The importance of touch in cabinets of curiosities and the early museums

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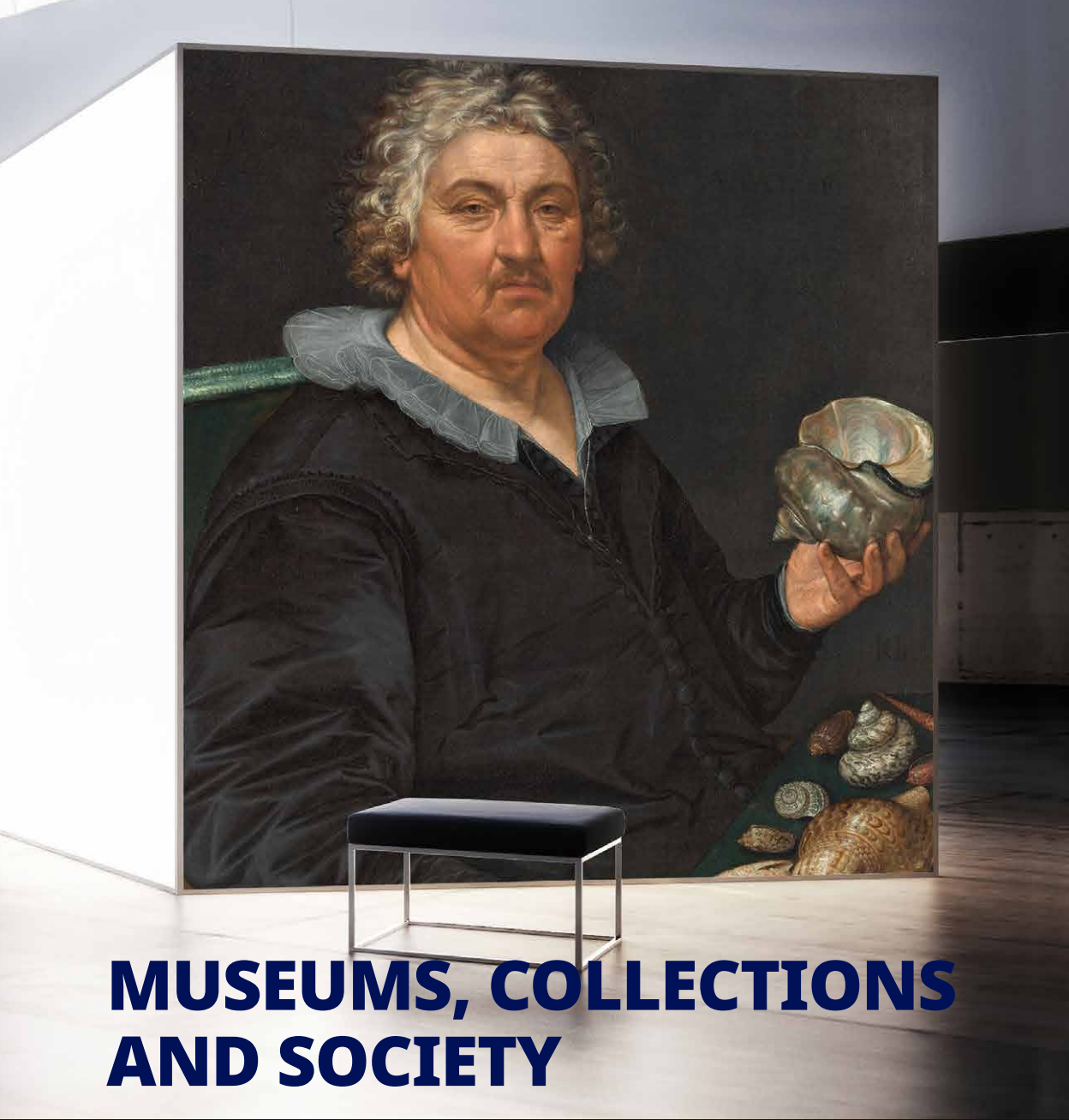

MUSEUMS, COLLECTIONS AND SOCIETY

YEARBOOK 2023

Holly O'Farrell and Pieter ter Keurs (eds)

Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

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Contents

The Importance of Touch in Cabinets of Curiosities and the Early Museums

Stijn Bussels[1] & Bram Van Oostveldt[2]

This article aims to draw an initial and therefore preliminary picture of the importance of the sense of touch at two key moments in the European history of collecting. By putting our main focus on the early modern cabinets of curiosities, with special attention for the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, we will show the long history of evoking a personal experience with extraordinary objects and shed new light on how these cabinets functioned as precursors of the early museums of the second half of the eighteenth century. We want to make clear that touch is important for interacting with the collections, although we cannot deny that the objects were not always really touched, but often only touched in the imagination. Therefore, Alois Riegl's concept of *Nahsicht*, often translated as "haptic perception," serves as a starting point for us. While his concept *Fernsicht* refers to an optical perception from a distance and is mainly associated with architecture, *Nahsicht* is characterised by proximity to the object.[3] This proximity leads to a direct relationship with the observed object. For this, Riegl refers to oriental carpets, among others, but also to miniatures. With this second example, he makes it clear that the haptic is not limited to only tactile perception, but that sight can also generate a straightforward experience from the proximity of the object, with the eye touching the object, as it were. Riegl speaks of "the plane which the eye perceives when it comes so close

1 Leiden University.
2 Ghent University.
3 Ana Araujo, "Feeling through sight: zooming in, zooming out," *The Journal of Architecture* 19, no. 1 (2014), 1-18.

to the surface of an object, that all the silhouettes and, in particular, all shadows which otherwise could disclose an alteration in depth, disappear. The perception of objects … is thus tactile, and in as much as it has to be optical to a certain degree, it is *nahsichtig*".[4]

Cabinets of Curiosities

Research on the early modern *Wunderkammern* or cabinets of curiosities is exhaustive.[5] These cabinets have been associated with crucial transformations in natural history.[6] In addition, cabinets have been linked to identity formation, because individuals from the old nobility to the wealthy burghers constructed *Wunderkammern* to convey good taste, wealth, and influence. In addition, the cabinets also strengthened group identities. Claudia Swan, for example, has pointed to the fact that the objects brought together in such cabinets were the pride of the trading metropolis of Amsterdam and also, more generally, of the Dutch Republic, which could thus profile itself as the centre of the world or the warehouse of the continents.[7]

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4 Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry*, transl. Rolf Winkes (Rome: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1985), 24-25.

5 An early study is Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Spätrenaisance. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Sammelwesens* (Leipzig: Kunstgewerbes, 1908), but the interest in the cabinets of curiosities gained momentum thanks to Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor, *The Origins of the Museums. The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). Other important publications on the topic are among others, Horst Bredekamp, *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine* (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 1995); Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), esp. chaps. 2 and 7; Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature. Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Berkely: University of California Press, 1994); Martin Kemp, "'Wrought by No Artist's Hand.' The Natural, the Artificial, the Exotic, and the Scientific in Some Artefacts from the Renaissance," in Claire Farago (ed.), *Reframing the Renaissance. Visual Culture in Europe and Latin America, 1450-1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 117-96; Joy Kenseth (ed.), *The Age of the Marvelous* (Hanover: Hood Museum of Art, 1991); and Arthur MacGregor, *Curiosity and Enlightenment. Collectors and Collections from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). For studies regarding the cabinet of curiosities in the Dutch Republic, see Ellinoor Bergvelt and Renée Kistemakers (eds.), *De wereld binnen handbereik: Nederlandse kunst- en rariteitenverzamelingen, 1585-1735* (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers, 1992); Eric Jorink, *Reading the Book of Nature in the Dutch Golden Age, 1575-1715* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), chap. 5; and Marika Keblusek, "Merchants' Homes and Collections as Cultural Entrepôts: The Case of Joachim de Wicquefort and Diego Duarte," *English Studies* 92, no. 5 (2011): 496-507.

6 Mark Meadow, "Introduction," in *The First Treatise on Museums. Samuel Quiccheberg's* Inscriptiones, *1565*, trans. Mark Meadow and Bruce Robertson (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2013), 1-41.

7 Claudia Swan, *Rarities of These Lands. Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Dutch Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), chap. 3. For a discussion of still lifes and their expression of international commerce, see Julie Berger Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007). Cf. Jochen Sander (ed.), *The Magic of Things. Still-Life Painting 1500-1800* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008).

For our interest in the role of touch, Surekha Davies's essay in the volume *Early Modern Things* provides interesting insights as she points out the importance of the tangible presence of the objects collected in the cabinets:

> Rather like world maps and costume books from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and casta paintings from the eighteenth century, such cabinets provided viewers with a visual encyclopedia with which to think comparatively about the world's peoples and their entanglements with nature. However, cabinets were distinctive in two ways: first, they allowed their viewers to experience great distance, space, time, and culture via physical things in a compressive space and not merely via representations (although images and descriptions also circulated). Furthermore, fleshwitnessing in a cabinet was an efficient way to acquire "unique" and "admirable" expertise.[8]

Davis has borrowed from Yuval Noah Harari the concept of "fleshwitnessing," which complements "eyewitnessing," to describe the impact of the objects in the cabinets of curiosities.[9] Both concepts focus on direct perception, but while eyewitnessing is characterised by objectivity attributed to the knowledge that can be derived from it, fleshwitnessing indicates subjectivity, more specifically the intense experience of sharing time and place with a rare object from a distant past or place. The concept of fleshwitnessing is thus close to Riegl's *Nahsicht* but adds the character of personal involvement to the haptic perception of objects.

The intensity of the experience is provoked by the paradoxical combination of tangibility and the unfathomability of the objects which are for a reason called curiosities and wonders. The famous Danish collector Ole Worm wrote in a letter from 1639: "I conserve [the things in my cabinet] well, with the goal of, along with a short presentation of the various things' history, also being able to present my audience with the things themselves to touch with their own hands and to see with their own eyes, so that they may judge for themselves how that which is said fits with the things, and can acquire a more intimate knowledge of them all."[10] So Worm addresses *Nahsicht* avant-la-lettre by combining the senses of touch and vision. Moreover, whereas it is hard to abstract precisely what the collector meant by "intimate knowledge," fleshwitnessing is part of the perceptional modus he intended for his visitors.

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8 Surekha Davies, "Catalogical Encounters. Worldmaking in Early Modern Cabinets of Curiosities," in Paula Findlen (ed.), *Early Modern Things. Objects and Their Histories, 1500-1800* (London: Routledge, 2020), 231.

9 Yuval Noah Harari, "Scholars, Eyewitnesses, and Flesh-Witnesses of War: A Tense Relationship," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 7, no. 2 (2009), 213-28.

10 Translated from the Danish by Valdimar Hafstein, "Bodies of Knowledge. Ole Worm and Collecting in Late Scandinavia," *Etnologic Europaea* 33 (2003), 9. Quoted in Swan, *Rarities*, *op. cit.* (note 5), 102.

Fig. 1.1: Hendrick Goltzius, *Jan Govertsz. van der Aar,* ca. 1603. Oil on canvas, 107 × 82 cm. Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

In the Dutch Republic the cabinets were meant to be similarly perceived. In 1628, a year after the death of the Leiden pharmacist, botanist, and collector Christiaen Porret, the objects from his *Wunderkammer* were offered for sale. The title of the auction catalogue read: "Exceptional items or rarities and rare sensualities [*uitgelesen sinnelickheden*] such as Indian and other foreign conches, shells, terrestrial and sea

creatures, minerals, and also strange animals; as well as some artfully made handicrafts and paintings, which Christiaen Porret, pharmacist of late, assembled in his cabinet."[11] By describing the collection as *sinnelick*, the catalogue notes that the auction offers concrete objects that can be straightforwardly perceived.[12] Moreover, *sinnelick* also implies charming and beautiful, as well as sensual and sentient. So we are dealing with a set of exceptional objects that are tangibly present and whose beauty knows how to charm. Moreover, the *Wunderkammer* overwhelmed not so much by establishing a direct contact with one specific distant past or place as by the tangibility of a wonderful world that could only be evoked within the four walls of the cabinet.

Sensual Shells

In Hendrick Goltzius's portrait of Jan Govertsz. van der Aar, the tactile contact with objects is at the centre of attention (Fig. 1). Full of self-confidence, the Haarlem merchant and collector looks us straight in the eye, but his contact with his collection of shells is defined by touch. Van der Aar was a famous *liefhebber van fraeyicheyden*, a "lover of beautiful things,"[13] a phrase often used to name owners of curiosity cabinets. In another depiction of van der Aart, the emphasis is more explicitly placed on how his sense of touch may be related to his loving relationship with the collection. In a 1607 painting by Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, van der Aar takes centre stage seated at a table surrounded by allegorical figures of peace, the arts, and the sciences (Fig. 2).[14] Jan Blanc identifies the men closest to van der Aar as the artists

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11 "Sonderling-Heden oft Rariteyten ende Wtgelesen Sinnelickheden van Indiaensche ende ander wtheemsche Zee-Horens/ Schelpen / Eerd ende Zeegewassen / Mineralen / ende oock vreemde Gedierten; mitsgaders eeinighe constichlijck ghemaecte handwercken ende schilderijen / Die Christiaen Porret, wijlen Apoteker / in zijn Cunstcamer vergadert had." Translation and discussion in Swan, *Rarities, op. cit.* (note 5), 100. Cf. Roelof van Gelder and Jaap van der Veen, "'Een Kunstcaemer aan de Breestraat.' Rembrandt als liefhebber van kunst en rariteiten," in *Rembrandts Schatkamer*, ed. Bob van den Boogert (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers, 1999), 30-31; Thijs Weststeijn, "Introduction: Global art history and the Netherlands," *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 66 (2016), 13.

12 See lemma "zinnelijk" in the online version of the *Woordenboek der Nederlansche Taal*, accessed February 2, 2024, https://gtb.ivdnt.org/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=WNT&id=M089309.re.1&lemmodern=zinnelijkheid&domein=0&conc=true.

13 Swan, *Rarities, op. cit.* (note 5), 23-25. Cf. Claudia Swan, "Liefhebberij: a market sensibility," in Inger Leemans and Anne Goldgar (eds.), *Early Modern Knowledge Societies as Affective Economies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 141-64.

14 Due to lack of a high-resolution picture, we cannot reproduce the original painting: Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *Allegory of the Arts in a Time of Peace*, 1607. Oil on canvas, 70 × 92 cm. Private collection of Lord Sackville, Knole House, on loan to the National Trust UK. Lawrence W. Nichols, "Jan Govertsz. van der Aar. On the Identification of Goltzius's Patron," *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 38 (1987), 241-55; Emil Reznicek, "De achtste tronie van de schelpenverzamelaar," in Anne-Marie S. Logan (ed.), *Essays in Northern European Art Presented to Egbert Haverkamp-Begmann on His Sixtieth Birthday* (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1983), 209-12; Pieter J.J. van Thiel, *Cornelis Cornelisz van Haarlem, 1562-1638. A Monograph and Catalogue Raisonné,* trans. Diane L. Webb (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1999), 372-73.

Fig. 1.2: Isaac Seeman, after Cornelis Cornelisz. van Haarlem, *Allegory of the Arts in a Time of Peace*, 1746 (original 1607). Oil on canvas, 175 × 236 cm. Collection Lacock, Wiltshire. © National Trust UK.

Fig. 1.3: Cornelis van Haarlem, *Neptune and Amphitrite*, ca. 1616. Oil on canvas, 71 × 93 cm. Stichting P. en N. de Boer, Amsterdam.

Karel van Mander and Hendrick Goltzius and the composer Jan Pietersz. Sweelinck.[15] But the figure that arouses our interest is the nude female figure at whom van der Aar is staring. Although he has looked away from his shells to gaze at her, he is clearly touching the shells delicately with his fingertips. The woman herself holds a statuette in such a way that the man next to her can touch it while also touching her. This man's attentive gaze only enhances the emphasis on the haptic experience. *Nahsehen* is explicitly portrayed in a constellation between the sensuous shells, the female nude, and the statuette that gives the painting its erotic allure. The erotic dimension is accentuated by the fact that the statuette is most likely a variant of the Cnidian Aphrodite of Praxiteles. The original Greek statue was lost in antiquity, but the countless ancient and early modern copies and variants indicate that the statue was repeatedly linked to sensuality and sexuality.[16] Sculpture features here as an intermediary between the world of the collector and the sensual world of Venus.

The shells must have aroused an erotic longing as the nude figures did. In her contribution to the volume *Conchophilia*, Anna Grasskamp makes it clear that rare shells from the Pacific and the West Indies were considered *invitations au voyage* to places that were unfamiliar but nevertheless sultry.[17] However, both Goltzius and van Haarlem present van der Aar as a confident collector in complete control of his love for his objects. But in another painting depicting Neptune as *liefhebber*, van Haarlem plays a complex game with the foreground and background that results in a tension between the experience of proximity and distance (Fig. 3). As was commonly accepted in the early modern time, among others thanks to the vivid reception of Aristotle's *De anima*, touching an object – and certainly a shell – is an unmediated experience that creates a close relationship between the observer and the observed object.[18] On the other hand, however, holding the shell opens the door to other distant and strange worlds. The exotic shells in the foreground of van Haarlem's painting function as mediators between the viewer's world and the exalted world of the ancient gods. Hence, Neptune can take on the role of a

15 Jan Blanc, *Le siècle d'or hollandais. Une révolte culturelle au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Citadelles and Mazenod, 2019), 66.

16 Stijn Bussels, "Meer dan beeldende liefde: Extreme reacties op Praxiteles' *Venus van Cnidus*," in Stijn Bussels and Caroline van Eck (eds.), *Levende beelden: Kunst werken en zien* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2011), 28-43; Stijn Bussels, "*Da' più scorretti abusata:* The *Venus de' Medici* and its History of Sexual Responses," in Caroline van Eck, Joris van Kessel, and Elsje van Kessel (eds.), *Secret Lives of Artworks* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2014), 38-55.

17 Anna Grasskamp, "Shells, Bodies, and the Collector's Cabinet," in Marisa Anne Bass, Anne Goldgar, Hanneke Grootenboer, and Claudia Swan (eds.), *Conchophilia. Shells, Art, and Curiosity in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 49-71. Cf. Claudia Swan, "The Nature of Exotic Shells," in Bass, Goldgar, Grootenboer, and Swan (eds.), *Conchophilia, op. cit.* (note 15), 21-48.

18 Aristole, *De anima*, 418a3-6, referred to in Frank Ankersmit, *De historische ervaring* (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 1993), 35, accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/anke002hist01_01/.

Fig. 1.4: Utrecht manufacture, *Nautilus Shell with Gilded Silver Mounts,* 1602. H. 27.9 × w. 16.8 × d. 10.8 cm. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 1.5: Willem Kalf, *Still Life with a Chinese Bowl, Nautilus Cup, and Other Objects,* 1662. Oil on canvas, 79.4 × 67.3 cm. © Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

proud collector, and he assumes the same body posture as van der Aar in both his portraits. Love is in the air, for behind him Amphitrite, with her mouth slightly opened, admires her husband's strong body and stares at the shells in his hair. But the painting is disturbing for two reasons: Neptune's hand is out of proportion, and the way the shell and hand are connected has an extraordinary quality. But it is mainly the background that catches our attention and to which Neptune even hints by leaning back. It is the bottom of the deep ocean, painted in a blue and sombre grisaille, where naked women and men carry baskets to collect the shells. Although the bottom of the sea is the actual habitat of the shells, it is also represented as the underworld, populated with the dead appearing and disappearing like the

disturbing shadows of what they once were. The nude female figure on the far right is modelled after the Cnidian Aphrodite, but it is also reminiscent of Euridice, languishing dazed and unaware in the darkness of death.

Exotics in Context

The boundlessness evoked by the haptic experience in the cabinets of curiosities was not limited to shells or statuettes, as all *naturalia* and *artificialia* reinforced each other there. The rich diversity in origin and material did not interfere with this. For example, Anna Grasskamp has pointed out that Chinese porcelain having the same tactility as the exotic shells only enhanced the sensuality and eroticism of the experience in the cabinet:

> By inviting both the gaze and the touch of the hand, ceramic as well as shell vessels offered seductive surfaces attractive to behold and possess. As part of what Jonathan Hay has called the complex "surfacescapes" of early modern collecting, the cups engage the human capacity for erotic response. "Thinking materially" with the body of the early modern beholder, the artifacts' "sensuous surfaces" embody a powerful affective potential in addition to conveying a plethora of metaphorical meanings.[19]

Exotica are not something that exist before they are discovered but arise in the act of discovery.[20] When objects such as shells or porcelain, as well as stuffed animals, lacquerware, and weapons, were taken away from their original environment, the cultural meaning they exerted there also disappeared, but the objects were appropriated by collectors and thus acquired new meaning. The nautilus shell that was mounted in silver or gold illustrates how an exotic object could be created by literally and figuratively containing and disciplining its foreign origin (Fig. 4).[21] Moreover, we move toward a self-profiling through the exotic exquisite.[22] Collectors showed their wealth through the rare, foreign beauty that was combined with

19 Grasskamp, "Shells," *op. cit.* (note 15), 64.

20 Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism. Geography, Globalism, and Europe's Early Modern World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

21 Marsely L. Kehoe, "The Nautilus Cup between Foreign and Domestic in the Dutch Golden Age," *Dutch Crossing* 35, no. 3 (2011), 275-85.

22 Thijs Weststeijn made it clear that the display of wealth using foreign objects, esp. Chinese porcelain, also encountered a certain awkwardness that can be described, in Simon Schama's words, as "the embarrassment of riches". Thijs Weststeijn, "Unease with the Exotic. Ambiguous Responses to Chinese Material Culture in the Dutch Republic," in Angela Vanhaelen and Bronwen Wilson (eds.), *Making Worlds: Global Invention in the Early Modern Period* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023), 436-76.

excellent European craftsmanship.[23] Pride seem to take over from the overwhelming effect of touch – or perhaps not completely?

Let us turn to Willem Kalf, the celebrated painter of so-called sumptuous still lifes (*pronkstillevens*).[24] Through Kalf's special attention to light reflections and shadows, his use of monochromatic backgrounds, and his sophisticated compositions, he draws attention to the materiality of the precious objects, while at the same time depicting the materials in such a way that he arouses a sense of alienation from these objects, although they are tangibly present in the cabinets. In a painting of 1662, Kalf presents a nautilus cup next to Chinese porcelain, an oriental carpet, a Venetian glass, a silver plate and spoon with the auricular ornament, and fresh tropical fruit on a marble table (Fig. 5). The gilded figures mounted on the shell glimmer intensely in the light. At the top, Neptune chases one of his victims by riding a sharp-toothed sea monster, a recurrent motive in actual nautilus cups (Fig. 4).[25] Whereas the cup itself can already be seen as a shape-shifter by simultaneously representing a vessel, a monster, and the sea, Kalf goes further by evoking an even greater boundlessness. He gives the originally stiff statuettes on the cups a more convincing suggestion of movement in his painting, thus competing with famous sculptors and silversmiths. In the triton that forms the foot, the viewer can admire a refinement that cannot be found in the actual objects but that brings to mind grand statues of Atlas carrying the firmament. Kalf might have had the ancient Atlas in the Farnese collection in mind,[26] but, living in Amsterdam,[27] he was more likely inspired by Artus Quellinus's design of a colossal Atlas from the early 1650s that would eventually crown the rear façade of the town hall.[28] If the triton is transformed into Atlas, then the nautilus shell must become the firmament or at least a celestial body. Kalf removes the wrinkles that are normally visible on the surface of nautilus shells after they are processed by European craftsmen, creating a smooth surface on which the light is reflected in soft

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23 To this we can add that, even though the popularity of the nautilus cup went far beyond the Dutch Republic, there it expressed the Dutch power over the seas, for the shells came to the Netherlands thanks to the United East India Company, the precious metal for framing thanks to the West India Company. Michiel van Groesen, "Global Trade," in Helmer Helmers and Geert Janssen (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 166-85.

24 Sam Segal, *A Prosperous Past. The Sumptuous Still Life in the Netherlands 1600-1700* (exhibition catalogue, Delft: Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof, 1988), 185; and Miya Tokumitsu, "The Currencies of Naturalism in Dutch *Pronk* Still-Life Painting. Luxury, Craft, Envisioned Affluence," *RACAR. Revue d'art Canadienne/Canadien Art Review* 41, no. 2 (2016), 30-43.

25 Eugenia Zuroski, "Nautilus Cups and Unstill Life," *Journal 18. A Journal of Eighteenth-Century Art and Culture* 3 (2017), accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.journal18.org/issue3/nautilus-cups-and-unstill-life/.

26 Accessed February 2, 2024, https://mann-napoli.it/en/farnese-collection/.

27 Accessed February 2, 2024, https://rkd.nl/nl/explore/artists/record?query=willem+kalf&start=0.

28 Maarten Hell, "Een gebreidelde Atlas en zijn hemelkloot. De geschiedenis van een stadhuisbeeld," *Oud Holland* 129, no. 3/4 (2016), 131-48.

Fig. 1.6: Anonymous, *Bowl with Lid,* 1620-40. Porcelain, height 16.5 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

shades of yellow and gray, in a manner similar to the moon. Although the smoothness of this moon landscape has lost the tactility of the actual nautilus, the sharp edges of the scrubs and the monster's teeth still evoke an intense tactile vision.

Norman Bryson has argued that Kalf's depiction of objects "indicates a deficiency in the original object that will not be remedied by the supplement but contaminates it and so to speak hollows it out." This has "the unnerving consequence of suggesting a virtuosity that circles endlessly around a kind of void."[29] Applied to our attention to the intense personal experience evoked by touch, we can say that Kalf's presentation

29 Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 126. Cf. Joanna Woodall, "Laying the Table. The Procedures of Still Life," in Angela Vanhaelen and Bronwen Wilson (eds.), *Making Worlds: Global Invention in the Early Modern Period* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2023), 111-37; Zuroski, "Nautilus Cups," *op. cit.* (note 23).

of the objects generates tangibility, but at the same time presents them as intangible. This can also be seen in the way Kalf presents the Chinese bowl taking central stage in the painting. He depicts a precious object manufactured in Jingdezhen, for the European market, only few decades before the painting was made (Fig. 6).[30] Perhaps, it is one of the bowls found in the collection of Amalia van Solms, Princess of Orange.[31] These bowls were admired for the contrast between the characteristically smooth surface of the porcelain decorated in the typical underglaze bleu and the protruding biscuit figures that appear as four couples representing the Daoist Immortals. Kalf, however, does not render these figures, nor the lion that forms a finial on top of the cover, but instead allows them to attract attention with eye-catching red and gold attire instead of white. Kalf emphasizes their brightness and three-dimensionality to such a degree that the original object cannot fully be recognized. The contrast with the texture of the lemon adds an extra layer to the haptic sensation felt by the viewer. In addition, both the biscuit figures and the lemon tend to break up the two-dimensionality of the painting and entice viewers to imagine them as in their own space, inviting them to touch these precious, breakable objects.

Grasping the Past

Mary Helms writes in her essay "Interpretations of Distance" that the "European worldview was forced to accommodate novel concepts of 'distance' identified in time by a new recognition of classical antiquity and in space by the identification of heretofore unknown foreign lands." *Wunderkammern* "were available to effect such control, to keep the pieces – or at least representative pieces – of these expanded cosmological realms literally in hand."[32] We can complement this observation by focusing on the tactile experience evoked by objects from antiquity. Direct contact with ancient coins, jewellery, statuettes, busts, and other artifacts functioned in the early modern period as a starting point for an exploration of the possibilities and impossibilities of making contact with a bygone past.

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30 See Karina Corrigan, Jan van Campen, Femke Diercks, and Janet Blyberg (eds.), *Asia in Amsterdam. The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* (exhibition catalogue, Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2015).

31 Christian Jörg, *Chinese Ceramics in the Collection of the Rijksmuseum, the Ming and Quing Dynasties* (London: Philip Wilson, 1997), cat. no. 31 and D.F. Lunsingh Scheurleer, *Chine de Commande* (Lochem: Tijdstroom, 1989), fig. 37. Several museums have this kind of bowl in their collections, e.g., Musée Guimet in Paris, Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/zoeken/objecten?q=acht+onsterfelijken&p=1&ps=12&st=Objects&ii=3#/AK-MAK-563,3.

32 Mary W. Helms, "Essay on Objects: Interpretations of Distance Made Tangible," in Stuart B. Schwartz (ed.), *Implicit Understandings. Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other People in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 355.

Fig. 1.7: Rembrandt, *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer,* 1653. Oil on canvas, 143.5 × 136.5 cm. Purchased with support of friends of the Museum. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

In his painting *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* of 1653, Rembrandt takes this search for unity across the ages as his theme (Fig. 7).[33] By highlighting a stack of writings in a niche behind a curtain that has been opened, the master shows how Aristotle has left book wisdom behind in order to contemplate the bust of Homer. To this day, the appeal of this work is largely determined by the question where the musings

33 Jonathan Bikker, "Contemplation," in Jonathan Bikker and Gregor J.M. Weber (eds.), *Late Rembrandt* (exhibition catalogue, London and Amsterdam: National Gallery and Rijksmuseum, 2014), 214-33 and Julius Held, *Rembrandt's Aristotle and Other Rembrandt Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

led Aristotle. Rembrandt makes every effort to pose this question as succinctly as possible, but he also makes it clear that it is the touch that leads Aristotle to surrender to his own thoughts. Moreover, it is touch that allows geniuses to meet over the centuries. Once again, we see an object presented as a way of being transported to a different time and place. Rembrandt contrasts this with Aristotle's other hand, which is not touching the bust but nonchalantly resting on a chain from which hangs a pendant depicting his powerful pupil Alexander the Great.[34] Hence, the bridging of the centuries is made the central focus of attention.

In this painting, Rembrandt proves that he can evoke diverse materials like no one else, without having to paint them in minute detail. He excels in creating the folds of Aristotle's sleeves, as well as the reflection of his golden chain, but the depiction of the bust requires our special attention (Fig. 8). White and yellow strokes evoke the marble at the top of the bust, in contrast with the pink tones of Aristotle's skin. Here, Rembrandt indicates the difference between the touching hand and the object touched. However, the Amsterdam master gradually moved away from painting different colours in the bust and Aristotle's figure. In the choice of colour for Homer's hair and neck, as well as his chiton, Rembrandt does not try to evoke the actual colours of a bust. We see red and grey-green tones in the rendering of the chiton, far from a realistic rendering of marble. Although the hand touching the bust differs from the object it is touching, other parts of the bust are equated with the person touching it, as the same colour is used. Consequently, Rembrandt shows both the physical impossibility and the mental ability of the person touching the bust to make contact with the person whose bust is being touched.

In *Rembrandt's Roughness* Nicola Suthor discusses the bust as follows: "The fringe-like, pendent quality of the brush strokes above the base is more suited to the materiality of the cape placed over the philosopher's shoulders than to the bust's marble solidity."[35] Hence, in his rendering of the bust, the master confuses his audience by intermingling sculpture and painting. This intermingling goes beyond the iconographical level. The bold brushwork helps Rembrandt to activate the spectator's tactile vision. Giorgio Vasari and Karel van Mander admired Titian's ability to create the illusion of lifelikeness from afar but that up close viewers were confronted with the material nature of the paint because of the rough brushstrokes.[36] Half a century after van Mander, Rembrandt seems to respond to the invitation to use rough brushstrokes thoughtfully and skilfully in exploring the sculpture's three-

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34 Held, *Rembrandt's Aristotle*, *op. cit.* (note 31), 29-41.

35 Nicola Suthor, *Rembrandt's Roughness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 131.

36 Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, vol. 3 (New York: Abrams, 1979), 1981-2 (quoted in Bikker and Weber, *Late Rembrandt*, 14). Karel van Mander, *Foundation of the Noble, Free Art of Painting,* trans. Walter Melion (Leiden: Brill, 2023), chap. 12, stanzas 23-25. Cf. Walter Melion, "Introduction," in van Mander, *Foundation,* 75-79 and 150-51; Suthor, *Rembrandt's Roughness, op. cit.* (note 33), 17.

Fig. 1.8: Detail of fig. 7.

dimensionality. Indeed, the Metropolitan Museum describes the masterpiece as an "almost sculptural buildup of paint".[37] Moreover, the master matches the style of painting to the subject he is painting, but the original intermingling of sculpture with painting has been reversed. Just as the musing philosopher touches the bust to get closer to the epic poet, viewers are invited to use a haptic perception and approach the painting as if it was a sculpture. In doing so, they get closer to the painter and his so-called *handeling* (handling of the brush).[38]

Nahsehen in the Eighteenth Century

Haptic perception would remain important in the following centuries and certainly in the rise of the museum in the second half of the eighteenth century. In what follows, we will focus more specifically on the historical experience in which *Nahsehen* evoked concrete pasts in museum visitors. However, before focusing on the early museum, we will first further explore the paragone between painting and sculpture as it contextualises haptic perception in this period. This subject gained interest, first with Denis Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles* of 1749, then with Comte de Caylus's *Parallèle de la peinture et de la sculpture* of 1759 and Étienne Falconet's *Réflexions sur la sculpture* of 1768, but the most daring ideas came from the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder.[39] In his *Plastik. Einige Wahrnehmungen über Form und Gestalt aus Pygmalions bildendem Traume* of 1778, Herder states that whereas painting always stays representation, sculpture can become truth.[40] The truth of sculpture resides in the sense of touch

37 "Aristotle with a Bust of Homer," The MET, accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437394.

38 Yannis Hadjinicolaou, *Thinking Bodies – Shaping Hands.* Handeling *in Art and Theory of the Late Rembrandtists* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

39 Anne Betty Weinshenker, *A God or a Bench. Sculpture as Problematic Art During the Ancien Régime* (Oxford-Bern-Berlin: Peter Lang, 2008), 165-175.

40 Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Plastik. Einige Wahrnehmungen über Form und Gestalt aus Pygmalions bildendem Traume* (Riga: Hartknoch, 1778). Translation: Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Sculpture. Some observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream,* transl. Jason Gaiger (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 2002). See Caroline van Eck, *Art, Agency and Living Presence. From the Animated Image to the Excessive Object* (Boston-Berlin-Munich-Leiden: Walter de Gruyter- Leiden University Press, 2015), 120-122.

which enables an immediate contact with the work of art and makes it in a most direct way 'present'. Touch 'animates' sculpture, while painting, according to Herder, lacks immediacy and remains distant. Interestingly for the focus in our essay is the fact that Herder does not so much suggest that sculpture should be really touched to be appreciated. What he actually explores is how looking at sculpture generates a desire in the beholder to touch, comparable to what Riegl will later name with *Nahsehen*.[41] Herder writes:

> Consider the lover of art sunk deep in contemplation who circles restlessly around a sculpture. What would he not do to transform his sight into touch, to make his seeing into a form of touching that feels in the dark? (…) he shifts from place to place: his eye becomes his hand and the ray of light his finger, or rather, his soul has a finger that is yet finer then his hand or the ray of light.[42]

Herder's belief in haptic perception is grounded in the ideal of *Einfühlung* or empathy. As Rowan Bailey remarks, a haptic encounter "with sculpture enables the concept of 'feeling inside' … Herder uses the structure of *as if* to situate oneself inside the space of the 'other', whether that is the mind of another person or a material formation."[43] So, finally, haptic perception not only addresses questions of aesthetics, but also questions of morality. It seeks to establish a 'touching' community in which the relation towards the 'other' – being a person or an object – is fundamentally regulated by our "own bodily feeling, or responses to other bodies." [44]

Herder's notion of haptic perception, both aesthetically and morally, is similar to Diderot's ideal of spectatorship in the theatre. Diderot conceptualizes this as a profoundly paradoxical spectatorship that tries to overcome the limits of sight without actually ignoring those limits. It starts off as distanced and is completely excluded from the representation, but always has the desire to overcome this distanced position. Due to this urge to intrude into the representation, the beholder experiences the representation not only as pure presence, but also becomes emotionally and morally involved. Diderot develops this paradoxical spectatorship and this urge to intrude into the theatrical space already in his first bourgeois drama *Le fils naturel* from 1757. In the prologue to this drama, Diderot informs the reader he witnessed the performance from a hidden position.[45] Thanks to this unnoticed position he perceived the performance as more natural and real. But in the epilogue

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41 See Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects, and Technologies* (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

42 Herder, *Sculpture, op. cit.* (note 38).

43 Rowan Bailey, "Herder's Sculptural Thinking," *Parallax* 17, no. 2 (2011), 77.

44 Bailey, "Herder's Sculptural Thinking," *op. cit.* (note 41), 76.

45 Denis Diderot, "Le fils naturel," in Denis Diderot, *Oeuvres Complètes,* ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: Robert Laffont, 19960, IV, 1083.

to the play, Diderot problematizes this hidden position literally saying that he wanted to leave his hidden position and intrude the scene to become part of it:

> La représentation en avait été si vraie qu'oubliant en plusieurs endroits que j'étais spectateur, et spectateur ignore, j'avais été sur le point de sortir de ma place, et d'ajouter un personnage réel à la scène.[46]

Of course, Diderot does not actually intrude and remains in his hidden corner. He develops an idea of spectatorship that overcomes its excluded position by the urge to intrude without actually realizing this desire. It remains an imaginative act, knowing well that realizing this urge would ruin the entire fiction. This tension is also present in Herder's ideas in *Plastik*. When the desire to touch is realized in actual touch, the imaginative effect of animation would be contradicted and would vanish by the cold materiality of the marble or the bronze.

Touching Objects?

The idea of haptic perception, in which the limits of the sense of sight are problematized, is not only important to understand the spectatorial reaction in the theatre, it equally gives us insight in the experience of visitors in the early museums. Famous in this respect, is the account of the German writer and friend of Herder and Goethe, Sophie von La Roche. On September 6, 1786, she visits the British Museum to see the famous collection of statues, vases, urns, and other objects of the British diplomat, Sir William Hamilton. The description of her visit has become a kind of classic in present-day studies on the experience of art in late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century museums. Most of the time, the account is presented in a shortened version, suggesting a profoundly tactile experience of art that has been lost in the course of the nineteenth century.[47] When we take the quote in its entirety, this suggestion of a straightforward tactile experience becomes, as we will argue, much more complex, but let us first give the quote:

> With what sensations one handles a Carthaginian helmet excavated near Capua, household utensils from Herculaneum, lachrymary Vessels from the Graves of Magna Graeca… There are mirrors too, belonging to Roman matrons, golden

46 Diderot, "Le fils naturel," *op. cit.* (note 43), 1126.

47 See for instance Constance Classen, "Museum Manners. The Sensory Life of the Early Museum," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (2007), 895-914; Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense. A Cultural History of Touch* (Champaign Ill: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 141-142; Kate Smith, "Sensing Design and Workmanship: The Haptic Skills of Shoppers in Eighteenth-Century London," *Journal of Design History* 25, no. 1 (2012), 1-10; and Marcia Pointon "Materializing Mourning: Hair, Jewellery and the Body," in Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley (eds.), *Material Memories: Design and Evocation* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999), 39-58.

earrings, necklaces, and bracelets. With one of these mirrors in my hand I looked amongst the urns, thinking meanwhile, "Maybe chance has preserved amongst these remains some part of the dust from the fine eyes of a Greek or Roman lady, who so many centuries ago surveyed herself in this mirror, trying to discover whether the earrings and necklace before me suited her or not." Nor could I restrain my desire to touch the ashes of an urn on which a female figure was being mourned. I felt it gently, with great feeling, between my fingers, but found much earth mixed with it. The thought "Thou divided, I integral dust am still", moved me greatly, and in the end I thought it must be sympathy which had caused me to pick up this one from so many urns to whose ashes a good sensitive soul had once given life. This idea affected me, and again I pressed the grain of dust between my fingers tenderly, just as her best friend might once have grasped her hand, complaining that she had but ill reward to her kindness, or that her best intentions were misread. And gently I returned the particle I had taken to the rest of the dust, murmuring to myself, "Forgive Hamilton and me for breaking in on your peace". I had become quite attached to that ash and would have liked to bury it somewhere, so as to prevent its being shaken up and fingered again (*nicht mehr betastet werde*).[48]

Since we know that eighteenth-century visits to the British Museum were extremely regulated and were almost always guided group visits[49], it is not very plausible that this quote can be read as an actual account of Sophie von La Roche's visit, nor that she really went with her hands through the ashes of an urn. Her description is a carefully constructed narrative of her desire to touch and to overcome the limits of sight, as well as the limits of time. For instance, the mirror in her narrative functions as a mediator between past and present and announces a transfer from *Fernsehen* to *Nahsehen*. By holding the mirror in her hand, La Roche suggests that she herself wants to try on the ancient jewels, establishing thus a contact between her and a Roman matron. This delicate shifting between imagination and material presence in front of the mirror only functions as prelude in her narrative, before she moves up to the 'real' work, which is going with her hand through the ashes. Here, an animation takes place and the ashes are restored to the wholeness of a young lady who she takes by the hand in what is almost an erotic act. Then, she brings in Hamilton as a character and asks forgiveness for both his and her own indiscretion. She wishes in a

48 Sophie von La Roche, *Tagebuch einer Reise durch Holland und England,* Sept. 7, 1786, 2nd ed. (Offenbach am Main: Ulrich Weiß, 1791), 234-235. For an English translation, see Claire Williams, *Sophie in London, 1786: Being the Diary of Sophie V. La Roche* (London: Cape, 1933), 107-108.

49 For the history of the British Museum, see among other publications Robert G.W. Anderson (ed.), *Enlightening the British. Knowledge, Discovery and the Museum in the Eighteenth Century* (London: British Museum Press, 2003) and David M. Wilson, *The British Museum. A History* (London: British Museum Press, 2002).

protective but also possessive voice that the young girl "nicht mehr betastet werde". Especially this last section suggests an awareness of the problematic of touch in a museum and seems to point at the fact that her experience is not about actual touch, but about the desire to touch, a desire that we also recognized in Herder's haptic way of perceiving.

Torchlight Visits

The notion of *Nahsehen* can also help us understand one of the most theatrical experiences in early museums, the famous torchlight visits.[50] They started in Italy, but were soon repeated throughout northern Europe. In these torch visits, small groups of visitors were led through museums at night while illuminating works of art, especially sculpture, with torches. This resulted in an extreme experience of transcending the boundaries of time and place, as the images in the flickering light gave the impression of liveliness and gave the stone a fleshy quality. Herder and Goethe, as well as Carl August Böttinger, Bertel Thorvaldsen, Madame de Staël, Stendahl, Sir William Hamilton and many others were enthusiastic participants in these torchlight visits presenting it as the best way to appreciate sculpture.

The experience of animating the museum objects was carefully constructed through the alternation and temporalisation in the use of the torchlight as a continuous and moving chiaroscuro. The torchlight visits to the Vatican Museums, for example, followed a specific dramaturgy of light. The whole tour was carefully planned, carefully determining where which attendant should stand and how they should hold their torches to achieve the right effect.[51] The visitors that were kept in the dark show us similarities with the distanced spectatorship in theatre. Similar to Diderot's fourth wall, the torch functions as a focal strategy, drawing all the attention to the sculpture. Goethe writes in his *Italienische Reise* after visiting the Capitoline Museum that the torch highlights the statue making it possible to perceive it in all its nuances.[52] It is the combination of isolating the sculpture on the one hand and the flickering of the light on the other hand that results in the idea that the statues were animated. For example, when Gilbert Elliot-Murray-Kynynmound, 2nd Earl of Minto, together with Thorvaldsen, visited the Vatican Museums in 1821, he wrote:

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50 On the torchlight visits in the early museum, see Claudia Mattos, "The Torchlight Visit: Guiding the Eye through Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Antique Sculpture Galleries," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 49/50 (2006), 139-150; Oskar Bätschmann, "Pygmalion als Betrachter. Die Rezeption von Plastik und Malerei in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jarhhunderts," in Wolgang Kemp (ed.), *Der Betrachter is im Bild. Kunstwissenschaft und Rezeptionsästhetik* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1992), 237-278; and J.J.T. Whiteley, "Light and Shade in French Neo-Classicsim," *The Burlington Magazine* 117, no. 873 (1975), 768-773.

51 Mattos, *The Torchlight Visit, op. cit.* (note 49), 148-149.

52 Johann Wolgang von Goethe, "Italienische Reise," in *Goethe Werke,* ed. Erich Trunz (München: Beck Verlag), vol. 11, 439.

Fig. 1.9: Benjamin Zix, *Torchlight visit by the Emperor and Empress,* ca. 1804-1811. Grey ink, brown wash, graphite, pencil, 260 × 290 mm. Paris, Louvre.

> I had always been a little sceptical with regard to the power of torchlight in bringing out the beauties of a fine statue, as it did not appear to me that the statues I had seen in lighted rooms at night gained very much. But in the Vatican, and with concentrated light of one flambeau, the effect is quite marvellous. … The Belvédère Torso, which is the first we saw, is also that which gains the most by torchlight, as in addition to the beautiful display of form and muscle it acquires a fleshy appearance, which gives it an air of life such I never saw in any other work of art.[53]

In torchlight visits we can see again how haptic perception is operative. The torchlight produces in the beholder the sensation of real flesh evoking in the viewer the desire to touch, but touching would have been difficult, even strictly forbidden as Benjamin Zix shows in his drawing *Torchlight visit by the Emperor and Empress* made around 1810 (Fig. 9). There, we can see how during a torchlight visit of Napoleon to the Louvre, the Laocoon and the Belvedère Venus were protected by a balustrade, preventing the visitors from getting to close and to touch them.

The haptic perception that is generated by torchlight visits is even explicitly considered as a worthy substitute, even a better alternative for the direct touch in closely examining sculpture. In another passage of the Earl of Minto's description of his visit to the Vatican Museums we read:

53 Mattos, "The Torchlight Visit," *op. cit.* (note 48), 150.

> I have always maintained, with Thorwalson (sic), that in the finest ancient sculpture some of the shading was so delicate and minute as not to be detected by the eye and only to be perceived by passing the hand over it. He, on the contrary, always asserted that the most minute depression or elevation in the surface of the marble was easily detected by torchlight, and I am now satisfied that he is right.[54]

Torchlight visits can thus be seen as exemplary for this late eighteenth century explorations in the possibility of haptic perception. They signal the complex relation between sight and touch in the appreciation of art, especially sculpture. They produce in the beholder a desire to touch without actually having to realize this desire. Touching the sculpture, just like entering the theatrical representation as Diderot described, would only destroy the illusion of living presence.

Conclusion

The *Wunderkammern* have emerged as a prominent precursor of the early museums in several previous studies, including those looking at the appropriation of ordering principles.[55] *Nasehen*, however, has not yet been treated as a common factor. Nevertheless, we see how the sense of touch is balanced with sight in both contexts. This quest simultaneously demonstrates a consideration of how personal the engagement with objects can be and the importance of a powerful, even overwhelming experience for bringing objects together and putting them on display. The visual culture around the cabinets of curiosities pointed to how the collector could touch and haptically see objects to evoke a new world primarily defined by an explicit but never precisely definable distance in space and time. *Nasehen* was also central to the early museum. Ego documents of prominent visitors make it clear that there too, bridging the distance in space and time was essential in the overwhelming experience of perceiving museum collections objects and primarily their sculptures. However, the historical experience gets more concrete by becoming increasingly focused on a specific space and time. The strange world that the art rooms managed to evoke thanks to the *Nasehen* takes on a focus that we can connect to the rise of modern historiography and art history, but also wrangles with it because emotions are still running high.

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54 Mattos, "The Torchlight Visit," *op. cit.* (note 48), 150, note 64.

55 See Impey and MacGregor, *The Origins of the Museums* as well as other publications mentioned in footnote 3.