

INTRODUCTION

You have come to the exposition titled “The First Natural-History Collections of the Kunstkamera”. Everything here is related to Peter I, his projects and activities, due to which Russia’s first museum was established, lead the way the Russian people to learn the word Kunstkamera. The Kunstkamera accumulated different forms of knowledge about the surrounding world embodied in books and natural and man-made objects (Naturalia and Artificialia). At the tsar’s order the entrance to the museum was free for everyone: “I want people to watch and learn”.

The young tsar felt the importance of educating and enlighten his people during his so-called Great Embassy in 1697—1698, when he travelled around



▲ *Portrait of Peter I. Jan Weenix. 1697 (?)
On loan from the State Hermitage collections.
The artist painted the young tsar’s gala portrait according to the canons of his time,
which implied reflecting the model’s solemnity and valour*

Western Europe and, in particular, during his visit to Holland, which at that time was the largest maritime and trade power in the world. The small country used its huge fleet to colonize new regions of Africa, America, India and Indonesia (East Indies). The ships of the East- and West-Indian Companies returned to Europe with exotic goods, spices and treasures. It was Holland that set the trend for collecting “overseas curiosities” and provided the supply.

The 17th century in Europe is referred to as the Baroque era. This art style was most pronounced in Italy, Spain and Flanders. In Northern Europe it started to develop a little later, and its manifestations were more moderate, but everywhere it involved a passion for rarities and curiosities, and many collections were gathered in the royal courts and in the homes of scholars and owners of large trading companies.

Collection of exotic, previously unseen animals and plants went on an enormous scale. Natural objects were accumulated in “Naturalia” collections, while results of “nature’s mistakes”, as Francis Bacon referred to them, formed “Monstrosities” collections. Collections of “freaks of nature” became a popular trend. Kings and tsars “collected” dwarfs and giants in their courts. Famous artists painted their portraits, and scholars described them in their academic works.

The fanciful atmosphere of Baroque *kunstkameras*, where various wonders and rarities were accumulated, could leave no one indifferent. Foreigners who visited Russia’s young capital were astounded by the richness of collections of the St. Petersburg *Kunstkamera*. It was hard to imagine how such extensive and diverse collections could be accumulated in just a couple of decades. Unlike many other European collections, the St. Petersburg *Kunstkamera* was open for the public, and in 1727 a magnificent building was erected in the very centre of Russia’s new capital to accommodate the museum. Peter the Great viewed the creation of this museum as an important mission, since at that times the size and diversity of collections proved not only to the power of a state, but also to the high level of enlightenment of its sovereign. Since the very beginning, the acquisition of collections for Peter’s museum was of national-wide importance, which is evidenced by a number of special decrees issued by the tsar. According to Peter’s plan, the museum was to play a crucial role in the education and enlightenment of the people of Russia, and had to form the basis for the St. Petersburg Emperor’s Academy of Sciences and Arts (established ten years after the museum’s foundation), and the University.

A Short Description of the City of St. Petersburg and the Visit of the Polish Embassy in 1720 contains vivid descriptions of Russia’s first museum and its collections at the time when they were still exhibited in boyar Kikin’s Mansion when the museum building was still under construction. Beyond doubt, the anonymous author of these descriptions was greatly impressed by the museum:

“Outside the city, in the direction of the monastery, on the Neva River banks there is a small stone palace, where his Royal Majesty showed us his Anatomy. He had bought it somewhere in Holland, from some famous Dutch doctor. <...> This is a two-storied palace that stands on a beautiful plain, and you can see a wide overview of it. Through the inner porch you come to a room, where numerous glass vessels are exhibited in showcases. Inside them, are babies’ heads (aged 1 to 3 years), kept in spirit, they look as fresh as if they were alive. Some look at you with eyes as real, as if nothing ever disturbed their gaze, although they have been there for several years. Some look as if they were bleeding, and you have the feeling that they have just had their heads cut off. Some bottles contain arms and legs, and you can see blood vessels through the skin, as if they

were still alive. In the next room, glass jars illustrate the development of human foetus from when it is an embryo and until it is born. Also, there are different monsters, both of human and animal origin, as well as other curiosities and rare animals: stuffed elephants, basilisks and fishes, and dried fishes with amazing muzzles.

The collection of animal samples kept in bottles is as rich as that of human samples. There are also many birds of various types and colours. Here you find ostriches, red storks, vultures, Indian crows, three types of parrots and many other birds whose names are unknown. We were shown various small birds: white, red, blue, yellow and so beautiful that the tsar himself kissed them. Among them, some were as tiny as crickets. <...>

The Anatomical collections is to be moved to a palace that is being built behind the big fortress on an island, as the current building is too small, and rarities keep arriving.”

Foreigners who visited the *Kunstkamera* were most impressed by the anatomical preparations that showed intrauterine foetal development. They also noted other curiosities. A French traveller named Aubrey de la Motraye, who visited St. Petersburg in 1726, wrote: “Among preparations and freaks I was shown several foetuses formed in the womb in their natural environment, and then preserved in an artificial environment <...>. All parts and stages of the development, and the intrauterine position at the age of 15 days to 9 months <...> A four-month-old embryo of a Mauritanian girl, whose head is larger than her body <...> A Kalmyk baby approximately nine months old with two bodies and two heads, and well developed organs”.

Some of the visitors’ complimentary responses were expressed in verse. In 1735 Johann Tremmer from Danzig wrote a poem titled *Parting with St. Petersburg*, which contained the following words (below is a word-for-word translation):

*In the Academy, I've seen countless wonders.
First, there is a wax statue of the tsar,
And a cabinet with treasures and curiosities,
That are more valuable than anything else.
There is also the Father of all Globes –
Enormous and legendary.
There is a whole chamber of extraordinary animals,
And a huge skeleton that once was a Frenchman.*

As it has already been mentioned before, Peter’s passion for collecting (as well as his other projects) pursued certain practical ends. While in Holland, he appreciated the educational potential of zoological and anatomical collections, and noted that by studying them one could “acquire systematic knowledge in the natural history domain”. That is why, Peter not only bought there various scientific instruments and apparatus, but also a small collection of “fishes, birds and reptiles preserved in glass jars”. Soon after his return to Russia, he issued a decree, instructing the people “not to conceal” natural-born freaks.

Everything Peter bought during his first travel abroad was sent to Moscow to be preserved by the Apothecary Office. These first collections formed the core of the “Tsar’s Cabinet” and, later, the *Kunstkamera*. When Russia’s

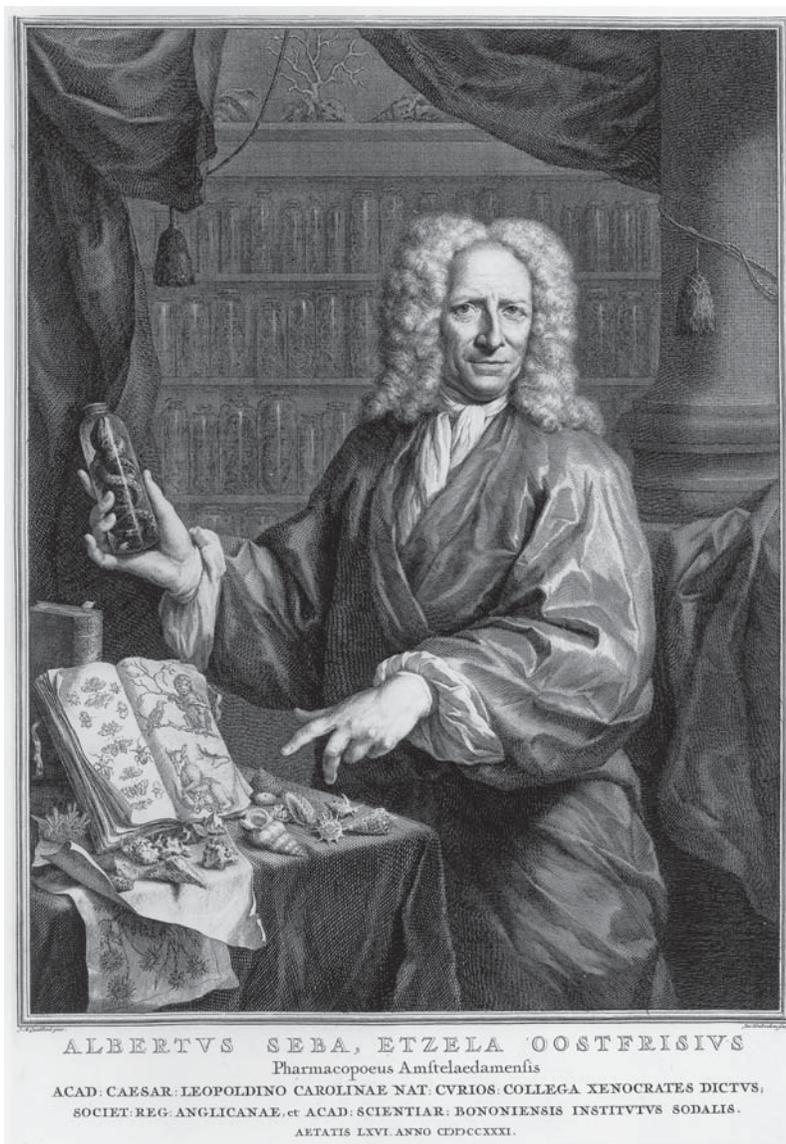


▲ Frederik Ruysch. Print by Jurriaan Pool, Ruysch's son-in-law, (1702)
after his own painting (1694)

capital was moved from Moscow to St. Petersburg, the tsar ordered to transfer there his personal collections including his library. In 1714 all exhibits were brought to the new capital and placed in the Summer Palace. Court physician Robert Areskin, assisted by Johann Schumacher, was commissioned to take care of them. The fact that in 1714 “natural and artificially-made” rarities formed a single collection that was opened for the public, allowed historians to refer to it as the foundation of Russia’s first museum: the Kunstkamera. Later, Peter I bought in Amsterdam his two largest and most famous collections: the collection of exotic animals, fishes, shells and insects that belonged to a Dutch apothecary Albert Seba (1665–1736), and the anatomical collection

and herbarium of an outstanding anatomist Professor Frederik Ruysch (1638—1731). About the same time, the tsar issued a decree “About bringing newborn freaks and discovered rare objects in all towns to Governors and Commandants, about rewarding those who bring them and penalties for hiding them” (1718). This order was rigorously followed everywhere in Russia.

The Summer Palace was too small to accommodate all these collections, and in 1719 the grand opening of the *Kunstkamera* took place in Kikin’s Mansion



▲ Albert Seba. Print by J. Hubraken’s after a painting by Jan Maurits Quinkhard. 1731. Frontispiece of the Ist volume of the catalog of Albert Seba’s collections «*Locupletissimi Rerum Naturalium Thesauri*» (Accurate description of the very rich thesaurus of the principal and rarest natural objects). Amsterdam, 1734



▲ *Kikin's Mansion.*
Modern view

near the Smolny Palace. Now this was a full-fledged public museum, whose mission was formulated by the tsar as educating and enlightening the people. The Kunstkamera opened for the public two times a week (on Tuesdays and Fridays), and the entrance was free. Peter believed that it was right to “teach and treat enthusiasts, instead of making them pay”.

There's a wide spread belief that visitors to the Kunstkamera were offered vodka. However, this is not true. Documents have preserved,

according to which special means were allotted by the tsar to treat noble visitors to the Kunstkamera with coffee and “zuckerbrots” (i.e. “sugar bread”, a dainty popular in Holland) and Hungarian wine. Visitors were welcomed by the “sub-librarian” or other experts, who kindly accompanied them around the museum, showing them the exhibits and providing short explanations. People eagerly visited the Kunstkamera, and there's evidence that it was always “full of people of different ranks”.

Kikin's Mansion also housed a library. Evidence has preserved by a Swede named Lorenz Lange that people could borrow books there. The tsar anticipated that even Kikin's Mansion would soon be too small to accommodate the collections, so in 1718 construction of a special building began on the Vasilievsky Island in the centre of the new capital. The plan was to unite Peter's collections, the library, the anatomical theatre, the observatory and the famous Gottorp Globe under one roof. Putting together a complex of facilities for comprehensive study of the surrounding world was at that time a unique solution that reflected the latest philosophical and scientific trends. The new Kunstkamera was the first public building in St. Petersburg made of stone, and it is the world's oldest building erected specifically for the museum purposes.

Originally, the collections of the Kunstkamera consisted of the following three sections: Natur-Cabinet, Kunst (art)-Cabinet and Münz (coin)-Cabinet. The Natur-Cabinet was the largest of them and occupied the most space. Later, when the Kunstkamera became part of the Academy of Sciences (the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences was founded at Peter's order by the Governing Senate's Decree of January 28th, 1724), its structure expanded: it now consisted of the Kunstkamera itself with the Cabinet of Physics and the Observatory, the Natur-Cabinet with the Anatomical Theatre, and the Münz-Cabinet with the Emperor's Cabinet dedicated to Peter I who died in 1725. Despite the fact that some construction works were still going on, on November, 25th, 1728 the grand opening of the “Emperor's Library with the Kunst and Natural Cabinets” took place. By that date only the hall on the ground floor and the “six special chambers where the Emperor's cabinet was preserved” had been finished. By mid-18th century, the Kunstkamera's rich collections and their classification promoted it to an exceptional position among other European museums. At some point, however, it became no longer possible to preserve the collections of Peter's Kunstkamera intact (like all other such collections of the 17th and 18th centuries). For many of them there was simply not enough space. In 1830s the following museums were established within the Academy of Sciences based on the collections of the Kunstkamera:



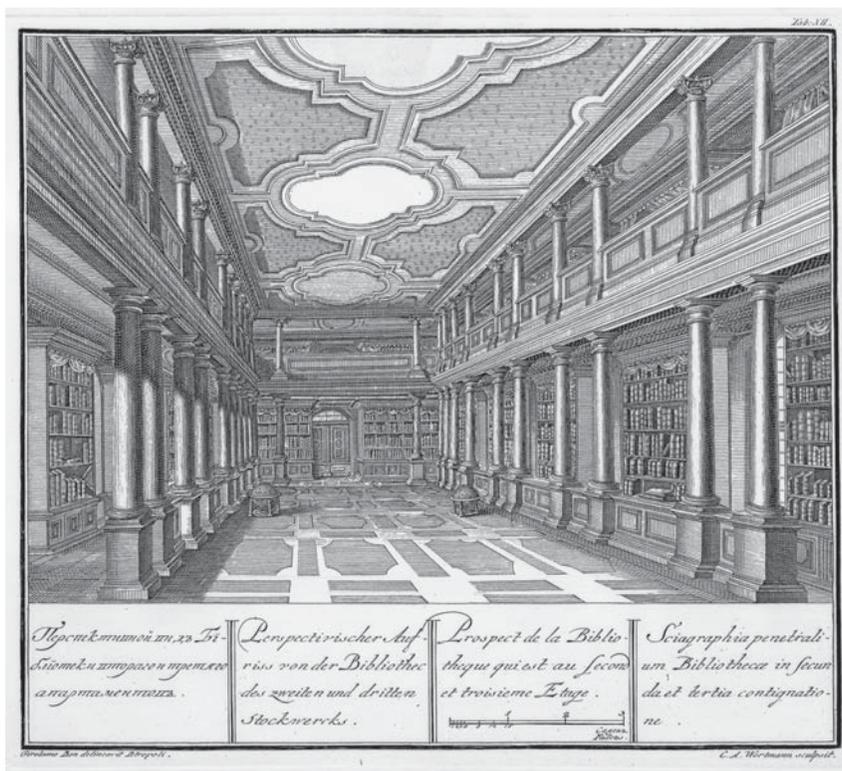
▲ *Kunstkamera building, view from the yard side.
The unknown engraver from drawing of the artist of school O. Elliger. 1730th*

the Zoological, the Botanical, the Mineralogical, the Ethnographical, the Egyptian, the Asian and the Museum of Numismatics. Many exhibits were transferred from the Kunstkamera to the Emperor's Hermitage (1848, 1851, 1859, 1894), to the Tsarskosel'sky Arsenal (1851) and the Armoury (1810). Thus, the Kunstkamera based on the tsar's "chamber of curiosities" of the 17th century gave life to many Russian museums and enriched numerous collections.

The exposition called "The First Natural-Scientific Collections of the Kunstkamera" is located in a room decorated in the Baroque style. This room once used to house the library that formed the basis of the present-day Library of the Academy of Sciences. This is the only room in the museum where 18th-century décor has preserved. In 1747 a fire destroyed most of the interiors and the wooden tower that crowned the building. During the restoration works, many interiors were re-decorated. In 1757 an artist named A. Ganni created a moulded plafond pattern in a room located on the first floor of the eastern wing. Later, in late 1770s, sculptor Pavlov added two high reliefs: "Feasting Europe" and "Triumph of Russia". The plafond and the high reliefs have been preserved until our times. Many early European museums of the 16th—18th centuries were decorated in the Baroque style, so that the interiors and the expositions supplemented each other.

On this exposition you can see the first natural-scientific collections of the Kunstkamera. Along the wall facing the Neva River, there are showcases containing the preparations of the Dutch anatomist Frederik Ruysch, and along the opposing wall showcases with "monsters" and freaks collected at Peter's decree of February 13th, 1718 are located.

The large showcases in the middle of the room tell about the work of Frederik Ruysch (showcases #11 and #13) and his contemporaries: the collector



▲ *Perspective view of the library (second and third sections).
 Print by Christian-Albert Wortmann after a drawing by A. Schumacher. 1741
 From the album «Chambers of the Emperor's Academy of Sciences, the Kunstkamera and the Library»*

and chemist Albert Seba (showcase #11), artist Maria Sybilla Merian and her daughter Maria-Dorothea, who came to St. Petersburg with her husband Georg Gsell and worked in the Kunstkamera as a decorator (showcase #15).

Several large showcases contain exhibits illustrating the interests and occupations of Peter I, the founder of Russia's first museum. In showcase #12 one can find his decree ordering to collect "monsters" as well as the earliest preparations of dead inborn freaks brought to the Kunstkamera. In showcase #18 exhibits reflecting Peter's interests are placed and in showcase #19 you can see the tsar's personal clothes and tools. The exhibition also contains objects related to the foundation of the Academy of Sciences established according to Peter's plan, and the first years of its existence (showcase #17). However, since in the 17th-century Europe anatomy aroused great interest, most of Kunstkamera's first natural-history collections consisted of anatomical preparations. So why was everyone suddenly interested in the constitution of the human body? Most probably, this was due to the fact that for many centuries it had been prohibited by various religions, although the body is the only thing that people possess from birth until death. Not only the exhibits in showcase #15 tell about the development of anatomy, but also an interactive program (the screens are located opposite showcases #11 and #12). By touching the screen visitors can call up a menu and browse, for example, to the beautiful illustrations to a book titled "The Factory of the

Human Body” written in 1543 by Andreas Vesalius (1514—1564), a reformer of anatomy, or to see images of people with inborn deformities from the book of an Italian biologist named Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522—1605). This program also represents the first cabinets and private museums established by collectors in Naples, Paris, Copenhagen, Vienna and Amsterdam, and allows getting an impression about the ways of preservation and exposition of exhibits in the early *kunstkameras*.

Many parents who want to see the museum’s collection of monster embryos bring their children with them. High-school students, who already know the basics of anatomy, procreation and genetics, usually take a good look at the preparations. However, anatomy and teratology are alien and incomprehensible for younger children. We suggest that parents focus younger children’s attention on stuffed animals represented on the exposition. You can read the animals’ names indicated on the labels, or the corresponding sections from this guide-book that provide information on where an animal lives, what it feeds upon, etc. The presence of corals, fishes and animals on this exposition is not accidental: originally, the zoological collections of Albert Seba, as well as the zoological part of Ruysch’s collection and other suchlike exhibits, were on display in the *Kunstkamera*, and it wasn’t until much later that they were transferred to the newly created Zoological Museum.



▲ *Anatomical composition by F. Ruysch. Illustration to the 10th volume of the catalog of Ruysch’s collection*