

resembling a portrait, are more than just witty virtuoso pieces. They, too, state that nothing is as it appears, that changing perspectives can transform the random into the purposeful, the unknown into the familiar, a face into a bowl of fruit, that art could be nature and nature art. As in Hainhofer's *Kunstschränk*, the eye was easily deceived while the subtle and occult harmony of the universe stood revealed by the artist's hand. The artist's poetic insight bared the *disegno interno* underlying the divine creation, and this divinity itself was revealed to be an artist. The grotesque and the totality of excess were only the flipside of the simplicity of the eternal truth. The items in Rudolf's *Kunstammer* bore witness to this conviction: somewhere in their staggering multiplicity and diversity lay hidden that kernel of eternal truth which the alchemists called the Philosopher's Stone. To find it would be to grasp the beating heart of creation itself. The collection itself became an instrument: the greatest alchemistic laboratory the world had ever seen.

For all the dazzling exoticism of the collection, Rudolf was no naïve lover of everything strange. He insisted that the bodies of birds of paradise (thought to be forever airborne as most specimens reached Europe without feet), be drawn and painted with legs, so that the fiction around the object was contrasted with the imagined reality. This scientific bent, though, did not prevent him from collecting magical objects, such as the Paracelsian zenexton, an amulet enclosed by a bejewelled gold case and containing a cake made of toads, virginal menstrual blood, white arsenic, orpiment, dittany, roots, pearls, coral and Eastern emeralds, the recipe for which appeared under imperial privilege in *Basilica chymica* (1609).

Rudolf was especially proud of his unicorns' horns, mandrakes and dragons, which so much impressed the court physician de Broodt that he made a drawing of one of them, adding 'this is the figure of a Dragon which the Emperor Rudolf II has; dried it is this exact size, where it is preserved'. The relics held in the vaults were characteristically not Christian but classical in orientation and included nails from Noah's ark, and the jaw of one of the sirens that Odysseus had encountered.

Among the books in Rudolf's library, symbolic knowledge figured prominently in works on Egyptian hieroglyphs, alchemical, magical

than just witty virtuoso pieces. They appear, that changing perspectives can be purposeful, the unknown into the known, that art could be nature and nature art, that the eye was easily deceived while the mind's insight bared the *disegno interno* and this divinity itself was revealed to the totality of excess were only the eternal truth. The items in Rudolf's collection were based on this conviction: somewhere in their diversity lay hidden that kernel of eternal truth, the Philosopher's Stone. To find it was the heart of creation itself. The collection was the greatest alchemistic laboratory the

of the collection, Rudolf was no naive collector. He insisted that the bodies of birds of prey were to be made of wax or paper and painted with legs, so that they contrasted with the imagined reality. This was to prevent him from collecting magical objects like the *zenexton*, an amulet enclosed by a chain containing a cake made of toads, virginal hair, vermilion, orpiment, dittany, roots, pearls, coral and other things for which appeared under imperial seal (1609).

of his unicorns' horns, mandrakes and other things. He passed the court physician de Broodt that he had made of them, adding 'this is the figure of a unicorn that Rudolf II has; dried it is this exact size, and the horns held in the vaults were characteristic of the siren in orientation and included nails of one of the sirens that Odysseus had

's library, symbolic knowledge figured in Egyptian hieroglyphs, alchemical, magical

and Rosicrucian tracts and other works investigating symbols, magical seals and emblems. It appears that the emperor was well read in this neo-Platonist literature. Other magical texts and books by Jewish Talmudic and cabbalistic scholars added to the library. Rudolf's interest in the magical arts went further than just inviting its practitioners to his court, for he himself was actively involved. In 1609, the Tuscan ambassador sniffed disdainfully, 'for he himself tries alchemical experiments and he himself is busily engaged in making clocks, which is against the decorum of a prince. He has transferred his seat from the imperial throne to the workshop stool'.⁵

Attracted by the emperor's reputation, the English occult scholar John Dee arrived in Prague in 1584. He had been adviser and astrologer to Queen Elizabeth I, had had an influential post at court and was in a good position to pursue his main ambition: to regain the perfect, primeval knowledge that Adam had had, which humankind had lost with the fall, and thus to understand the cryptic correspondences between all things and the universal core of truth contained in them. His hopes of achieving this goal were bound up in a mystic emblem, the *Monas hieroglyphica*, designed to elevate spirits through meditation of its mystical, geometrical and theological connotations. He quickly gained an audience with Rudolf, which lasted for a full hour. Dee outlined his method of gaining arcane knowledge and also told him, according to his own handwritten protocols:

It pleased God to send me *his Light*; and his holy Angels, for these two years and a half, have used to inform me: yea, they have brought me a *Stone* of that value that no earthly Kingdom is of that worthiness as to be compared to the vertue and dignity thereof, etc.
The Angel of the Lord hath appeared to me, and rebuketh you for your sins. If you will hear me, and believe me, you shall Triumph: if you will not hear me, The Lord, the God that made Heaven and Hearth, putteth his foot against your breast, and will throw you headlong down from your seat.
Moreover, the Lord hath made his covenant with me . . . If you will forsake your wickednesse, and turn unto him, your Seat shall be the greatest that ever was: and the Devil shall become your prisoner: Which Devil, I did conjecture, to be the Great Turk. This my Comission, is from God.⁶

The emperor was horrified by this message, and sceptical about the messenger, about the Great Turk and Dee's more personal motives for seeking to take charge of Rudolf's salvation. Dee was never again allowed to appear in front of the emperor and was banned from the Habsburg territories two years later.

As an intellectual approach to the mysteries of the universe, alchemy and magic were seen to be right at the cutting edge of a scientific method which had as yet no way of distinguishing between phenomena such as magnetism and other presumed 'sympathies' between substances, between the existence of iguanas and sea snakes already discovered and the lore of dragons that might still be awaiting discovery in lands as yet unreached. Natural magic, the pursuit of the *prisca theologica*, the first knowledge revealed to Adam and handed down in a hermetic tradition to Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras and later *magi*, assumed that the key to the understanding of the world lay in deciphering the alphabet in which the universe was written at its creation. There are strong echoes of this in our modern preoccupation with the genetic code and the creative, indeed demiurgical, possibilities raised in understanding and controlling it. It is in itself no less strange than the assumption that all elements were constructed according to an occult 'genetic' code, and that unravelling and changing it would allow initiates to change mud into gold.

To the alchemists and the magicians of the sixteenth century, the dividing line between the natural and the occult was simply that natural phenomena were those that occurred most of the time, according to the 'habits of nature', and manifestly to the senses. Occult phenomena were those that differed from the norm, or those that were hidden from sensory perception. In accordance with this conception, gravity, magnetism and acoustic resonance were all counted among the occult phenomena, together with the *pneuma*, the spirit realm governing the object world, and with the symbols presumed capable of unlocking its secrets. In investigating these, the alchemists were scientists.⁷

The central notion in the alchemical conception of the world was the idea of *pneuma* or *spiritus mundi*, the invisible fluid medium world spirit that linked all elements and entities in the universe whose existence was accepted by scientists and thinkers as different from one another as the author of the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton,

by this message, and sceptical about the mark and Dee's more personal motives for Rudolf's salvation. Dee was never again the emperor and was banned from the courts later.

to the mysteries of the universe, alchemy right at the cutting edge of a scientific way of distinguishing between phenomena ever presumed 'sympathies' between substances of iguanas and sea snakes already dragons that might still be awaiting discovery. Natural magic, the pursuit of the *prisca* magic revealed to Adam and handed down in Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras and later *magi*, the understanding of the world lay in a system in which the universe was written at its echoes of this in our modern preoccupation with the creative, indeed demiurgical, possibilities of controlling it. It is in itself no less strange that all elements were constructed according to a system and that unravelling and changing it would lead into gold.

the magicians of the sixteenth century, the natural and the occult was simply that natural that occurred most of the time, according to what manifested to the senses. Occult phenomena were those from the norm, or those that were hidden from the norm. In accordance with this conception, gravity, resonance were all counted among the occult. With the *pneuma*, the spirit realm governing the symbols presumed capable of unlocking its secrets, these, the alchemists were scientists.⁷

the alchemical conception of the world was the *spiritus mundi*, the invisible fluid medium of all elements and entities in the universe whose nature was understood by scientists and thinkers as different from one another. In the *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton,

Collecting as a philosophical project

who described it as a 'most subtle vapour, which is expressed from the *Blood* and the instrument of the Soul, to perform all his Actions, a common type of *medium*, betwixt the Body and the soule,'⁸ and Isaac Newton, who assumed the existence of an aether linking the sublunar realm to the cosmos. The *spiritus mundi* was everywhere, and it is indeed far from vanished from contemporary thinking. It has survived, though transformed, in the political and philosophical traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the shape of Hegel's *Weltgeist*, the World Spirit realizing itself in history through the dialectic process; an idea taken up and developed not only by Marx, but also by other thinkers in the Hegelian tradition. Nationalism, the idea that the essence or destiny of a nation can be realized only if uncontaminated by foreign influences and allowed to flourish, is one aspect of Hegel's national spirits through which the World Spirit, the destiny of history, works its mysteries.

Collecting as a philosophical project, as an attempt to make sense of the multiplicity and chaos of the world, and perhaps even to find in it a hidden meaning, has also survived to our day, and we find echoes of Rudolf's elaborate alchemy in every attempt to capture the wonder and magnitude of everything around in the realm of personal possession. A record collector seeking the essence of genius in hundreds of recordings of the same concert or of the same artist continues this tradition in the same way as someone trying to capture beauty itself in everything that is 'rich and strange'⁹ – a phrase, incidentally, from Rudolf's day. This practical alchemy is at work whenever a collection reaches beyond appreciating objects and becomes a quest for meaning, for the heart of the matter, a hope to be able to see a grammar if only enough words and phrases are brought together.

Rudolf's Mannerist universe complemented the course taken by Ulisse Aldrovandi and his fellow naturalists. And while, in the age-old opposition of all philosophy, the latter cast himself as a new Aristotle, the mystical orientation of Mannerists followed Platonic ideas. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola summed up this project in one phrase: '*Nam si homo est parvus mundus, utriusque mundus est magnus homo*'¹⁰ ('For as man is a small world, the world, by turns, is a large man').

Both the mystical and the critical method of collecting were

responses to the challenge of recent discoveries and new horizons. The analytical, Aristotelian rhetoric of the high Renaissance seemed to provide the answer to some, while others found it wanting. They turned to the traditions of Hermetic knowledge promising the single, occult key to a multiplicity of problems. Among the opponents of such neo-Platonist collections, Sir Francis Bacon was particularly trenchant in his critique of the mystical hotchpotch of ideas and correspondences:

There is such a multitude and host as it were of particular objects, and lying so widely dispersed, as to distract and confuse the understanding; and we can therefore hope for no advantage from its skirmishing, and quick movements and incursions, unless we put its forces in due order and array by means of proper, and well arranged, and as it were living tables of discovery of these matters which are the subject of investigation, and the mind then apply itself to the ready prepared and digested aid which such tables afford.

When we have thus properly and regularly placed before the eyes a collection of particulars we must not immediately proceed to the investigation and discovery of new particulars or effects, or, at least, if we do so, must not rest satisfied therewith.¹¹

Bacon was on the winning side. The scientists and philosophers, the pan-sophists, eirenists, Hermetists, neo-Stoics and neo-Platonists, Paracelseans and chiliasts were soon dismissed when rationalism began to provide more powerful and verifiable answers to many of the problems that had been exercising European thinkers. Rudolf's policies of balance and indecision, later distorted by paranoid wilfulness, were arguably an illustration of the powerlessness of these ideas to provide solutions to problems in the prosaic realm of human lives. For a brief period, however, the return to neo-Platonism and the search for the great idea seemed to contain the answer that found its expression in the most splendid collection of the period. Only in the twentieth century would the search for the Big Idea be taken up again, and again with catastrophic results.

As his collections, forever unable to satisfy his appetite, grew to legendary size, Rudolf the politician became an increasingly embattled and disputed figure. He had always been a complex man, oscillating between conscientious government and obsessive pursuit of his ideas, great moderation and phenomenal excess, between kindness and fits of

recent discoveries and new horizons. The
 eric of the high Renaissance seemed to
 , while others found it wanting. They
 ermetic knowledge promising the single,
 problems. Among the opponents of such
 Francis Bacon was particularly trenchant
 notchpotch of ideas and correspondences:

ost as it were of particular objects, and lying
 t and confuse the understanding; and we can
 from its skirmishing, and quick movements
 s forces in due order and array by means of
 as it were living tables of discovery of these
 investigation, and the mind then apply itself
 ed aid which such tables afford.

nd regularly placed before the eyes a collection
 mediately proceed to the investigation and
 effects, or, at least, if we do so, must not rest

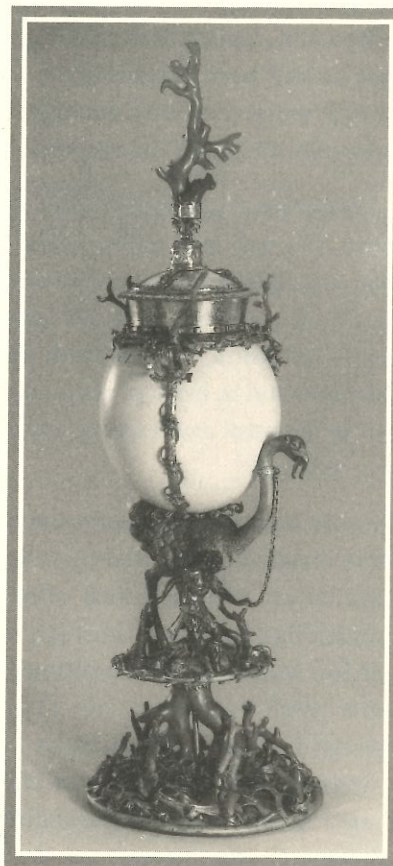
g side. The scientists and philosophers,
 ermetists, neo-Stoics and neo-Platonists,
 re soon dismissed when rationalism began
 and verifiable answers to many of the
 rcising European thinkers. Rudolf's poli-
 n, later distorted by paranoid wilfulness,
 on of the powerlessness of these ideas to
 s in the prosaic realm of human lives. For
 return to neo-Platonism and the search for
 ain the answer that found its expression in
 n of the period. Only in the twentieth
 r the Big Idea be taken up again, and again

er unable to satisfy his appetite, grew to
 olitician became an increasingly embattled
 d always been a complex man, oscillating
 rnement and obsessive pursuit of his ideas,
 omenal excess, between kindness and fits of

rage, approachability and total withdrawal, generosity and paranoia.

During the later stages of his life conjecture and rumour abounded
 in the streets of Prague and at the courts of Europe as to the contents
 of the famous *Kunstkammer*, and about its owner's state of mind. As
 his passion had become known, princes had made it a point of honour,
 and of policy, to search their own palaces for the finest pieces to
 be sent to Rudolf. The ambassador from the Duke of Savoy, Carlo
 Francesco Manfredi, reported with delight that Rudolf had spent 'two
 and a half hours sitting motionless, looking at the painting of fruit and
 fish markets sent by Your Highness'.¹² The ambassador was not always
 so lucky with the emperor's changeable moods. During his second
 visit, he was made to wait a full nine months before being granted
 an audience and being allowed to present his gifts of friendship: 'an
 Indian dagger', a rhinoceros horn
 encrusted with rubies, three be-
 zoars, 'a large silver ship that con-
 tained inside it half of an Indian
 nut, larger than a man's head', and
 a crown. This time, however, the
 bearer of gifts was treated to a
 tour around the collections, which
 was conducted by two servants
 (the emperor himself only showed
 round other crowned heads). He
 was especially impressed by a
 polished stone 'and in the vein of
 the stone "Christ" was written by
 nature's hand in big letters', he
 reported. Nature had spoken to the
 emperor through the stone.

Rudolf's collection and his
 widely reported 'ailment of melan-
 choly' increasingly interfered with
 the business of state, sometimes
 making it well nigh impossible.
 Around the change of the century,
 just after the death of his uncle



Philip II in 1598, a crisis occurred. The emperor's mood swings worsened. When he heard that Isabella of Spain, tired by twenty years of fruitless negotiations, had decided to marry one of his brothers, he exploded in a fit of rage. Soon afterwards he dismissed two of his most trusted administrators, Wolf Rumpf and Paulus Sixt von Troutson. He also seems to have attempted committing suicide with curtain cords and splinters of glass. The emperor was confused and distrustful to the point of paranoia, refused to see petitioners, ministers and ambassadors, and relied for everything on a small group of lackeys and minor aristocrats of dubious stature who effectively constituted his government and held in their hands enormous power. Even the once highly trusted Spanish ambassador San Clemente, Rudolf's link to the court of his childhood and youth, could not gain an audience and was unable to catch a glimpse of the emperor for two years.

By 1600, Rudolf was a changed man and it was commonly believed that he had been bewitched by his enemies, but he could still impress foreign emissaries with his dignity, intellect and charm. The Venetian envoy Soranzo met the emperor in 1607. Rudolf, he said, was

... rather small in figure, of quite pleasing stature and relatively quick movements. His pale face, nobly formed forehead, fine wavy hair and beard and large eyes looking around with a certain forbearance, made a deep impression on all who met him. The Habsburg family likeness was evident in their largish lips which curled towards the right. There was nothing haughty in his comportment: he behaved rather shyly, avoided all noisy society and took no part in the usual amusements; jokes pleased him not, and only rarely was he seen to laugh.¹³

Despite being able to summon his old qualities at times, Rudolf was increasingly beleaguered by religious and political problems, and his days as an even remotely effective ruler were now numbered. His politics had long been hostage to his indecision and to the hatred he felt for Matthias, his ambitious brother who had forged strong alliances with Protestant and Hungarian nobles. Soon, brother stood against brother, and Matthias swiftly consolidated his advantage by marching into Prague. In an effort to avert his downfall Rudolf, no longer in command of the political situation and manipulated by his entourage, put his fate in the hands of his 23-year-old nephew,

occurred. The emperor's mood swings at Isabella of Spain, tired by twenty years decided to marry one of his brothers, he afterwards he dismissed two of his most Rumpf and Paulus Sixt von Troutson, committed suicide with curtain cords emperor was confused and distrustful to the see petitioners, ministers and ambassadors on a small group of lackeys and minor who effectively constituted his government's enormous power. Even the once highly San Clemente, Rudolf's link to the court could not gain an audience and was unable emperor for two years.

changed man and it was commonly believed by his enemies, but he could still impress dignity, intellect and charm. The Venetian emperor in 1607. Rudolf, he said, was

quite pleasing stature and relatively quick movement forehead, fine wavy hair and beard and a certain forbearance, made a deep impression Habsburg family likeness was evident in their words the right. There was nothing haughty in his never shyly, avoided all noisy society and took no jokes pleased him not, and only rarely was he

upon his old qualities at times, Rudolf was by religious and political problems, and his effective ruler were now numbered. His change to his indecision and to the hatred he vicious brother who had forged strong alliances with Hungarian nobles. Soon, brother stood Matthias swiftly consolidated his advantage by an effort to avert his downfall Rudolf, no political situation and manipulated by his in the hands of his 23-year-old nephew,

Leopold, who was charged with opposing Matthias. Prague was in a state of civil war, with plundering troops ravaging the Old Town and the Jewish Quarter. At the critical moment, when Matthias approached with his own forces, Leopold's mercenaries abandoned the town and left Rudolf to see his brother crowned King of Bohemia, while he himself was granted an annuity and the ceremonial title of emperor. Having lost all power, he finally had the solitude he craved. But this last period of his life lasted for less than two years, and he died on 20 January 1612. His grand experiment of collecting as practical alchemy had come to an end once and for all.