

# THE HABIT OF CURIOSITY

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**Abstract:** Curiosity is commonly referred to as a way of being, or an object of curiosity. How curiosity is part of our daily lives, how we engage with curiosity intellectually has a long and interesting history. Since the sixteenth century it has been manifest in cabinets of curiosity, museums and curio cabinets; exercises in collecting, self-reflection and discovery. However, the end of the twentieth-century has altered our sense of the world, through the speed and accessibility of information leaving a changed relationship with wonder. This paper discusses the role of curiosity in research as a “habit of curiosity”, (Benedict 2001, 2) a method for discovery. It reviews its historical manifestations and concerns, locating it through objects and actions, and questions what new meanings the twenty-first century brings with it. Is curiosity at risk? Is it still risky? The relationship between the individual and their interior and exterior socio-cultural landscape continually creates new meanings for knowledge and how we achieve it. This shadowy landscape of our curiosity has not lost meaning intellectually, but it in our shrinking, globalized world how we engage with it requires a new investigation.

**Keywords:** curiosity, cabinets of curiosity, research, collecting

The quest to understand, interpret and express our world is at the core of the experience of being an academic, scholar, artist, designer or scientist. This constant journey into the unknown or revisiting the known for new knowledge is driven by curiosity. It does not have an easy history or interpretation; curiosity is risky, having famously “killed the cat”, it is virtuous “perhaps the greatest virtue of a man” according to Anatole France, and for Casanova “love is three quarters curiosity”. Clearly curiosity runs the gamut of human experience. It is the drive, an object, and a way of being. In a more practical sense, according to author Zora Neale Hurston, “Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.”<sup>1</sup> It is here that a bridge is gapped in trying to understand the role of curiosity in the

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes are from <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/curiosity.html>

intellectual practices of individuals. This paper will investigate the role of curiosity in the practice of design, specifically referencing the role of the cabinet of curiosity; developing a historical understanding of what curiosity has meant and how it is now serves as inspiration, and its role in research.

That it can have such diverse interpretations speaks of the perplexing fluidity of its outcomes. The language around curiosity has changed and that reflects the culture in which it exists. First, it is best to understand what curiosity is and how it has functioned historically. As Neil Kenny in *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern France and Germany* (2004) states, “Discourse about curiosity, while not confined to questions of knowledge, played a crucial role in the production, acquisition, control and circulation of knowledge. Curiosity was considered to be both something inside a person that made him or her desire certain objects and yet also something about those objects that made them desirable. Both subject and object oriented sense”. (1, 3) Importantly for a practice approach curiosity requires action. According to Freudian thinking it requires a catalyst, and can easily dissipate. (Daniel 2008, 194) Twentieth-century psychology tells us that curiosity and anxiety are linked through similar environmental conditions of complexity and novelty leading to exploratory behavior. (Voss and Keller 1983, xi) Since curiosity interrogates it can upturn questions and situations that are not always pleasant or easy to accept. It subverts conventional wisdoms and questions the innate relationship with which many believe it has to human nature.

Barbara Benedict in *Curiosity: a cultural history of early modern inquiry* states that, “Curiosity is always transgressive, always a sign of the rejection of the known as inadequate, incorrect, even uninteresting”. (2001, 4) This can create not only anxiety, but a difficult position for the person who is curious and attempts to practice it. By locating oneself on the edge or outskirts of society intellectually social acceptance becomes precarious. One of the oldest stories in humanity is of Adam and Eve being cast from Paradise, because curiosity, as a temptation, drove them to disobey; their awareness of themselves forced them to think differently than they had before. The time demarcation of before and after knowing as a result of curiosity allows that it does change who we are by how we think and, hence, how we behave. Logically how we think is manifest through how we practice who we are. Sites of curiosity, where and how we practice it, are a result of these actions. Forms of curiosity, those objects needed to

practice it, create and reflect our understanding of curiosity as it evolves become integral to our understanding.

The practice of curiosity requires discovery, collecting, and pondering, all of which require time. In *Collections in Context: the organization of knowledge and community in Europe* (2011) this is elucidated in the process of collecting, “[it] might involve multiple actions—observing, defining, amassing, acquiring, selecting omitting, creating, and presenting, each of which requires an assessment of the material or object considered.” (Fresco and Hedelmann, 2) This becomes more complex when we recognize that “collections can be made of overlapping layering of text, image, and music—each element with its own networks of meaning extending out to different genres or social sphere.” (*ibid.*, 10) This question of its role becomes relevant when one recognizes that each of these actions, the broader or more specific, requires time for questioning, discovery and pondering. Unfortunately time is a finite resource we have to work with and the speed at which we are required to work today places an additional stressor on time. How then, has curiosity evolved to have a place in our lives? If it can be formalized, as Hurston suggests, then surely it can find its place in our work lives, forty hours over five days. Not only a question of formalization, one has to ask how to capture curiosity, hone it and use it wisely. To what extent does order have a place in the practice of curiosity? Journeys of discovery often require a certain freedom to roam; how curiosity is captured under the restrictions of research is a basis for creating effective teaching tools for designers.

Further, for students today growing up in an age of speed the practice of curiosity, and the time it requires, has created new definitions of ‘inspiration’. To discover, with no depth (i.e. the Google search), to collect or gather (Pinterest/Facebook) and lastly to think thoughtfully about why and how it inspires you, (let alone apply it) requires a different mindset than allowed for by today’s information society. Why you collect something, or practice curiosity, has an impact on how you interpret it. Cheap imitations, surface applications and a lack of synthesis of all aspects create no understanding of the thinking required to be motivated, to be curious. To suggest that curiosity is intrinsic to human nature requires an investigation into the conditions which impact its role in practice, allowing that while integral to humanity, it is not static or non-evolutionary. “The act of collecting, of gathering similar or dissimilar things, of tending or

editing those items, has played a pervasive and influential role in shaping our knowledge and culture, certainly prior to the advent of museums.” (Fresco and Hedelmann 2011, 2) One must question what socio-cultural factors impact the understanding and role of curiosity in society and how it is allowed to be practiced.

The history of design curiosity was most openly referenced in the development and popularity of cabinets of curiosity. While the very distant ancestor of today’s curio cabinet and the museum, these early versions were directly linked to the renaissance interpretation of the “habit of curiosity” (Benedict 2001, 2) through objects of curiosity and the curious collector. The concept of the cabinet of curiosity often referred back to images of St. Jerome and St. Augustine (as he was concerned that it is not left to its own devices) in their respective studies, and later the renaissance where the *studiolo* of the ducal palace Gubbio of the Duke of Urbino, who had commissioned a masterpiece of *trompe l’oeil* to contain illusionary curiosities. Early images of the collections of natural history items of Ole Worm and Ulisso Aldrovandi create the link between the cabinet /room collection and the smaller individual collections contained in the casework cabinet. It was in the in the sixteenth century, however we saw their popularity rise, (particularly in the prosperous Netherlands), both the objects and their cases were highly valued for both aristocracy and the wealthy. Early dollhouses such as that owned by Petronella Oortman create a more gender specific use of the case and the objects collected. A cabinet could also refer to a small room which (*wunderkammer*) served a particular purpose, typically of display. The intricacy and craftsmanship of the cabinets themselves were of equal value to the object. Later, the concept of ‘clever’ design found in eighteenth century mechanical desks allowed for similar hidden compartments and surface illusions. While they fell out of use for some time, interpretations of displays of curiosities can be interpreted through the British Earl of Burlington’s Chiswick house gallery of 1725, the approach to the design of the painting cabinet (gallery) designed by Antoine Watteau and Claude Audran in the early eighteenth century and later references are seen in Thomas Jefferson’s entryway “cabinet” at Monticello. The modern museum owes much to the cabinet of curiosity. Indeed, the development cabinets of curiosity foreshadowed the intense interest in taxonomy, classification and symbolism so popular in the nineteenth century. While watered down to the curio

cabinet of today, we will see that the idea of ‘curiosity’ still manifests itself in the home.

Certain assumptions are put forth about curiosity; it is something that is engaged with, two, we have agency, three, that it is formalized—it can be an object—and lastly that its meaning evolves as society changes. This evolution also assumes that curiosity has a value, as either a mindset—a way of practicing—or as an object. As it treads the unknown curiosity can take issue with propriety and ethics. This paper will engage with these arguments but also look at how societal changes affect how we understand curiosity and how it is applied. This investigation will assess curiosity’s ability to make change, and the depth to which it succeeds.

Research should bring about awareness and change, but it always lies at risk of failure; to evidence, support, to function. It requires calculated leaps stretching between hypothesis and reality, creativity and fact. This ability to imagine a situation or circumstances differently requires the thinker to open themselves to the possibility of failure. The risk factor of curiosity, the experimental, is a central link to research. As it famously killed the cat, curiosity uncontained and chaotic can kill the research.

Historically, the risk of curiosity had more to do with a social imbalance and the chaos that could (potentially) ensue from hierarchical disruption. Early scholars, the religious, often warned of the dangers of curiosity. Augustine associated it with a pride that turns the mind from God (Benedict 2001, 3). Whether pride as a human flaw, or a turning from God, these alone were not positive but their link through curiosity muted an admiration for curiosity. According to the Church it was curiosity’s link to a desire or longing for knowledge, which connotated a weakness in humanity. To desire left one open to temptation. Much later in the early seventeenth century Francis Bacon “advocated a voracious learning that encompassed all areas of existence while honoring the supremacy of God”. (Benedict 2001, 19) It could merge the pondering aspects of curiosity, with an outcome of understanding of one’s world, that which has been defined by God. Ostensibly, the knowledge gained from curiosity should evidence God’s greatness. Fittingly, the saying, ‘Knowledge is power’ is attributed to Sir Francis Bacon. Clearly he understood the risk that knowledge, an outcome of curiosity, could bring to the Church, yet, he also believed the individual could be curious, knowledgeable and respectful of God’s supremacy.

It is an interesting paradox that depictions of the great thinkers are shown in their '*studiolos*' spaces of contemplation surrounded by objects which inspired and motivated them; their manifestations of curiosity. Perhaps these are later interpretations of their interests by those who were proponents of curiosity. Regardless, the association between objects of curiosity and the learned was linked visually. Contained in spaces of contemplation they allowed for the path from the unknown to the known to be visualized, indeed, for the subjects themselves became objects of curiosity. As Neil Kenny notes, "curiosity often came to encompass not only people's desire to know or possess something but also *what* they desired to know or possess". (2004, 5) To then further depict this type of interiority through objects suggests a lack of distinction between the subject and subjectivity, a blurring of the corporeal and intellectual boundaries. In essence doing so creates a more holistic boundary around curiosity, it has a physical way of being and the haptic experience then creates a sense of order and understanding—satisfying the curious in all of us.

That longing is a sensation of/for the unknown, in fact, that it is a sensation creates two areas of risk. First, sensation is sensory, it is bodily; to what extent can we control our bodies sensations? Second, that ignorance creates a gap or a darkness, which requires great faith or foolishness to attempt to breach. Does one truly know the object person or experience for which they long? While the surface may be attractive, or the imaginings of it may be filled with possibilities, these are not the reality. It is this unknown which creates risk and possible failure. In research we attempt to fill in the boundaries of possibility with evidence, suggested lines become solid and functional. Without curiosity however, those suggested lines of a potential form do not exist. We need the risk of the unknown to create the known, we need to manifest our desires to move forward. An unsatisfied longing remains amorphous, a vast emptiness waiting to be filled, at risk of being defined by someone other than ourselves.

In curiosity's quest to become a reality we see man's need to control an outcome. It allows us "to do or discover things that go beyond one's allotted role in life." (Kenny 2004, 4) Our interiority and our ability to control its destiny is linked to our curiosity. To accept our fate or define our fate is a choice that the curious make. This more secular approach to curiosity developed with the Enlightenment. The individual could create their own narrative based upon internal drives, supported by evidence, contained by collections signifying the origins

of the individual. This chaos of the unknown is mollified by the actions of the curious. One could argue that cabinets of curiosity helped formally bridge the gap to the Enlightenment.

The unknown, of course, is perceived as being out of control. More specifically, it is not in *our* control. In that sense then the knowledge or quest that we desire is chaotic, we do not know how or where to grasp for the hoped for outcome. Curiosity itself is chaotic by nature. Single-minded in its pursuit of the unknown with no boundaries, desire for desire's sake could lead to chaotic upheaval with its outcomes and potential changes. Kenny suggests that from the "antiquities through the 16<sup>th</sup> century" the interest in discussing curiosity in part "was almost [due to a need] to regulate knowledge or behaviour, to establish who should try to know what, and under what circumstances." (2004, 4) In this way social order, hierarchies, and potentially moral codes could be kept in order, and to maintain order. In particular "secular definitions and uses of curiosity usually opposed the churches more 'sinful' approach to curiosity." (*ibid.*, 2004, 18)

To participate in sinful acts was to allow a more base and willful thinking into the intellectual world order. Yet with the Age of Reason's onset in the seventeenth century the discourse on curiosity "was morally neutral or positive." (Kenny 2004, 4)

Reason created a framework of understanding and an approach to curiosity, and, importantly, these unknowns would be contained within a form. The cabinet of curiosity allowed for thinking to have a physical way of being, one's desires could be contained, removed as needed, then put away again. The time required to understand could be managed. The degree of workmanship in these cabinets created an aesthetic order to curiosity. Order is the opposite of chaos.

Possession then starts to play a role in curiosity. It offers control of desire in a socially acceptable manner. These objects (commonly focused on natural 'wonders') could be collected and, effectively curated, in a way that made sense to the owner. Why one object was placed near another, and the resultant network become another system of control to subdue the chaos of the unknown. The links of action, object and form could potentially create a negotiation of knowing, how one moves through information and the links one creates are a form of order. Today, when a newspaper article is read online, it is different from when one reads a newspaper in hand. The traditional method gives us a selection of visual images and opportunities (advertisements and articles) from which to choose. On-line, the reader's visual world

is controlled not only by the limits of the space, but by algorithms which will cue articles and advertisements of interest based upon previous searches. The limits of curiosity are often contained by space whether physical or cyber, but hyperlinks create a new linkage of choice. In fact advertisements create an economic factor to our curiosity which resembles the economics of commodification of early collecting.

Benedict notes that “the expansion of curiosity from a passion to a product reflects the revolutionary shift in English society as wealth flooded in from colonies and new inventions and as all aspects of culture became subject to reification.” (2001, 3) By re-creating chaos into an orderly form, or identifying chaos as a form it allowed for collectors to re-associate or re-identify themselves in the new order. Whether scientists or performers, curious people seek and manifest new realities and reshape their own identities and their products—curiosities-incarnate these new realities and identities as examples of ontological transgression. (*ibid.*, 4) To place oneself in a new world, designed by oneself, is an act of creativity. It gives a power to the possessor, not only through comprehension but through self-imposed location. This creation of order out of supposed chaos is often considered to be the basis of creativity.

Not only is the unknown now known, but it can be labeled, collected, contained and linked. This unknown comes under control as the curious collector is now a voyeur into what was the unknown. The multiple understandings of curiosity now become expanded into the creation of the ‘curiosity’ which is under the gaze of the owner/viewer. In essence, their curiosity is embodied in the ‘curiosity’ and they engage in an act of self-reflection when pondering the curious aspects of the object. They could further solidify this concept by creating a case, or cabinet of curiosities, to preserve the curiosities. The case functions as a skin around the internal organs of curiosity, the entire aforementioned ‘habit of curiosity’ embodies the existence of the collector, reflected not only by what is collected but by the ornate and detailed workmanship of the cabinet itself; reflections of wealth, taste, knowledge and money.

Two phenomena are occurring here, one of spectacle and the second of connectivity. What is connected, and how it is connected (not withstanding the collectors role) creates a degree of spectacle. This spectacle though had to bridge the world of the unknown to become educational, downplaying the ‘display’ aspect to become useful,



especially when dealing with the unknown for as Baz Kershaw in *Curiosity or Contempt: on spectacle, the human and activism* (2003, 592) notes citing the *Dictionary of Theater: terms, concepts and analysis* “the borders between reality and spectacle are not easy to define.” (Pavis 1998, 347) This is done through the system of display of the curiosities and a need to create a more educational purpose to allay fears of the negative aspects of curiosity. This would assist in understanding curiosities of nature if not the curios themselves as noted in this 1868 explanation of the curiosity of sound, “To our limited understandings it some times seems that Nature delights in curious freaks; but when we come to analyze her apparent vagaries, they resolve themselves into mere instances of the working of simple laws.” (Watsons, 229) These laws are translated by the private collector through their own organization of objects and ornamentation of space.

Two examples include the picture gallery at *Château de Muette* and Thomas Jefferson’s reception ‘cabinet.’ In both cases it can be argued that curiosity is understood to be not as much about being encyclopedic but culturally specific with a conscious manipulation of design, ornamentation and the message being created. According to Blondel d’Azincourt, “A man must be interested in many things to merit this title.” (Bailey 1987, 436) This could be understood not just through the collecting methods, but the display as well. Early in the eighteenth century chronology was not important but schools (of art) were, and by the late eighteenth century this was considered an abomination.

“It seems to me that a student’s genius will develop far more quickly and his taste far more surely when he is able to contemplate a series of fine pictures together and follow the progress of a great painter, than when he has to look at a landscape hanging next to a history painting, or a Bambochade next to a Raphael. Such display, he continued, was “as ridiculous as a cabinet *d’histoire naturelle* arranged without regard to genus, class, or family.”“(LeBrun 1793 in Bailey 1987, 445)

This brings a number of points to light: collections seemingly had trends, they were not isolated collections, they foreshadowed their role in the development of museums, and there was a distinction between the types of cabinets of curiosity, further having some sense of order was necessary to create logic. When applied to cabinets of curiosity they could dispel the lesser, more base side of curiosity. Further relationships to order can be defined by the ornamentation of the

spaces: in a discussion of the ornamentation of the painting gallery at *Château de la Muette* by Watteau and Audan detailed deconstruction of the patterns allows for specific understanding of which techniques were used that linked the images together through themes of otherness, play and *chinoiserie*, the exotic. The in-depth analysis of Thomas Jefferson's reception area at Monticello also revealed a concerted and thoughtful arrangement where a visitor could see understand his interests, "Nowhere are the fruits of Jefferson's intellectual curiosity more evident than in the entrance hall at Monticello—a veritable cabinet of curiosities that included fine art, natural wonders, ethnological artifacts, and marvelous curios of human contrivance." (Robinson 1995, 41) Interestingly, it also contained an image of St. Jerome in his study.

These methodologies of collecting, display and linkage speak directly to the role of research, the process of understanding, this habit of curiosity. Habit conjures up the everyday, the near unconscious ways of being. Michel DeCerteau, in discussing the practices of the everyday in relation to the individual and the neighborhood states, "that the everyday banality of this process [the repetition of habit] renders invisible its complexity as a cultural practice and its urgency in satisfying [the curious]," (1998, 11) curiosity as an impetus to research usurps the banality of process, creating a temporary disorder through a studied way of engaging with curiosities. The conscious design of mythological themes, rare materials and specific objects is not a question of chance but of focused research. It is the result of the collector (the researcher) thinking about what interests them and why, and, of equal importance why they are placed as they are in their cabinet. The degree of steps it could take to find an object stored beyond two doors in one small drawer can denote the relationship the object has to the interior mind of the collector.

While these objects were reflections of personal interest they were most commonly materials of the natural world. New discoveries through travel brought back to the continent stimulated an interest in the environment. Corals, bones, stones and plant life were all a source of fascination. The desire to record, copy and archive are different though than the act of ponderance and the sense of wonder brought on by curiosity. How better to understand God's methods than through objects of nature? Should one choose to study the exotic or unknown side by side with 'local' artefacts a greater comprehension of the breadth of development of the natural world could be perceived. As

Benedict notes these become, “visible clues of God”, (2001, 8) the unknown starts to have a logic and order to it. It reigns in the chaos of the unknown through structures and forms.

To what extent then does a collector limit others’ curiosity or ability to quench it, by containing this new knowledge? Curiosity contained creates a new order of intellectual power. To travel the world through objects of the world could, might possibly, quench curiosity or, make it more insatiable. To be in the position of power to create new linkages is (ostensibly) a luxury held by the wealthy. When an object is removed from its natural setting and placed in a cabinet with other removed objects (the others) a natural or origin based hierarchy is destroyed, this rarity and exclusion has the ability to create a different kind of hierarchy or order in a broader world through a new set of relationships/networks in this new contained world, the cabinet of curiosities. While objects of God, the world is man-made. Stafford and Terpak in *Devices of Wonder: from the world in a box to images on a screen* suggest that these new orders were less about ponderance than performance, “The *kunstkammer* was not so much a static tableau to be contemplated as it was a drama of possible relationships to be explored.” (2001, 6) This offers an opportunity for curiosity to become something enacted, more of the earlier aforementioned renaissance concept of the habit of curiosity. The collector then is a performer or agent of curiosity. What we see, is the natural world of God, is static, the man made world of linkages and relationships is one of an individual’s agency. It takes curiosity beyond the object to the relationship man has with the both the world and God. The arrangement of the unknown becomes (potentially) more important, not more than the objects themselves, admired and valued for their rarity, but for creating a new value.

In the handling of the objects —to create an order of connectivity—the collector participates in the sensory experience of design. As design is experiential, sensory satisfaction is central to its success. Not just the functional or comfort factors but the sense of experiencing satisfaction, contentment or success. This manmade approach may be more satisfying than to be in the natural world as it comes from our interior, personal knowledge. The possible shift from the natural world as a rarified object to a world experienced through self-determined relationships creates a new relationship with the world and self. Yet it still leaves the unknown, the disturbing or dark side of nature, that not seen or experienced before, as opposed to a similar world to be

reckoned with by curiosity and its collectors. It was of course contained in a form “a universe in a box” (Stafford & Terpak 2001, 7) that was familiar and manageable, described by them as “a homey microcosm... receptacles [which] invite us to experiment with order and disorder.” (*ibid.*, 7) The schism between the natural world of God and the man made world is breached through taking the unknown, the other of a non-local world and organizing it into a man made container, no less grand or complex than the natural world and creating a ‘reasoned’ world reflecting the interior motivations of the collector, the driving force of curiosity creating an opportunity to wonder at the world, enlighten their intellectual world, and locate their standing socially. This working out or practicing of curiosity became most developed during the Enlightenment, according to Benedict, “whereas ominous monsters end their long march from the distant past in early modern England, curiosity is born at this moment as the mark of the peculiarly modern identity of the solitary searcher, the inquiring everyman, the democratic detective.”(2001, 8) This marked a shift in the ownership of knowledge from the aristocracy to the ‘everyman’. Even if, according to Benedict the poor would collect from nature, and the wealthy went further to collect art and antiquities as well. (2001, 202)

This is an important step in understanding the world, for new creatures and materials discovered, created, for the non-curious a world of monsters, the stuff of myths. To what extent does mythology spur on curiosity, and considering the extent of scientific knowledge we have now what is the parallel? An argument can be made for the role of gods in mythology in understanding curiosity. It encompasses both scale and power, and the voyeuristic aspect of a collection. “Like humans but on a grander scale, God/gods as players and experimenters could be curious about what eventuates when certain things are tried.” (Newbold 2008, 74) Their grand scale – bigger than humans and voyeurs of humans - creates an analogous relationship between the collector and the curiosity, the subject and subjectivity. If gods were aspects of ourselves we too could hold these same qualities on a smaller scale. Being a voyeur is akin to being an invisible divine watcher, (*ibid.*, 86) The power of the voyeuristic qualities of curiosity are played out through collections and collecting Often there is an assertiveness involved which is driven by dominance and power needs, that is, exercising a prerogative to make someone an object, subject to the mastery of a (tyrannical) gaze. (*ibid.*, 85) Could there exist a dark

side to curiosity not from a sinful nature but from one of dominance whether over knowledge, the world, or the ability to question any of it? This type of relationship focuses less on the reflective side of curiosity than the voyeuristic/performative. Relationships of hierarchy require a playing out of roles, even if it is between a person and an object it is a dominance over the world by making a man-made microcosm. The picture gallery 'cabinet' as a cousin to the cabinet of curiosities served a similar experience, including "the pleasure of owning one's own". (Bailey 1998, 436) The curious when seen as spectacular has the ability to "attract and repel in the same instant". (Kershaw 1998, 594) It is this ambivalence which can exist that creates a "syndrome that separates serious art from spectacle." (*ibid.*, 592) One can derive an inference that in any good collection there had to be a difference between a mere display and the deeper meaning and satisfaction derived from the curious.

Whether of for good or evil this concept collecting and pondering, classifying and displaying are part of what Beth Fowkes Tobin in her study of the Duchess of Portland's shell collecting (*Material Women*, 2011) refers to as a 'praxis' or the engagement of research processes. This working out or practicing of curiosity became most developed during the Enlightenment, according to Benedict, "Whereas ominous monsters end their long march from the distant past in early modern England, curiosity is born at this moment as the mark of the peculiarly modern identity of the solitary searcher, the inquiring everyman, the democratic detective." (2001, 8) This marked a shift in the ownership of knowledge from the aristocracy to the 'everyman'. Even if, according to Benedict the poor would collect from nature, and the wealthy went further to collect art and antiquities as well. (2001, 202) Importantly, as can be read in Tobin's work on the Duchess of Portland, it has been historically easy to disregard the work of a wealthy woman<sup>2</sup> until one understands the depth of intellectual engagement she had with her subject matter, in this case, shells. There is discussion of the Duchess' tools, her trips (via letters), her process of classifying, and principles of arrangement. In fact, the Duchess was preparing to publish her collection at the time she passed away. (Tobin, 2011, 259) Thomas Jefferson's collection of "tokens of friendship" in

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<sup>2</sup> This paper will not go into the perception of women and curiosity as it is beyond the scope at this time, however, it was largely negative and could be and has often been dismissed as 'amateurish', in the negative sense of the word.

his reception hall, or as he referenced it his “Indian Hall” (Robinson, 1995, 43) also creates a specific narrative which “invites speculation concerning the role of the Native American in the cultural and political thought of the Jeffersonian generation.” (*ibid.*, 44) These narratives are developed through process, “the physical transformation it [the object] under went and the conceptual categories it transversed as it moved from the out of doors...to the cotton lined drawers of the collector’s mahogany cabinet, a process by which it accrued value as an object of beauty, curiosity, and scientific inquiry.” (Tobin 2011, 250); it includes display, and language—how the discourse on objects and collections inform it. The transversing from public to private whether it is the object taken from its natural habitat, encased as such (i.e. *chinoiserie*) or published for more to see also reveal the individuals role in defining themselves and their place in the world. The eighteenth century grand tour both allowed for more collecting, more knowledge and desire for these ‘curiosities’ it could foster curiosity at its most base in the form of souvenirs, but ideally in the desire for knowledge and dissemination. As Susan Stewart in *On Longing* notes the souvenir and the collection are two devices for the objectification of desire. (1993, xii) Each creates a unique narrative; the souvenir may work with nostalgia and place—locating oneself in a specific landscape, (*ibid*, xii) the collection becomes “the space where history is transformed into space or property.” (*ibid.*, xii) This idea of location, whether the movement from a natural setting or origin to the commodified setting through ownership in a collection places the individual at any point in the process into a specific landscape. Our physical being in relation to this Stewart references in regard to the miniature and the gigantic. “We find the miniature at the origin of private, individual history, but we find the gigantic at the origin of public and natural history.” (1993, 71) In essence, the collection of/within a cabinet is private/miniature, but the desire is public/gigantic ourselves against the world. When we hold the world in miniature, we attain a particular view of the world, but desire/curiosity is the larger force played out in public and sets us against the landscape of our society. Creation is gigantic because the unknown is larger than us—but attainment is miniature because we ‘own’ it can literally be in our hands. It is human, as opposed to god-like or mythological. Our curiosity is our interior landscape, continually morphing, regardless of attainment. Research allows us to locate our knowledge, create microcosms of our world, and secures our place within it.

How then is all of this referenced in society today? In our contemporary society the spectacle of the world is no longer as grand as the mythological gods, ours is a globalized world visualized in pixels, which we telescope in on, collect, deconstruct, experience and own in a less haptic way. This is what Baz Kershaw refers to as the “miniaturization of spectacle” (2003, 596) and all the wonder which comes with it. The computer becomes the new cabinet of curiosities, “As the shadowy box of boxes and paradigmatic multitasking instrument, the analogical case of wonder is a tantalizing emblem of the needless struggle to incorporate infinite variables into our lives.” (Stafford and Terpak 2001, 3) We collect ‘friends’ and ‘likes’ on Facebook and images on Pinterest, all public forums. Our notions of curiosity lend themselves to a more voyeuristic approach than ever before. Networks are our new ‘links’ between items, and the arrangements and degree of linkage create our new understandings of the world. Space and location are different in a cyber world, the very word ‘hyperlink’ creates a tone of being ‘extra’ or more, it’s not just a link, but an extra-special link which delves deeper. The historic cabinet of curiosities housed the new and unusual, but as Stafford and Terpak note, “One era’s familiar objects turn alien in another epoch. Memories, if they are to persist, have to be incorporated into the stuff of contemporary stories.” (*ibid.*, 9) Curiosity, no matter how it is manifest, always requires a process of thinking and research. Collecting, pondering, linking, the synthesis of ideas and actions into new ways of being never grows old or outdated regardless of the tools.

This paper has proven that curiosity is an essential component to design research. It has discussed varying historical understandings of curiosity, its nature and role, specifically focusing on its application to design forms. It has shown a continuity in the importance of the role of curiosity in creating and responding to not only objects and spaces, but in the design process. The importance of how objects interrelate and are physically linked to one another, regardless of boundaries does not change over time. Our objects of curiosities may change, but we still need to them for motivation, we still need to relate them to our world, we need curiosity to create our world no matter what it is made of or how it is encased.

Curiosity drives our quest for knowledge, in this way practices of curiosity are essential to the research process. However, as we have seen, curiosity is in itself elusive. In the play *The Shadow of the Hummingbird* by Athol Fugard (2014) an elderly philosopher attempts

to explain Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* to his grandson. He uses the analogy of the shadow of a hummingbird that they see on his wall. The grandson cannot understand why he is interested in the shadow when the 'real' hummingbird is outside the window. Curiosity is the shadow, and knowledge the hummingbird, while the facts are there, how they appear—through shadows—and how it changes their meaning is more elusive. Our position and perception of both 'reality' and its shadows changes how we think about our world. The boundaries move, causing us to search for new meanings, new understandings, new ways of perceiving our world. As the elderly philosopher in the play recalls, "The final landscape is within." Curiosity is what takes us within, it allows us to not be fooled by appearances or forms, but to create an understanding of our world by not only what we see, but by our imagination.

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