VISUAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE, 1300-1700

Mårten Snickare

Colonial Objects in Early Modern Sweden and Beyond

From the *Kunstkammer* to the Current Museum Crisis

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Visual and Material Culture, 1300-1700

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Acknowledgements

When I first noticed the presence of objects from faraway lands in the collections of Swedish castles and palaces, I thought it could be the stuff of a conference paper—an interesting detour from my daily round as a scholar of the European baroque. Today, many years on, these objects and the entangled histories of museums and colonialism they bear witness to have become the focus of my research and teaching, and that first conference paper has slowly grown into the present book. In hindsight, I can see my own learning process parallels the development in academic discourse and public debate. Long ignored or dismissed as a mere curiosity, Sweden's colonial past and present have recently become burning issues. At the same time, museums' colonial legacies have been intensely debated all over the world. I hope my book will contribute to these debates, in Sweden and internationally.

Many individuals and institutions have helped guide me along the winding path leading up to this book. Before I even thought of this as a book project, I had the opportunity to spend a summer at the Clark Art Institute, where I presented my first thoughts on the topic for the brilliant research seminar there. Supported by the Axel Wenner-Grens Stiftelse för Internationellt Forskarutbyte and the DAAD, I spent a semester at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, drafting the first outline of the book, and I later returned there at Charlotte Klonk's invitation to present a version of the book's final part. The University of Warwick has been another important place, first at the invitation of Margaret Shewring and Michael Hatt to present my project, and then again for a workshop on colonial objects initiated by Hatt. The discussions at that workshop were essential for the final stages of the book.

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Finnshyttan, 9 January 2022

Introduction: The King's Tomahawk?

The objects at the centre of this book have been on my mind a long time. It began with an unplanned visit to the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. I am an art historian specializing in the baroque, with no expertise in ethnography, so I was going for a happily aimless stroll around the exhibits when suddenly my attention was caught by one particular object: a tomahawk (Fig. 1).

If I try to put my instantaneous reaction into words, and explain why the object gripped me, I think it had something to do with the way it was displayed, in splendid isolation in a glass case, strikingly lit and arranged with elaborate carelessness on green, velvety fabric. It was a display that encouraged an aesthetic approach to the object, an appreciation of its formal pregnancy: the bold curve of the wooden helve, the way it was balanced by the straight iron blade. As if it were a Brancusi sculpture. The clash between a display mode associated with modern art and design, and an object usually classified as ethnographic, heightened the tomahawk's visual attraction while at the same time evoking an uncertainty of its status and belonging.

But there was also something about the way it appeared to have a history. Remains of wampum mosaics on its helve suggested exquisite craftsmanship and high status, and even if I knew little about the ritual and social implications of wampum, it was immediately clear this was not just any tomahawk. The fact that most of the wampum tesserae had been lost suggested frequent handling and gradual decay, lending the object the aesthetic appeal of a ruin, or fragment. At the same time, there was something slightly disturbing about its shape, as if its individual parts—helve, blade, leather strap—did not really belong together. It looked as if it would fall apart if anyone struck a blow with it.

Finally, inseparable from my unprepared aesthetic response, there were the childhood memories it evoked: reading Karl May and Edward S. Ellis adventure stories cover to cover, perched in a little apple tree outside our block of flats, the overgrown orchard around me a trackless wilderness, irresistibly frightening and tempting. For me the tomahawk was a madeleine, instantly evoking a mythical, make-believe childhood landscape.

As that first moment of enchantment faded and gave way to a more detached, scholarly gaze, I read the label and learnt the tomahawk originated from the north-east of North America, where it was probably created by a Lenape or Susquehannock artist

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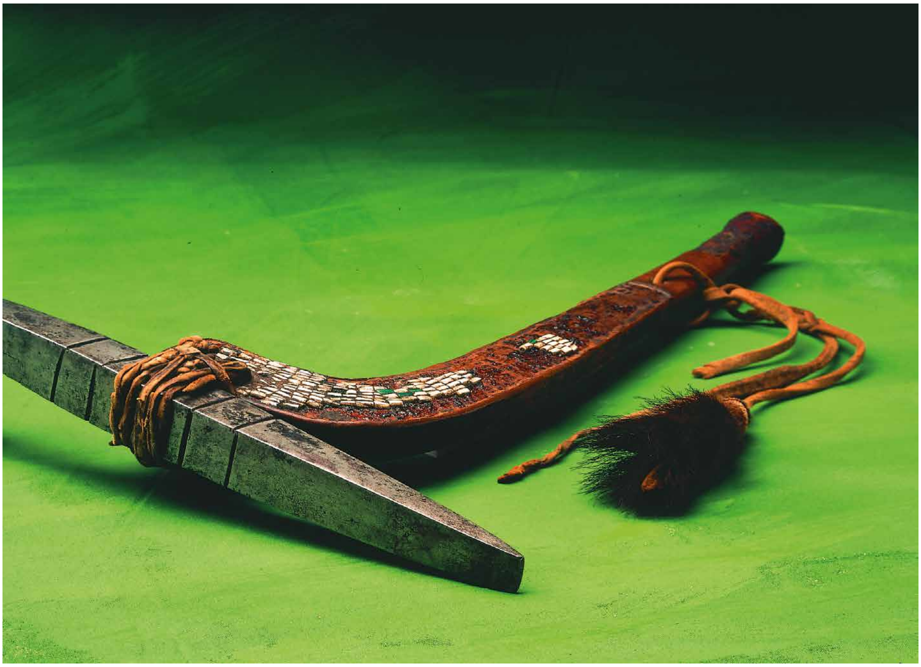

Fig. 1. Tomahawk, wood, wampum, iron, hide, 44 × 33 cm, eastern North America, seventeenth century, Etnografiska museet, Stockholm.

or craftsperson in the lower Delaware River area in the early or mid-seventeenth century, and that it had been in Stockholm since at least the 1680s as part of the royal collections in the old palace Tre Kronor. The king, Charles XI, kept it in his armoury, with weapons and armour of all kinds, but also clothing, masquerade costumes, props, and curious objects from all over the world. Much later, when I started digging into the question of non-Western objects in Western collections, I shamefacedly learnt my oh-so singular experience coming across the tomahawk was merely a repetition of a museum *Urszene*, enacted by a Western visitor who, within the protective walls of the museum, stumbles across the foreign other. The most heroized and mythologized instance is Picasso's encounter with African and Oceanian masks and sculptures in the Musée d'ethnographie in Paris one day in June 1907. Picasso's museum visit, according to legend, altered the course of modern art. My visit did not have repercussions of that dignity, but it nevertheless resulted in the present book, its three key questions all following on from my chancing on the tomahawk.

First, what was this strange object from a distant continent doing in the collections of a seventeenth-century Swedish king? Under what historical circumstances did it first appear in a Swedish display context? Where and how was it displayed, watched and understood? Remarkable as it was, the tomahawk was hardly unique.

A glance into the *Kunstkammern* and armouries of seventeenth-century Swedish royalty, aristocrats, and scholars reveals hundreds of artefacts and specimens from faraway places. In Tre Kronor, the tomahawk had shared space with such objects as a stone hatchet of South American origin, decorated with red feathers, an African knife with a bone haft and wooden sheath, and a stuffed reindeer with a *geres* (a Sámi sledge), with other examples of Sámi material culture, not to mention rugs and other textiles from the Ottoman Empire and porcelain from China. Count Carl Gustaf Wrangel's armoury at Skokloster Castle, north of Stockholm, had everything from a South American hammock, a Greenlandic kayak, and a stuffed armadillo to arms and armour of European and Ottoman origin. In the humanist and scholar Johannes Schefferus' *Kunstkammer* in Uppsala, there were no less than three ceremonial Sámi drums, together with a miniature copy of the Koran, and minerals and stuffed animals from distant parts of the world. The tomahawk and its companions bear witness to a large-scale global circulation of objects in the seventeenth century, and to Sweden's active role in that circulation.

The objects also suggest the Swedish elites' preoccupation with the world beyond Christian European culture. By extension, they point to the European colonial enterprise, and Sweden's participation in it, suggesting the emergence of a colonial worldview, with European—and in this case Swedish—elites collecting and ordering the world around themselves. The first part of this book thus explores seventeenth-century Swedish practices of collecting and displaying objects from outside Christian Europe, situating the objects in two interconnected spatial configurations: the early modern world, framed by colonial encounters and exploitation, with its accelerating global circulation of objects, people, and ideas; and the *Kunstkammer*, the peculiar display space of choice in early modern Europe, in which many of these circulating objects were put on show.

Second, why did the tomahawk end up in the museum I had visited, Etnografiska museet? How had it arrived there from its elusive origins in seventeenth-century North America, via the royal palace in Stockholm? What happened to it along the way, on its move between physical localities, institutional belongings, and contexts of display? How was it reclassified and reconceptualized, and what does that say about shifting attitudes, and by extension about changing conceptions of faraway places and cultures? The second part of the book approaches these questions by tracing the itineraries of a few chosen objects. In following their physical, institutional, and interpretative shifts down the centuries, my aim has been not only a more precise understanding of the ways they have been treated at different moments in their history, and their insertion into new narratives about the world and the self, but also how the objects themselves have affected their collectors and viewers and what responses they have elicited at different times. Not only what people have done with the objects, but also what the objects have done to people.

My own moment with the tomahawk was preceded by centuries of Swedish encounters with faraway objects, each of which had its idiosyncrasies while sharing important traits with all the rest—earlier audiences too experienced wonder and aesthetic enjoyment combined with a thirst for knowledge and the projection of preconceived ideas. Thus each object itinerary charts a singular course of events, the better to understand that object, while noting the parallels with other itineraries, allowing more general conclusions in answer to two questions. How do the object itineraries relate to the histories of collecting and display in Europe, from the early modern *Kunstkammer* to modern museum and display systems? And how do they relate to the history of colonialism and decolonization and to shifting colonial worldviews?

Third, the tomahawk is not merely a trace of previous responses and uses; it is materially and visually present in the museum today (it was its tangible presence that first caught my eye, after all). Not only a centuries-old signifier, the tomahawk is also a contemporary object. This may seem a truism, valid for any object in any museum. However, when it comes to the tomahawk and its companions, their physical presence in Western museums has lately become a delicate and pressing issue with far-reaching legal and ethical implications. Being concrete, material reminders of Western colonialism and imperialism, they raise urgent questions about belonging, possession, and representation, of lingering colonial structures and the prospects for decolonization. Where do these objects belong today, legally, culturally, morally? Are there ethically defensible ways to continue to display them in Western institutions? What are we to do with them? What might they do to us? These questions and challenges are addressed in the third part of the book, in which I propose that a deeper understanding of the history of collecting and display may shed light on the present situation—in other words, that we may learn something from the *Kunstkammer*. I would also argue these objects deserve a central place in the debate about the shortcomings and potential of museums and display in a globalized world.

In their historical past and their tangible present, the tomahawk and the other objects speak volumes about two interconnected histories: the history of European colonialism and the circulation of objects it involves; and the history of collecting and display, and the museum as a typically European institution. The point where these two histories intersect is where the narrative of this book plays out.

Colonial Objects

In seventeenth-century Europe, the non-European artefacts which are the subject of this book were not clearly defined as one category or given one fixed label. They were often referred to as rarities or wonders, but these two terms were used in the broadest sense, spanning everything from natural specimens to the most elaborate artworks. In an inventory of Queen Christina's *Kunstkammer* in Tre Kronor, drawn up in 1652, 'rarities' was the catch-all term for everything there.[1] The printed catalogue of the Danish scholar Ole Worm's collection in Copenhagen in 1655 has a similar wording—*Museum Wormianum, seu, Historia rerum rariorum* (lit. rare objects)—while its subtitle—*tam naturalium, quam artificialium, tam domesticarum, quam exoticarum*—offers a rare example from the period of the word 'exotica'.[2] Yet while the title contrasts the natural and the artificial, the domestic and the exotic, this clear-cut distinction did not extend to the actual display of Worm's collection, in which objects from different categories were juxtaposed according to diverse, and apparently conflicting, principles such as material, size, shape, or formal similarities. In modern scholarly and curatorial practices, the objects dealt with in this book are often categorized as ethnographic, emphasizing their connection to the academic discipline of ethnography and to the institution of the ethnographic museum, both of which first appeared in the nineteenth century. Sometimes they are also called non-European or non-Western objects, underlining their otherness in relation to the European or Western museums in which they are now displayed.

The term 'colonial objects' was not used in the seventeenth century, although their origins in regions subjected to European colonial exploitation was an important part of their identity. Even when used today, it is mostly in a descriptive, common-sense way, with little consistency or reflection. Thus it can refer to objects acquired by European colonizers and put on display in their homelands, or to objects produced by the colonial powers with stylistic allusions to the material culture of their colonies.[3] My use of the term is informed by W. J. T. Mitchell, who in his essay on 'Empire and Objecthood' asks for the material and non-material 'objects of Empire':

> What kinds of objects do empires produce, depend on, and desire? What kinds of objects do they abhor and attempt to destroy or neutralize? What happens

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[1] The inventory exists in two copies, one in French and one in Swedish, in Kungliga biblioteket (National Library of Sweden), Stockholm: 'Inventaire des raretéz qui sont dans le cabinet des antiquitéz de la serenissime reine de Suède fait l'an 1652', KB, S 4; 'Inventarium oppå alle dhe rariteter som finnas uthi H. K. M:ttz wår allernådigste dronings konstkammar, Deels ifrån Prag Komne: Deels upkiöpte och deels foräarte, Giort Anno 1652', KB, S 4a. The words used are *Raretéz* (French) and *Rariteter* (Swedish). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[2] Ole Worm, *Museum Wormianum. Seu historia rerum rariorum, tam naturalium, quam artificialium, tam domesticarum, quam exoticarum, quæ Hafniæ Danorum in ædibus authoris servantur* (Amstelodami: apud Lvdovicvm & Danielem Elzevirios, 1655), title page.

[3] My impression is that the term appears more frequently today. Two relatively recent examples are Annabel Cooper, Lachy Paterson & Angela Wanhalla (eds.), *The Lives of Colonial Objects* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2015); Jos van Beurden, *Treasures in Trusted Hands: Negotiating the Future of Colonial Cultural Objects* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2017).

> to objects when they undergo a 'worlding' in their circulation, moving across frontiers, flowing from one part of the globe to another?[4]

Mitchell attaches great importance to part played by objects in the establishment and maintenance of empire. What he calls 'objects of empire' were the focal point of strong, ambivalent emotions from desire to abhorrence, and were key to the dynamic, unstable processes of production, destruction, and global circulation. I use 'colonial object' in a similar manner to refer to objects shaped or reshaped, defined and contested, in a colonial contact zone. Colonial objects aroused strong, ambivalent emotions in the colonizer—desire, fascination, wonder, curiosity, aversion, fear—and were subject to exchange, barter, plunder, or destruction. Once acquired by the colonizers, colonial objects were forced to migrate across geographical, epistemic, and conceptual borders. Thus the concept as I use it underscores not only the disputed, unstable situation of the object in question, but also its place at the centre of the colonial encounter. The desire for objects was a powerful driving force in colonialism. But on the other hand, objects may play an important role for the mobilization of colonial resistance.

The term 'colonial object' does not refer to any intrinsic quality, but rather to a stage in what Arjun Appadurai would call the object's 'social life'.[5] Before it finds itself in the colonial sphere, it may have been primarily associated with other values—aesthetic, religious, magic, social, or utilitarian. Once a colonial object was incorporated into the colonizers' collections, these original values were often downplayed, and new values and meanings added. It could become a trophy, symbolizing the triumph of the colonizer. It could serve metonymically to form notions of its producers and primary users and audiences. It could even become an object of knowledge, subject to scholarly examination and classification. In all these hypothetical cases, the object would have contributed to the negotiation of colonial relations and the shaping of a colonial worldview. Often the epistemic, conceptual transformations of a colonial object entailed physical transformations too—the addition of stamps, labels, or other marks of ownership and classification, or accidental damage from its transfer and use, or even intentional damage designed to disable a potentially dangerous object and impair its magical or religious powers. A colonial object is an object that has become reconceptualized and recontextualized in colonial encounters and confrontation.

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[4] W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 146.

[5] Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

The act of categorizing and labelling an object is in a sense always an act of violence because it highlights some facets at the expense of others.[6] A label curtails the object and reshapes it to fit a category. 'Colonial object' may appear a particularly problematic label because it takes the side of the aggressor in a profoundly asymmetrical colonial encounter; the object's producers and original users probably had no wish to see the colonizers to interfere in their material practices in the first place. Yet despite this, I would argue that 'colonial object' can still be a productive concept, because it stresses the conflicted history involved—a history that is downplayed, even concealed, in such concepts as 'ethnographic object' or 'non-Western object'. Even in the seventeenth century, European colonialism was a force to be reckoned with, affecting the production, reception, and circulation of objects worldwide. Colonizers and colonized alike acted in a sociocultural landscape largely defined by colonialism. To see the mechanisms that circumscribed or sanctioned the agency of the objects and their producers, traders, collectors, and consumers, we have to recognize the importance of colonialism.

Yet it remains true that 'colonial object' does not refer to any intrinsic qualities, but rather to a state in the historically situated existence of an object. In the same way as an object might have been something else before it became a colonial object, it might become something else again. A colonial object could be involved in decolonial processes. Indeed, to acknowledge an object's colonial history is an important step towards its decolonization.

The *Kunstkammer* and the Modern Museum and Display System

As my encounter with the tomahawk brought home to me, to see an object is never a self-contained act, but is always mediated by circumstance. Even if I was not prepared for that specific encounter with the tomahawk, the very act of visiting a museum had determined my gaze, making me receptive to unexpected aesthetic experiences. Once in the museum gallery, particular elements in the display—the lighting, the splendid isolation—directed my attention to the tomahawk. When we talk about the material presence of an object, it is thus never *das Ding an sich*, but always the object as mediated by display techniques. The way an object is placed in the display space, its juxtaposition with other objects, its lighting and staging: these are all factors in the encounter between viewer and object.

In seventeenth-century Europe, too, display practices and techniques varied according to their purpose, place, and the type of object. The display of relics in a church differed from classical sculptures exhibited in a gallery in a royal palace, or natural specimens in a scholar's study. There were habits specific to the time, however. As inventories and visual representations of displays show, they were often crammed full with objects, covering not only the walls but often also the ceiling and much of the floor, filling the shelves and cabinet drawers. Further, seventeenth-century displays were often heterogeneous, juxtaposing objects we think of as belonging to different categories, and thus suggesting an aesthetic and epistemological plurality, a readiness to compare and connect natural specimens with artworks, or non-European objects with European ones. This heterogeneity also implies a relative lack of hierarchy: a European artwork was not necessarily given a more prominent place than a non-European artefact. The sources show that displays were generally dynamic and flexible rather than static, with visitors taking objects down from the walls or out of drawers to examine them, so creating new, temporary juxtapositions. Finally, seventeenth-century display spaces were usually exclusive and accessible only to the elites, and thus arenas for social manifestation and distinction.

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[6] I am grateful to Dan Karlholm for provoking me to rethink my use of the term 'colonial object'.

These display spaces had many names, often used without clear-cut distinctions. One example is the collection of artefacts and specimens owned by the humanist Johannes Schefferus, and displayed in a purpose-built building in central Uppsala. In three sources from around 1670 it was referred to as a 'Museum', a 'Natur-Kammer', and a 'Konst Kammer' respectively.[7] Similarly, when Johann Daniel Major, a leading theorist of collecting and display, in 1674 drew up a catalogue of all the collections known to him, he did not distinguish between them in his title: 'Kunst- Antiquitäten- Schatz- und fürnehmlich Naturalien-Kammern/Conclavia, Muséa, Repositoria, oder auch nur kleinere Scrinia Rerum Naturalium Selectiorum'.[8] I have chosen *Kunstkammer* as a general label for these seventeenth-century display spaces, largely to emphasize the ties between the Swedish and German collections (especially the circulation of objects and visitors), but also to draw on the literature on early modern collecting and display in the German-speaking world. *Kunstkammer* was among the commonest terms for this kind of display space in seventeenth-century Northern Europe, and is still standard in the German literature.[9]

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[7] 'Museum' in Johan Heysig-Ridderstierna, 'Index rerum naturalium qvæ servantur in Museo Schefferiano, Upsaliæ', 1677, Uppsala universitetsbibliotek (Uppsala University Library), Nordin 1190, fol. 135^{r}; 'Natur-Kammer' in H. Albrecht, 'Reÿse Diarium oder Beschreibung deßen, was beÿ der A:o 1670 won H. Albrechts zu Sachßen Gotha fürstl. Durchl. naher Hollstein, Dennemarck und Schweden gethanen Reÿse von Tage zu Tage passiret und vorgegangen', British Library, Add. 15133, fol. 116^{v}; 'Konst Kammer' in Corfitz Braem*, Dagbok under en resa i Sverige åren 1671 och 1672*, (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1916), 46.

[8] Johann Daniel Major, *Unvorgreiffliches Bedencken von Kunst- und Naturalien-Kammern ins gemein* (Kiel, 1674), n.p.

[9] Examples significant for this study are Horst Bredekamp, *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben: Die Geschichte der Kunstkammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1993) (English transl: Horst Bredekamp, *The Lure of Antiquity and the Cult of the Machine: The Kunstkammer and the Evolution of*

The *Kunstkammer* as a notion is also instructive when it comes to problematizing modern conceptions of art, or *Kunst*. The manifoldness and heterogeneity of objects in a *Kunstkammer* is an echo of the premodern Latin *ars*, which not only referred to works of art in a modern sense, but also skill, craft, knowledge, science, and method. That natural specimens were an integral part of a *Kunstkammer* suggests there was no fundamental distinction between the natural and the artificial. An artefact, just like a natural object, was nothing if not part of God's Creation. When I write of *Kunstkammer* without referring to a particular site, I refer to this dominant mode of display.

Over the last couple of centuries, a completely different mode of display has developed, characterized by distinction and specialization. Objects once juxtaposed in the *Kunstkammer* have gradually been separated and put on display in specialized museums—art museums, natural history museums, ethnographic museums, and so on. Generally, displays have become less dense, particularly in art museums. There is also hierarchization: chosen masterpieces picked out with various display techniques; art museums (and particularly contemporary art museums) ascribed higher status and value than other museums. The most fundamental distinction is that between art and non-art, between art museums and other museums. Another significant difference, compared to the *Kunstkammer*, is that modern museums and other display spaces are generally open to the public. This, however, does not mean they have ceased to be arenas for social distinction. In this study, I use 'the modern museum and display system' to refer to the characteristics typical of the last two centuries of display in the Western world. My point with this unwieldy term is to emphasize the interconnection between museums and other display spaces and situations, such as Kunsthallen or biennales. The system is neither uniform nor absolute, for it comprises a great variety of display techniques and strategies, some with a critical edge to the system itself. However, much as the *Kunstkammer* set the tone in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the modern museum and display system has dominated display in the Western world for the last two centuries. At a general level, I find it useful to distinguish between these two historical display modes: the *Kunstkammer* of the early modern period and the modern museum and display system of the last two centuries. In the second part of this book, I look closely at the ways colonial objects transitioned from the *Kunstkammer* to the modern museum and display system.

When I encountered the tomahawk and the other colonial objects it was as a scholar who specializes in the art and architecture of the European and Swedish

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Nature, Art and Technology (Princeton: Wiener, 1995)); Elke Bujok, *Neue Welten in europäischen Sammlungen: Africana und Americana in Kunstkammern bis 1670* (Berlin: Reimer, 2004); Dominik Collet, *Die Welt in der Stube: Außereuropa in Kunstkammern der Frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

baroque, and with a particular interest in the history of display. I already knew about the seventeenth-century Swedish collectors, and a good deal about the castles and other buildings in which their collections were housed. At first this was a study heavily focused on Swedish royalty, aristocrats, scholars, and officials, all practising collection and display. However—and this was prefigured by my first encounter with the tomahawk—the objects eventually claimed their place at the centre of things. Even if the collectors are still a feature of the narrative, this is a book about material objects; objects with weight, shape, texture, and colour; objects travelling geographically and temporally; objects that can captivate us today, just as they did in the seventeenth century. If I convey some of my original fascination with the tomahawk, convincing the reader that colonial objects deserve attention, and for their material and formal qualities as much as their politically charged itineraries, then I will have done much of what I set out to do with this book.

The gradual shift in focus, from collectors to objects, is also the trajectory of the book. While the first part concerns the collectors' practices and conceptions, the second turns to the objects as protagonists, tracing their travels. The third part then discusses the objects' potential to encourage—even force—a re-envisioning of display practices, of canons of art and artefacts. This has ethical implications. Sweden has a colonial history that dates back at least four centuries and continues to be a cause of concern in our own day, as exemplified by several lawsuits about land rights between the Swedish state and Sámi communities, and by recent actions of protest against the exploitation of natural resources on time-honoured Sámi land. The equally long history of collecting and displaying colonial objects is likewise present today, in the showcases and storage of national museums, and in the increasingly topical issue of restitution, and the questioning of the museums' self-assumed right to tell the history of others. I am as irrevocably embedded in this matrix of colonizers and collectors as the next person. I can by no means claim to speak for the producers and original users of the objects (and, worse, more often than not we do not even know their names). However, those anonymous producers and users have left materially and visually eloquent traces of their skills, practices, agencies, and worldviews, namely the objects themselves. By paying close attention to the objects, by putting them centre stage, I hope this study will contribute to the opening up of a space where more voices will be heard than those of the colonizers and collectors.

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