

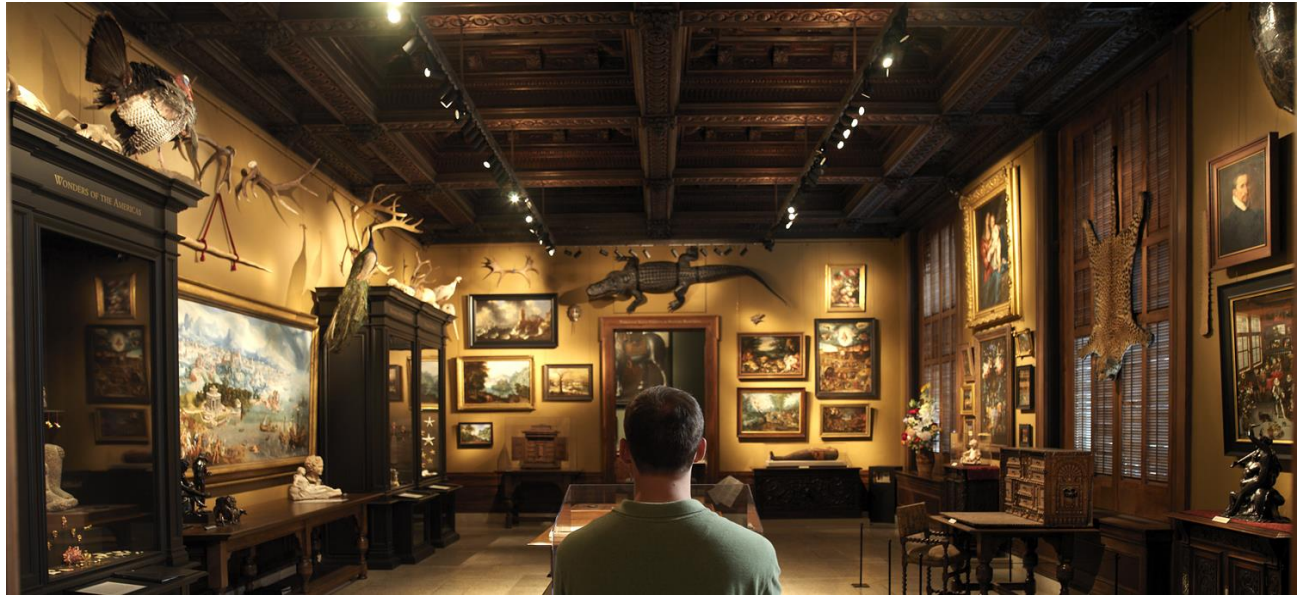
Activating the “digital humanities”: Visiting the Walters’ Chamber of Wonders Online

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Since it opened in 2005, three en-suite galleries recreating a fictive collection of a nobleman in Habsburg lands in the seventeenth-century—centered on a “Chamber of Wonders” but encompassing an entry Hall of Arms and Armor and a Collector’s Study—have become the most visited rooms in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore. Now well-known much further afield in the United States, Canada and Europe, they are used, for example, in university courses on the history of collecting (or museums), of art, and of science; however, the magical experience of standing in the space caught in a web of interconnected phenomena (a Microcosm of the Macrocosm, in seventeenth-century terms) is now limited to those who can come to the museum in person. The



spaces and extensive research behind their conception and display have no accessible web presence beyond an image and brief description of most of the art objects on the museum’s website in the section on “Works of Art.” I have made an internal proposal to rectify that.

Over the past decade, the Walters Art Museum has fostered many projects that increased free and public access to high quality digital assets in the humanities: for example, providing free and open access to the digital collections under a

Creative Commons 3.0 license through the museum’s own online *Works of Art* website and through ArtStor (<http://www.artstor.org>) and ArtStor Images for Academic Publishing (<http://www.artstor.org/what-is-artstor/w-html/services-publishing.shtml>), Wikimedia, Google Art Project, eMuseum Network and a host of social media channels such as Facebook, Flickr and ArtFinder; creating complete digital surrogates of the manuscripts in our collection—with the support

of the NEH; and serving as the host for the investigation of the Archimedes Palimpsest, with then Walters' curator Will Noel as Project Director (<http://www.archimedespalimpsest.org/>). These projects have made important contributions to the work of scholars and continue to make unique materials freely available to researchers both here and abroad.

My current proposal involves a different model, a web application activating not only the collections but also the scholarship supporting the installation—a way of displaying collections that at the time was thought of as joining the wondrous creations of nature, *naturalia*, with those of the human spirit, *artificialia*—and now for public benefit. The web application would ideally offer an immersive experience that would additionally permit the web “visitor” access not only by controlling his/her movements through the gallery by means of panoramic photography (optionally with a voice over tour) but by clicking on objects or links delving into layered, increasingly sophisticated levels of analysis and information, indeed the whole apparatus of analysis, essays, and bibliography characteristic of a scholarly monograph but in an updatable form, expandable through myriad types of links taking full advantage of online resources, for example digitized sixteenth-century natural history volumes or good, accessible information on the armadillo. The web application would therefore blend the functions of a scholarly (“academic”) research site and a public resource. The basis of the success of the Walters' Chamber suite with all audiences is its scholarly basis. Such collections generated knowledge in the past and I want to improve the capacity of the Walters' Chamber to do so today. Given the wide-spread interest in the topic today, to the general public (evidenced not only by our visitors who congregate there even on the slowest days but by the array of photos and comments on Tumblr etc.), to scholars/students, and to artists, a serious webpage could become the “go-to” place for the subject.



Hieronymus Francken II and Jan Brueghel, *The Archdukes Albert and Isabella Visit a Collector's Cabinet*, c. 1621-3 (Walters Art Museum)

A beloved painting in the Walters, *The Archdukes Albert and Isabella Visit a Collector's Cabinet*, painted around 1621-23 in Antwerp, shows the couple, rulers of the Spanish Netherlands and each a powerful member of the Habsburg family in their own right, on a visit to a collector; the emphasis is very much on looking and comparing. Thus, while the representation of the space inspired the setting for the Walters' cabinet and suggested the location of this fictive collection in Flanders in what is now Belgium, the atmosphere of quiet examination is equally suggestive. In the Walters' Chamber, as in the painting, there are no labels attached directly to objects. Everything is on laminated sheets or in the "collector's notebooks" scattered about. Curiosity is first aroused by the object, not the text.

In other contemporaneous paintings of collections, both actual and imaginary, and also in the prints that often served as title pages or frontispieces to catalogues of natural history collections, as that of Ferrante Imperato illustrated here, it is striking to see the depiction of the collection *being visited* and the process of engagement. How could we best foster that mood? What are the qualities of a good internet visit versus an actual one? As younger, more tech-oriented colleagues remind me, we must consider each on its own terms. The complexities and costs attendant on creating an immersive experience using panoramic photography to which is introduced a serious system of hotspots and links are enormously greater than basing a webpage on flat photography. However, the magic of an immersive experience is impossible without panoramic photography, so for many of our potential users, this would be critical, but it can have its own character. Nevertheless, clarity is important. The resolution of the immersive, panoramic photography used for the Google Art Project museum visits, for example the visit to the Acropolis Museum, doesn't seem sharp enough for a generation brought up on video games.



Ferrante Imperato,
Dell'istoria naturale
(Naples 1599),
frontispiece



This is the Collector's Study, photographed from a curiously high vantage point and before the "collector's notebooks" with label text were placed on the front ledges but serviceable for our purposes. One immediately recognizes that what you might contemplate in a study wasn't necessarily books, which were likely kept in the library, but small objects, meant to be handled as part of the examination, here organized by materials, as Archduke Ferdinand (Albert and Isabella's cousin) did at his palace outside Innsbruck, Austria. The cases are designed to have the feel of a seventeenth-century cabinet. Their proportions and moldings are roughly like those of the cabinets made for Archduke Ferdinand.

Imagine that you enter the room. After you chose (perhaps) to access a brief introduction to the very idea of a study in the Renaissance and why the collections here are organized by material with portraits hanging above, you might "walk" over to one of the cases, perhaps one with Renaissance small bronzes of female nudes. All the works of art can be accessed but for some there is a lot more to be said then for others, so the present assumption is that you would select a case or the paintings as a group and then go to the individual objects. The units of information at this level tend to be short, but links may be to images, purpose-written texts or extended publications on jstor or some other web storage facility including wikipedia. Links would crisscross the Walters' collection, especially within this web application. For some objects the hotspot or link will simply take you directly to the entry for the work on the "Works of Art" section of the Walters website.

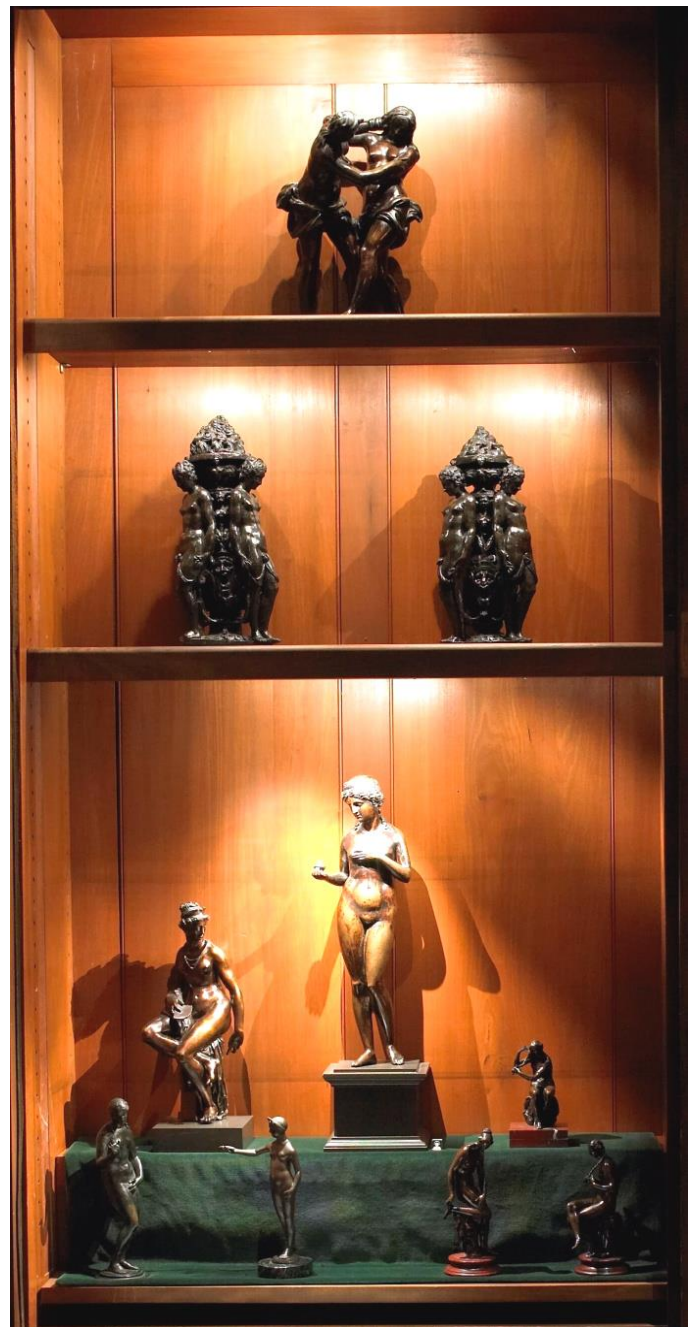
Case II: Bronze: Statuettes and the development of the female nude

In the Renaissance, educated collectors, especially in Padua and Venice in the north of Italy but also in northern cities such as Nuremberg, Antwerp, and Brussels, created a demand for artifacts of Greek and Roman culture, like those in case XIV and over the desk.

Authentic ancient objects were sought after, but modern works imitating them were more affordable and had their own appeal, both as legitimate [embodiments of ancient values](#) and as expressions of stylistic homage and rivalry with the achievements of classical antiquity, the latter exemplified by the Italian sculptor whose nickname was Antico. His [Venus](#) is the central work in this case. During the later Middle Ages, statuettes of [saints](#), [the Virgin](#), or [Christ](#) in bronze or brass served as aides to devotion, but they were often derived from more valued carved wood statuettes and were not collected as works of art. By the early 1500s, the bronze statuette representing an antique subject and fashioned in an antique manner became the focus of private commissions, collecting, and study as never before. [Improved bronze-casting techniques](#) allowed for the production of multiple casts from the same model. They might be kept on shelves or, especially in Northern Europe, on tables, as in [The Archdukes Visiting a Collector](#) (fig.) The evolution of statuettes from ancient votive figures of the gods (as those in Greco-Roman religious rites [case XIV] and even earlier in Egyptian rites [case XV]) to private objects of aesthetic, even sensuous, enjoyment was complete.

When Italian Renaissance sculptors began to explore the nude figure—that is, the human body as a subject of aesthetic appreciation exemplifying classical, pagan antiquity's emphasis on human dignity—the focus was on the male body. Sculptors in the northern Italian centers of classical studies (Padua, Mantua, and Venice) subsequently turned their attention to the female nude, partially in response to the demand for small-scale figures from collectors. These statuettes appeal to the hand as well as the eye. Statuettes of beautiful but modest unclothed females were usually identified as [Venus, goddess of love](#), for whom sensuality and nudity were treated as natural qualities. As distinct from Eve after the Fall, often shown awkward and cowering, Venus was not subject to the shame that, as a legacy of the concept of Original Sin in the Christian tradition, would adhere to a naked (that is, one expected to be covered or clothed) female subjected to a viewer's gaze. The taste for statuettes of the nude female figure is a reflection of the tension between Christian and classical values in the 1500s.

[The importance of touch for the collector](#) /
[Bibliography](#)



Here is a draft main entry text for one of the highlighted objects (with its own hotspot) in the case. The analysis is original, not yet published elsewhere, and signed. The linked “*Antique*” *Candlestick* will lead to a related publication by the author. Comparative images freely available could be inserted directly with others linked.



Modest Venus (*Venus Pudica*), ca. 1500

Italian (Venice or Padua)

The pose of this statuette of [Venus, the Roman goddess of love](#), is characterized by one hand covering the genital area and the legs close together. This type is known as *Venus Pudica*, modest or chaste Venus and is ultimately derived from a famous (now lost) statue of Aphrodite (the Greeks’ name for their goddess of love) by the Greek sculptor [Praxiteles](#) (mid 4th c. BCE), later versions of which were available in Renaissance Italy, such as this *Venus Pudica*, in a [Roman collection](#) (fig.). Presumably at her bath, she suddenly becomes aware of an unexpected male intruder.

A very similar statuette of a *Modest Venus* (in the Basel Historisches Museum, Switzerland) was owned by the Basel jurist and collector [Basilius Amerbach](#) (1533–91), who believed his to be ancient. [Amerbach’s statuette](#) (also probably made ca. 1500 in Padua) was proudly displayed in a niche of a chest specially made to hold his collection of medals. A third *Modest Venus* (now in Vienna) was bought—as an ancient piece—through an agent in Italy by the [Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle](#) (1517 – 1586), living in Brussels. It was sold by his heirs to the [Emperor Rudolf II](#) in Prague, as a treasured ancient statuette. All three statuettes have silver-inlaid eyes, a feature copied from antique bronzes (such as the Roman [Head of a Maenad](#) in Case XIV), as are Venus’s corkscrew curls. The slightly green cast was probably induced chemically to make the figure look as if it had suffered corrosion from being underground, to be compared to the authentic burial corrosion suffered by a Roman statuette of [Venus](#) in Case XIV.

It is likely that these Renaissance statuettes were created as “antiques,” for which there was great demand, for which see further pieces in Case XIV that, though actually made in the 1500s, were apparently passed off as antiquities by the 1600s: a broken marble [Torso of Hercules](#) and “*Antique*” [Candlestick in the Form of a Man](#) (JSpicer). *Bronze (solid cast), silver; 54.244, acquired by Henry Walters, 1904*

[Other Views](#) / [Further discussion](#) / [Technical study](#) / [Bibliography](#)

Natural history specimens are an important component of the Chamber of Wonders as Microcosm, especially in this period as the certainties of the Medieval, theological worldview gradually crumbled. In this period of transition, there remained a widespread conviction that there was (or...one hoped that there was) a Divine plan but what was it? There presentation of Natural Wonders in cases and on the wall will be couched within a history of natural history in the early modern period. Specimens would be linked both to current information and sixteenth and

The image is a composite of three panels illustrating the history of natural history museums.

Top Left: A photograph of a museum cabinet labeled "MUSEUM OF HUMAN EVOLUTION". The cabinet is filled with various artifacts, including a mounted bird, a skull, and a large egg. The background shows a painting of a ship.

Top Right: A photograph of a display case containing human figures, skulls, and large eggs. The figures are arranged in a row, and the skulls are displayed below them. The large eggs are positioned on the right side of the case.

Bottom: A detailed engraving of a Native American figure riding an armadillo. The figure is holding a bow and arrow. The background shows a landscape with a river and a building. The engraving includes Latin text at the bottom:

*Ille quidem ad huc datum non cognitus erit.
 Hic tamen auctoris laus celebranda venit.*

*Quodammodo potestatis est humana regenda.
 Quamvis ferebat praestanda AMERICA clavis.*

7

How to proceed?

In trying to move the proposal forward sufficiently so that it can be internally assessed, I am working on developing a basic “proof of concept (POC)” with my inestimable collaborator Eva Helfenstein, post doc in the department of Renaissance and Baroque Art, with the assistance of techie intern Christopher Mergen and with the advice of Trevor Munoz, of the Maryland Institute for Technology and the Humanities. If the project proposal is accepted, the team will ideally include as well Dylan Kinnett, Walters’ webmaster, and Kate Blanch, in charge of the museum’s databases, with input from colleagues in the Education division as well as our budding “users’ group” of university professors, students, high school kids, public contacts through Tumblr etc. as well as IT or DH professionals who might help us. We were very pleased to have been invited to present at this Digital Humanities colloquium.

For the time being we (more precisely, Christopher) are developing a mockup using freeware to insert links in flat, already existing photography to try out the layering approach. We don’t need to reinvent the wheel. If there are models out there or any other possible solutions that anyone would care to recommend, we would appreciate hearing about them.