

The Great Embassy of 1636 and Rudolf II's Cabinet of Curiosities

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In July 1636 the Earl of Arundel visited Prague Castle where he was deeply impressed by the scale of Rudolf II's Cabinet of Curiosities. As Premier Earl of England and the Earl Marshal in charge of the College of Heralds, Henry Frederick Howard, 3rd Earl of Arundel (1608-1652) was a powerful figure in the court of Charles I, not least in the aftermath of the Peace of Prague signed between the Emperor Ferdinand II and the Elector Johann Georg of Saxony early in 1635. This settlement brought temporary peace to much of Europe after the outbreak of 'The Thirty Years' War but its provisions specifically excluded the interests of the Palatine family, then in exile in the Netherlands, and they stimulated a sharp response from King Charles I.

The territories of the Upper and Lower Palatine had been forfeited by the Elector Frederick V in consequence of his election by anti-Habsburg Protestant nobles as King of Bohemia and his subsequent defeat at the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620. He had died in exile in November 1632. His widow, Elizabeth, daughter of James I of England (the Winter Queen), was championed by her brother, King Charles I of England, and plans were laid at the meeting of the Council in August 1635 to send the professional diplomat, John Taylor (?1600-1655), to negotiate with the Emperor Ferdinand II. His efforts were unproductive, but Charles I was nonetheless encouraged to believe that a formal embassy led by an important English public figure could open the way to concluding an appropriate treaty leading to the restitution of the Palatinate. In March 1636 after days of confidential discussions in Council chaired by the King, Lord Arundel put his name forward to lead an embassy extraordinary in the name of the King to the Emperor Ferdinand II though in private he expressed doubts as to its chances of success. Arundel's motives were mixed. Impecunious in his early years, he had married in 1606 Alatheia, daughter and co-heiress of the rich Earl of Shrewsbury, and with her money rapidly gained an international reputation as a very knowledgeable and avid art collector. He undoubtedly appreciated the buying possibilities opening up to him by the Great Embassy and exploited them to the full while honouring his diplomatic obligations.



Thomas Howard, 14th Earl of Arundel, (1585-1646), portrait by Peter Paul Rubens in the National Gallery London

He was to be accompanied by John Taylor, the seasoned professional diplomat who had earlier in his career been employed by the Commonwealth administration in London in embassies abroad from 1627 and was by repute an excellent linguist. Later, as also a committed royalist, Taylor was in Vienna in the service of the exiled Charles II from at least 1652 and died there in 1655. As soon as his nomination as Ambassador had been made public, Arundel assembled in two weeks the large entourage required for the Great Embassy together with stocks of food and other provisions needed for them, and defensive weapons since they would be travelling outside well-ordered towns and through lawless war-ravaged territories open to attacks by marauding gangs. Edward Walker entered Arundel's service at this time as his private secretary.

Edward Walker had first met Arundel in Edinburgh at the Scottish Coronation of Charles I and soon afterwards entered Arundel's household. There he rose to become Arundel's private secretary in 1636 and supervised the preparations for the Great Embassy, before travelling with it. William Crowne was recruited in 1636 to maintain a detailed account of the travels of the Great Embassy and prepare it for publication.*

*This was published in 1637 under the title of *A true relation of all the Remarkable Places and Passages observed in the travels of ... Thomas Lord Howard, Earle of Arundell ... Ambassador Extraordinary to his sacred Majesty Ferdinando the second, Emperour of Germanie, Anno Domini 1636*. The modernised text is made available by Francis C. Springell in his *Connoisseur & Diplomat, The Earl of Arundel's Embassy to Germany in 1636 as recounted in William Crowne's Diary* London (Maggs Bros. Ltd, 1963).

Many individuals of rank and distinction wished, as was the custom then, to travel with the Embassy as private persons, but the King and Lord Arundel each insisted on approving them individually. Sir John Borough of the College of Arms was seconded to the Great Embassy having been promoted to Garter Principal King of Arms in 1634. He was a highly efficient administrator without whose talents the rapid assembly of such a complex international public relations exercise could not have been put in hand. Making a stately progress across Central Europe, the wagons of the Great Embassy – three of them displaying the Royal Arms of England - finally reached Linz where it had been arranged that the Imperial Court would assemble. Three audiences were granted to Arundel by the Emperor who, reluctant to take any decisions, appointed a commission of three to negotiate with him concerning the restitution of the Palatinate. Arundel then left the Imperial Court in Linz on a private visit to Vienna and Prague in pursuit of his passion for collecting works of art.

William Crowne has provided us with a detailed account of Arundel's visit to Prague Castle and the "Schant Room" (*Schatzkammer*) where the treasury was housed and where he noted that there was also the most wonderful collection belonging to the "Emperor Rudolfus". In the first room, he records, were cupboards set in the walls on the right hand side "containing precious worked items of amber, ivory, and hardstone, etc., identified as *Hardsteine* or *Erzstufen* mostly coming from the *Schatzkammer* of the Archduke Ferdinand of the Tyrol and previously housed in Schloss Ambras outside Innsbruck and now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Such secure storage follows the precedent of the Studiolo of the Grand-Duke Francesco I of Tuscany in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence created by Vincenzo Borghini in the 1560s.

In Prague anatomical specimens, shells and other natural history specimens were assembled in three cupboards in the Fourth Room as part of Rudolf II's *Wunderkammer* including a "yard-long Unicorn's horn" (narwhal tusk), probably that still in the Vienna *Schatzkammer*. The Emperor Rudolf II's *Wunderkammer* was more of a visually stimulating collection of *curiosa* which reflected his interest in the variety of the natural world, in contrast to his highly sophisticated taste for Late Mannerist and Early Baroque art which was also well represented by objects assembled in his *Kunstammer*.



The Narwhal Goblet in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna circa 1600-05, the work of the Jan Vermeyen and Miseroni workshop

Of the huge number of natural history specimens listed in the inventory of Rudolf II's collection prepared by Daniel Fröschl very few items surviving today can be reliably identified by comparison with the images included in Fröschl's manuscript catalogue entries dating from after 1570. Two large volumes of nature studies comprising 179 folios are preserved in the Österreichisches Nationalbibliothek, Vienna. The 1607-11 Inventory of Objects in the imperial collection is organised under *naturalia*, then *artificialia* and finally *scientifica*, as advised by Clusius, Rudolf's court naturalist. This inventory mostly lists natural history objects in their original, unworked forms. The two rhinoceros horns recorded in a miniature from his Museum of Emperor Rudolf II suggest a close association with the rhinoceros horns with gold filigree decoration (Goa or Lisbon, *circa* 1580) preserved in the Vienna *Kunstammer* today, but that relationship is generic rather than specific.

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