



# LAYOUT

---

EXHIBITION

# INTO THE WONDER ROOM

From February 13, 2019 to January 5, 2020  
at **Pointe-à-Callière**

**The *Into the Wonder Room* exhibition invites visitors to explore the history of cabinets of curiosities and the singular universe of collectors in six immersive rooms, each featuring impressive museography and installations.**



POINTE-À-CALLIÈRE

Montréal Archaeology  
and History Complex

Montréal ☞



# IN THE DAYS OF CABINETS OF CURIOSITIES

---

Cabinets of curiosities—or “wonder rooms”—first emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries among European aristocrats, who, in assembling collections of man-made objects and natural elements, sought to understand the world and recreate it in a veritable microcosm. These “curiosities” took many different forms—objects that were rare, precious, bizarre, exotic, mysterious, or of extreme beauty—but all had a point: to arouse interest and attract the eye! These early collectors sometimes used their cabinets to highlight their prestige, but also to demonstrate the extent of their knowledge, and take stock of their discoveries or their travels.

Visitors are introduced to the exhibition in an elegant setting that gives one the impression of entering the living room of an aristocrat of the era—an explorer, someone with a passion for geography, or a member of a learned society. A small object theatre presents the various types of pieces one could find in period cabinets of curiosities, such as *naturalia* (objects from nature), *artificialia* (objects created by humans), *antiqua* (objects dating back to Antiquity), and *exotica* (objects from far-off lands).



In Québec, it was only much later on, in the Victorian era, that we began to see display cases exhibiting mounted animals in middle-class homes, as well as the appearance of “curiosity rooms” in Montréal to entertain the public with the presentation of strange objects. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some collectors, such as Jacques Viger, historian and first mayor of Montréal, took an interest in texts and images recounting the history of the country, which they assembled under the heading *Canadiana*.



## OTHER TIMES, OTHER PLACES

---

Europe at that time was fascinated by Antiquity, which it rediscovered through findings made during great explorations. A room is dedicated entirely to *antiqua*—with objects typical of Egypt and Ancient Greece and Rome—and to *exotica*—showcasing “treasures” unearthed on long expeditions. These notably include objects brought back from overseas voyages, like shell necklaces from the Solomon Islands, items from China brought back by Jesuit missionaries, and mounted animals that inspire a sense of wonder, like a platypus from Australia and an assemblage of hummingbirds.



# WHERE REALITY MEETS IMAGINARY

---



Visitors will then venture into a zone that examines myths and beliefs, with a focus on unexplained wonders, the strange powers of certain objects, legendary animals, and natural oddities. Among the items with supposedly wondrous powers are the “unicorn horn” (in reality, a narwhal tusk), which apparently could be used for its purifying power and as an antidote—making it one of the most sought-after objects of the Middle Ages. Also on display is the Rose of Jericho, which withers in dry weather and opens up when moistened—said to have the power to help women in childbirth—, and the little remora, a small fish that was believed to be able to stop ships with its suction cup. “Monstrosities” were also very popular with collectors, who would proudly display a two-headed calf or a young lamb with two noses...

## FROM GLIMMER TO BRIGHT LIGHT

---

We then make our way to the Age of Enlightenment, during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when scientific thought became more organized and a thirst for knowledge took precedence over a sense of amazement. The exhibition features one of the 28 volumes from the original edition of the very first encyclopaedia, *Encyclopédie or the Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* by Diderot and d’Alembert, published from 1751 to 1772. New scientific instruments also saw the light of day, including microscopes, refracting telescopes, and Borda’s reflecting circle, the ancestor of today’s GPS systems. Aesthetics, valued in the cabinets of curiosities of yesteryear, slowly began to give way to scientific classification and the development of the first ethnographic museums.







## ENTER THE WONDER ROOM!

---

The exhibition layout culminates in a truly eclectic and immersive wonder room, recreating the spectacular effect of a cabinet of curiosities with a monumental installation that includes scores of multicoloured butterflies and birds, along with a profusion of cultural or unusual objects from around the world. This is a space for contemplation and amazement before the richness and diversity of our world—a magical place that will stir up emotions! The room will also lead to reflection, as—even though the pieces it includes were not collected with this goal in mind—certain mounted specimens have, over time, become irreplaceable witnesses of our threatened biodiversity.

## A PASSION FOR COLLECTING

---

The exhibition's final zone is dedicated to the singular universe of seven Montrealers or Québec-based collectors. It focuses on the psychology of collectors and, through interviews, examines their motivations and their all-consuming passion for the objects they collect. Several disparate collections are brought together in the space: ancient swords, small cars, porcelain cups... even a collection of little pig-shaped knick-knacks. Visitors will learn if they fit the profile of a collector and will get to examine the objects of one collector who is at once a plangonologist (doll collector), an arctophile (collector of old stuffed toys), and a ludophile (toy collector). This exhibition will surely bring to mind a few memories of visitors' collections from the days of their youth... or inspire some to start a collection of their own!

