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Curiouser and Curiouser: Curiosity cabinets' role in creating Modern LAM and tenets of Public Access

Introduction

Despite the ubiquity in American life, particularly in urban centers, of libraries and museums, little thought is ever really given to how their presence, and standardized aspects therein, came to be so familiar to the average civilian. Why are libraries and museums even separate institutions at all? They provide similar services across the information field spectrum for the general public, and it could be argued that their biggest difference is simply in the content they store. As the digital age shows this connection between LAM institutions more clearly, it is important to recognize that there was, for a short time in early modern history, a setting (in Europe and North America) where the institutions could be found as one entity. Cabinets of curiosity are most often looked upon as an eccentric fad, and it is easy to understand why when you see that their owners were often duped by artificial artifacts; but their very existence and eventual disassembly shows a path that connections the ancient history of libraries and archives to the ones we interact with in contemporary life. Curiosity cabinets influenced not only the very structure of libraries, archives, and museums (LAM), but also the notion of public access in and to those institutions—and they may be able to guide us forward as modern LAM settings begin to experiment with digital collections and lines between the roles of these cultural institutions once again begin to blur.

LAM Predating Curiosity Cabinets

Cabinets of curiosity, of course, did not beget the very idea or existence of libraries, archives, and museums in all their sundry forms. It is worth taking a brief moment then to look at the history of these institutions (in the Western hemisphere) to understand how and by whom they were used, and how the phenomenon of curiosity cabinets enabled the culture switch that we view as normal practice today.

Libraries and archives weren't heavily distinguished from one another in classical antiquity. Towns in Ancient Greece and the Near East focused their librarian efforts on preserving local traditions, writings, and culture, a practice that is easy for contemporary information professionals to label as belonging to both an archive and a library. Of course, the archives were, in their own time, thought of more as "record rooms": in Greece, many temples had archival storage. In Egypt, some records were indeed also kept by temples, but most were provided by royal scribes for the government's own purposes (tax-collecting, trade inventories, decrees, etc.).

The first sign of a break between libraries and archives in the West was the rise of institutional libraries for the schools of philosophy in the 4th century BCE. While the access to these libraries was still limited, the user base (to use a more modern term) was undeniably widened. Aristotle's library, founded for the Peripatetic school, even served as the basis of the Great Library of Alexandria. Arguably the most famous library of all time, the Library is often given importance separated from its original function. Like its founding collection, the Library was meant for scholars, and was a connected part of the Alexandrian Museum, the research institute in Alexandria. Envisioned initially as a universal library, the founding of both the Library and Mouseion (the Alexandrian Museum) was ordered by Ptolemy I. This royal order set a precedent for the future rulers of Egypt and their relationship with the Mouseion's library: the kings continued to have direct supervision over the library and its branches, and they provided both the funds and encouragements for collection development, as well as more intensive record-keeping throughout the kingdom.

This way in which the Library of Alexandria was set up and expanded provides an interesting lens through which we can connect it to the practice of libraries and archives in the European Middle Ages and Renaissance. The rise of monastic libraries in Europe gave rise to the early inklings of a public library system through inter-monastery lending, and the 11th century beginnings of universities naturally saw their own libraries become main repositories for books and the study thereof. Both institutions continue the scholarly purpose behind the Library of Alexandria, while limiting access to those who would use the collections for the pursuit of knowledge. The royal benefactor aspect of the Library of Alexandria takes longer to develop in history, but beginning in the 13th century, the idea of private book collections begins to rapidly gain ground. As the Renaissance coincided with the Age of Exploration, so too did wishes to gain knowledge from other places; and with books still being an expensive purchase, only the aristocracy had the money to spend on them. Once Gutenberg's printing press expanded literacy to a wider audience, book collecting became more widely available—albeit still to the upper class.

(Archives suffered during the Middle Ages due the decentralization of government recordkeeping. It fell to local governments or the parish, and was not often looked after with an eye towards preservation.)

Meanwhile, during both the creation of the Church of England and the Reformation, many church archives were disseminated and their more valuable contents were redistributed into private collections of the aristocracy. The exponential growth of private collections and the shift away from public access, regarding artifacts we would consider today to belong to any of the LAM institutions, due to a combination of the Renaissance, Age of Exploration, burgeoning Enlightenment movement, and Gutenberg's printing press, helped give rise to the cultural phenomenon of cabinets of curiosity.

In the Eye of the Beholder

Cabinets of curiosity first began to appear in continental Europe in the late sixteenth century. As larger record archives and libraries were disseminated or sold off, and as explorers began to return to Europe with unbelievable artifacts from far off lands, the wealthy upper class wanted a slice for themselves. While early cabinets of curiosity were indeed cabinets, they soon became actual rooms, stuffed to the brim, and arranged so that every item was on display. The set-up was necessary for easy showing-off to one's visitors, but the curiosity cabinets, at the start of the cultural phenomenon, were really just for the collector's personal and private enjoyment. Whether attributed to a king's fancy, an aristocrat-philosopher's pursuit for knowledge, or a wealthy merchant's social-climbing, the cabinets housed artifacts that held ties almost exclusively to the person who had collected them (Impey & MacGregor).

Peer Review

The proliferation of curiosity cabinets eventually made it impossible to avoid showing them off in a public way. It seems the natural next step after kings showed off their collections to visiting dignitaries and as resources became more accessible to the rest of the peerage, and soon they were able to begin sharing, and importantly, comparing theirs to one another's.

With the Renaissance just behind Western Europe and the Enlightenment era about to begin, it makes sense that "being curious was considered a praiseworthy attribute" in the higher levels of society, and this was seen most clearly at the Royal Society of London, where the "*pursuit* of curiosities was seen as a valuable endeavor" (da Costa 44; emphasis mine). Founded in 1660, at the height of the curiosity cabinet craze, the Society's statutes detailed that the activities of the members at each meeting should be: "to order, take account, consider, and discourse of philosophical experiments and observations… also to view, and discourse upon, rarities of nature and art; and thereupon consider, what may be deduced from them, or any of them; and how far they, or any of them, may be improved for use or discovery" (da Costa 46).

The statute showcases an interesting mindset that curiosity cabinets contributed to, and which then influenced the cultural trajectory of the cabinets in turn. The encouragement to collect curiosities was fully felt, and starting as early as 1703, the Royal Society of London began to use its weekly meetings to showcase artifacts from its members' cabinets. And in addition to exhibiting their own cabinets and treasures, the Fellows would read letters at meetings that "mentioned accounts of various cabinets of curiosities in Europe" (da Costa 44). Much like the monasteries loaning items among themselves, the Royal Society found a way to keep tabs on the other cabinets and new curiosities around the continent.

But perhaps the most important insight into the legacy of curiosity cabinets that came out of peers sharing their collections with one another, particularly at the Royal Society meetings, is the embrace and active spreading of the notion of "learned entertainment." As da Costa points out, it is both "difficult and indeed incorrect to make a clear distinction between the entertaining and the educational or investigative aspects" of the cabinets and the exhibitions of their interior contents. The cabinets made it clear that the "satisfaction of curiosity was also not necessarily adverse to social utility"—the artifacts, both natural and artificial, familiar and exotic, presented in a social setting, could be used to spread knowledge and culture to other parts of society (da Costa, 49).

Opening Their Doors

Being curious about the natural and unexplored world and being learned (and *wanting* to be learned) was highly valued by the upper and upper-middle classes. Between this and the Age of Enlightenment beginning to pursue its ideals of spreading knowledge, particularly of the newly formed fields of science, from the wealthy scholars to the masses, it makes sense that, as private curiosity cabinets slowly opened to larger audiences of like-minded collectors, the next step would be for these aristocrat-philosophers to begin spreading knowledge by allowing public access to their curiosity cabinets. Rubin & Janes argue that the cabinets, through their combination of the cultural institutions, were intended to "inspire and elevate the 'lower classes'" (18), and often for a small fee, the public was starting to be shown the curiosity cabinets.

And similarly as to how kings would often show off their private curiosity cabinets to visiting foreign leaders to demonstrate the "civilized" nature of their culture and land, curiosity cabinets could also help show the other denizens the "character of the cities in which they were located," whether that be via taxidermied fauna, artistic depictions of flora or architecture, or books on history (Rubin & Janes 18).

With an expansion of access to cabinets of curiosities built on the predication of spreading knowledge to an audience that would otherwise have no access to it already gaining ground, we can pair it with the physical dissemination of those cabinets to begin looking at how the LAM institutions as we know them today got their start.

Restricted Access

As books were printed in larger numbers and became less expensive, as professionalized fields (such as archaeology) were being introduced, and as the boundaries of scientific pursuits drew lines between curiosities' values and were relegated to universities and new laboratory spaces, cabinets of curiosity began to see a change in their fundamental makeup. The "book collections within the cabinets tended to dominate and the natural history aspects faded," (Rubin & Janes 18) and ultimately the cabinets began to overflow their own physical spaces as they became "more specialized in subjects, objects, places, or times" (Marcum 2014). And as the last generation of these eccentric, enthusiastic scholars began to pass away, and a general perspective shift in upper society focused on the Industrial Revolution, that was yet another reason to consider dismantling the private cabinets.

The dissemination of curiosity cabinets into the newly-created knowledge institutions is perhaps the clearest view into the differentiation between the LAM institutions. As the collections became too large and specialized to be manageable (a vicious ouroboros), their parts were "split off into archives, museums, and libraries, each focusing on a different form of information and on users of different kinds" (Marcum 2014).

As mentioned above, the sciences became more formally recognized and bounded, and so the laboratory equipment, scientific experimentation, and exploration artifacts of curiosity cabinets were sent to university collections. The Ashmolean

Museum at the University of Oxford is a prominent example; as is the specialized collection that the family of Myron Eell donated to Whitman College, which chronicled the history and cultures of the peoples of the Pacific Northwest (Marcum 2014).

Archives also received and grew out of specialized collections, often compromised of what we know think of as traditional documentation. Some of them were clear descendants of the Royal Society method of collaborating and sharing curiosity cabinets among like-minded peers: the Massachusetts Historical Society was founded in 1791 in order to preserve and document American history and its original items were pulled from the private collections of its ten founders. The notion of creating historical societies by joining like documents from personal cabinets and collections spread rapidly through the young United States in the early nineteenth century.

Both archives and university libraries restricted the accessibility of the artifacts they received to certain groups of users, by nature of the institutions themselves. But curiosity cabinets were split mainly into museums and libraries, and there the user base was widely expanded. Books, manuscripts, and collections of letters were sent to libraries, of which public (and sometimes national) versions were being set up by governments and princes (the latter primarily in Italy).

Museums received essentially everything else: works of art, natural specimens, artificial specimens, and historical artifacts. It can indeed be argued that some museums were started from cabinet collections, with good evidence. Sir Hans Sloane, himself a member of the Royal Society of London, bequeathed his incredible personal curiosity cabinet to the British government upon his death in 1753, and it was then used to found the British Museum in 1759. (The British Museum has recreated this to a certain extent on the first floor of the museum in London, so a modern visitor—or "user"—can see what a curiosity cabinet would have looked like at the height of their popularity.)

Access Granted

As museums and libraries distinguished themselves in the nineteenth century as bastions of learned entertainment for the masses, the twentieth century took the ideas of public access even further. Public libraries were now well-stocked and accessed enough to prove their worth of being funded by governments. And as the Gilded Age came to a close, its wealthiest members became trustees in order to keep museums afloat for decades (and centuries) to come. This often resulted in admission-free or pay-as-you-want admission fees, allowing the influence of the need to spread "learned entertainment" from the curiosity cabinet fad to carry on. Now a much wider audience, comprised of more varied demographics, had access to certain artifacts and knowledge that they may not encounter in their daily lives—and they were the ones who could *choose* what to interact with.

Yet, as Rubin & Janes point out, "significant portions of the physical collections of museums and archives were hidden from public view and difficult to access." An unforeseen side effect of the sudden boom in library and museum collections is that not every part of their collection would be available to their users all the time. Libraries certainly had more of their items available, but even they had a de-selection process in order to keep their collections both current and within the physical boundaries that their users had access to.

The Digital Age

As "people's expectations about what should be available to them increased" via the new widespread use of search engines in the early 2000s, museums and archives scrambled to digitize their collections in order to keep up with the requests for access to what the public would not normally have access to—either because they would have needed to visit a collection in person or because the artifacts they sought were in storage (Rubin & Janes 18). While libraries were ahead of the curve due to a long history of online catalogs, they faced a similar challenge as e-books became more popular and needed to be understood as a non-physical collection item. (The problems libraries faced in patrons expecting their catalog searches to match the way they used Google is a worthy topic, but not relevant here.)

As collections became more available online, the lines between the LAM institutions once again become blurred. Deanna Marcum argued that, "our computers are cabinets of curiosities": much like how curiosity cabinets brought together types of artifacts that by today's standards didn't belong together but were still able to together provide information and holistic images about a singular topic, so too can computers "bring to our individual inquiries multiple kinds of information from multiple sources" (Marcum 2014). And again like how personal cabinets were filled, the LAM digital collection process is focusing on the modern user, who is engaged in one search on one topic, "where resources are evaluated based on situationally defined personal need" (Rubin & Janes 19).

LAM institutions in the digital age also rely on their public access to fulfill the tenet of social inclusion. As mentioned earlier, the Age of Enlightenment encouraged learned members of the upper classes to consider how best to spread the wealth of knowledge they possessed to those who could not otherwise access it, in order to promote a betterment of all mankind. While it seems an especially lofty goal, they were able to succeed in some aspects, and social inclusion has been a fundamental part of libraries and museums' approach to patrons. Libraries and museums are constantly reevaluating the conditions of their accessibility in order to address users' social exclusion in this space, as relating to "a lack of material resources… inadequate social participation, lack of cultural and educational capital, [and] inadequate access to services and lack of power" (Gehner 2010). While the owners of curiosity cabinets may not have foreseen the digital advances LAM are paired with today, they certainly understood the importance of overcoming the above hurdles and they put their curiosity cabinets up as the first line of defense.

Conclusion

Cabinets of curiosity have long been seen as a historical craze, funded by and purely for the fanciful entertainment of wealthy European aristocrats. But we have seen here that these cabinets were not a cultural anomaly, but instead were a very natural confluence of the changing social perceptions of who was allowed to own knowledge and what counted as new knowledge. There is no way, of course, to know what modern LAM institutions would look like had curiosity cabinets not existed, but their influence on how items are determined to belong to which LAM branch, and more importantly, how access should be decided on, is undeniable. We can use curiosity cabinets then to look also to the future, as the digitization efforts begins a reconvergence of LAM institutions, at least in the eyes of the user. Lisa Given and Lianne McTavish perhaps say it best in their 2010 article, "What's old is new again": "By respecting and acknowledging our shared history and by using that history as a springboard for reenergizing the convergence of the information professions, we can ensure a vibrant future for our cultural materials and the ways our citizens can engage in that history." Accessibility is a continual battle for LAM, and as information professionals, we owe it to our users to understand our history in order to avoid repeating mistakes and insure that our accessibility efforts are truly making a difference.

Resources

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