

Beyond Text: Objects as Historical Sources

Activity

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This is a seminar plan for a source-focused session lasting 50 minutes on the subject of ‘Cabinets of Curiosity’. The session is aimed at second- or third-year undergraduate history students with some understanding of (a) the period 1600–1800, (b) the history of museums and collections and, ideally, (c) histories of knowledge-making.

Context and aim

The session uses visual sources (some of which depict material culture) to illuminate questions of early modern collecting, collections, models of categorization, histories of colonialism and the origins of twenty-first-century European museums. After the session, students will have:

- Practised skills of primary source analysis, with a particular focus on images;
- Practised skills of initial, exploratory online research in order to better understand uncontextualized primary sources;
- Developed their understanding of the histories of collections, collecting and museums;
- Considered the relationship between colonial violence and exploitation and European museums and their collections.

Preparation

Engaging with the following would be advantageous:

Sarah Longair and John McAleer, 'Introduction', in Longair and McAleer (eds), *Curating Empire: Museums and the British Imperial Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp. 1–16.

Description of activity

Introduction to the topic [5 minutes]

Tutors should provide students with an overview of what cabinets of curiosity were and who collected and displayed them in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Brief the students that through an analysis of cabinets of curiosity, the session will illuminate wider histories of collecting, histories of knowledge and histories of colonialism. The session also tests practical skills of primary source analysis, using two key historical images of rooms full of objects.

Divide the class into groups of no more than five students per group. Give half the groups Image 1: The Museum of Ole Worm and the other half Image 2: Richard Greene's Museum at Lichfield.

For Part 1, students are required to use their own powers of observation to first describe and then analyse the image in front of them. Peer learning within the group will also be important for this part of the class.

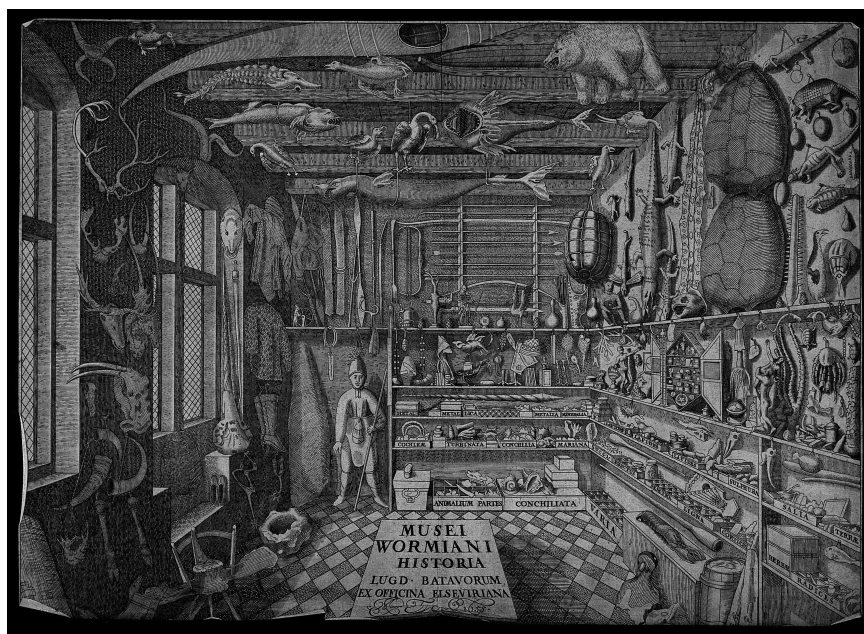


IMAGE 1 The Museum of Ole Worm, Copenhagen: interior. Engraving, 1655. Wellcome Collection. Reference: 571887i.



IMAGE 2 Richard Greene's museum at Lichfield, the "Lichfield clock" standing among cabinets of curiosities. Engraving by Cook. Wellcome Collection. Reference: 35709i.

Part 1: Group work – primary source analysis with limited context [10 minutes]

Students should consider the following questions:

- What does the image depict?
- What individual objects (or categories of object) are contained?
- How are the items displayed or grouped?
- What kind of building do you think contained this room?

Part 2: Whole class feedback and discussion [10 minutes]

Ensure that a member of each group reports one or more observations about the image they analysed. Consolidate the findings across the class, but also draw out areas of doubt or absences of information. Ask the class how they might go about filling gaps in understanding. Show both images to the

whole class on the board, so that both have been viewed by each student. Underline any similarities and differences between the two.

Students will now return to their original group but, this time, with some additional sources which will help to contextualize their image. It will be beneficial if students are able to conduct additional online research during this section. These sources can include:

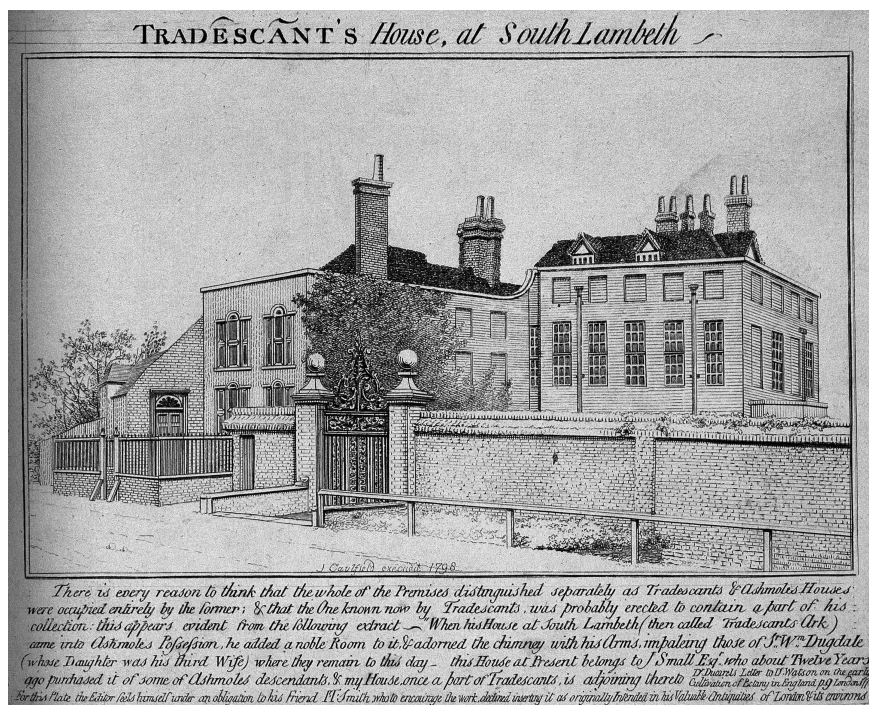


IMAGE 3 Smith, John Thomas (1766–1833), ‘The house of John Tradescant I at south Lambeth’. Line engraving after J. T. Smith (1798). Wellcome Collection. Reference: 9243i.

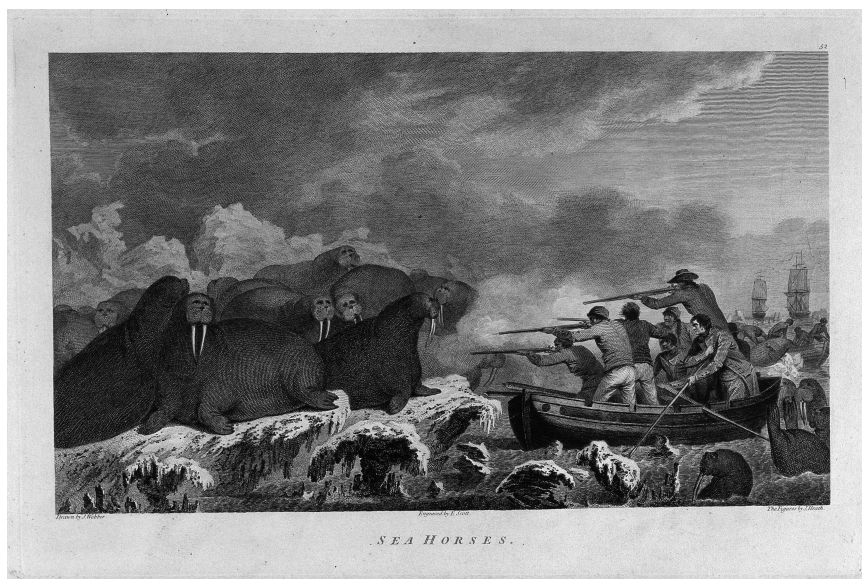


IMAGE 4 Webber, John (1751–1793), ‘Captain Cook’s men shooting at a herd of walrus in the Arctic Ocean during his third voyage (1777–1780)’. Engraving by E. Scott and J. Heath, 1784 after J. Webber (1784). Wellcome Collection. Reference: 566702i



IMAGE 5 Cruikshank, George (1792–1878), ‘The British Museum: Working-class people attending a guided tour and looking at exhibits of English history in glass cases and on the walls’. Etching (1843). Wellcome Collection. Reference: 32525i.

Part 3: Primary source analysis with context [15 minutes]

Students should consider the following questions:

- What status or value did cabinets of curiosity convey in early modern societies?
- How was material organized and for what reasons?
- Who were these cabinets or rooms for, and who could access them?
- How and why did the answers to these questions change over time?

Part 4: Whole class feedback and discussion [10 minutes]

Ensure that a member of each group reports one or more observations about the image they analysed in combination with the additional sources provided for context. Draw the groups' feedback together and address any gaps in understanding. Prompt the class to consider:

- The meanings of collections in early modern European society;
- The (wide range of) actors who collected, organized, displayed and viewed such collections;
- The consequences for twenty-first-century museums and collections of these histories.

Choosing Modules: Risks and Rewards

Activity

Nicki Kindersley

This is a plan for a reflective exercise that students can undertake alone or in small groups. It could also be adapted as a 50-minute introductory seminar. If so, the tutor should introduce and conclude the session with material relevant to that module, allocate equal time to the three parts and build in some time in each part for students to discuss their findings and previous experiences in small groups.

Context and aim

This exercise is designed to support individual students or groups of students in reflecting on their own journeys through history education and identifying new possibilities and directions for study. It may be especially helpful to undertake it when making module choices for the next academic year.

Preparation

You are not required to undertake any reading or other preparation for the session. The activity involves a creative mapping, which could include craft materials or could be done simply with pen and paper. You will also need a basic Mercator projection of the world map – print or sketch one out yourself.

Description of activity

Part 1: Timeline your history education

What histories have you been taught? Scribble down the different topics you've covered in your history classes as far back as you can remember. If you have covered a particular topic more than once, note that too (I remember being taught the British industrial revolution three times at different points!). Try to remember as many topics as you can, even if you can't remember any details. Then draw a line on your page and place the topics you've studied into a chronological line. This might help you to remember a few more topics you've covered. When you have done this, consider the following questions:

- Which periods has your history education focused on?
- Which time periods were *not* explored in your school history classes?

Part 2: Map your history education

Take your printed or sketched world map. Now start to transfer your school history topics onto the map, maybe by colouring in the locations of each topic you studied or covering them with Post-It notes. You could colour-code different regions according to how often your classes focused on this area – so, for example, green for geographical areas that were covered in several classes, orange for areas you looked at two or more times, and red for those only covered once. When you have done this, consider the following questions:

- Which geographical areas has your history education focused on?
- Are there any regions that are completely blank?

Remember that this timeline and map are not representative of all your history knowledge. You have learned histories from much wider sources – from your family, your surroundings and your own explorations. But this exercise can show you where your formal education has taken you – and where it has not.

Part 3: Final reflection

Take your timeline and map, and write or draw over them to highlight the periods, regions and themes that you are most interested in. For example, maybe you will colour in the Atlantic, to highlight your interests in oceanic

and Atlantic world histories. To guide you in this part of the exercise, consider:

- What histories have you found compelling, inside and outside of the classroom?
- What themes, questions and protagonists motivate you to study?