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Online



Curiouser and curiouser

Weekend Glitz | Jordan Ma 22 Jun 2018



An exhibition showcasing hundreds of rare artifacts from Hong Kong and France is whisking visitors back into time on an exciting voyage of discovery.

The Cabinets of Curiosities. From the Natural Sciences to the Art of Nature. Collections from France and Hong Kong features more than 250 artifacts from 10 museums, galleries and private collections and is being held at the Lau Ming Wai Academic Building in the City University of Hong Kong until August 19.

Cabinets of curiosities, which came to prominence in Europe from the 16th to the 19th centuries, were collections of religious, royal and eccentric items.

Chief curator and director of CityU Exhibition Gallery Isabelle Frank said: "These cabinets were also the site of serious scholarly and scientific investigations that were published in encyclopedias, history books and collection catalogs. There, the study of nature went hand in hand with the study of the arts and letters.

"These early scholars and scientists laid the foundations for what later became the academic disciplines of social and natural sciences."

To breathe more life into the exhibition, Frank has incorporated contemporary art into the event. Divided into five sections, the exhibition sheds light on different cultures, ethnicities and wildlife.

It begins with Cabinets of Curiosities - a Brief History and features mesmerizing artifacts such as a gold and lacquered inkstand from the 18th century and a corner cabinet from the Louis XV period.

An open-work table specifically made for reading and drawing from the Louis XVI period features a 19th-century book on it.

Frank said: "We have some 16th- and 17th-century books from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology that show discoveries and mechanical inventions of the time."

The exhibition then moves into Maritime Expeditions and the Collecting of Exotica. "Our designer Frederic Beauclair did a wonderful job in creating the right atmosphere and you can hear the sounds of waves and the creaking of old ships," she said.

This section showcases artifacts from The Hong Kong Maritime Museum and The University Museum and Art Gallery of the University of Hong Kong. A mummified head from Deyrolle, a former scientific and pedagogical institution and now a shop in Paris, is also on display.

Next up is a section called From Amateur Collections to Discoveries in the Natural Sciences, with artifacts from the Musee du Vivant at the research institute AgroParisTech.

It features technical, animal, vegetal and artistic artifacts used for research and teaching, including a 19th-century hand-painted poster that explains the Rubiaceae plant family.

The fourth section, The Maison Deyrolle Cabinet of Curiosities: Nature Art Education, features specimens that emphasize the importance of preserving our ecosystem.

At the core of the section is a display of rare animal specimens including a wallaby, a piglet and an aardvark.

"Deyrolle is very involved in environmental protection and ecological issues," said Frank, adding that this section lets you "walk into their store in Paris and surround yourself with the specimens."

And finally, Cabinets of Curiosities and Contemporary Art shows works from British artist Damien Hirst, French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel and CityU professor Jeffrey Shaw. Viewers should not miss the 23.5-centimeter-tall bronze sculpture, Cyclades, by Jean Cocteau. "It is rare to have a sculpture by this famous filmmaker," Frank said.

Another fascinating object is a mixed-media work by French artist Emeric Chantier that resembles the head and the tail of a European hare. "The young artist plays with the idea of nature and reminds people about the preservation of animals," she said.

Other highlights include a beautiful and delicate 3D-printed thermoset polymer made by Tobias Klein, an architect and interdisciplinary artist.

This exhibition echoes the gallery's vision in showing one-of-a-kind artworks and lesser-known attractions to the public.

"You might be able to find one of these objects outside Hong Kong. But you will never see stuffed animals brought together alongside

21st-century art or 18th-century furniture," Frank said.