

SIGNIFICANT CONNECTIONS

Bravo Damien Hirst!
But why Florence and why that room?

They were my first thoughts after viewing Damien Hirst's diamond encrusted skull, *For the Love of God*, in the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence. The more I thought about the dazzlingly beautiful object afterwards and its location within the Camera of Cosimo de' Medici, which visitors reach by passing through the Studiolo of Francesco I de' Medici, the more I admired Hirst and curator, Francesco Bonami, for reviving a long tradition of displaying rare and curious objects in traditional cabinets. "Cabinet", although originally designating a chest used to keep small and precious items, referred in the sixteenth century to intimately scaled rooms designed to display private collections.

I was one of six people on a bitterly cold January morning to enter the exhibition with great expectations. Public access to the small, barrel-vaulted Studiolo is normally restricted so we had a rare three-minute opportunity to admire its jewel box like interior before being ushered into a completely blackened and enclosed space. For three more minutes we bumped into one another as we walked around the central and only feature of the room – a brightly illuminated showcase containing the artwork. Crouching down to examine the diamond paved interior of the eye sockets, nasal passage and mandible or standing tall to take in the perfect covering of the crania with its central pear shaped pink diamond cluster it was over all too soon. But what an impression it left on the viewer and how long it remained in the mind's eye. It is surely evidence of nineteenth century curator John Parker's defense of the presence of curiosities in the Ashmolean Museum collection. Parker claimed curiosities "*attract people, and when they are brought hither by curiosity, they may stop to learn something better; they may want to know something of the history of the curiosities they have come to see.*"¹ My curiosity took me on such a journey.

The Studiolo was originally part of Cosimo de' Medici's private quarters and was accessible only from his bedroom. Inside the Studiolo two concealed doors lead, by way of secret staircases to his Treasury. Constructed before the Studiolo the Treasury protected his most precious objects and manuscripts in *pietra serena* closets located behind a series of carved walnut doors. When Cosimo began collecting classical manuscripts he unlocked a revival of interest in ancient Greece's pagan deities and myths. From his patronage grew the Platonic Academy that made Florence the keystone of Renaissance learning. Cosimo (1389-1464), his son Piero (1416-1469) and his grandson Lorenzo (1449-1492) were all collectors. The Medici family's walled garden on the Via Larga, contained sculptures, sarcophagi, funerary

¹ Parker quoted in Murray 1904:204.

urns and tomb portraits, portrait busts, medallions, statues, columns, capitals, votive vessels, wall inscriptions and carvings in marble, terra cotta and bronze from Rome, Greece and Asia Minor. The estate inventories of 1464, 1469 and 1492 list the gold and silver coins, medals, antique carved gems and hard stone vessels collected by Cosimo; the marble portraits busts and gold, silver and bronze effigies collected by Piero and the paintings by Uccello, Fra Angelico and Masaccio collected by Lorenzo.

The Renaissance invented the concept of the *Universal Man* that made versatility in performance and breadth of interests the chief aim of education. Renaissance cabinets typically held the natural and artificial objects that fixed humans to the physical world: minerals, fossils, anatomical and botanical specimens, textiles, scientific and musical instruments, ethnographic objects, mechanical automata, gold and silverware, religious relics, wax effigies, death masks, books, coins, gems, medals, maps, miniatures, drawings, paintings, sculptures and manuscripts. The totality of these collections represented the 'theatres of the world' or the world in microcosm, the whole sum of human knowledge. *Cabinets d'ignorance* were created especially for those objects and products of nature, which could not be named or classified.²

The Medici, however profligate, were not the only or the earliest collectors. Pliny in *Historia Naturalis* and Suetonius in his writings mention material preserved in temples by the Greeks and Romans. Achilles' spear was preserved in the sanctuary of Athena at Phaselis and the sword of Memnon in the temple of Æsculpius at Nicomedia. Pliny also records that the bones of two giants, kept as curiosities in the gardens belonging to the Emperor Augustus, were preserved in a *conditorium*, or sepulchral vault.³ Scaurus, the stepson of Sulla, started the Roman fashion for displaying *dactyliotheca* or precious stones. Pompey the Great dedicated King Mithridates *dactyliotheca* in the Capitol, Julius Casear consecrated six collections in the temple of Venus Genetrix and Marcellus, the nephew of Augustus, presented one to the temple of the Palantine Apollo. By the close of the Republic it was fashionable for wealthy citizens to display ancient art works and Vitruvius, writing in the time of Augustus, includes the *pinacotheca* amongst the apartments of a great house.

Medieval Christian churches and monasteries preserved relics, illuminated manuscripts, art works and curiosities acquired from pilgrims or travellers returning from the Holy Land. Objects acquired for reasons of piety and superstition (griffin eggs, tortoise shells, elephant tusk's, antelope and unicorn horn's, meteorites, antediluvian bones and thunderbolts or stone axes) were displayed in a reliquary, chest or cabinet with the dual intention of drawing people into the church and to ward off evil.

² Murray 1904:208.

³ Murray 1904:5.

The founding of the Vatican Museums can be traced back to 1503 when Pope Julius II (1503-1513) placed a statue of *Apollo*, found in 1490, in the ruins of a Roman villa in the internal courtyard of the Belvedere Palace built by Innocent VIII (1484-1492). In 1506 the *Laocöon*, a legendary work of Greek art once owned by the Emperor Titus and described by Pliny, was added to the collection after its discovery on the Esquiline Hill. Cardinal Federigo Borromeo acquired Gian Vincenzo Pinelli's library and collection of globes, mathematical and philosophic instruments, fossils, natural objects and coins upon his death in 1601. The foundations of numismatics were formed by the detailed transcription of the inscriptions on the coins, rings, seals and gems.

During the 1600s the contents of the major European cabinets were published. The catalogues were the textual counterparts of the collections and they were carefully constructed. Material was sorted into paintings and sacred objects, objects made of inorganic material, organic materials (subdivided into earth, water and air), artefacts and material glorifying God.⁴

To describe a natural collection was an attempt to reconstruct the world in all its encyclopaedic completeness and University of Bologna academic cleric, Ulisse Aldrovandi, (1522-1605) published thirteen folio volumes describing his collection in 1599. One volume, *Musaeum Metallicum*, included a description of rocks (including fossil plants, shells and fish, stone axes and flint arrowheads) and earths, minerals and metals.⁵ Michele Mercati of San Miniato (1541-1593), who formed a *musaeum* at the Vatican while he was keeper of Pope Pius V's botanic garden, organised the natural collection under ten headings: earths followed by salts and nitres, clays, stones, sands, semi-metals, metals, bitumens and sulphurs, volcanic productions, corals and marbles.⁶

Supernatural powers were attributed to minerals, stones, metals and fossils. Flint arrowheads or *glossopetrae* were commonly thought to be either human tongues (Pliny), serpent's tongues (turned into stone by the preaching of St Paul), shark's teeth (Mercati, Olivus, Colonna), sea dogs teeth (Niels) or petrified teeth.⁷ *Glossopetrae* occupied a prominent place in the *pharmacopoeia* being principally used as a remedy for snakebite or ground for tooth powder. In 1554 German goldsmiths encased arrowheads in silver and sold them as serpent teeth charms. They were hung around babies' necks to assist dentition and to keep off the 'frights'.⁸ Belemnite was an accepted cure for nightmare and powdered stone axe a cure for jaundice.

By 1650 collecting had become a widespread obsession with cabinets

⁴ Pearce 1996:xii.

⁵ Murray 1904:79.

⁶ Murray 1904:214.

⁷ Murray 1904:68.

⁸ Murray 1904:73

reflecting “*the Renaissance stress on the importance of the individual and the development of contemporary early capitalism with which it went hand in hand.*”⁹ Capitalism advanced knowledge through maritime and colonial enterprise as well as political, scientific and cultural growth. The opening up of the sea route to India, the discovery of the New World, the founding of factories and trading stations in the East and West Indies and on the American continent exercised much influence and aroused a spirit of scientific inquiry. By 1690 Antoine Furetiere’s *Dictionnaire Universel* defined the curious man as a person who had a “*thirst for learning and a desire to look at the treasures of art and nature.*”¹⁰ Thus ownership of a collection marked a curious man from his dull counterpart.

The association of *For the Love of God* with the Studiolo was surely a stroke of intellectual prowess. The room, a combination of paintings on slate (upper register) and panel (lower register), carved and gilded cabinetry, corner niches for bronzes and a ceiling of fresco and stucco work, was commissioned in 1569 and completed in 1575 by a team of over thirty-five artists under the supervision of architect and artist Giorgio Vasari, scholar Vincenzo Borghini and Francesco himself.¹¹ Francesco was a major patron of the sciences, particularly of chemistry. He was the first to melt rock crystal for the making of vases; he succeeded in producing porcelain similar to that of the Chinese. His interests included astronomy, geography, cartography and metallurgy, the distillation of liquors and the development of pharmaceuticals.¹²

The Studiolo’s iconographical program elaborates the complex relations between humans and nature. The central ceiling panel shows *Nature donating a gem to Prometheus* - the Titan who, after kneading some earth with water, made man in the image of the gods. Prometheus gave man precious gems, rings and more importantly fire – the means of subduing animals, manufacturing weapons, warming dwellings and coining money, the agency of trade and commerce. Each wall of the Studiolo corresponds to one the four Elements painted on the vault: air, water, earth and fire. The wall paintings also operate as mnemonic devices: the oval panels in the lower register act as cabinet doors visually revealing the contents of the wall closets they physically conceal.

Some of the mythological themes include: *Perseus and Andromeda* (Giorgio Vasari), *Ops*, *Circe and the Companions of Ulysses*, the *Fall of Daedalus and Icarus* (Maso da San Friano), *Apollo leaning on his Lyre* (Lorenzo dello Sciorino) *Hercules and Ladon*, *Danae* (Bartolomeo Traballese), the *Sisters of Phaeton*, *Hercules and Iole* (Santi di Tito), *Jason and Medea* (Girolamo

⁹ Pearce 1996:xi.

¹⁰ Pearce 1996:xi.

¹¹ Schaefer 1982:125.

¹² Cesati 1999:97.

Macchietti), the *Forge of Vulcan* (Vittore Casini), the *Sack of a City* (Niccolo Betti) and *Lavinia at the Altar* (Mirabello Cavalori).

The water wall features *Moses and the Red Sea* (Santi di Tito), *Collecting Ambergris* (Giovanni Battista Naldini), *Diving for Pearls* (Allessandro Allori) and the *Baths of Pozzuoli* (Girolamo Macchietti). *The Banquet of Cleopatra* (Allessandro Allori), *Alexander and Campaspe* (Francesco Morandini) and Giovanni Battista Naldini's *Allegory of Dreams* emphasize the connection between the Studiolo and the adjoining bedroom.

Many paintings document the Prince's patronage: he visits the city's *Armory* (Ludovico Buti), *Bronze Foundry* (Francesco Morandini), *Gold Workshop* (Alessandro Fei), *Glass Workshop* (Giovanni Maria Butteri) and *Wool Factory* (Mirabello Cavalori). Jacopo Coppi's *Invention of Gunpowder* and Giovanni Stradano's *Alchemy Laboratory of Francesco 1* reinforce his scientific interests.

Under the Element of air is the image that has the greatest resonance for the exhibition: Maso da San Friano's *Diamond Mine*. Centrally located between Bronzino's portrait of *Eleonora de' Toledo* (Francesco's mother) and the *Fall of Daedalus and Icarus* it is one of the first images visitors see. Borghini conceived it as a "bizarre and extravagant painting"¹³ and because he was unsure how diamonds were found or extracted it is a fabulous diamond mine too: rugged mountains stretch skyward and the miners attached to the scaffold by cords and rope ladders have only to peck the facets "like woodpeckers"¹⁴ and diamonds fall to the ground.

Diamonds of course have a more significant connection with the Medici family. The pyramid cut diamond ring (a symbol of eternity, loyalty and union) is possibly the most famous and recurrent personal device used by successive Medicean generations. The diamond (from *deo amante*, "through the love of God") is shown on its own or as a number of interlocked rings in the Borromeo fashion. Medallions struck for Cosimo and his grandson, Lorenzo, depict three interlocked diamond rings and the motto SEMPER, meaning 'always'. Piero's personal crest consists of a falcon holding a diamond ring in one of its talons, probably symbolizing strength, fidelity, faithfulness and bravery.¹⁵ The associated motto FA CON DEO AMANTE (Do all for the love of God) sounds very similar to *Falcone diamante* (falcon and diamond).

Now how clever is that? Firstly, Hirst creates an iconic piece and he titles it, *For the Love of God*, thus fusing it's association forever with Medicean devices and the concept of diamonds and perpetuity or SEMPER. Secondly, he exhibits the artwork in a former Medicean cabinet. This connection is

¹³ Cecchi 1979:173.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Coughlan 1971:17.

perhaps the most meaningful given the beauty of the piece is matched by the splendor of the Palazzo Vecchio. It is also the most acute – the setting and the associations, values and meanings linked to the Palazzo enhance the artwork’s unquestionable cultural significance. Hirst has spent on a scale both lavish and unprecedented and the artisans who created the artwork in 2007 follow a long Florentine tradition of creating aesthetically pleasing objects. It is arguable that the Bond Street jeweller, Bentley & Skinner, is the modern day equivalent of the *bottega*, or workshop, where such pieces were created during the fifteenth century.

But possibly the cleverest exhibition conceit of all is that both the Studiolo and the skull are marvellous curiosities, modern day ‘fakes’ akin to ‘furried fish’ albeit without problems of authenticity. Francesco started to dismantle the Studiolo only a few years after its completion – transferring the collection to the Uffizi. The room that is visible today was reconstructed in 1910 with the original materials based on information revealed in the letters written by Borghini to Vasari.¹⁶ And while the room is fascinating it is a fabrication. In a similar way *For the Love of God* is not a diamond encrusted ‘skull’. It is a complex piece of craftsmanship: a perforated platinum mould, multi-sectioned and pave-set with 8601 flawless diamonds. The mould is biometrically matched to a human skull belonging to an 18-35 year old male of European/Mediterranean ancestry who died sometime between 1720 and 1810.¹⁷ Purchased through an Islington taxidermist the only real connections we have with that individual’s triumph over death are his teeth.

For the Love of God, in its general conception and especially in its use of diamonds to express deep emotion, is undoubtedly a source of pleasure and satisfaction to all who see it. And, although Hirst repeatedly linked the skull to Horace’s expression, “I once was as you are. You will be as I am.”¹⁸ he was clearly unable to make the cerebral connection work – the skull’s incredible radiance somewhat undermines the ready identification with death or *vanitas*. The connection that does work though is the old and established one between public curiosity, celebrity and immense wealth.

For the Love of God has only been shown twice. Its inaugural exhibition in 2007 was at White Cube in London followed by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 2008. It’s Florence season will close on 1 May 2011.

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¹⁶ Bucci 2007:39.

¹⁷ Hirst 2007.

¹⁸ Hirst 2007:27,39.

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Image Captions

1: The Studiolo of Francesco I de' Medici, *Florence, Palazzo Vecchio*.

2. *Maso da San Friano, Diamond Mine, Florence, Palazzo Vecchio*.

3. Exhibition Postcard, *Damien Hirst, For the Love of God, 2007, Florence, Palazzo Vecchio*.