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CLASSIFICATION AND VALUE IN A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MUSEUM: William Courten's Collection FREE

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Abstract

Like many seventeenth-century virtuoso cabinets, that of William Courten (1642–1702) contained prints, drawings and paintings as well as medals, natural specimens and other curiosities. After providing a general account of Courten and his 'museum' (which was inherited by Sir Hans Sloane and thereby became part of the British Museum), this paper focuses on the roles of pictures therein. Fine botanical paintings, valued as accurate conveyors of natural historical knowledge, were by far the most expensive items in Courten's collection. But he also owned a number of Old Master drawings and a large collection of prints that he catalogued according to artist, subject matter and quality. In so far as virtuosi like Courten valued and classified a wide range of images in several different ways, it is suggested that the modern characterization of early collectors that distinguishes between 'artistic' and 'non-artistic' interests is inappropriate.

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