

The Chamber of Curiosity



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and the New Elegance

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Things as Ideas & Identity

By Shonquis Moreno

Our body is the first thing we own, which means that we are naturally and irrevocably bound to the material world and to things. But things represent opportunity as much as constraint: Belongings and how we live with them are our way of telling the world where we belong—or want to belong. They express our values and, if not what is true about us, at least what we wish to be true. If understood correctly, things, above all else, are ideas. This fact may explain the recent fascination with the medieval cabinet of curiosities, which moved into the popular consciousness and then into our living spaces. Casting off aesthetic uniformity and banal minimalism, interior designers are underscoring atmosphere and individuality through eclectic and painstakingly collected furnishings and objects. Using poetic contrasts, the eloquent naïveté of the artisanal object, unconventional juxtapositions, palettes, and bespoke materials, they are exploring the client’s unique character, experiences, and point of view through space—with results that recall those marvels of long ago.

Ancestor to the modern museum, from the 15th to the 18th century, the cabinet of curiosities—or **Wunderkammer**—consisted of a room or series of rooms (**Kammer**) brimming with art (**Kunst**) and objects of wonder (**Wunder**). It was a place to store, study, and catalog the known and the unknown, a personal sanctuary and a showcase of both wealth and erudition. It was also considered a microcosm of the natural world, a space where awe, innovation, learning and mystery were privileged over tradition, conformity, and doctrine. This made it, not least, a baroque expression of its creator’s unique view of the world.

That world was contained in an immersive interior over whose every surface were juxtaposed wildly eclectic objects: a crocodile mounted to the ceiling, seahorses, shrunken heads and

once-living things dried, stuffed or bottled, human anatomy sculpted in colored wax, drawings of snowflakes observed through a microscope and the microscope, itself. “Rarities” included real fakes like Montezuma’s feather headdress and outright inventions: the feathers of a phoenix, a mermaid’s hand, fact and fiction living side-by-side, as equals.

Early on, every surface of the interior became a display, from the spaces between ceiling beams to every inch of wall, along with elaborately crafted, purpose-built cupboards and shelves, drawers and armoires and built-in cabinets whose faces unlocked to fold down. Taken together, these displays seemed serendipitous or arbitrary, but were neither. Instead, this **horror vacui** followed the intuition or logic of its designer: Objects were grouped to establish connections or reveal those that had been overlooked in order to see and think about the world in entirely new ways.

The power of the **Wunderkammer** lay in its relationship to the individual imagination. If the objects in the curiosity cabinet were actually exhibitions of their creator’s intellect, tastes, memories or manifesto, so too are those in the contemporary interiors that, eschewing any particular style or trend, may be called “scenic”: interior landscape, scenography or a little of both, they are driven by a personal point of view.

Collectors of Things

Often this means that the designer is their own client, or the client, their own designer and that each is, by nature, a collector—a collector reconstituting that early immersive microcosm of wonder. The scenic interior becomes the designer’s cabinet, an experiential collage in which most objects, because they rep-

resent a point of view, are the character actors of interior design, precisely because they are built on character. The collector seeks objects everywhere, at all times: whether brand name or an anonymous piece of mysterious provenance (unicorn horn or narwhal's tusk?), they are not sought to suit a color scheme or contribute to a particular style. They are simply—and irrationally—loved, found now, and used when a use is found. Istanbul studio Autoban has found original pieces on the wheelbarrows of the Istanbul eskici, or junk sellers. Milan-based Dimore Studio found the weight plates for an old scale, but turned them into a pair of sconces. Designer Jean-Christophe Aumas returns again and again to the Paul Bert section of Paris' Porte de Clignancourt marché aux puces or when he travels, to a favorite flea market in Antwerp. These designers scavenge in junk shops on the way to auction houses and antique dealers. Beloved items are inherited from parents or knit by a daughter. Shinsuke Kawahara's Paris apartment is a warren of rabbits collected over years—porcelain rabbits, silver rabbits, a wooden rabbit carved in 1915—because they express his connection to Nature. Alketas Pazis is more than just a collector: He lives behind his Athens showroom in an apartment filled with industrial antiques with which he parts only reluctantly.

Relationships Among Things

In a sense, a cabinet of curiosities was like a koan. In order to fire the viewer's synapses in some fresh way, items entirely devoid of context (which is what happens to an object when collected) were grouped—poetically—around a theme of greater or lesser specificity. Similarly, the threads that connect objects in a scenic interior may be very subtle indeed. The designers edit and organize more or less irrationally, a peculiarly intuitive task that produces, among other things, a revelation of meaningful affinities and contrasts and a juxtaposition of unexpected objects into productive ecosystems.

But how to draw diverse objects together? One way is by throwing out hierarchy. Unlike minimalism, which can feel chilly and hollow or society homes—overwrought and impersonal—scenic interiors are surprisingly democratic, with junk store finds and limited editions on equal terms. Jean-Christophe Aumas pairs a daybed from Ebay with work by Gio Ponti, knowing that contrasts and unexpected connec-

tions reveal the most in the fewest “words.” Aumas also clarifies this mashup by framing worthy things: colors frame fields of color, reflective surfaces frame the fine old wood of the floor, and hollow cubes frame emptiness, giving the viewer a delicious pause.

Through their editing and composition of interior still lifes, Milan-based Dimore Studio's combinations of objects seem too personal to be a style or decor. Their interiors are predicated on the fact that each complex object has been chosen for complex reasons, and integrated into complex scenarios with dissimilar objects—in a way that looks effortless. It is not single objects that make a space: “What really counts,” says designer Emiliano Salci, “is the interaction each object has with those surrounding it.” Dimore Studio's spaces are saturated with atmosphere because a compelling imbalance of extremes—thrilling and tranquil, obscure and familiar, humble and luxe—helps them manufacture mood. With light and shadow, they partition space into cubbyholes and niches, giving each vignette its stage without putting up walls. Scenic designers relate objects not just to each other, but to light, color, materials, forms, textiles, and texture.

For Italian designer Pietro Russo home is an expression of self: “The ambience must be a reflection of myself,” he says, “mirror my equilibrium and my contradictions. I see interior space as the scenery of everyday life.” Color is a rich way to render these shifting aspects with immediacy: Dimore Studio borrow the chiaroscuro palette of an Old Master painting. Kelee Katillac consults her gem collection to mix paint colors. George Koukourakis exaggerates the jewel-tones native to his house on Nisyros, assigning vibrant hues to public space and tranquil tones to private quarters while, in a small Berlin apartment, Gisbert Pöppler blocks out fields of assertive color to lead the eye through space.

Fidelity to Certain Things

The scenic interior may express fidelity to time, place or person. To be true to an historical period or location, designers may bring in master craftsmen to restore antiques, match extinct colorways or replicate a window frame. David Hurlbut makes something new in the spirit of the old, using cheap plastic Halloween masks to cast classical sculptures. He also respects

history by living with low-wattage light bulbs and large-scale furniture because the old electrical system can't support a bigger load and the building's stateliness would have swallowed anything smaller. Autoban reconcile elements from various time periods with contemporary pieces by layering them. Guided by the “aura” of a building, Pietro Russo designs many custom pieces: “Even in a home without furniture, anyone who enters feels this aura,” he explains. “This aura is an expression of culture and should suggest the design direction.”

Honoring time and place may also involve excavation—scraping the paint, peeling away layers of wallcoverings—and knowing when to stop. “If part of a building is beyond repair, work with what you have and leave the exposed area as-is,” says Hurlbut who, on moving into his home, took a broom to the peeling original paint, but left what remained after a vigorous sweeping: a mosaic of uneven paint layers.

In the age of the cabinet of curiosities, conformity was a nearly universal value; today because the world has shrunk, it is an increasingly homogenous place in which individuality has its virtues. The rich details of a scenic interior are nothing if not true to its inhabitant: Dimore Studio designs very self-consciously to differentiate their clients. In the Carrer Avinyó holiday home shared by two brothers in Barcelona, David Kohn Architects designed a mosaic floor, featuring a triangular pattern that mimics the geometry of the architectural plan with gradations of color, from green at one end to red at the other, mapping out each man's domain. A dining table stands at the confluence of the red and green tiles, a graphical symbol of the gathering together of loved ones, of the home as a space of belonging—a microcosm of family.

Once, collectors saw the cabinet of curiosities as a microcosm of the natural world. And then we began to fathom and domesticate Nature. Today, it is our inner nature that is the mysterious macrocosm writ large in the scenic interior. We return “home” to find ourselves both marvelous and monstrous, rich and rare, fake and unfamiliar. Now we want to marvel at (and very occasionally, understand) our own natures, recover that gothic innocence—the flacons of perfume and dragon's blood lined up on the shelf next to the powdered mummies and poisons. No wonder: Without the curiosity, after all, it would just be a cabinet.