AFTERWORD

On 18th and 21st January, 1655, Queen Christina of Sweden, recently arrived in Rome, made two visits to the Jesuit University, the Collegio Romano. On both occasions, the moving spirit who devised the iconography for the transformation of the College into a theatre of hieroglyphics, and later guided the abdicated and newly-Catholic queen into the inner chambers of library, sacristy and museum was the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602-80).[1] The first reception presented the Roman College, intensely decorated with painted emblems, ephemeral architecture, and feigned statuary, in the form of a temple of the Female Intellect – Sibyls and Muses, all under the patronage of the pagan Minerva and the Christian Holy Wisdom.[2] Medallions, inscriptions and statues lauded women poets and empresses who had chosen a virtuous exile.

The culmination of Christina's second visit was a tour of the College's Museum, which had been formed in the mid-century under Kircher's direction to represent not only an externalisation of his own extraordinary range of intellectual interests, but also a precise epitome of the universal reach and intellectual vigour of the Society of Jesus. Antiquities, models of the obelisks of Rome, natural and artificial marvels from the Jesuit missions in the Far East and Iberian America, figured stones, hydraulic automata, and combinatory arks. The Queen particularly admired the magnetic clocks, apparently magical devices which were in actuality highly theatrical scientific demonstrations of the operation of the lodestone. She was presented, as would have been expected, with two symbolic gifts, both of which were themselves demonstration of the virtuosity and range of Kircher and the Society: the first was an Arabic translation of the Psalms, with an index of passages relating to the Temple of Solomon, in allusion to the 'house of wisdom' which it was hoped that this monarch might build in Rome. The second was a miniature obelisk, inscribed in thirty-three languages with the praises of 'Great Christina, Isis reborn.'[3]

The institution which she visited at this high point was one which lasted for a comparatively short time, flourishing and fading with its celebrated creator. But, for three decades, visitors from all over Europe regarded this cabinet of wonders and its curator as a nodal point of intellectual life in Catholic Europe, and an important element of baroque Rome. As one of Kircher's correspondents wrote, 'If, in fact, I leave Rome without greeting or seeing Your Reverence, I believe that I would have seen nothing of Rome.'[4]

As Paula Findlen phrases it,

> In the middle decades of the seventeenth century, visitors to Rome with any taste for antiquities, curiosities, and inventions knew that Athanasius Kircher's museum at the Collegio Romano was the one sight that they could not miss. The Dutch traveller Jacob Spon, who visited Rome in the twilight of Kircher's career in 1675, introduced his readers to the pleasures of visiting Kircher with the following words: 'Does the

[1] Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: museums, collecting and scientific culture in early modern Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994),p..389.
[2] Maurizio Fagiolo d'Arco (ed.), *La Festa Barocca* (Rome: Edizioni de Luca, 1997), pp.382-84.
[3] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, pp.398-90.
[4] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p.380.

> conference of learned persons please you? See Father Kircher for unknown languages and mathematics.'[5]

The museum described in this volume served many purposes, one being to elicit the admiration of visitors for the institution which contained it: Antonella Romano has written of how the museum of the Collegio Romano 'constituted another element in the [Jesuit] politics of spectacular visibility.[6] To this end it catered to the insatiable early modern appetite for the prodigious: 'the essential category of the Museum of the Collegio Romano was the amazing,'[7] as its texture was defined by multiple levels of perceived interconnection:

> Relations of resemblance imposed by the nature of creation itself governed Kircher's world. The natural order was, in fact, nothing but the fabric of correspondences among things established by the act of creation.[8]

Like many baroque environments and baroque devotions, however, the museum used the repertory of splendour and astonishment to a more serious purpose – a cabinet of marvels which was also an expression of the mission and operation of the Jesuits in the world. In the words of Eugenio Lo Sardo:

> Under Kircher's stewardship, the museum of the Collegio Romano became a sort of philosophical gymnasium, an exercise space for the mind. Following Ignatius's views, he quickly grasped the power of classical scholarship and of images . . . for him, symbols and religion were the same thing: the most neutral image had a hidden meaning, both for the unlearned and for those initiated into the sacred mysteries. . . To stop at the surface, not to get down to 'the deepest spiritual meaning' is therefore a pernicious error. 'To understand the significance' it is necessary to 'seek the source,' and this source is 'the light and wisdom of God.' Every one of Kircher's images is infused with this message. They reveal the religious and devotional context from which they sprang, the spirit that led to the building of grandiose churches . . . and that inspired the heroism of people who abandoned everything to carry the message of Christ to the four corners of the earth. Kircher's museum helps us understand the human and religious reality of baroque Rome, with its passion for Hermetic wisdom, obelisks, and antiquities.[9]

The museum also, inevitably, reminds us of the sheer geographical spread of the Jesuit order and the resources which were at Kircher's disposal not only for the verification of natural and astronomical phenomena worldwide but also to gather those objects which were necessary to him for his own reinvention of the universe.[10]

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[5] Paula Findlen, 'Science, History and Erudition: Athanasius Kircher's museum at the Collegio Romano' in Daniel Stolzenberg (ed.), *The Great Art of Knowing : the baroque encyclopedia of Athanasius Kircher* (Stanford: Stanford university Libraries, 2001), p.17.

[6] Antonella Romano, 'Epilogue, understanding Kircher in Context' in Paula FIndlen (ed.), *Athanasius Kircher, The Last Man Who Knew Everything* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p.405.

[7] Renato Nicolini, 'Il Museo e le Tinte Impure del Mondo', in Eugenio Lo Sardo (ed.) *Il Museo del Mondo* (Rome:Edizioni de Luca, 2001), p.36.

[8] Carlos Ziller Comenietzki, 'Baroque Science between the Old and New World' in *The Last Man*, p. 319.

[9] Eugenio Lo Sardo, 'Kircher's Rome' in *The Last Man*, p.60.

[10] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p.82.

Giorgio De Sepi's published catalogue of the Museum, explicitly offered as a record of the collection which can also serve those preparing themselves for a visit to it, sets forth, in Paula Findlen's words, 'an image of Alexander VII's Rome as a site of wonder and collection,'[11] and elsewhere she reminds us that

> . . . a gallery organised around reproductions of the Roman obelisks whose meaning Kircher had interpreted for a succession of Popes . . . enhanced the sensation that the Collegio Romano Museum was the central axis through which all accounts of Rome, and of Rome's unique relationship to the world, intersected. For this reason Kircher and his disciples constantly praised his museum as a 'theatre of the city and the world.'[12]

The nature and character of the museum have also been described by this leading contemporary scholar of Kircher:

> Kircher's museum contained curiosities surrounded by portraits of the great Catholic sovereigns, of missionaries and philosophers, and set forth an ideal combination of knowledge, faith, and politics which reflected post-Tridentine optimism concerning the global triumph of Catholicism.[13]

And yet the Pope's likeness was not only present in heraldry at the gates of the museum and amongst the portraits of Sovereigns and patrons which adorned its walls, but also multiplied to infinity in one of Kircher's cabinets of mirrors –

> . . . the *literal manipulation of form*, through technological intervention, characterised the Baroque museum. 'The Baroque,' as Gilles Deleuze observes, 'endlessly creates folds'. The catoptric Machine, which literally enfolded the image of the Pope producing an infinite series of refractions, was a quintessentially baroque artefact.[14]

The main gallery of the museum was dominated by the wooden models of the obelisks of Rome, whose inscriptions Kircher believed himself to have deciphered, and with obelisks whose inscriptions in honour of contemporary sovereigns, including Christina of Sweden, were of his own devising. In this, as in the presence of the 'combinatory arks', mechanical devices for translation and cryptography, the Collegio Romano museum was a museum of language:

> Kircher's fascination with the hieroglyphs indicated a broader interest in the problem of communication. Numerous objects in the Roman college museum attested to its importance as a laboratory of communication. Chinese scrolls, Egyptians hieroglyphs, Etruscan tablets, and fragments of other ancient and modern scripts were materials from which to construct the original language of humans.[15]

But, as is proper with a baroque collection, the attempt at concise description is defeated by the copiousness of the thing itself, or rather of the constituent things themselves.

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[11] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p.46.
[12] Findlen, 'Science, History, and Erudition', p.22.
[13] Findlen, 'Un incontro con Kircher a Roma' in *il Museo del Mondo*, p.39.
[14] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p.47.
[15] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p.86

> As Adalgisa Lugli notes, Kircher's collection could not be contained in any *one* book nor even fully in his museum. Returning to the frontispiece of the 1678 catalogue, what is striking about this image is its sense of openness and distance. The obelisks draw our eyes upward to the vaulted ceiling whose cosmological motifs bring us out of the space of the museum into the heavens where the banner for the collection rests. Kircher and his visitors appear insignificant in comparison to the objects and the space of the museum. . . Kircher does not control the objects in his collection, they control him.[16]

The exaggerations of scale perpetuated by De Sepi's catalogue are inevitable products of the baroque desire for the glorious: the catalogue anticipates recollection by depicting the museum at the enhanced scale which it might eventually reach in the memory of the visitor who had been stupefied by its wonders. This is especially visible in the engraved frontispiece, which greatly increases the size of the model obelisks, and thus of the whole gallery, mostly through the very device with which Piranesi was later to transfigure the city of Rome in the European imagination, the shrinking of the human figures within the space.[17] Indeed this frontispiece is, in many respects, a representation of the overwhelming experience of a visit: the scales of figures, obelisks, skeletons and antiquities do not correspond, and the whole draws the museum together as in one of the distorting mirrors which were exhibited there.

It is worth considering more precisely what kind of work this catalogue is and what was the reality of the protean and mythologised collection which it describes. It is a record published two years before Kircher's death, and densely referential to earlier published works by him, of his collection, housed in fairly restricted premises within the Collegio Romano. This museum almost certainly incorporated an earlier collection which had been kept in Kircher's room in the College.[18]

In this earlier form, it failed to impress the English virtuoso John Evelyn, who visited it on the 8th of November, 1644. Evelyn was openly hostile to the Jesuits, and thought Kircher himself tedious and his collection trivial compared to the great Roman art collections which he was engaged in visiting:

> We visited the Jesuites Church. . . Here Father Kircher (professor of Mathematics and Oriental Tongues) shew'd us many singular courtesies, leading us into their refectory, dispensatory, gardens, and finally (through an hall hung round with pictures of such of their order as had been executed for their pragmatical and buisy adventures) into his own study, where, with Dutch patience, he shew'd us his perpetual motions, catoptrics, magnetical experiments, models, and a thousand other crotchets and devices, most of them since since published by himselfe or his industrious scholar Schotti.[19]

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[16] Findlen, *Possessing Nature*, p.93.
[17] *Il Museo del Mondo*, p.41.
[18] *Il Museo del Mondo,* p.225.
[19] John Evelyn, ed. William Bray, *Memoirs* (London: Henry Colburn,1827), vol.I, pp.166-67. In the diary for 1655, Evelyn records the opinion of the protestant Archbishop of Armagh, James Ussher, that 'Kircher was a mountebank', *Memoirs,* vol.II, p. 103.

The collection found its form as a public museum in 1651, with Alfonso Donnini's bequest of works of art and antiquities, which supplied the element which Evelyn had apparently found wanting, and led to the location of the augmented museum in larger premises. It functioned sporadically until 1680, by which time it was in decline. The museum was re-opened, with considerable additions and alterations, in 1698 by Filippo Bonanni (1638-1725), but it closed and most of its contents were dispersed with the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773.[20] Elements of the collection – the model obelisks and a number of prepared natural history specimens – remained with the institution which inherited the Collegio Romano building, the Liceo E.Q. Visconti, and survive there to this day.[21] Although this published *Musaeum Celeberrimum* is essentially the work of Kircher's assistant Giorgio de Sepi, drafts survive in Kircher's hand for parts of the text of the volume, [22] and it is reasonable to suppose that the order in which the book describes the collections and some of the narrative which it attaches to particular objects in it, reflect Kircher's habitual custom and discourse when receiving visitors.

But, as Paula Findlen reminds us, the unique nature of the collection derived from its curator and animating spirit:

> De Sepi's catalogue, which appeared only two years before Kircher's death, described the museum when it was already in its twilight years. It selected images from his numerous other publications to create a catalogue of a museum Kircher had been describing for decades in his learned treatises. By 1678, Kircher was no longer actively engaged in the majority of his projects. It is unlikely that he was still able to show visitors around the museum.[23]

This is perhaps the point at which to consider that which was distinctively Jesuit about the collection which is here described, indeed how it compares to those Jesuit collections which are now preserved at Stonyhurst College, collections which have their origins at the exiled English Jesuit College at St Omers in the early seventeenth century and which have retained, to the present day, elements of the early-modern Kunst und Wunderkammer in their display. The nature of a Jesuit museum, in so far as it is possible to hazard a preliminary definition, is defined by a pedagogic function almost limitless in scope. Thus, while the collections of coins and antiquities, and later of natural history specimens, have a function within the curricular education offered by a Jesuit College, and scientific and astronomical instruments are both educational and a demonstration of the achievements of the Society, there is by definition a wider scope to a Jesuit collection, which reflects both international affinities and an educational mission directed at society in the widest understanding of the term. All of these functions are served by the objects in both of these collections. Thus those objects which we would now identify as world art have a place in Jesuit collections as the natural result of the Society's global reach, and also as a part of the supra-nationalism which is an

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[20] *Il Museo del Mondo,* p.16.

[21] Cf. Alessandro Orlandi, 'Le Collezione Scientifice del Liceo E.Q. Visconti e l'ereditá del Museo Kircheriano' in *Il Museo del Mondo*, pp.257-260. The whole *Museo del Mondo* volume and the exhibition for which it served as catalogue, embody much information about the present whereabouts of objects from Kircher's Museum.

[22] *Il Museo del Mondo*, p.223, Michael John Gorman and Nick Wilding cite the manuscript now in the library of the Gregorian University, APUG 566, f.236r.

[23] Paula FIndlen, 'Science, History, and Erudition' in *The Great Art*, pp.18-19.

important part of the identity of the old Society. These also function as part of a wider educational mission which not only included Sodalities and other activities for adults, but that part of Jesuit educational activity which sought to engage local elites with the maintenance and achievements of the Colleges. Jesuit collections will inevitably contain that which is specific to time and place – one of the defining characteristics of the Society's way of proceeding is attentive dialogue with the milieu in which they find themselves – thus Kircher's museum catered to a specific taste for the *meraviglia* with machines and mirrors, where the St Omers museum focused on its displaced English identity by gathering the *disjecta membra* of English Catholic culture. To summarise, it is perhaps the sheer breadth of the potential collections in the field of world art, or hybrid art drawing on local traditions worldwide, which constitute the most immediately apprehensible characteristic of the museums of the Old Society.

Beyond this, that which set Kircher's museum apart, was its monographic nature: the protean personality lay at the centre of the collection, the collection retained for his lifetime an ambiguous status as supplement to the illustrations of his lavish folio publications, animated for visitors by the text of his speech and presence. Which element itself might have contributed to a sense of astonishment, almost of vertigo. Everything contains a multiplicity of potential readings, everything can be connected to everything else.

After Kircher's death, a sense of unease with the prodigious shaped the view of the subsequent century (and of confessionally-hostile contemporaries) into a perception that magnetic devices and distorting mirrors lay altogether uncomfortably close to the fairground, to the feats of the charlatan. Kircher's ambiguous omniscience is further compromised in the eyes of later ages, not only by those occasions when he was the dupe of forged inscriptions, but also by his associations with such dubious artefacts as the 'Voynich' cipher manuscript, which was presented to him in the 1660s in the flattering belief that he was the only man in Europe capable of deciphering it. (It seems that he did not do so, and its interpretation remains an open field for speculation.) But Kircher's place in the list of those, including John Dee and the Emperor Rudolph II, who have owned what is now Yale University, Beinecke Library MS 408, draws him uncomfortably near to their worlds of necromancy and superstition.[24]

Subsequent commentators have voiced their disillusion

> No further or deeper essence of language comes to bridge form and meaning: or perhaps it is of the essence of Kircher's baroque linguistics to put a blank, a missed connection, in the place of that essence . . . This deception or disappointment – the magic trick that never quite comes off, at least for readers of our day and age – is an essential accompaniment to the reading of Kircher.[25]

Alternatively they have articulated their sense that Kirchers encyclopaedism was no longer tenable in an age of specialist knowledge:

> Who was Kircher, then, at the dawn of the Enlightenment? He was a man unable to recognise truth from falsehood, a scholar with an imperfect grasp of the science of

[24] Kircher's receipt of the manuscript in 1666 is documented at http://brbl-net.library.yale.edu/pre1600ms/docs/pre1600.ms408.htm accessed 1 March 2015

[25] Haun Saussy, 'Magnetic Language, Athanasius Kircher and Communication', in *The Last Man*, p.265.

> philology and linguistics, an archaeologist who did not know the difference between a Roman lamp and a Grecian urn, an inventor of language who could not recognise the simplest cipher . . . Increasingly, Kircher's penchant for connecting every different kind of knowledge no longer resonated with an eighteenth-century audience. In a world of increasingly specialised and jealously-guarded expertise, the lacunae in Kircher's scholarship seemed glaringly obvious.[26]

As Paula Findlen phrased it, focusing on Kircher's gaps, his incompleteness,

> Kircher seemed to possess so many fragments of ancient wisdom that it was entirely plausible to imagine that he had once owned and partially transcribed every lost manuscript of any significance.[27]

Reading such assessments is a poignant reminder of why Umberto Eco identified Athanasius Kircher in the introductory pages of *The Name of the Rose* as an anthologist who might have stumbled across absolutely anything, even Brother Adso of Melk's narrative of a lost book and a lost library. The apparitions of Kircher in Eco's fictions are not wholly creditable ones – Fr Caspar Wanderdrossel in *The Island of the Day Before* is Kircher's shadow, a figure who moves in the obscuring cloud of his own copiousness, before disappearing into the depths in a machine of his own invention.[28] What is evoked in both novels is an atmosphere of hopeless baroque encyclopaedism in which almost anything might turn up in almost any one of Kircher's enormous volumes, porus containers for the wreckage of everything that has gone before.[29]

So, in Paula Findlen's acute summary,

> Kircher has suffered the fate of one who lived, not ahead of his time, as commentators unanimously agree, nor after his time, but at the very end of his time.[30]

But a re-appraisal of Kircher has been in progress for some time and Eco balances reservations with measured praise,

> I would say that Kircher is fascinating for the same reason that he made so many mistakes. For his voracity, for his scholarly bulimia, for his encyclopaedic longing, and for having followed his own passions even while he found himself, through no fault of his own, half way between two epochs of the encyclopaedia.[31]

Kircher is figure who is indeed Janus-faced. He is poised in transition, looking back towards Pliny, forward to the *Encylopédie*. In this, he is to some degree like the early modern Society of Jesus which sustained him. It is very easy with hindsight to know better than Kircher, to know – for example – that hieroglyphics are phonetic not ideographic, but it is difficult to deny that he posed many of what were to become the salient questions in the prodigious number of fields into which he ventured. In its elaboration, but also in its geographical reach,

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[26] Findlen, 'Introduction' in *The Last Man*, p. 7.
[27] Paula Findlen, 'Introduction' in Paula Findlen, (ed.), *Athanasius Kircher, The Last Man Who Knew Everything* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 3.
[28] Umberto Eco, trans. William Weaver, *The Island of the Day Before* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994), pp.242 et seq.
[29] Umberto Eco, trans. William Weaver, *The Name of the Rose* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1983), p.3.
[30] Daniel Stolzenberg, 'Introduction: inside the baroque encyclopedia', *The Great Art*, p.3.
[31] Umberto Eco, 'Prefazione' in *Il Museo del Mondo* (Rome: Edizioni de Luca, 2001), p.13.

the museum of the Collegio Romano is an epitome not only of Kircher's works and interests, but also of baroque Rome and the territories over which it exercised authority.

This museum contained apparatus for projecting an image, possibly for projecting a rudimentary moving image; the combinatory arks in the entrance hall represented a first step in the invention of the computer. The quantity and quality of information available to Kircher from Jesuit observers and astronomers throughout the world was unprecedented. The speed and efficiency of its transmission was one of the essential strengths of an organisation which foreshadowed almost all international organisations to come. It would be possible to assert that the Jesuits, like Kircher himself, were poised to invent the modern world, were laying the foundations of the Enlightenment which, for the most part, disowned them.

Once more, in the present time, the speculative, analogical, unbounded Kircher begins to take on a new aspect considered from our perspective of a world more and more densely interpenetrated by the open ended, ubiquitous electronic encyclopaedia. What Eco wrote just over a decade ago still holds good today. Kircher maintains his paradoxical fascination, as everything continues to shift and change around us – *we feel him to be the most contemporary of our ancestors and the most outdated of our contemporaries.*