

Decolonizing the capuchin monkey?

Salzburg's cabinet of art and curiosities and its (post-)colonial heritage

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Abstract

This article explores the colonial dimensions of Salzburg's cultural heritage by examining the early modern Cabinet of Art and Curiosities in the former residence of the prince-archbishops. The collection serves as a case study tracing historical global entanglements of European colonialism and to critically assess museal practices. Drawing on both archival sources and secondary literature, we reflect on the historical creation and contemporary exhibition, as well as its framing and persistent Eurocentric narratives and imaginaries of non-European cultures and nature. We argue that, due to Salzburg's historical special position within the Holy Roman Empire and ideological heritage, the decision to preserve, rather than transform, the Cabinet has become central for the current form of the exhibition.

Keywords

Cabinet of art and curiosities, museum collection, postcolonial studies, early modern history, eurocentrism

1. Perspectives on (post-)colonial histories in Salzburg

Colonialism has left significant traces not only in the former colonies but also in Europe: monuments, street names, or museums and their collections form part of a colonial topography that often goes unrecognized. Due to the loss, destruction, or alteration of records, the provenance of objects obtained from former colonies can be difficult to determine. Moreover, colonial references and terminology in public spaces—and the historical contexts in which they were created—have either been forgotten or, in some cases, deliberately disregarded (Bechhaus-Gerst, 2019, p. 40). Addressing these legacies is an urgent and transnational concern, relevant not only to former colonial powers and empires such as France, Britain, or Germany, but also to smaller countries like Austria and cities like Salzburg that carry traces of a colonial past. While largely overlooked in public debates, this aspect has become increasingly prominent in academic scholarship over the last two decades (see, inter alia, Burton, 2021; Burton & Kuhn, 2022; Feichtinger et al., 2003; Hirschhausen, 2021; Judson, 2021; Molden, 2015; Sauer, 2011; Sauer, 2014; Sauer, 2017; Scheutz & Strohmeyer, 2008; Schölnberger, 2023).

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In this article, we seek to examine the connections and effects of European colonialism in the city of Salzburg, with a particular focus on the early modern Cabinet of Art and Curiosities (*Kunst- und Wunderkammer* in German).¹ Housed in the former residence of the prince-archbishops, now part of the museum complex *DomQuartier*, this collection serves as a case study to uncover how colonial histories are embedded within Salzburg's cultural heritage. Our objective is twofold: We are concerned with both a historical investigation of the collection reflecting time-specific colonial and global interactions as well as a public examination of (post-)colonial history using the example of the present exhibition, where objects, narratives, and interpretations from Eurocentric contexts persist to this day. By drawing on approaches from postcolonial studies, global and regional history, as well as public history, we call for a critical approach to historical culture and encourage new debates regarding how Salzburg's (post-)colonial past is remembered in public spaces, using the Cabinet of Art and Curiosities and its institutional setting as a lens to explore broader issues of Eurocentric representations in historical memory (e.g. Conrad et al., 2013; Eberth & Röhl, 2021; Jeismann, 1992; Kühberger, 2015; Kühberger, 2025; Procter, 2022; Said 1995/1978; Veracini, 2023).

2. The cabinet in context

Early modern cabinets of art and curiosities are considered encyclopedic universal collections that sought to encapsulate the entire knowledge of the time through microcosmic arrangements of objects, mainly accessible to members of the social elite (Beßler 2012; Daston & Park, 1998; Eming et al., 2022; MacGregor, 2008). The 'golden age' of these cabinets is generally dated to the European Renaissance and Baroque eras, although they had Medieval predecessors. Following the Enlightenment period in the mid-18th century and the scientific revolution of the 19th century, various objects from these collections found their way into systematized holdings of specialized museums (Rosenke, 2019).

The contemporary categorization process typically adhered to four primary taxonomies: *naturalia* encompassed the objects of the natural world—including gemstones, minerals, and conchological specimens,—while *artificialia*, by contrast, comprised human-made artistic creations such as sculptures, vessels, and paintings. The *scientifica* (or *technica*) reflected the cabinets function as laboratories for emerging scientific disciplines, housing machines, astronomical timepieces, and other instruments. Concurrent with European overseas expansion since the late 15th century, this era marked the inception of material appropriation of non-European artifacts, resulting in the incorporation of *exotica*—such as materials, flora, or fauna from tropical origin—into European cabinets of art and curiosities (Collet, 2007; Lemaitre, 2016).

However, the notion of *exotica* was not limited only to objects and animals: Indigenous people and communities, particularly from Africa and the Americas, were forcibly taken to Europe and presented in public and the courts. This dehumanizing practice persisted throughout the colonial period and onwards into the "Age of Empire" (Hobsbawm, 1989/1987), leading to the creation of ethnological expositions and so-called 'human zoos' in the 19th century (Brändle, 2023; Dreesbach, 2005; Windischbauer, 2026). In early modern collections, these individuals, frequently categorized as *monstra*, were objectified alongside animals and artifacts, thus reflecting the asymmetrical power dynamic between the collectors and the collected. This practice sought not only to evoke visitors' curiosity towards the unfamiliar exhibit, but primarily to demonstrate the global dimensions of authority and cultural domination claimed by Europe's collecting potentates (Procter, 2020; Smith, 2021).

In this respect, the Cabinet of Art and Curiosities in Salzburg stands as a compelling example of this phenomenon, its genesis intertwined with the ambitious vision of the rulers of the ecclesiastical principality and state of Salzburg (see Krampfl & Kühberger, 2016, for a similar perspective on Hellbrunn Palace). Dating back to the 17th century, this collection owes its establishment to prince-archbishop Guidobald von Thun (1616–1668), who initiated an expansion of his residence's representative rooms by aligning the façade of Saint Peter's Abbey with the palace, culminating in the creation of the Great Gallery (for the history of the construction see Hiller, 1981; Juffinger et al., 2008; Watteck, 1981). This architectural feature not only united both the residence, the abbey, and the Salzburg Cathedral, but also provided a space for the archbish-

1 Although the *DomQuartier* refers to the Cabinet as the "Chamber of Art and Curiosities" on the English version of its website, we will consistently use the term 'cabinet' throughout this text.

op's growing collection of art and curiosities. Since the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648, the prince-archbishop of Salzburg—being the highest-ranking member of the ecclesiastical princes—has held the honorary title of *primas germaniae*, while also acting as the Emperor's deputy at the Imperial Diet in Regensburg since 1662. Due to this exceptionally prominent position within the Holy Roman Empire, the establishment of a Cabinet of Art and Curiosities became an almost necessary asset for demonstrating the power of the prince-archbishop in the heart of his territory. The presence of European leaders and dignitaries—among them the prince-elector Ferdinand Maria of Bavaria (1636–1679) in 1659 and Emperor Leopold I (1640–1705) in 1665—must be considered in this context (Heinisch, 1988, p. 223). However, the Great Gallery and the Cabinet were only completed by his successor Max Gandolph von Kuenburg (1622–1687) around 1668, who is believed to have installed twelve glazed wooden showcases, seven of which have been preserved in place to this day (Ramharter, 2011, pp. 340–342; Watteck, 1975, p. 10; Watteck, 1981, p. 28).

As mentioned before, during diplomatic envoys, visits to the court or other representative occasions, the potentate could present his possessions from the alleged imagination from “all over the world” (Watteck, 1975, p. 9) displayed in these cabinets. It has been emphasized that the Great Gallery was not merely a passageway or corridor, connecting one part of the Cathedral complex with another, but rather a deliberately designed space intended to exhibit objects. According to Wagner (1983, p. 47), their purpose was to initiate or facilitate conversations or negotiations whenever high-ranking guests visited the prince-archbishop. Therefore, the Cabinet created a space where the prince-archbishop could not only engage with the intellectual currents of the time, but also reinforce his social status on both a local and European scale (see also Gollhammer, 2016). Eming and Münkler (2022, p. 4) highlight the importance of “performative elements”—such as the objects in cabinets—serving as instruments of “self-fashioning” among European princes, who engaged in a dynamic competition with one another for prestige and political legitimacy.

The Salzburg Provincial Archive (Salzburger Landesarchiv, SLA) still preserves three inventories of the Cabinet: The earliest surviving record dates from 1717 (SLA, GA XXIII, 69), followed by another from 1776 (SLA, GA XIII, 97), and the latest from 1805 (SLA, GHK XXVI, 7b). Together, they provide insight into the inventory of the collected items, the division and arrangement of the objects in the showcases, as well as the changes to the collections over time up until the secularization of the archbishopric and the resulting dispersal of holdings to Florence, Paris, Vienna, and Munich during and after the Coalition Wars (1792–1815) against the French Empire and its client states (Ramharter, 2011, p. 373, p. 377; Wagner, 1983, p. 47). Consequently, the precise provenance of the objects on display remains unclear. Only those items that can be directly traced from the inventories and are still preserved in institutions such as the Palazzo Pitti in Florence or the Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien (Vienna Museum of Art and History), for instance, can be identified with certainty (see for these objects Ramharter 2011, pp. 340–376).

The present arrangement is the result of an unconventional and ambitious restoration carried out by Eleonora (Nora) Watteck (née Borri; 1901–1993) in the mid-1970s on the occasion of the creation of the Cathedral Museum, which has been part of the *DomQuartier* since 2014 (Wagner 1983, p. 47; see for the biography of the curator Zaisberger, 1995, pp. 869–870). Based on the inventories and the remaining black wooden cases, Watteck acquired early modern items from the art trade or borrowed them from private collections and the neighboring Archabbey of Saint Peter to reconstruct the Baroque style of the exhibit using the collections of Ambras (Tyrol) and Kremsmünster (Upper Austria) as examples (Watteck, 1975, p. 11). At the same time, she composed the cases along her personal interests by featuring, for instance, numerous rosaries and Marian crowns in the first showcase (Watteck, 1981, p. 30), which are notably absent from the historical inventories.

Although the archival records indeed reveal object groups made of various materials, such as minerals (Showcase II), technical devices (III), ivory works (IV), shells (V), rock crystals (VI), and ibex horns (VII), none of the original showcases are specifically dedicated to certain materials or item categories as in seen in today's exhibition (see for the arrangement and the designations of the display cases the virtual tour of the DomQuartier, 2025). This distinction becomes even more apparent in the last two displays, which assemble a diverse range of unusual items under the categories of Seafaring (VIII) and Curiosities (IX), reflecting a more interpretative collection based on maritime themes and different ecosystems.

Figure 1: Showcase VIII: Seafaring



Figure 2: Showcase IX: Curiosities



In the following chapter, our focus will center on these two showcases and the objects situated in their immediate vicinity—placed atop of the showcases, on the walls, and ceilings, as well as between the window ledges—intending to establish a connection to the overarching themes presented in the Seafaring and Curiosities vitrines. Rather than examining individual objects and their provenance in detail, our analysis will prioritize the collection as an integrated whole, contextualizing it within broader frameworks of acquisition, representation, display, and labeling practices through a postcolonial lens.

3. Beyond curiosity: objects, animals, and the ‘Other’

“The renewed presentation of the Cabinet of Art and Curiosities must stylistically adhere to the conventions of the 17th century” (Watteck, 1981, p. 26). This statement by Watteck remains foundational to the current exhibition, shaping both the presentation of the objects and the curatorial interpretation of their historical context. This approach calls for a critical examination from both historical and postcolonial theoretical standpoints, raising questions about its implications for contemporary museological practices.

Both showcases are deeply connected with European expansion since the 16th century. In both the virtual tour and the onsite description, the Seafaring (*Seefahrt* in German) display is described as “dedicated to world discovery” (DomQuartier, 2025). In this context, the Mexican historian Edmundo O’Gorman opens one of his most fundamental works, *The Invention of America* (1958), with a striking provocation. Simulating the voices of indigenous communities upon the arrival of Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) in the Americas in 1492, O’Gorman states: “At last, someone has come to discover me!” (O’Gorman, 1958, p. 18). With this sarcastic yet philosophically meaningful statement, he underscores the significant distinction between Columbus’s belief that he had reached Asia and the subsequent European reframing of his voyage as the ‘discovery’ of an entirely ‘new’ continent. Therefore, this narrative is not an objective historical fact but rather a retroactive European interpretation of a fact that universal historiography has uncritically replicated for centuries in the form of the ‘discovery of America’. The inherent absurdity to which O’Gorman alludes in the erasure of the peoples of the Americas, who had existed long before European arrival, yet only became part of the European worldview through this so-called act of discovery. This exposes the profoundly Eurocentric nature of historical narratives, wherein the Americas are rendered effectively nonexistent until they are appropriated and named by Europeans. The Austrian-born American anthropologist Eric Wolf (1982) later captured this notion, highlighting how non-European societies have been systematically marginalized in the writing of world and global history.

In this sense, the showcases perpetuate the idea of the ‘discovery’ by displaying objects like globes, telescopes, and sundials, which emphasize the scientific enterprise underpinning European expansion around the world. Through the acquisition, categorization, and presentation of these artifacts, the prince-archbishop not only curated knowledge but also established a “connection to the events of the wider world”, as Watteck (1975, p. 9) stated, positioning himself as a scientific collector and agent of early modern global ambitions. The heroicized portrayal of Europeans crossing the oceans is reproduced in a similar vein, drawing on Watteck’s endeavor to reconstruct a 17th century presentation of objects in a Cabinet of Art and Curiosities. Therefore, the exhibition engages with multiple temporal layers: the *past*, *history* as a constructed narrative of that past, and the *present*—a division that amplifies its analytical rigor when examined through the critical framework of postcolonial studies.

This becomes particularly evident in the exhibition of taxidermied animals or parts of their remains. As expected, the Seafaring display features maritime specimens, including a pufferfish, a starfish, and parts of a sawfish. The Curiosities showcase consists mainly of so-called ‘exotic’ animals, such as a small crocodile, an armadillo, a parrot, a turtle, and a ray staged as a “dragon-like creature at the back” (DomQuartier, 2025). According to the inventory of 1717, some of these *naturalia* had already been part of the collection and on display at the beginning of the 18th century. The records list three different species of crocodiles (“Drey unterschiedliche sort-en von crocodiln”), one armadillo described as an “armoured mouse” (“Ain indiänische geharnischte maus”), one pufferfish (“Ain ausgebalter meerfisch”), and a fragment of an elephant’s tusk (“ein stuck von stain, ainem großen zahn gleichend”) (SLA, GA XIII, 97). These objects are similarly documented in the 1776 and 1805 inventories and remain part of the current exhibition (SLA, GA XIII, 97; SLA, GHK XXVI, 7b). Notably, a taxidermied zebra is specifically mentioned in the 1805 inventory but is absent from the modern display (see also the virtual tour of the DomQuartier, 2025).

Natural objects or animal-derived materials were often artistically transformed or incorporated into other artifacts, for instance, as drinking cups or furnishings. Notable examples include numerous items crafted from ivory, objects made of tortoiseshell, a coconut encased in fine silverwork (“Ain becher von ainer india-nischen nuß, mit ainem luckh in silber gefaßt”), as well as artifacts fashioned from coral or shell. In particular, narwhal tusks displayed as “unicorn horns” are consistently listed across all three inventories. While the 1717 inventory lists two large specimens (“Zway große ainkhürn-horn”) alongside another separate entry, totaling three horns, the

1805 inventory provides a precise physical measurement, describing them as seven to nine feet long (“von 7 – 9 schuh lang”). The earlier inventories even specify their exact placement atop (“Auf denen kästen”) or adjacent to the showcases (“Ausser den kássten”), whereas the 1805 inventory omits such locational details. However, its introductory notes mention the collection’s transfer to another room, indicating a complete relocation for safekeeping amid the political upheavals and the repeated changes of rule during the Napoleonic Period (SLA, GHK XXVI, 7b).

It is worth noting that a significant number of objects unrecorded in the inventories are present in the current exhibition, especially those placed atop, around, and close to the showcases. Yet some of them correspond with the designated themes, such as a painting of a fish from 1599 displayed over the Seafaring showcase, a stuffed fish suspended from the ceiling, as well as two turtle shells positioned on the walls in immediate proximity to the displays (see Habersatter, 2016, on the depiction of animals in Hellbrunn Palace with reference to the fish paintings). On top of the Curiosities showcase, a peacock is placed in the center, accompanied by two birds on its left and right. However, certain objects diverge from the thematic coherence of their assigned showcases: for instance, a small leopard-like feline and a capuchin monkey clad in an ornate cape rise above the Seafaring display.

Figure 3: The capuchin monkey on top of the Seafaring showcase



While their provenance remains undocumented, their placement likely reflects Nora Watteck's 1970s reinterpretation of the collection, which recreated a Baroque-era vision of 'the exotic', 'the curious', and, more broadly, 'the Other', perpetuating ahistorical fantasies of non-European landscapes (Watteck, 1981, p. 27). Although monkeys had already been domesticated as "expensive high-status" companions and were "widely available in Western Europe from the twelfth century" onwards (Walker-Meikle, 2012, p. 13), capuchins—originating from South America—only reached Europe in the 17th century to serve as living *exotica* in courtly menageries and subjects of anatomical research (Kahlow, 2018, p. 94, pp. 96–100). The Habsburg court of Emperor Rudolf II (1552–1612) at Ambras Castle, for instance, maintained two monkey houses alongside other prized animals like guinea pigs and lions (Kahlow, 2018, p. 93), suggesting that the prince-archbishops of Salzburg might have similarly kept primates despite the lack of documentary traces. This assumption is supported by artistic depictions found at Hellbrunn Palace, the prince-archbishops' summer residence, where monkeys appear both as woodcarvings from around 1750 in the Mechanical Theater and as a chained monkey in the fresco of the banquet hall (Grillitsch & Hanneschläger, 2016, p. 74). Strikingly, the capuchin's absence from historical records becomes pivotal and reveals its symbolic function within the exhibition: lavishly costumed and fitted with a small bell that audibly rendered its presence, the monkey embodies a dual exoticization—initially as a domesticated colonial animal import from the 'the Americas', and subsequently as a curated artifact in Watteck's baroque-like Cabinet of Wonders. Thus, the capuchin monkey now emerges as both a scientific specimen and an allegory of otherness.

As theorized by Edward Said (1995/1978), the construction of 'the other' is also evident through the Egyptian artifacts—a small mummy as well as several miniature statues and stone figurines—that, although absent from the inventories of 1717, 1767, and 1805, entered the collection in the 19th century or even as late as during the period of Watteck's reconstruction. Their presentation can be interpreted as a manifestation of an exotic imaginary constructed through a Eurocentric perspective and interpretation of cultures along the Middle East and North African region. As such, it embodies the orientalist framework identified by Said, wherein non-European cultures were appropriated, aestheticized, and recontextualized to affirm European notions of cultural supremacy and fascination with the 'exotic other'.

Finally, questions concerning the classification, documentation, and provenance of the exhibited objects arise. As noted earlier, not all objects currently on display in Salzburg's Cabinet of Art and Curiosities were part of the original collection, such as the Egyptian artifacts, tools used in agriculture, along with ceramics or objects featuring decorative designs.

Figure 4: Insights into the Curiosities showcase



Figure 5: Insights into the Curiosities showcase



The specific circumstances of their acquisition—whether through purchase, exchange, or under conditions shaped by asymmetrical power relations, such as forced appropriation in a colonial context—are often difficult, if not impossible, to determine. This raises the question of how such objects should be handled today. Museums across Europe are increasingly examining the colonial contexts of their collections, especially when individuals from the Global South encounter, often for the first time, objects belonging to their ancestors or cultural heritage, which are now held and interpreted by European cultural institutions. In 2023, an international advisory committee appointed by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Arts, Culture, the Civil Service and Sport recommended “supporting research into the participation of the Habsburg Monarchy in pan-European colonialism” and suggested in particular to look on how collections from colonial contexts are handled within Austria’s federal museums (Federal Ministry for Arts, Culture, the Civil Service and Sport, 2023, p. 24).

4. Conclusion

What exactly distinguishes the Salzburg Cabinet of Art and Curiosities? Returning to Watteck's initial assertion, the collection remains anchored in Baroque tradition, although many objects typically associated with early modern cabinets, such as alchemistic and technical instruments, were absent from the original display except for two clockworks (Ramharter 2011, p. 341). Strikingly, these alongside maritime and 'New World' objects now occupy prominent places in dedicated showcases, highlighting the juxtaposition between the historical objects of the time and the contemporary curatorial reconstruction. One plausible explanation for this distinctive composition lies in the elevated position of the archbishops of Salzburg within the Holy Roman Empire—a status they sought to manifest externally through their prestigious collection as a form of political self-fashioning. Yet, the Salzburg Cabinet emphasized "regional distinctiveness" (Wagner, 1983, p. 44) over universal encyclopedic themes, setting it apart from regional counterparts like Ambras Castle. Notably, the Cabinet resisted its transformation towards a place of study (*Lehrkammer*) in the spirit of the European Enlightenment (Dolezel et al., 2018; Eming & Münkler, 2022, p. 3), favoring a path of preservation that can also be seen in today's exhibition. Watteck's 1970s curatorial work initially appears to offer a tangible connection to this past, trying to rebuild and conserve the baroque identity of the Cabinet, but it does not accurately represent the exhibition of the time. Instead, Watteck merely provides a particular interpretation of an early modern cabinet of art and curiosities, one that reflects contemporary assumptions about the Baroque era and embodies a preconceived, Eurocentric image of the past.

Finally, the challenge today lies in examining both the potential and the institutional responsibilities entailed in hosting a cabinet of art and curiosities and the presentation of its objects. For example, how can a highly constructivist exhibition format, such as the one currently on display in Salzburg, be reimagined or reshaped as a site of information, reflection, and become a space open for a critical deconstruction of the Eurocentric narratives and visual impressions it conveys? Rather than merely preserving a curated projection of the past, such a space can serve as an invitation to interrogate how knowledge production, cultural hierarchies, and practices of collecting are discussed in public. This calls for ambitious curatorial approaches that not only acknowledge the constructed nature of the display but also actively promote critical engagement with the colonial legacies embedded in the exhibition itself, including Austria's still underexplored colonial past.

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Ethical statement

Our institution does not require ethics approval for reporting individual cases or case series.

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