SEA LIFE: DÜRER TO DION
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Sea Life
Mark Dion's Sea Life, 2013, (Fig. 1) resembles a bookseller's stall such as those seen along the banks of the Seine in Paris. Recently acquired by the Des Moines Art Center, Dion's sculpture was the inspiration for this exhibition. Channeling the artist's methods and thinking—not to mention pirating his title—this exhibition presents a selection of prints, drawings, and objects related to the sea. All works are from the Art Center's permanent collections. Albrecht Dürer's engraving, The Sea Monster, ca. 1498, (Fig. 2) is also a focal point of the exhibition. This essay describes the Dion sculpture and the Dürer engraving, and contrasts the ways that these two utterly different works captivate the viewer. This introduction also explores some of the parallels between collecting and cataloguing practices in the natural sciences and in the print world.

Contemporary artist Mark Dion (American, born 1961) appropriates some of the ways in which collectors and natural scientists historically assembled collections of specimens, curiosities, and fabrications. He designs and builds display furniture. He fills cabinets with found and fabricated objects. He is interested in revealing how systems of knowledge shape the understanding of nature and culture. In his writings and talks, he critiques the influence that modern science has in shaping public policy. Dion is frequently invited by museums to reinstall their permanent collections. As part of a traveling exhibition, he brings objects and specimens together in startlingly new relationships.

Dion's Sea Life can be a challenging and perplexing work. This sea-green painted wooden case on legs opens to reveal 236 books in many languages; two decks of playing cards; 86 postcards; 13 prints clothes-pinned to string; one cup; and one cigar box. All of these objects are connected in some way with the sea. Just to name a few (a drop in the bucket), there are books on beaches (Tony Soper, The Shell Book of Beachcombing); biology (J.A. Colin Nicol, The Biology of Marine Animals); boats (Hosking, A Source Book of Tankers and Supertankers); for children (Robb White, Up Periscope); ecology (Rachel Carson, The Sea Around Us); fantasy (Geoff Johns, et al., Aquaman: Throne of Atlantis, DC Comics); fishing (Roy Patrick, Tie Your own Flies; Guidelines to Reduce Sea Turtle Mortality in Fishing Operations, Food and Agriculture, Organization of the United Nations, 2010); history (John Hay and Peter Farb, The Atlantic Shore: Human and Natural History from Long Island to Labrador); ichthyology (Erwin Amlacher, Textbook of Fish Diseases); the sea as inspiration (Ann Morrow Lindbergh, Gift from the Sea); mapping (Roger Duvoisin, They Put Out to Sea: The Story of the Map); mythical creatures (Gwen Benwell and Arthur Waugh, Sea Enchantress: The Tale of the Mermaid and Her Kin); navigation (Joshua Slocum, Sailing Alone Around the World); novels (Jules Verne, Ventimila Leghe Sotto l’Mari); oceanography (Bulletin de l’Institut Océanographique, Monaco); pirates (Jorge Frogoni Laclau, El Pirata Almeida: Corsario del Río de la Plata); plants (André Manciot, Plantes Maritimes: Algues-Animaux-Fleurs); seals (Ewan Clarkson, Halic le phoque); shopping (Cabela’s catalogue, Fishing); travelers’ journals (Charles Darwin’s Voyage of the Beagle); tropical aquariums (Dick Mills, You & Your Aquarium: A Complete Guide to Collecting and keeping Aquarium Fishes); etc. In Sea Life—perhaps the most book-centered of Dion’s works—the books are arranged in rows. The artist pre-determined the contents of each row but the museum staff is free to arrange the sequence of the books within them.

What is the meaning of this accumulation of books and papers? Part installation, part action, Sea Life comes out of Dion’s own life. Perhaps Herman Melville’s Moby Dick, one of many novels in the bookstall, stands for New Bedford, Massachusetts, the artist’s birthplace? (Stella, Stubb & Flask kill a Right Whale)

The artist considers this work a self-portrait. “See life.” Can we dive deeper and see Sea Life as a self-portrait of the artist at work? In making this, Dion has evoked his activities as a browser at shops and stalls for the components of his projects. Dion has incorporated found books in many previous projects, such as in a scholar’s Wunderkammer, an explorer’s library, and a wildlife biologist’s field station. When he goes shopping for books, he has a mental list of what kinds of things he needs for various works in progress. He has created numerous projects related to the seas—notably Raiding Neptune’s Vault (Venice, 1997), and Oceanomania (Oceanographic Museum of
Monaco, 2011). Sea Life is a portrait of the working artist and his obsessions.

Dion’s sculpture also references earlier works in the history of art about the sea. Among the postcards in the bookstall are reproductions of works by Zhou Dongqing, (Chinese, active late 13th century), detail from a handscroll, The Pleasures of the Fishes; by Hendrick Goltzius (Dutch, 1558-1616) (Gestrande potvis, Stranded Sperm Whale, Teylers Museum Haarlem); and by Winslow Homer (American, 1836-1910) (The Gulf Stream, Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY). Ultimately, Sea Life descends from Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades. (By coincidence, the artists share the same initials.) Working in Paris 100 years ago, Duchamp created unprecedented sculptures that re-presented utilitarian objects such as a bicycle, a coffee mill, and a urinal. His contention that an object is art if the artist says so shocked audiences who expected art to be designed and made by artists rather than merely found. Sea Life is, in part, about artists finding.

In this work, Dion prods the viewer to wonder, “How do we learn and know things?” “How much can we know?” If we could read all of the randomly accumulated books in Sea Life and look at all of the pictures, would we have a greater understanding of the sea than studying oceanography formally? Certainly, we would know more, yet our understanding and feeling for the sea would still be partial, for each branch of knowledge teaches only one aspect of a larger truth.

Images of the Sea at the Des Moines Art Center

Sea Life led me to wonder what prints about the sea might be in the Art Center’s collection. So I went trawling in the collections, hauled up a large catch, and selected objects dating from the late 15th century to contemporary art. I pulled in fish (Hokusai, Leach, Seder); sea monsters (Dürer, Fossum); seaweed (Roche); coral reefs (McCoy); shells (Huquier); and whales (Stella). I netted images of children playing (Homer); drowned women (Homer); the Egyptians drowned in the Red Sea (Callot); fishermen, sailors, and ship-builders (Homer); men overboard (Bosman); pagan sea gods (Vermeulen); and women waiting (Barnet, Homer). I snared images of boats (Fukushima, Hasui); ports, battles, and invasions (Le Clerc, Chagoya); and ships (Hollar). I found the ocean’s surface (Celmins, Meyerowitz) and depths (McCoy); shores (Avery, Homer, Marin); storms (Lorrain); and tides (Smith); bathers (Homer, Mammen, Marsh); beaches (Baldessari, Cadmus, Secunda); and seafood (Beal). There are so many ways to depict the sea’s transparency and tranquility, its turbulence, and terror. If the many sea-related works in the permanent collections are any indication, the sea must be a nearly universal subject for artists.

The Sea Monster

In the Art Center’s marvelous impression of The Sea Monster by Albrecht Dürer (German, 1471-1528), a nude woman, hair adorned as a princess, is abducted by a half-man, half-sea creature who swims bearing her away on his long tail. Other nude women bathe in the water. On the shore, a Turkish-garbed father raises both arms in alarm. In the distance, a fortified Germanic village, fantastical rocks, and luxuriant trees rise up to the sky. With Dürer, the late Gothic interest in representing the natural world entered printmaking. Thanks to his unprecedented powers of observation, unsurpassed execution, and astonishing invention, a viewer journeys though his engravings with amazement. In The Sea Monster, Dürer depicted different aspects of the sea, blending naturalistic representation, imagination, and myth. The water around the sea monster is agitated with small, choppy waves, but the surface of the water near the distant shore is smooth, reflecting the trees. Out at sea, a strong breeze fills the ship’s sails. The terrors of the deep are figuratively embodied by the monster himself. Although scholars have proposed various interpretations involving the abduction of women by sea gods—Neptune and Amymone, or Perimele and Achelous—Dürer himself simply called it The Sea Monster. It is one of several mythological fantasies that Dürer engraved around the year 1500.

Collecting and Classifying

Turning back to Sea Life, what might Dion’s ideas and methods teach us? Sea Life’s fish prints hanging from a line and its random assortment of postcards can make us think more about how individuals and
museums collect. For the serious collector as well as for the idle browser, there is thrill in the hunt and excitement in discovery.

Most of the prints in the permanent collections were donated to the museum but some were bought by the Art Center directly from artists, dealers, and galleries. A handwritten inscription on The Sea Monster shows that our impression was bought from the 17th-century Parisian print dealer Pierre Mariette in 1666. Over time, old prints have passed through many hands. Some of the Art Center’s prints may even have been sold from a print and book stall similar to that of Dion’s Sea Life. In such a shop, a collector can browse among inexpensive popular and folk prints as well as woodblock, engraved, etched, and lithographic plates cut out of early illustrated printed books. Occasionally, one can find rare treasures.

Mark Dion’s artistic practice led me to reflect on the study of objects in the natural sciences and in art. Although this subject is too broad and complex to address comprehensively here, a few observations are in order. Dion is fascinated by the zoological system of taxonomic ranking (domain, kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species) devised by Carolus Linnaeus (1707–1778). What, by extension, are the criteria and hierarchies that scholars and vendors use to describe and organize prints? Print sellers, museums, and individual collectors each have their different systems. Traditionally, in old print shops, images were arranged by subject matter rather than by artist (a system still in use in some shops and even on some vendor websites today). Categories might include animals, architecture, caricatures, city views, plants, landscapes, maps, military, politics, portraits, religion, satire, and technology. Museums frequently organize print collections by nationality, century, and alphabetical order.

Prints are multiples, as are plant, animal, and geological specimens. Since the mid-19th century, print scholars’ cataloguing practice has paralleled that of the natural historian. Both look closely to see whether the structures and phenomena observed in a single example are repeated in others of its class. Art historians compile artists’ catalogues raisonnés in which they describe subject matter, sizes, states, proofs, media, quality of impression, variant impressions, papers, inks, and watermarks, often assigning Arabic and Roman numerals and alphabet letters to the prints. Numbering systems and alphabetical codes are helpful to scholars and the marketplace but to the un-initiated, they render prints more mystifying. Since the last century, artists, printers, and publishers have taken to writing numbers and letter codes on their prints signifying edition and state information. Collectors have come to expect it.

Both science and art museums assign unique accession numbers to each object in their collections. In the past, if one did not know the contents of a visual collection, information could be difficult to retrieve. In recent years, key word searches of computer data bases and searchable digital imagery enable researchers to extract collection records quite easily. In contrast, Dion’s Sea Life affirms the joys of browsing through chaos.

**Vision and Mystery**

The Sea Monster marks the moment when, 500 years ago, Dürer transformed printmaking into an autonomous art form. Blending acute observation, invention, and astonishing artistic skill, Dürer brought human anxieties about the sea to life. Looking at this engraving, the viewer experiences the pleasure of seeing, searching, and finding. The image transports us to another world.

The contemporary Sea Life enthralls the viewer in a different way—through the force of desire. Vast amounts of information and literature about the sea are contained in it, but because this bookstall is a work of art in a museum, its contents are untouchable. We yearn to explore its contents. The shopper in each of us wants to browse. It is like sunken treasure, a closed oyster—or better, forbidden fruit.

Taken together, the works in the exhibition remind us that we human beings—surrounded by, traveling across, fearing, and dreaming of the sea—live together on our Water Planet. Life emerged from the sea. All water returns to the sea. Even our blood and our tears are salt water.

Amy N. Worthen
This gallery guide is published in conjunction with the exhibition

**SEA LIFE: DÜRER TO DION.**

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Amy N. Worthen, Curator of Prints and Drawings, organized the exhibition and wrote this publication.

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**EXHIBITION PROGRAMS**
Artist Lecture
Mark Dion
Sunday, June 14 / 1:30 pm
Levitt Auditorium

Gallery Talk
Amy N. Worthen
Curator of Prints and Drawings
Thursday, September 10 / 6:30 pm
John Brady Print Gallery

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**CHECKLIST**

Image dimensions are given unless otherwise specified. Height precedes width.

All works are from the Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections.


