scholar, who was not bound to any particular social class, needed a place in which he could pursue, without interruption, his intellectual occupation. His researches provided him with higher knowledge and wisdom, so that he was no longer a passive element in the godly plan, 'sondern Baumeister seiner Welt'.³

Having established the necessity of such a place, the question of its furnishing was considered. In this connection Pliny's *Historia naturalis* emerged, as it were, as a connecting thread. This song of praise for 'the mother of all objects' is an encyclopaedia of nature comprising thirty-six volumes and developed out of the author's wish to transmit his 'scientific strivings' to the reader. For reasons which will be discussed, it gains in importance for the history of collections during the succeeding centuries.

After the description of the world, of its movements and those of the planets, Pliny describes the place of man and nature in the macrocosm and their relationships with God's purposes. According to Pliny the aim of all human research is self-knowledge of human triviality in the face of the infinite power of nature which he represents by the word 'God'.⁴ Man can never fully understand nature, although, as a godly creation, it has been conceived solely for the benefit of man. This unique position, designated for