

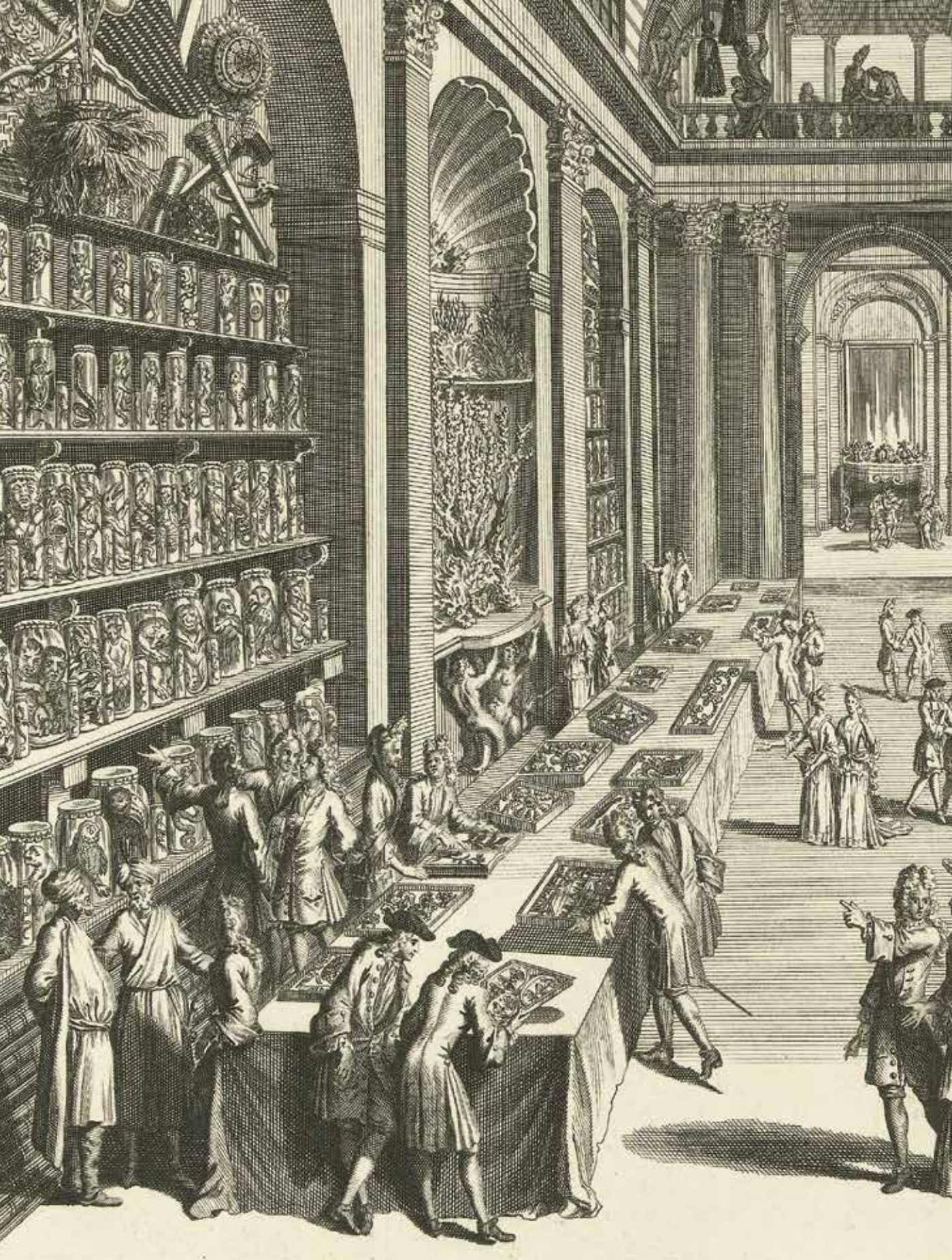
W U N D E R K A M M E R



————— THIJS DEMEULEMEESTER —————

W U N D E R K A M M E R

————— *An Exotic Journey through Time* —————



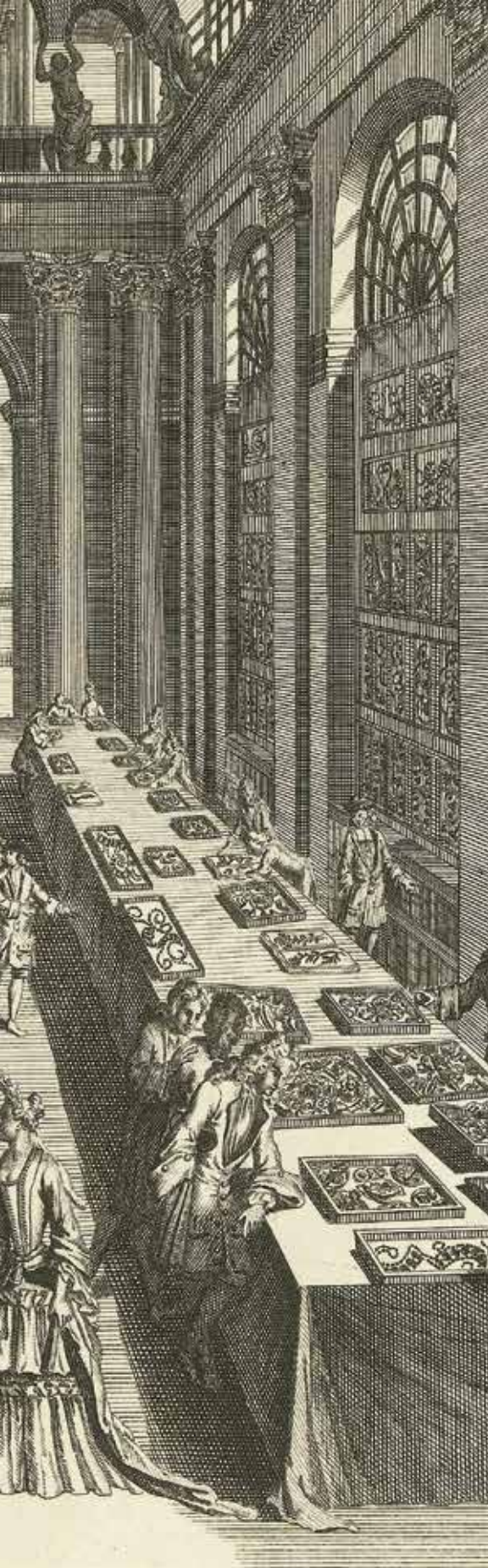


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INTRODUCTION

This is a book about discovery, about curiosity and adventure, about exploration and new trade routes – and also about distant civilizations and their exotic flora and fauna. Especially it's a book about knowledge, both fabricated and proven. *Wunderkammer. An Exotic Journey through Time* is an intrepid quest, albeit on paper, for the wonderful and curious, the outlandish and the outré. A thrilling boy's – and girl's! – own story, for hunters and collectors. It's also for people with patience, because you don't acquire an entire collection of exotica overnight. A collection is built over a lifetime. And for eight centuries people have been collection-building with a single end in view – to impress their contemporaries with their knowledge or wealth.

Those collections of exotica showcase nature's best and most beautiful, from ostrich eggs to narwhal tusks. They also demonstrate what man can do with nature. He can, for instance, prepare, stuff and mount the skins of animals with such lifelike effect that it's impossible to separate nature from the work of his own hand. Organizing unknown flowers in a herbarium is another example. That's empiricism versus nature. Does a plant even exist if it's never been given a scientific name? What if a goldsmith transforms a rare shell into an elegant piece of tableware? Who is the ultimate artist then? And what if we drink from a gold-lidded nautilus shell standing on a golden foot? Are we then putting nature on a pedestal? Do we award the laurels to the inventiveness of creation? Or are we trying to emulate or even surpass nature with our human ingenuity and craftsmanship? That is the covert contest in this collection of exotica: who is the greatest artist of the universe: nature or man? Who imitates whom? And which is making a fool of the other?

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The botanical prints from Robert John Thornton's 'The Temple of Flora' (1798-1807)
look like exotic landscapes.

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Visitors in Levinus Vincent's natural history cabinet in Haarlem,
Andries van Buysen (1706).

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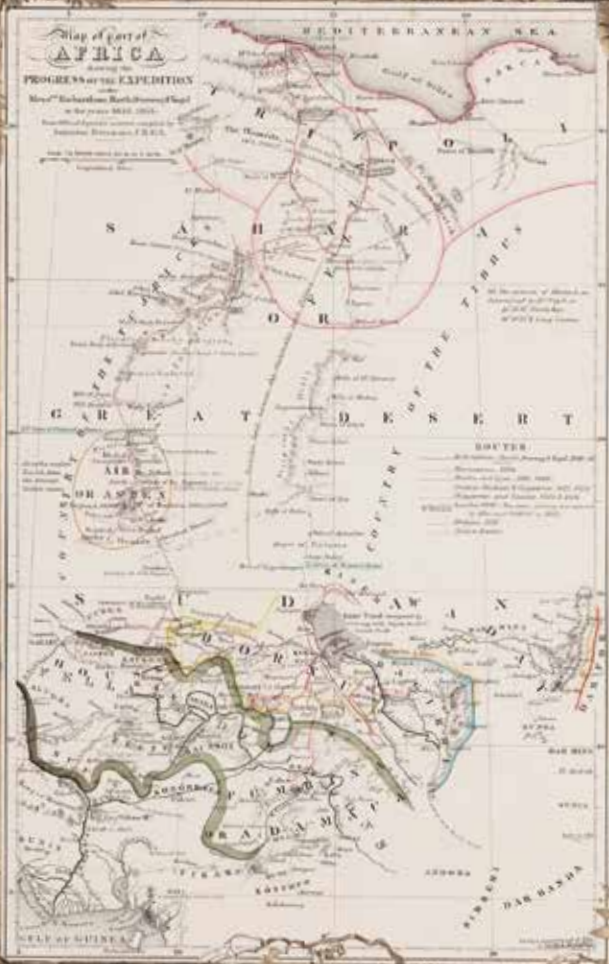
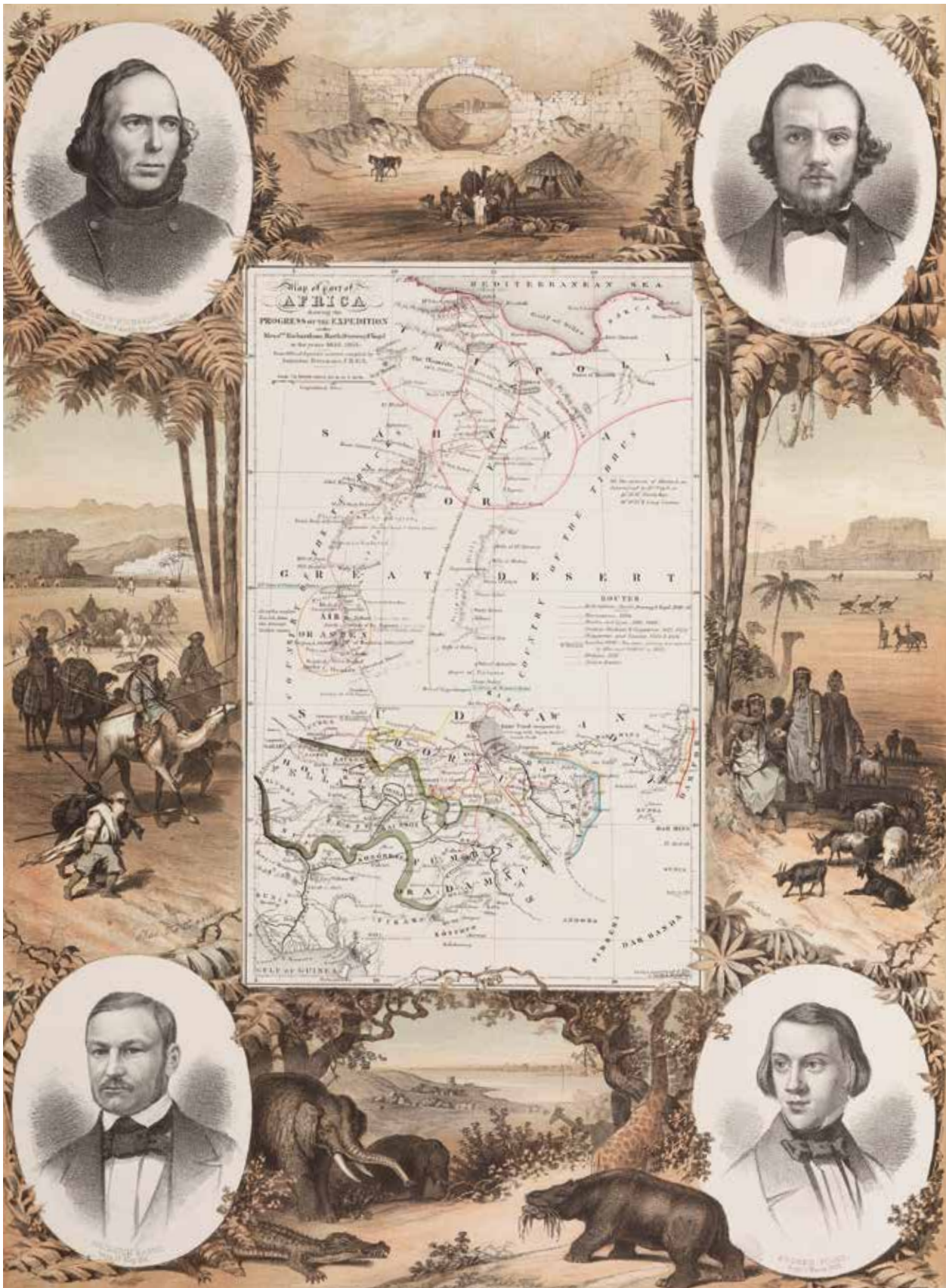
The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities in London
houses a twenty-first-century *Wunderkammer*.

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Maria Sibylla Merian (1647-1717) was an unconventional naturalist and scientific illustrator
who published a major work on the insects of Surinam.







THE DISCOVERY OF CURIOSITY

From Medieval Bestiaries to Early Explorers:

How the Collecting of Exotica Began

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Make sure your hands are clean.

Follow the guide obediently.

Don't admire things that aren't particularly rare.

You'll make yourself ridiculous.

after Casper F. Neickel, *Museographia*, 1727

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Why does anyone collect exotica? At a guess, because nature has more imagination than man; because we're intrigued by the wonders of the natural world, particularly those things that are very rare or that we've never seen before. How else can we explain the popularity of television channels such as National Geographic and Discovery Channel? What are natural history programmes but exotica on film? For some, simply looking was not enough; collectors of exotica tried to improve on nature by arranging their specimens in a *Wunderkammer*, a 'chamber of wonders' or 'cabinet of curiosities'. Or they turned them into something more extraordinary still – a piece of ivory into an exquisite sculpture, a coconut into the support for a piece of virtuoso engraving ...

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This map of Central Africa, a title plate by F. Moras designed by August Heinrich Petermann, shows the European explorers James Richardson, Eduard Vogel, Heinrich Barth and Adolf Overweg who carried out an expedition to Central Africa from 1850 to 1853.

SLIPSTREAM

Man has been intrigued by fauna and flora for millennia. But the urge to collect them is more recent, and the desire to classify and organize specimens of the natural world that are strange and new to us is more recent still. That we put shells or rocks or holiday souvenirs on show in our living rooms today can be laid directly at the door of Vasco da Gama, James Cook, Christopher Columbus and all the less celebrated explorers who not only discovered new worlds but also the plants and animals that inhabited them. They came home full of travellers' tales that were eagerly lapped up by the less intrepid. Some of these stories were true, some were generously embellished, some were complete fabrications. But the result was the same: they inspired an unprecedented passion for exploration. The cabins of those bold adventurers were crammed with exotic and beguiling objects. No one had ever seen such things before. No one had ever studied them. No wonder that people at home were astonished by the extraordinary objects which the travellers brought back. Nor is it any wonder that canny merchants quickly spotted a market for all that exotic novelty. In the slipstream of their mercantile activity a maritime trade developed, a commerce in decorative items collectively known as *exotica* – from shells to minerals, from coconuts to ostrich eggs, from feathers to entire stuffed birds.

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ENTER EXOTICA

In Europe collecting had begun in earnest in the Middle Ages. It was then that western nobles taking part in the first crusades encountered spices and other oriental products. Even before the first great voyages of discovery had set sail – journeys that would herald the end of the Middle Ages – merchants were travelling to Persia and India. By the thirteenth century you would have been able to find prestigious treasuries whose contents included *exotica*. But it was in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that the *Wunderkammer* really became an essential cultural appurtenance, especially for princes, prelates and the contemporary intelligentsia. The concept of collecting as an expression of the changing worldview was then relatively new. Renaissance humanists saw it as a way of bringing the world within grasp – in both senses of the word. And it was necessary to have a good grasp of the latest geographical news, for in that period the known world expanded with every voyage of exploration, as new and exotic lands were discovered. As those lands were claimed for the crown that had sponsored the explorers who found them, Europe's omnipotence as the only civilization was gradually revised. At the same time, the knowledge that those new parts of the world existed aroused all men's mercantile instincts. On a small scale this led to *exotica* in the *Wunderkammer*; on a large scale it led to colonization.

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The first fleet of the second Portuguese expedition to India, led by Vasco da Gama in 1502, in the *Livro das Armadas*.

Partirão pera a India a cinq e anove d'abril / 17 / vellas Repartidas em duas capitãias
 mores. s. Jorje da quiar por capitão mor de / 13 / oytu pera a carga despicaria e cinco
 pera elle com ellas figar darmada na costa darabia. e das quatro moys sia por capitão
 mor diogo lops de sequeyra pera cõ ellas passar ao descobrimento de Malia q. onde dis
 cobrinda a avia de figar cõ ho mesmo titullo de capitão mor. e os capitães de toda s
 eraõ des

Pera ho descobrimento de Malia q.



João nunz. D
Su canalizo da casa.



Goncallo de souza D
que de poye sey meyrinso
do paço del Rey dom Manoel.



Diogo lops de sequeyra D



Hieronimo teyxeira D

Pera a carga despicaria, esta s



João thio piveyra D



João V. carnalço D



Christão da silva D



lionardo



Jorje daquiar D
pordeose de noue
nas fegades teyxoas
na costa s.



Alvaro barreto D



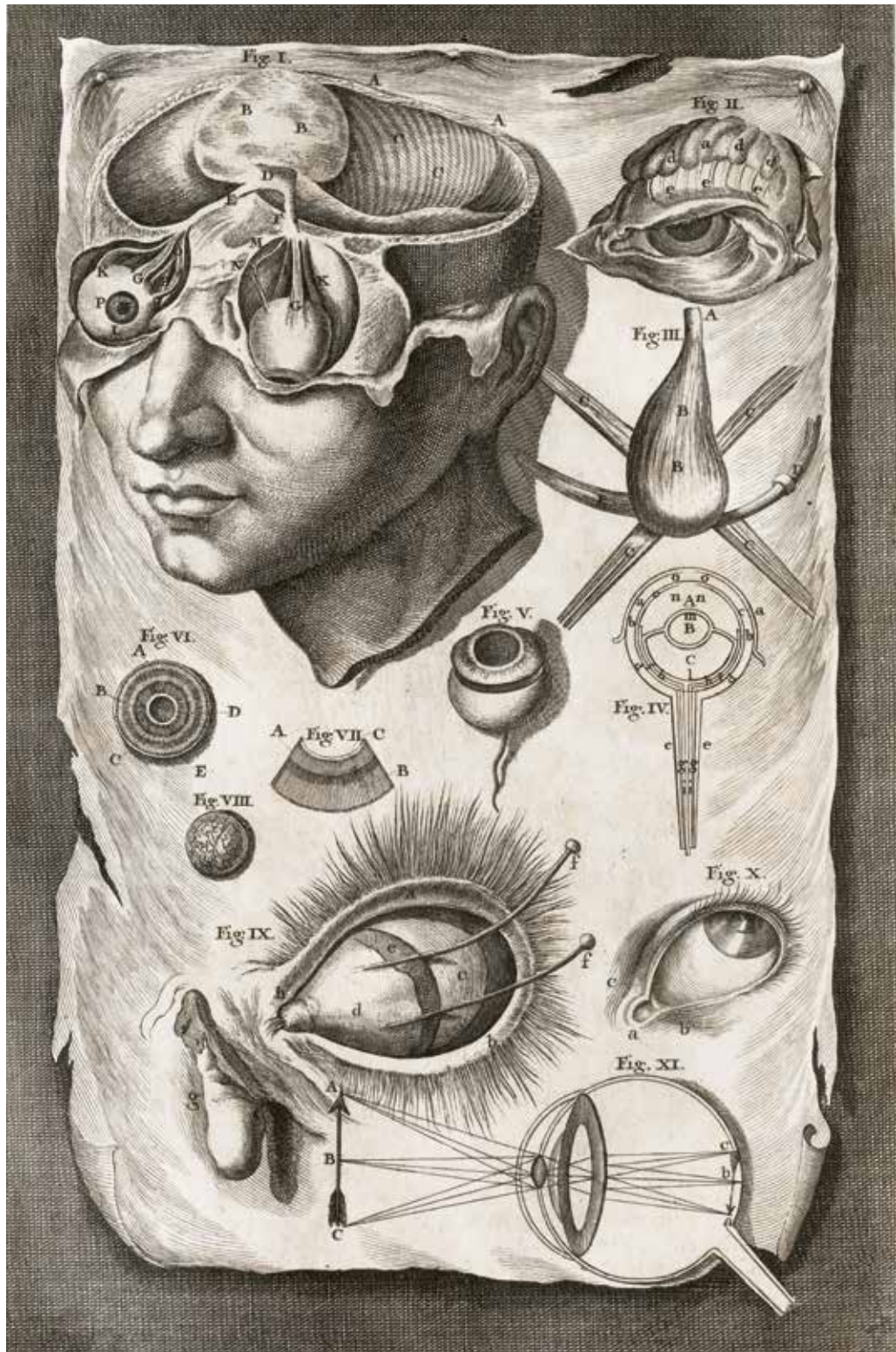
J. piveyra pestana D
m verros em quilloa pera onde
sia por a petho.



João colasso D
Su canalizo da casa de d. lio.



Goncallo mendiz delexito D



Physica Sacra (1731-1735) by Johann Jakob Scheuchzer is a fascinating blend of theology and natural history.

EXOTICA: 1, RELIGION: 0

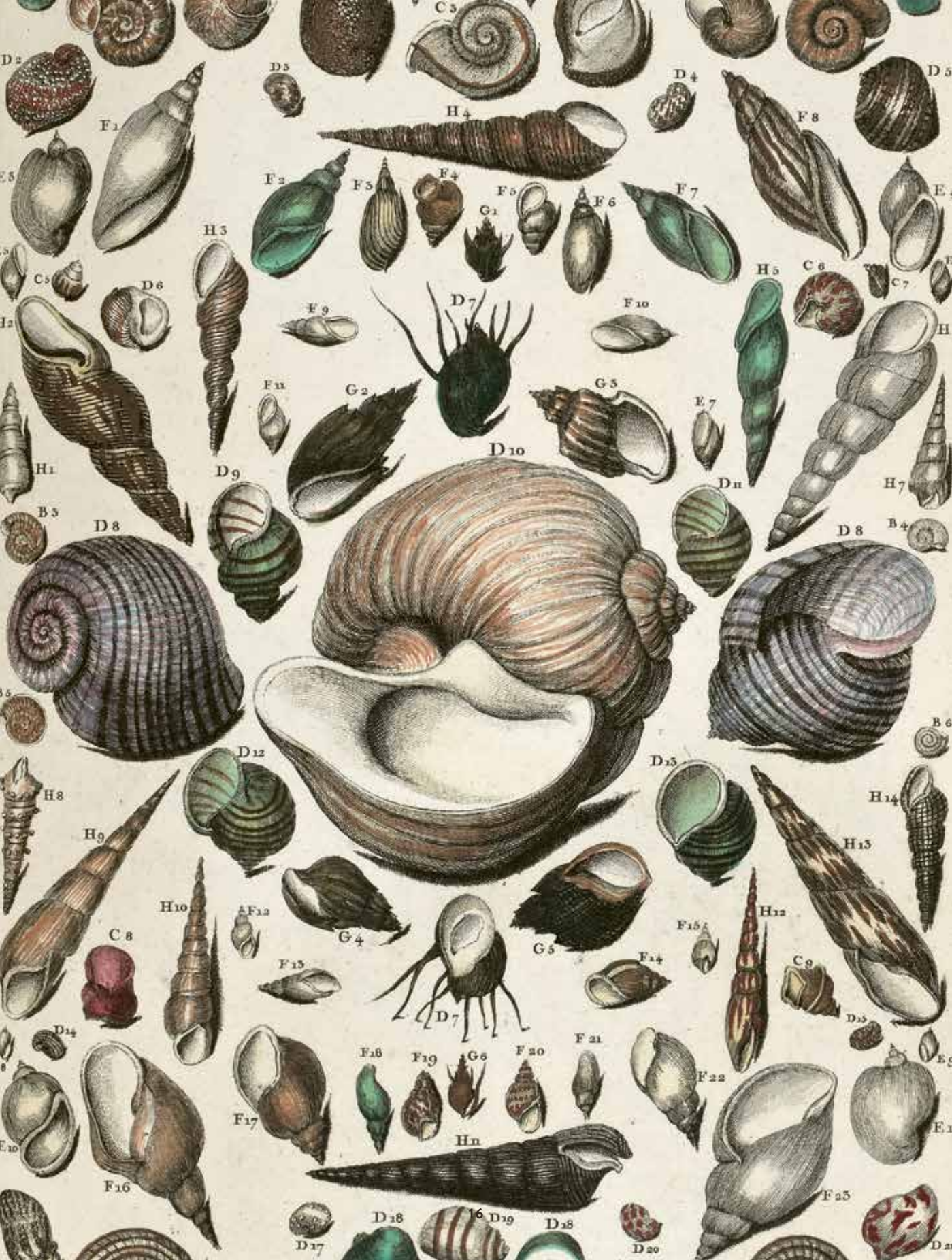
Europe's Renaissance may be seen as a full-blown 'intellectual revolution' – one that was motivated by man, not the Church. Bit by bit, the Church as an institution lost its superiority to science. Faith and knowledge were no longer communicating vessels. As yet, no one had gone so far as to question the biblical account of the Creation. From a religious point of view the merest manifestation of *curiositas* – the very thing that drove the scholar and the collector – was to be deplored. Christianity castigated curiosity, regarding it as a vice. To the French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes (1596–1650), however, faith and scientific progress were not mutually exclusive: God simply existed beside the laws of nature, which science urgently ought to investigate, he thought.

A century later the Swiss physician and natural philosopher Johann Jakob Scheuchzer (1672–1733) was also wrestling with the tension between empiricism and faith. He combined his studies with elements from the Bible, which led to remarkable conclusions. Take his interpretation of fossils, for instance. Scheuchzer, who was renowned for his work as a palaeontologist, believed fossils to be leftovers from the Flood. His *Kupfer-Bibel* (or *Physica Sacra*, published between 1731 and 1735), was a commentary on the Bible based on the latest scientific insights of his day. He sought scientific explanations for the exotic animals, plants and miracles mentioned in the Bible – a rationale for Creation, for example, and for the serpent, the apple and the fig leaf in the famous scene between Adam and Eve. His book tried to show that the Bible was 'scientifically correct'. Not everyone was pleased by this, however; the Church labelled Scheuchzer a heretic.

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NEW HORIZONS

The explorers of the late fifteenth century seem not to have been unduly worried about the 'sinfulness' of the curiosity that impelled them on their adventures, and they continued to set off into the unknown. Officially, their search for terra incognita was in order to spread Christianity; unofficially, it was a form of western imperialism. A key moment came in 1492 with Europe's discovery of America. The Italian explorer Christopher Columbus (1451–1506) had a hidden agenda for his mission: he was looking for a back door to trade between Asia and Europe, which traditionally went via the Silk Road. He risked his life to find a new westward passage to India – driven by the spirit of adventure, no doubt, but also by an underlying economic purpose. In 1492 that mission brought him not to Asia but to San Salvador in the Bahamas. Instead of Japan, Columbus reached Cuba. And although the Vikings had preceded him in the eleventh century, it was Columbus who paved the way for permanent contacts with the so-called New World. It was curiosity that made him broaden his own horizons – and those of the world then known.



SHELL SHOCK

Shells were very highly prized among collectors of exotica. They were not extremely expensive, but they were difficult to find. Ambroise Paré was captivated by them; in *Des monstres et prodiges* (1585) he wrote that 'There are to be found in the sea such strange and diverse kinds of shells that one can say that Nature, chambermaid of great God, plays in fabricating them.' Another influential book for shell collectors was written by the French scholar Antoine-Joseph Dézallier d'Argenville. In 1757 he wrote *La conchyliologie, ou Histoire naturelle des coquilles de mer, d'eau douce, terrestres et fossils*. In it he makes a rather odd distinction between collections of shells and collections of birds. It was perfectly fine to display birds 'artistically', perched on an artificial branch for instance, but shells should be arranged according to class and family, species by species. And the reason for this? Stuffed birds need looking after to save them from vermin, whereas shells neither rot nor decay.

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In 1757, shells collectors could feast their eyes on the superb illustrations in Antoine-Joseph Dézallier d'Argenville's book of shells, *La conchyliologie*.

OLD WIVES' TALES

The medieval world was small: Europe and the Holy Land were the epicentres around which everything turned – even the sun. If there is one document that illustrates the way in which medieval man saw the Earth, it's the Hereford Mappa Mundi, drawn around 1285. This extraordinary world map gives us a detailed picture of the medieval worldview. It's the largest and most valuable medieval map still in existence – so valuable, in fact, that during the Second World War it was moved to a place of safety in a secret location.

The Mappa Mundi was not exactly a map by which to navigate; you couldn't fold it up and take it with you and it wouldn't prevent anyone from becoming hopelessly lost. But there are 420 cities and mythical places on it, such as the Garden of Eden and the Tower of Babel. Take a look at the edges too; there are countless bizarre drawings of exotic plants, hybrid animals and barbarian peoples. In India we see dragons, giants and dwarves; in Egypt a phoenix and a centaur; and in Africa hermaphrodites and amazons. In the Mediterranean a mermaid bobs around. The Turks are set down as 'descendants of Gog and Magog; a barbarous and unclean race devouring the flesh of youths and abortions'.

'At the farthest reaches of the world often occur new marvels and wonders,' wrote the English monk Ranulph Higden (1280–1364), 'as though nature plays with greater freedom secretly at the edges of the world than she does openly and nearer us in the middle of it.' This bears out what is on the Hereford Mappa Mundi. And it says a lot about what was generally believed then: the closer you came to the fringes of the world, the more exotic were the people, the animals and the plants you'd find there. More outlandish, more frightening, but also more attractive.

That's exactly how Gervase of Tilbury described the world in his *Otia Imperialia* or *Recreation for an Emperor* (1210), written to entertain Otto IV. The diverting book of marvels was an encyclopedia of the 'knowledge' of that time. A 'bagful of foolish old woman's tales' is what the German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) called it in 1700 or thereabouts – which only goes to show that it was still being read 490 years after it was written.

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Google Earth anno 1285! The *Mappa Mundi* shows how medieval man saw the world: Jerusalem at the centre and a miscellany of marvellous creatures on the periphery.





Fabulous sea creatures, Nicolaes de Bruyn (1581-1656).



APPLE SMELLERS

Even now, in the twenty-first century, Gervase's wonderful list of 'exotica from all provinces' is a delight to read. We learn, for example, that the upper Ganges valley is the home of the gangines or 'apple smellers', whose only nourishment is the delicate fragrance of that fruit. And we make the acquaintance of the 'eale' or 'yale', which has one horn pointing forward and one backward. The yale 'comes from India, has a body like that of a horse, the jaws of a goat, the tail of an elephant and horns a cubit in length', Gervase informs us. Mythological beasts and monsters all seem to be denizens of distant climes, however; in Europe they're rather thin on the ground. The *Otia Imperialia* tells its marvelling readers all about phoenixes, dragons and suchlike improbable species. Of course, Gervase had not seen all these extraordinary creatures himself. His book was simply an amusing sampling of earlier sources, borrowing heavily from both the Bible and Germanic and Celtic sagas.

Gervase wrote the *Otia Imperialia* as pure entertainment, so Leibniz may have had a point in refusing to take it seriously. But the bottom line of the medieval book still applies to every collector of exotica (and reader of this book) today: man has an insatiable desire for the new, the rare and the strange. Amazement and entertainment still go hand in hand. How else do you explain the renewed popularity of taxidermy, for example?

RAW FOOD

If there's one thing we have in common with our medieval forebears, it's our penchant for monsters and the monstrous. One of the earliest treatises to catalogue and describe bizarre and exotic creatures was the eighth-century *Liber Monstrorum*. This immensely popular inventory of the outlandish and outré told of cyclops, satyrs, centaurs, cannibals and sciapods (men with one foot so large that they could lie on their back and use it as a sunshade), of ants born 'as big as dogs', sea creatures with the front end of a horse and the rear end of a fish, and 'strange' human races such as Ethiopians and pygmies. The author even claims to have known a hermaphrodite personally ... In all likelihood he had never set eyes on an Ethiopian or, indeed, on anyone whose physical characteristics differed much from his own. When it came to exotic peoples he gave his imagination free rein: 'There is a certain race of mixed nature on an island in the Red Sea', he tells us, 'who are said to be able to speak the languages of all nations. In this way they astonish people who come from afar, by naming their acquaintances, in order to deceive them, and eat them raw.'