

Make Your Own Cabinet of Curiosities, aka Wunderkammer

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BRIEF OVERVIEW

For centuries, Cabinets of Curiosities, or Wunderkammer, have offered glimpses of collected items from the natural world. Animals, plants, and minerals were displayed along with other objects reflecting a history that included colonization and misappropriation.

Printed books from the seventeenth century to the present include vivid illustrations of such displays. This assignment invites you to begin your own Wunderkammer. Start by selecting one item and follow the activity below.

This lesson can be taught synchronously in one class session, or adapted for asynchronous learning.



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Understand** the physical qualities, or materiality, of books, manuscripts, objects, and other primary sources, and the information that can be gleaned from handling these items (see our [Teaching Materiality Online](#) for more details).
- **Actively engage with and critically examine** classification and limitations of historical works, as well as libraries and archives.

SESSION OUTLINE

Activity:

Students will be asked to find an item from nature inside or outside of their dorm room, apartment, home, or classroom. Students can respond to the following prompts asynchronously in writing or synchronously in small groups.

- Describe the object using your senses (how does it look, what sound does it make, how does it feel to the touch, any smell?)
- How would you classify the item? With what other objects might this object be classed or associated? Be creative—think outside the lens of contemporary scientific categories and those of Western history. Create your own classification system to use. What title, date, or format might you give to it? How are objects generally classed within your system?
- Share something about this item that is not readily known from the description you've provided—such as how it makes you feel, a memory associated with the item, or where it came from. What hidden powers or powers not readily observable may the object have?
- What questions remain about the item?

Suggested Reading

[Wonders and the order of nature, 1150–1750 by Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park. New York : Zone Books ; Cambridge, Mass. : Distributed by the MIT Press, 1998.](#)

Suggested Follow-Up Assignment:

- Include assignments where students incorporate specific readings from the course with this activity, comparing their item to a specific item from a digitized early modern primary source.
- Have class or small groups create a Wunderkammer, bringing their individual objects together as a collective to discuss grouping (how, why, where).

QUESTIONS?

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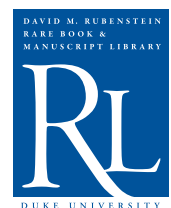
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