

# Adam Olearius, *Gottorp Cabinet of Curiosities* (1674)

## Abstract

Adam Olearius (1599–1671) was a German scholar, mathematician, geographer, and librarian. In 1639, he was named mathematician at the court of Friedrich III, Duke of Holstein-Gottorp (1597–1659). Later, Olearius became the keeper of the duke's cabinet of curiosities. In the preface to his book about the Gottorp Cabinet of Curiosities [*Gottorffische Kunst-Kammer*], Olearius described the central function of such collections: to study God's creation, nature, ancient times, and foreign cultures. Cabinets of curiosities, also known as “wonder rooms” [*Wunderkammer*], offered viewers an opportunity to study objects from the four quarters of the globe in one place. Olearius also uses the book to praise the reign of his patron.

## Source

Preface to: *Gottorp Kunst-Kammer, within which all sorts of uncommon items have been created and prepared, partly by natural and partly by artistic means. These were gathered from all four corners of the world, and some years ago they were described and illustrated by Adam Olearius; at the time, in the library and antiquities collection at the Gottorp residential palace of the prince. Currently, however, managed and printed at the expense of Gottfriedt Schultzen.*

Gentle reader,

When a wise father or diligent preceptor wishes to teach his children and students something about science, he not only speaks but also uses his pen; he sketches and illustrates various figures and images, thereby using something small to point to and explain something larger. This is the way of mathematicians and geometers. With a small, handheld celestial globe, an astronomer reveals the nature of the cosmos with all its visible heavenly bodies—each point representing an enormous star. Similarly, a geographer uses a small ball or terrestrial globe to depict the whole sphere of the earth with all its landscapes, oceans, and rivers; each point representing a city; a line for a stream; and the entire expanse of a vast sea must fit within a space as wide as your thumb.

The Lord God, our Father in Heaven and the wisest of all teachers, does precisely the same for us, his children and students. Along with his revealed word, he has given us the world's greatest book of wonders with its two vast pages, heaven and earth, so that we should study it and thereby learn to recognize something greater, namely, the creator himself in all his majesty and omnipotence. As we gaze upon the beautiful creation of the heavens, not only with our physical eyes but also with a keen mind's eye, it is only with God's help that we see and observe the miracles before us. Many thousands of miles above us, the stars appear to us as tiny lights, but all are much larger than the earth. Should we approach them, then we would be blinded and unable to think. They all follow a certain pattern, so that down here below one can learn about their courses, and about planetary encounters, oppositions, and eclipses before they happen, and describe and predict future activities of the heavenly bodies to some extent. When one sees and ponders such things, it cannot be wrong to conclude that the Lord who created all of this must be an even more glorious and majestic God.

This is what we see above our heads, floating in the ether. Turning our eyes to the elemental world in which we move, and partially tread with our feet, we encounter so many wonders that it is impossible to recount and

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describe them all. How many birds are there in the air, one more beautifully adorned and decorated than the next? How many species of fish are there in the seas and rivers; how many animals are there in the world; what kind of exquisite things are to be found in the bosom of the earth? If you examine the three kingdoms—animal, vegetable and mineral—what wonders are to be found! And in different places of the world at that, since nature in one spot always seems richer, more beautiful, and more magnificent than the last—as testified to by historians, naturalists, and chemists. One can agree with David’s proclamation: *O Domine Dominus noster, quam admirabile est nomen tuum in universa terra*. “O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth.” And further: “O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches, [...] and they are sought out by all who desire them.”

Thus, one would wish that all men, for whom all things were created, would have the pleasure of duly contemplating the glorious works of God to better understand them, for if this were the case, then God’s intentions would be fulfilled, and he would be loved and praised as a benevolent creator. This is also exhorted by Paul.

We, however, behave a lot like schoolboys. Some are lazy and sleepy; some have a book in their hands but look past it; some stick the book under the bench, gawk at other things and play the fool. Nonetheless, some are ingenious and have a desire to learn; let us support them in the direction in which they are headed. This is also how it is in the great “school” that is the world. Some have little desire to look at the world-book in a thoughtful way and to learn to see God through his works. Others ogle that which is forbidden and search for the white and red earth (silver and gold). Here, nature leaves no impressions; instead, they are stamped by the hand of the coin maker and stored away, whether rightly or wrongly. Some, however, whose character and intellect reach for something higher, receive their greatest approbation and reward by closely observing godliness. To the extent that is mortally possible, they busy their minds with the wonders of natural science and that which is extraordinary. This also includes the historical sciences of antiquity, which we know were discovered and used by the ancients who lived long before our time; as well as that which the hands of artists or foreigners have made. Looking into such things also brings us enjoyment. Those who are marvelously ingenious are sometimes compelled to research that which can be found in far-off foreign lands. Consequently, some set off on very costly and dangerous journeys, and often meet their end like Pliny the Elder, who paid for the exploration of Vesuvius with his life.

However, such enthusiasts can also benefit from visiting those places that have quite wonderful, rare, marvelous, and exotic items brought together in compilations, museal exhibits, and art collections. All of these objects, which otherwise could only be encountered during distant travels, may thus be viewed without danger. Sovereigns, and others to whom these treasures belong, are to be commended for sparing no expense in the examination of nature and the attendant advancement of knowledge. Alexander Magnus is one such generous gentleman, who spent 800 talents of gold (five tons) for the works of Aristotle, just for the purpose of researching and describing the nature of animals. Even more laudable are those who gather remarkable items that are well worth seeing, and where possible, create collections of art and rare objects—not only for their own knowledge and enjoyment, but also for viewing by other devotees. The Serene Prince, Duke Friedrich of Schleswig Holstein has created just such an excellent art collection; an exhibit of antiquities; large double globes and a Copernican sphere; along with wonderful presentations of theatrical operas at the Gottorp Palace. With regard to the art collection, it began as the well-known Enckhaus art collection, which was gathered by Bernardus Paludanus, a notable medical doctor. This considerable body of artworks came from Egypt, Australia, and other Oriental and Occidental locations, most of which were visited by the doctor himself. In 1651, His Illustrious Highness the Prince purchased the collection from Paludanus’ heirs. I arranged to bring it from Holland to Holstein to be installed in the Gottorp residential palace. Since then, from year to year, it has been augmented with rare and precious valuable items. Now, along

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with the treasured library of his son, the Illustrious Prince Christian Albrecht, it brings much pleasure to my most gracious lord.

Additionally, at present, there are also two sovereigns from neighboring kingdoms and lands who are great supporters of the sciences and who have a special appreciation for uncommon natural and artistic creations. These are, namely, His Majesty King Friedrich III of Denmark-Norway, and the Illustrious Elector Prince Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg. It has been an honor and a special pleasure that they have viewed the Gottorp art collection and have contributed several excellent pieces to it from the natural world as well as from the arts. After a time, His Royal Majesty even founded a collection of art and rare objects in Copenhagen with new additions every day. The Illustrious Prince Elector has also gathered together many old and rare objects. Regrettably, most of these were destroyed two years ago in an unfortunate fire.

The special pleasure enjoyed by visiting an art collection is similar to walking through a well-designed garden or arboretum—a feast for the eyes, as one moves past flowers, plants and fruits. If one is not fortunate enough to make such a visit, it is no less rewarding to see illustrations and read descriptions of these exotic objects. And, for those absorbed with important business, or those who do not know what to do with their idle hours, it can be especially delightful and enjoyable to read about something unusual. Then, there is the variety and diversity of strange and uncommon items that lead us from one to the other. As the saying goes, “Varietas delectat”—variety is the spice of life; therefore, enjoyment is hard to avoid. Thus, I hope that I will have done the reader a good service by describing this Gottorp art collection (which, because of its many rare and precious objects, can be justifiably called a treasure chamber).

In one form or another, I could indeed have made the presentation more extensive, perhaps as a compendium or introduction to the entire art collection. Instead, I have made a summary that includes, in part, that which I brought myself from the Orient, and, in part, attractive excerpts that I found by other authors. I am saving the rest until God grants me the opportunity to employ my pen once again. Then, I will describe the great double globes, the Copernican sphere, and the antiquities, of which there are many old and rare gold, silver and copper coins along with the more common ones from foreign lands—and much more beside the coins that should be brought to light. Farewell.

Adam Olearius.

Source: “Preface” in Adam Olearius, *Gottorffische Kunst-Kammer, Worinnen allerhand ungemeine Sachen, So theils die Natur, theils künstliche Hände hervorgebracht und bereitet. Vor diesem aus allen vier Theilen der Welt zusammen getragen, und vor einigen Jahren beschrieben, auch mit behörigen Kupffern gezieret durch Adam Olearium, Weil. Bibliothecarium und Antiquarium auff der Fürstl. Residentz Gottorff. Anjetzo aber übersehen, und zum andern mal gedruckt, auff Gottfriedt Schultzens Kosten. 1674 In dessen Buchladen in Schleßwig solche zu finden ist*. Available online at: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/page/52957510>

Translation: Bill C. Ray

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