Crocodiles - the Singular Beast in the Renaissance Cabinet

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Crocodiles - the Singular Beast in the Renaissance Cabinet

Abstract
Stuffed crocodiles often predominated many famous cabinets, hanging in the center of the ceiling. Crocodilians are the largest reptiles and the largest predator that spends time on land. They have existed for about 240 million years, and today there are 23 species of crocodilians in total, categorized in three families: 13 species of crocodiles, two species of alligators, and six species of caimans. Archaeologists found a “Supercroc” fossil as long as 40 feet (12 meters) and weighting 17,500 pounds in Niger. They believe that the crocodile lived alongside dinosaurs about 100 million years ago. [excerpt]

Keywords
crocodiles, Supercroc, exoticism, Maria Sibylla Merian

Disciplines
Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture | Fine Arts | History of Science, Technology, and Medicine | Industrial and Product Design | Intellectual History

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Original version online at http://wonder-cabinet.sites.gettysburg.edu/2017/cabinet/the-singular-beast/
Audio guide on crocodiles, Supercroc, and scientific drawings included.
Crocodiles — the Singular Beast in the Renaissance Cabinet

By Peter Zhang

Stuffed crocodiles often predominated many famous cabinets, hanging in the center of the ceiling. Crocodilians are the largest reptiles and the largest predator that spends time on land. They have existed for about 240 million years, and today there are 23 species of crocodilians in total, categorized in three families: 13 species of crocodiles, two species of alligators, and six species of caimans. Archaeologists found a “Supercroc” fossil as long as 40 feet (12 meters) and weighting 17,500 pounds in Niger. They believe that the crocodile lived alongside dinosaurs about 100 million years ago[1]. For more information on Supercroc and crocodilians, click here and here.

Nature’s irregularities were highly appraised by the Europeans during the Renaissance. Monsters, such as two-headed horses were exhibited in Renaissance cabinets as practical jokes that God and nature had played[3]. Collectors desired to find one item that embodied nature’s irregularities that would be capable of satisfying their curiosity about science and art[4].
Among the chamber full of mysteries, the crocodile was often the most exotic monster and a frequently encountered star in the cabinet of curiosity. The extravagant size, sometimes even bigger than today’s crocodile (due to the overhunting of the large crocodiles, click here for more information), and its mysterious origin figured them as a perfect fit in the cabinet.

The exoticism of crocodiles was first raised by the Spanish Jesuit José de Acosta, author of *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*. In his text, he questioned why biblical texts omitted the explanation of the origin of the crocodile. He wondered why crocodiles were not mentioned if Noah had saved them from the flood. Since the biblical text cannot lie, the origin of crocodile became an enigma. [5]

Maria Sibylla Merian was a pioneer in scientific drawings. The above illustration is showing a watercolor of a spectacled *Caiman (Caiman crocodilus)* holding a *False Coral Snake (Anilius scytale)* in its mouth. Maria collected many reptiles during her visit to Suriname, and she may have observed this scene of a caiman fighting with a coral snake on her way. Moreover, this drawing also illustrated a very interesting scientific fact that crocodilians are the only reptile that shows parental care. In the drawing, the *Caiman crocodilus* is protecting its hatched egg from the attack of the *False Coral Snake*. Unfortunately, her volume of Surinamese reptiles was never published; but many scholars and collectors were interested on owning a stuffed crocodile under her influence.
Ferrante Imperato was an apothecary of Naples who documented his the museum in *Dell’historia naturale*. Gentlemen who visited the museum were most impressed by the crocodile hanging on the ceiling. They were either pointing and discussing, or standing quietly observing the singular beast. Around the crocodile, the equally fascinating sea creatures were hanging. By hanging these creatures, Imperato hoped to avoid distracting visitors’ attention from the mineral and vegetable specimens along the museum’s walls.\[6\]
Lodovico Settala was a physician who established a cabinet of curiosity in Milan. His cabinet grew to be one of the richest cabinet in the 17th century after his son Manfredo Settala took charge. In his collection, objects were well-organized and exhibited in transparent glass-fronted boxes. The rich aspects of his cabinet attracted an ever-growing number of visitors of a broad range of nationalities and social classes.[7] Variety of treasures organized thematically. Three stuffed crocodiles can be easily spotted on the middle of the ceiling, showing the supreme rank of crocodiles during the Renaissance.[8]

The figure above is the title page of *Fasciculus Rariorvm*, cabinet of Basilius Besler, the botanist, apothecary, and botanical art book publisher. We can see Basilius Besler pointing at his cabinet and explaining to the visiting dignitary. The stuffed crocodile was lying on the ground. On the right side of the stuffed crocodile, a person was holding the crocodile skull. It seems like he was showing the crocodile skull to the visitor. The skull hanging on the right wall was possibly another oversized crocodile skull.

Different collectors appreciated the various aspects of the crocodilians. Interestingly, modern biologists are still learning fascinating facts about this ancient group of reptiles. In some ways they remain as mysterious and wondrous today as they were during the Renaissance.
The following are some useful websites for you to explore more:

1. Dell’historia natvrale di Ferrante Imperato napolitano
2. Hortus Eystettensis, Basilius Besler, gardens, and cabinets
3. Ferrante Imperato: Step Into His Cabinet of Wonders!


