

“Dartmouth’s Wunderkammer” uses the Renaissance tradition of cabinets of curiosities—encyclopedic collections of one-of-a-kind objects ranging from art to natural history—as a framing device for an exhibition of objects from Rauner Library’s realia collection (realia can be simply defined as objects and material from everyday life). The items on view date from 1769 to 1985 and while many speak directly to important moments in Dartmouth’s history, such as the development of computer programming in Dartmouth Hall, others relate to wider historical events, such as the growing role of pharmaceuticals in modern twentieth-century life. Like the cabinets of curiosities from days of yore, the three-dimensional items on view in this exhibition vary in their origin and materiality and are meant to provoke the viewer to consider the less than obvious affinities that may exist between them. Visual representations of cabinets of curiosities from both the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries found in the Library’s rare book collection are also on display.

This exhibition is curated by Elena Cordova. It will be on display in the Class of 1965 Gallery through December 14, 2018.

Case One

Products of Renaissance humanism and princely courts of sixteenth century Northern Europe, *Wunderkammers*, or cabinets of curiosity, were diverse collections of naturalia, automata, art, and exotica, which were deemed by their collectors to be extraordinary or unusual in some way. Objects exhibited within these “cabinets”—which could range in size from small cases to large rooms—were typically valued for coming from diverse geographical regions around the globe, such as Japan and the Americas, or for their craftsmanship. Typical were ornate and intricately detailed objects such as chalices and chess sets, which might be constructed of gold or other precious metals; other highly-valued natural materials like ebony, ivory, or amber; and sometimes even relative rarities like coconut shell and rhinoceros horn.

In the earliest *Wunderkammers*, items were often displayed in ways that today might be seen as arbitrary—a skeleton of a blowfish paired with a silver tankard, for example. But this type of arrangement was not altogether random. Disparate objects would be juxtaposed in ways that were meant to stimulate intellectual inquisitiveness and provoke contemplation in the viewer. The *Wunderkammer* sought to reproduce the universe in miniature, and collectors and viewers both were meant to consider their own position vis-à-vis this ever-expanding universe of things. Although different objectives often determine the ways we catalog and exhibit material today, cabinets of curiosities are commonly understood as progenitors to the modern museum, and marked an important moment in the history of collecting and exhibiting the material world.

1. Museum Wormianum, Ole Worm, 1654-1655, [QH41 .W6 1655](#)

One of the best-known depictions of a *Wunderkammer* is found in the frontispiece of Ole Worm’s *Museum Wormnium*, published in 1654. A Danish physician, philosopher, linguist, and collector, Worm amassed a large collection of natural history specimens, scientific instruments, and ethnographic objects on his travels throughout Europe, with the hope that they would become objects of study by other scholars in his native Copenhagen. *Museum Wormnium* provides a comprehensive catalog of Worm’s inventory, while also featuring an

important innovation: the four-part taxonomy Worm imposed on his collection—divided between minerals, plants, animals, and “artificialia”—reflected a relatively modern methodological approach to the organization of knowledge.

2. *The Theater of Nature, or Curiosity Filled the Cabinet*, Angela Lorenz, 1999, [L876lot](#)

Angela Lorenz’s twentieth-century artist book was inspired by another famous cabinet of curiosity of Renaissance Europe, that belonging to Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605). Aldrovandi was the first natural history professor at the University of Bologna, the oldest university in the West. Lorenz’s *The Theater of Nature* is composed of eleven hand-drawn copper-plate etchings, which depict a cabinet of curiosities that recedes into space when held upright, and also includes a clever rhyming poem. Lorenz takes her inspiration a step further. In an homage to the types of objects collected in *Wunderkammers*, Lorenz wanted her book to physically reproduce the animal, plant, and mineral worlds. And so, in her *The Theater of Nature*, the book’s back cover and spine are made of vellum; the etchings are printed on cotton rag dyed with calendula flowers; and the book closes with a magnet.

The arrangement of items in the other two cases here were inspired by the tradition of the *Wunderkammer*. Varied in their provenance and materiality, most of the items here come from Rauner Library’s realia collection—a unique collection comprised predominately of three-dimensional objects, dating from 1769 to 1985, many of which were donated to the Library by prominent alumni or figures in the local community. In certain cases, the items were found among our paper-based archival and manuscript collections; while others remain of unknown origin. And while these objects may not be made of valuable materials like many of the items in the original *Wunderkammers*, they often provide similarly rich insights into what their makers or previous owners valued most.

Finally, the early *Wunderkammers* attempted to nudge viewers in the direction of unexpected insights through the seemingly—but only seemingly—arbitrary arrangement of objects. So too with the objects from the realia collection displayed here. Some speak explicitly to Dartmouth’s history; others do not. They span time and space, and enfold such wide-ranging cultural moments as the civil rights movement, the exploration of the Poles, and the development of modern computer programming.

What these objects share, beyond their current home at Rauner Library, is for the viewer to decide. But what they might have to tell us about Dartmouth and its connection to the world is just as limitless as that endlessly receding cabinet of curiosity in *The Theater of Nature*.

Case Two

1. Two oil lamps, Date Unknown

Hand oil lamps were some of the most common items of everyday life from ancient times through the medieval period, particularly in the Mediterranean and Mideast, where plant-based oils were in abundance. Handheld lamps were used in a variety of circumstances, including both household and ritualistic settings. They were often made of stone, clay,

shell, glass or metal. Clay lamps were the most common and often included a simple decorative motif; while metal oil lamps may have been cast in more intricate molds. Metal lamps, such as those made of bronze, were almost always used as a status symbol due to the expense of the material.

The provenance of the two lamps here remains unknown, though their shapes, materials, and decorations are suggestive of the Byzantine or early Islamic periods. If replicas, however they were likely picked up by a traveler on a “Grand Tour” in a bazaar in Eastern Europe or the Middle East. One lamp is made of clay and is decorated with a simple linear pattern around the circumference of the lamp, and the other is cast in bronze in the shape of a bull’s head and has a small ring for fingers. Each lamp has two holes, one for a fibrous wick and the other for the reservoir of oil.

2. Black Arm Band Worn by Faculty to Protest 16th Street Church Bombings and George Wallace’s Visit to Dartmouth, 1963

Alabama Governor and vocal segregationist George Wallace gave a speech at Dartmouth in 1963, entitled “Brown Vs. School Board and the Law of the Land,” in which he attempted to show that the Supreme Court’s landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 was “based on false testimony.” Twenty faculty members as well as numerous students protested Governor Wallace’s presence on campus that year. A second visit by Wallace, in 1967, drew much larger protests by students and brought the college into the national spotlight. Wallace’s 1967 speech in Webster Hall (now Rauner Library) was interrupted several times by student protests; then, while departing campus, Wallace’s car was encircled by hundreds of students.

3. Fraisse’s Ferruginous Ampoules, c.1920s

An advertisement from the 1920s describes Fraisse’s Ferruginous as used “to repair, tone up, and activate the nervous system.” An intramuscular injection manufactured in Paris, it was prescribed to treat anemia and neurasthenia, a common diagnosis for the symptoms of fatigue, headache, and irritability thought to be brought on by the experience of modern industrialized life.

Interestingly, Fraisse’s Ferruginous Ampoules, are also described in Samuel Beckett’s first published work of fiction, *More Pricks than Kicks* (1934)—a collection of short stories centered on the misfortunes of Belacqua Shua, a character who would reappear throughout Beckett’s writing. Describing the eventual deterioration of Belacqua’s body and mind in the book’s final story, Beckett writes:

“A little sealed cardboard box lying on the mantelpiece caught his eye. He read the inscription: Fraisse’s Ferruginous Ampoules for the Intensive Treatment of Anaemia by Intramuscular Squirtation. Registered trademark – Mozart. The little Hexenmeister of Don Giovanni, now in his narrow cell forever mislaid, dragged into bloodlessness!” (Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks Than Sticks*, p. 184).

4. John G. Kemeny's Vanity License Plate - "Basic", c. 1964 – 1992

John Kemeny, a Dartmouth mathematics professor and the College's thirteenth president, was a central figure in the history of computing. In 1964, in the basement of Dartmouth Hall, Kemeny, along with fellow math professor Thomas Kurtz and a group of undergraduate students, built a time-sharing system to open computer access to everyone at Dartmouth. They also simultaneously developed a new programming language: Beginner's All-Purpose Symbolic Instruction Code, or BASIC. BASIC was designed to be easy to learn and applicable on any computer, and made the practice of computer programming broadly accessible for the first time. Well before such notions would become commonplace, BASIC's inventors envisioned a Dartmouth in which "every student on campus should have access to a computer, and any faculty member should be able to use a computer in the classroom." By the 1970s and 1980s BASIC would be found on nearly all minicomputers. While it may no longer be the programming language of choice, the creation of Kemeny and his collaborators played an essential role in the development of modern computing.

5. Polar Exploration Cigarette Cards, c. 1915

Cigarette cards—souvenir trading cards issued by tobacco companies—were devised initially to stiffen packs of cigarettes. Printed in runs of twenty-five or fifty, they often featured figures from popular culture: actors, pin-ups, athletes, military figures, and business men. The two series on display here were produced by Player's, a British tobacco company started in the nineteenth century, and commemorate European Polar expeditions. The images on view are titled "How Icebergs are Formed" (left) and "An Adélie Penguin and his Mate" (right). A short description and anecdote related to the image on the card is found on the back. About the Adélie Penguin, for example, the anecdote reads: "The little birds waddle and run in a ludicrous fashion, and their hoarse squawk of surprise at seeing a man cause the members of the expedition unbounded amusement." While these cigarette cards are representative of popular early twentieth-century ephemera, their subject of Polar exploration also fits into an important collecting area for Dartmouth Library.

Case Three

1. Two Snuff Boxes with Portraits of Daniel Webster, c. 1800 - 1899

Snuff boxes typically contained pulverized tobacco that could be inhaled and were often produced to commemorate special occasions. While many were luxury goods made of expensive materials such as precious metals, gemstones, and pearls, other boxes were made of cheaper and more widely accessible materials, such as potato pulp. In the nineteenth century, circular snuff boxes made of papier-mâché, such as the two here, were very much in vogue.

The same rendering of the antebellum politician and notable Dartmouth alumnus, Daniel Webster can be seen on both boxes here and both are made with wood, papier-mâché,

and lacquer. The fact that the Library has two snuff boxes with Webster's image not only speaks to the popularity of snuff, but perhaps more importantly to the cult of personality that surrounded the senator. During the nineteenth century, Webster's image could be found on any number of commercial goods well into the twentieth century—from snuff boxes to cigars and even on bags of flour.

2. Webster Golden Wedding Special Selection Cigars, c. 1950

3. Free Nelson Mandela pin – African National Congress, c. 1970 - 1985

In 1964, after several previous arrests, Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life in prison for sabotage and conspiracy to overthrow the ruling apartheid government in South Africa. He would not be released until 1990. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, the anti-apartheid and divestment movements gained significant traction on college campuses across the United States. In 1985, a student group known as Dartmouth Community for Divestment (DCD) built a shantytown on the Green to protest the College's investment in corporations doing business with South Africa. Protestors famously clashed on the Green with students aligned with *The Dartmouth Review*, who argued that the shantytown was an illegal encampment. In the end, however, the protestors were successful: Dartmouth moved to divest from South Africa in 1989.

4. Eleazar Wheelock's Conch Shell, c. 1769 - 1799

The conch shell was an iconic object in the early history of Dartmouth. As the story goes, Eleazar Wheelock, founder of Dartmouth College, did not have the funds to purchase a bell for the early campus, and so used his shell as a horn to call students to meetings, prayers, and recitations. In later years this job fell to freshmen or American Indian students. A nineteenth century college song written by E.E. Parker (class of 1869) and Addison Andrews (class of 1878) recounts this distinctly Dartmouth tradition: "It called the students from their play, to work, to prayers, with potent spell; Ill fared he who dared to disobey the summons of the Old Conch shell."

5. Mourning Ring Belonging to Sarah Olcott Duncan, 1845

The practice of wearing mourning rings in memory of the dead dates back as early as the fourteenth century, and persisted to varying degrees into the twentieth century. The ring here belonged to Sarah Olcott Duncan the daughter of Mills Olcott, a Dartmouth alumnus (class of 1790), long-standing member of the College's Board of Trustees, and prominent Hanover lawyer. The ring commemorates Olcott's death with the inscription: "Mills Olcott July 11, 1845 Æ 71 Years." The orange agate at the ring's center, which is engraved with Sarah's initials, is on hinges and can be flipped around to display several locks of the deceased's hair. The personal significance of this object to Olcott Duncan is self-evident; at the same time, the ring also offers a particularly intimate window into the mourning customs of an earlier period.