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## The Collectors' Cabinet: Renaissance and Baroque Masterworks from the Arnold & Seena Davis Collection - Wall Text Panel

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The art museum as we know it today is a direct descendant of the so-called “Cabinet of Curiosities,” which emerged in the Renaissance. Such collections were assembled by society’s cultural élite and featured wonders from both the natural and the man-made worlds (*naturalia and artificialia*, respectively). Displayed in purpose-built spaces and designed to inspire awe while facilitating learning, these *wunderkammern* (or “rooms of wonders”) were understood as microcosmic representations of the universe; their contents specifically installed to reveal hidden affinities and, by extrapolation, important clues to unraveling life’s mysteries. As the illustrated frontispiece from Ferrante Imperato’s *Dell’Historia Naturale* (Naples, 1599) makes clear, a typical cabinet might feature taxidermied reptiles, stuffed birds, and exotic shells, together with learned texts and treatises (it being assumed that nature had as much to teach us as books). This deliberate conjunction of the exotic and the scholarly in such spaces speaks to a very specific conception of knowledge and its acquisition in the Renaissance, as well as to the Humanists’ belief that a systematic study of the natural world could shed light on our own mortal existence. In the 17th century, ongoing exploration around the globe and expanded trade networks only heightened this desire to “map” the world – and humanity’s place in it – with a view to better understanding them both. This in turn gave rise to new epistemologies, which were less concerned with lifting the veil on the so-called “Great Chain of Being” than with manifest physical characteristics; a shift that impacted the way cabinets were installed, as Frans Francken’s exuberant *Chamber of Curiosities* (inset) of 1636 reveals. During the following century, the so-called Age of Reason, the thirst



Frans II Francken (1581-1642), *Chamber of Curiosities*, 1636 (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum)

for ever greater taxonomic clarity favored collections that were less universal and more targeted, paving the way for discipline-specific museums in the 19th century, including those focused exclusively on natural history or the visual and plastic arts. Despite important normative shifts, the objects in such collections continued to be prized not only for their inherently beautiful or fascinating qualities but also for the insights they provided into the power of creation (both human and divine). Along the way, the rituals and social practices associated with collecting developed and evolved, giving rise to a particular breed of individual: the “collector.”

The collector is someone who is devoted to the accumulation of a particular class of objects. The collector, who often loves the quest as much as – if not more than – the conquest, is driven by zeal and curiosity. The collector is a person whose eyes, mind, and heart play equally critical roles in the creation of his or her collection. When I first visited Arnold Davis in his home in 2012, I knew that he was indeed a true collector. Mr. Davis and his late wife Seena spent nearly the whole of their 65 years of married life pursuing European masterworks and assembling their remarkable collection. Seasoned travelers, they never missed an opportunity to visit not only the biggest auction houses but also, and perhaps more interestingly, small private vendors where they sought out “sleepers,” overlooked objects with tremendous

potential. Their stately Westchester County home is a testament to their commitment: every room on the ground floor is hung, floor to ceiling, with paintings and drawings from the 15th–19th centuries, and every object has a fascinating story that Mr. Davis readily shares with great generosity and humor. The art continues on the upper floor where, in the tradition of earlier collectors, the Davises mingled exotica from the natural world with cherished paintings and other fascinating man-made objects, including row upon row of beautifully arranged and framed vintage button hooks. In every instance, the works are installed intuitively rather than according to any strict thematic, temporal, or geographical criteria. And it works. Seeing so many marvelous paintings and works on paper hung amongst Renaissance majolica pieces, figurines from the antique and Medieval periods, prized volumes, as well as objects associated with Seena’s own art-making and Arnold’s earlier career as a violinist, one senses a unity and completeness that is sometimes lacking in more austere or sterile museum settings. Experiencing the works in this manner provides a unique vista onto the rich and storied lives the Davises created and enjoyed over the course of their more than six decades together. It was a privilege, then, not only to have the opportunity to study these works in situ but also to be able to create a special exhibition highlighting some of Arnold and Seena’s finest paintings, which first visited Fairfield University’s Thomas J. Walsh Art Gallery 18 years ago in a show entitled *Patience & Passion: Old Master Paintings from the Arnold and Seena Davis Collection*. I am delighted that we were able to bring this collection back to Fairfield University’s campus in an entirely new incarnation for an entirely new audience (many members of this year’s freshman class were born the same year that this earlier exhibition was mounted) in a venue that is celebrating its third anniversary this fall. My objective throughout has been to introduce our constituents to specific treasures from this particular “cabinet” while preserving the aesthetic of the collectors who so lovingly created it.

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