

Luxury goods, exotic objects, ivory and tuberoses – Habsburg imperial and aesthetic legacies of the “Cabinet of curiosities” (*Kunstkammer*) in Central European and Belgian modernist fiction 1880s-1930s

The Habsburg Empire once extended across vast territories of the known world. From its early expansion into the Americas and Asia to its dominance in Europe, it encompassed, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the regions of Central Europe, the Iberian Peninsula, and the Low Countries. During this period, the Habsburgs amassed extensive collections of rare and exotic objects, displayed in imperial castles in Austria and Bohemia in the form of *Kunstkammern*—“cabinets of curiosities”, precursors to modern museums. These practices also inspired similar forms of collecting among the bourgeois elites of major port cities within their imperial possessions in the Low Countries, such as Antwerp.

The aesthetic legacies of the Habsburg Empire, however, have rarely been examined from a comparative perspective. We therefore propose a study of modernist and decadent fictional interiors—spaces filled with luxury goods and exotic artifacts—as a possible continuation of Habsburg collecting practices, oscillating between the impulse toward imperial domination and an openness to alterity and difference. Through this decolonial lens, we will offer new interpretations of key authors within national modernist canons, focusing on novels and short stories by Georges Rodenbach, Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic, Franz Kafka, Mateiu Caragiale, and Bruno Schulz.

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Professor James' has published articles on the representation of German memory in Czech and Central European literature, co-editing the collective monograph, *The Representation of the Other in Czech- and German-Speaking Literature: Imaginations and Interrelations* (Frank und Timme, 2021). Currently, she is part of the editorial team of the major publication project, *The Cultural History of Central European Avant-Gardes*, coordinated by Brill-Rodopi, which aims to provide a transnational view of the region's avant-gardes.

Professor James also directs the ARC project (2023-2028) *The Artist, the Scientist and the Industrialist*, which is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of modernisms and avant-gardes in Central Eastern Europe.