

## Performing Knowledge

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Something as tiny and apparently insignificant as a button, allegedly tossed into gravel pit and found centuries later, prompted heated debate in the Swedish press at the outbreak of World War II. In her exemplary article, "The Testimony of the Button," published in 1971, Barbro Klein explores why this trifle, and the legends that attempt to account for it, should have created such a stir. I take this article as my point of departure for thinking about how knowledge is performed in several Swedish museums.<sup>1</sup>

A button found in 1924 in southwestern Sweden provided a tangible, if tiny and tenuous, connection to the unsolved cause of the death of King Charles XII of Sweden on the battlefield in 1718. His career, as Klein explains, had been spectacular and, with his premature death (he was thirty-six years old), the period of Sweden's military prowess ended. How did a button become the touchstone for a wealth of rumors, legends, and historical imaginings? Basically, according to legend, Charles XII was invulnerable and could only be killed by a button that belonged to him. Whatever it was that killed him, it struck his temple, going in one side of his head and out the other. According to legend, a soldier picked the button up from where it had landed and took it back to Sweden with him. Afraid to keep it, he tossed it into a pit.

How did this button get from the king's jacket and into a gun? Was he shot by a French assassin or by a Swedish soldier on instructions from the king's sister? Charles XII had left no heirs, so the next in line to the throne would have been his sister and her husband. How did the button get from the battlefield near a Norwegian fortress to a gravel pit in Sweden?

The button's sudden reappearance 206 years after the king's death provoked heated debates among historians and folklorists about the historical truth of the legendary accounts, the authenticity of the button, and the nature of the wound. Even before the button was found, the body of Charles XII was exhumed twice, in 1859 and 1917, in order to relate forensic examinations of the hole in his skull to ballistic information and to answer an unresolved question. Was the hole caused by an ordinary unjacketed lead bullet, a silver bullet, or a "special projectile," such as the button?

Thanks to the legends, this little object becomes "the very button that ended 'the era of great Swedish power politics,'" a message that had special salience, in light of Sweden's neutrality during World War II, a position it had to defend to the Allies. (Klein 1971, 142) Why this body of legend should have become a front-page story in 1940 in the Swedish press, where it was juxtaposed with news of the war, speaks to the psychological truth of the legends, as Klein astutely analyzes.

It is not until the very last sentence of Klein's article that I found the answer to a question that I kept asking myself as I read on. Where is the button today? Sure enough, "The button remains on exhibit in Varberg's Museum," which is located in the county where the button was found. Not only does it survive, but also there are still people who maintain that "'the king *could* have been shot with that button.'" (quoted by Klein 1971, 146)

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<sup>1</sup> I had occasion to reread Barbro Klein's article while living in Sweden for six months in 1999, thanks to the generous support of SCASSS, the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences, where Barbro is a director. This time, I was not reading about the button in Austin, Texas, where I was teaching at the time "The Testimony of the Button" first appeared in the *Journal of Folklore Research*. Rather, I was wandering around the Swedish historical landscape and exploring museums that, like the button, materialize the knowledge performed in legends. During my stay, I visited more than twenty-five museums in Sweden and Estonia, met with curators and other museum professionals, and continued to think and write about the history and theory of museums. Barbro was instrumental in orchestrating many of those visits and what I learned from them is the subject of this tribute to her. A shorter version of this essay was delivered at the reception on June 15, 1999, celebrating the conclusion of another successful year at SCASSS. Barbro's lifetime of outstanding scholarship and her passionate contributions to the intellectual life of Sweden during the last two decades are an inspiration for all those who have had the privilege to study and work with her.

The same qualities that activate a particular kind of historical imagination to express itself in legend can also intensify the resonance of the slightest material trace. If the button tells us anything, it is that uncertainty opens a space for protean speculation. It is speculation that produces legends and keeps them alive. But what about the button itself? The legend may have found its material trace, but that trace is no less ambiguous, for all its tangibility, than the stories told about it. Indeed, far from creating certainty, the button has become the evidence par excellence of the legend's ambiguity.

Moreover, the tradition of exhibiting such things is not only older than the legends themselves, but also predates the death of Charles XII. The button is a "souvenir of the wound."<sup>2</sup> Such souvenirs are the basis for what is considered Sweden's first museum, the Royal Armoury. Here is how the Royal Armoury describes itself today in its brochure:

#### THE ROYAL ARMOURY

*Welcome to Sweden's oldest museum!*

The Royal Armoury illustrates the history of Sweden's monarchs from Gustav Vasa (1496-1560) onwards with magnificent, gold-embroidered clothes from royal weddings and coronations, gilded coaches, arms and armour. See Gustavus Adolphus blood-stained shirts, elk-skin buff coat and horse from that fateful day of the Battle of Lützen in 1632, Charles XII's uniform, still muddy from the fighting in the trenches at Frederiksten Fortress in 1718, and the mask worn by Gustav III when he was shot at the masquerade at the Opera in 1792.

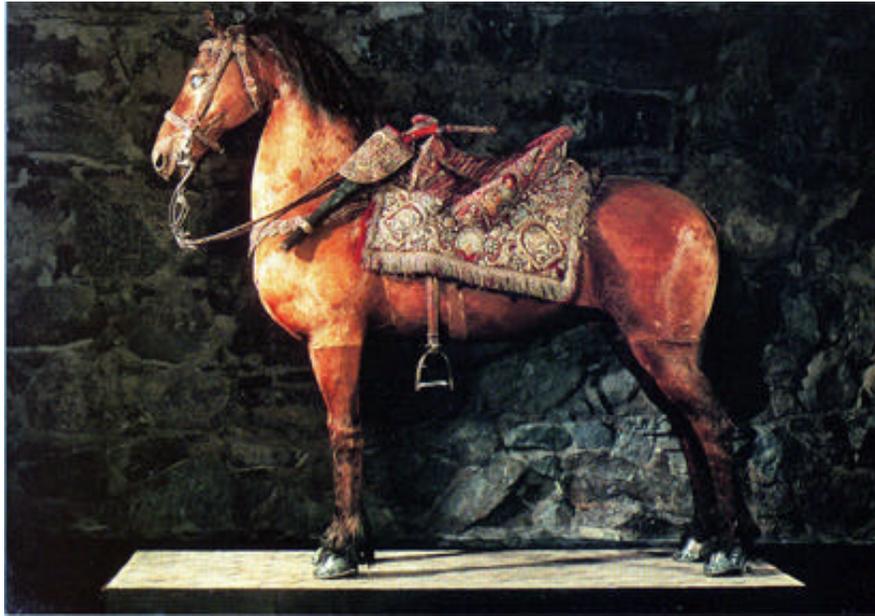
By rights, the button should be shown in the case with Charles XII's muddy cape.



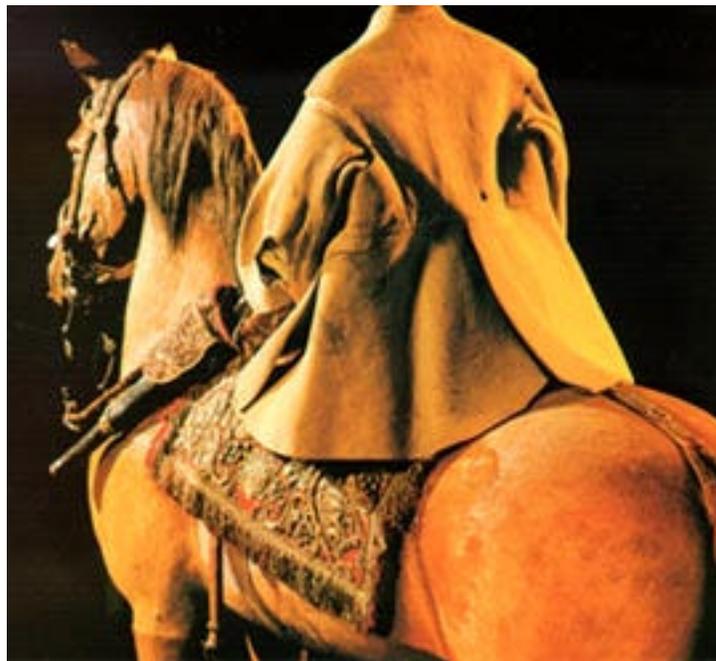
The Royal Armoury's foundation exhibits have been shown since 1633. Today, a visitor to the Livrustkammaren, or Royal Armoury, which was moved to the former wine cellar of the Royal Palace in 1978, will encounter "Gustavus Adolphus' elk-skin coat, with a bullet in the back, mounted on his horse Streiff," a casualty of the 1632 battle.

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<sup>2</sup> I take the felicitous phrase "souvenir of the wound," from Meyerson and Rangström 1984, 38, footnote 10.



The king was actually shot three times –in the elbow, the back, and the temple. The horse, who was shot in the neck, survived just long enough to accompany the funeral procession through North Germany, but died in Wolgast, the point from which the coffin was later shipped to Sweden. The horse's hide was cured, dressed, and shipped back to Sweden, where by 1644 it had been mounted on a wooden frame. (Dahlberg 1996, 12) Note that it is the coat, literally, that is mounted on the hide of the horse, as if the wind blew the ghostly presence of the king into the garment, which takes the shape of his absent body. Frozen in a living gesture, the riddled garment sits upright on the horse, or rather, two garments –the elkskin coat and horse's hide –are surfaces upon which an historical imagination can project itself. The pose captures the time between the second and third shot and evokes the wounded, but not yet dead, king.



Earlier visitors to the Royal Armoury were known to try on some of the bloody garments of kings killed in battle. In his 1809 travel account, English traveler Sir Robert Ker Porter describes his encounter with the gloves of Charles XII:

I have passed this day delightfully; not with the living, but musing on illustrious dead. The scene of my meditations was the arsenal. It stands in the king's garden.... After running over a hundred, to me, uninteresting things, a case was opened containing the clothes worn by Charles the Twelfth on the day which deprived that hero of his life, and the world of many acts of eccentric greatness. Even his shirt is preserved as a sacred relic. I could not help feeling an emotion they only know who possess a little chivalric enthusiasm; a certain something the quieter part of the world often impute to romantic folly, when I drew on my hand the very glove which had covered his, and was profusely stained with blood.... and pressed his blood-stained glove to my lips.... (quoted in Grönhammar 1994, 28)

The garments included ones that were, in his view, "prematurely exhibited," namely "the shirt and jacket of a royal duke still alive. They have sustained a war-rent on one of the shoulders," suffered, perhaps, in the battle of the gallies. Porter condemns "the hanging up of an old suit of uniform amongst the mailed coats of departed heroes." (quoted in Grönhammar 1994, 28)

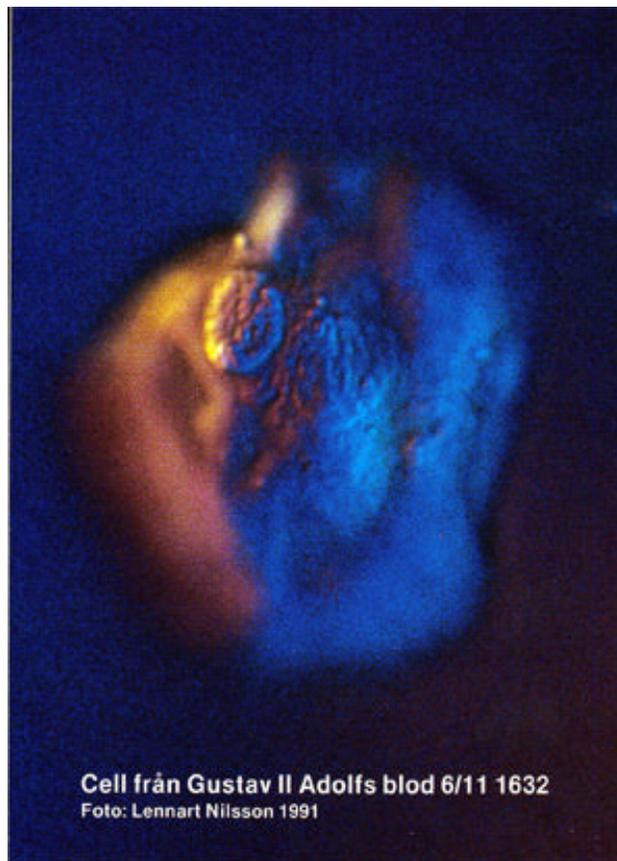
Porter was apparently unaware that Gustavus Adolphus had mandated that clothing he had worn when wounded in battles that he had survived should be saved. The first two such garments commemorate wounds that he suffered in two separate incidents during the Polish campaign in 1627. They were first preserved in the Royal Wardrobe and, in 1633, after his death at the Battle of Lützen, they were transferred to the Lesser Armoury, which was the precursor of the Royal Armoury. The Privy Council created the basis for their preservation, on 13 November 1633: "With regard to the apparel in which His Late Majesty was shot in Prussia, it was, by His Late Majesty's own command, to be kept here in the Royal Armoury as a perpetual memorial." (quoted by Dahlberg 1996,9)

The eventuality of death in battle was even anticipated, as evidenced by the burial doublet that the king took into battle with him in the event that his corpse would need to be laid out. This too is on display today at the Royal Armoury, as are the garments that Gustav III wore to the masked ball at the Royal Opera in 1792, where he was killed by two lead bullets. His costume stands as if he were wearing it. Nearby are the assassin's disguise and the little bottle that contained the arsenic with which the assassin committed suicide. In that bottle may now be found the contents of the assassin's stomach, removed during an autopsy, and, resting beside the bottle, the lead bullets removed from the king's body.

It was in the nineteenth century that the Royal Armoury, Royal Wardrobe, and Royal Stable merged, though it could be said that their merger had already been anticipated in such foundation exhibits as the riddled elkskin jacket riding Streiff, the faithful horse. These exhibits are extraordinary in relation to event and to substance. They speak as well to the button alleged to have killed Charles XII. Its absence from the Royal Armoury and presence in legend also speaks to the difference between displaying objects and telling stories and the vital link between them.

The Royal Armoury's foundation exhibits consist of things that not only bear the mark of an event, but are also events in their own right. Their eventfulness is literally dramatized by the way they have been installed. The clothing takes up a gesture, puffed into shape as it were by a gigantic breath of air that has blown into the room. These testamentary objects establish the uniqueness, and in the case of artifacts associated with death, the finality –the unrepeatability –of the events in which they played a role. Labels, catalogues, guides, visitors, and scholars, myself included, retell the stories occasioned by these things –with or without the "chivalric enthusiasm" or "romantic folly" expressed by Sir Robert Ker Porter, when he donned the blood-stained glove of Charles XII. They are a conversation piece, a touchstone, and, above all, an affective presence.

The foundation exhibits are also like a royal blotter. They are carriers of kingly substance, first and foremost blood, but also viscera. It is now possible to see an actual cell from the blood of Gustavus Adolphus, at least on a postcard, which identifies an iridescent blue blob as a "Dividing cell, with chromosomes just discernible, from the blood of Gustavus Adolphus, 6 November 1632, on the embalming sheet in the Royal Armoury."



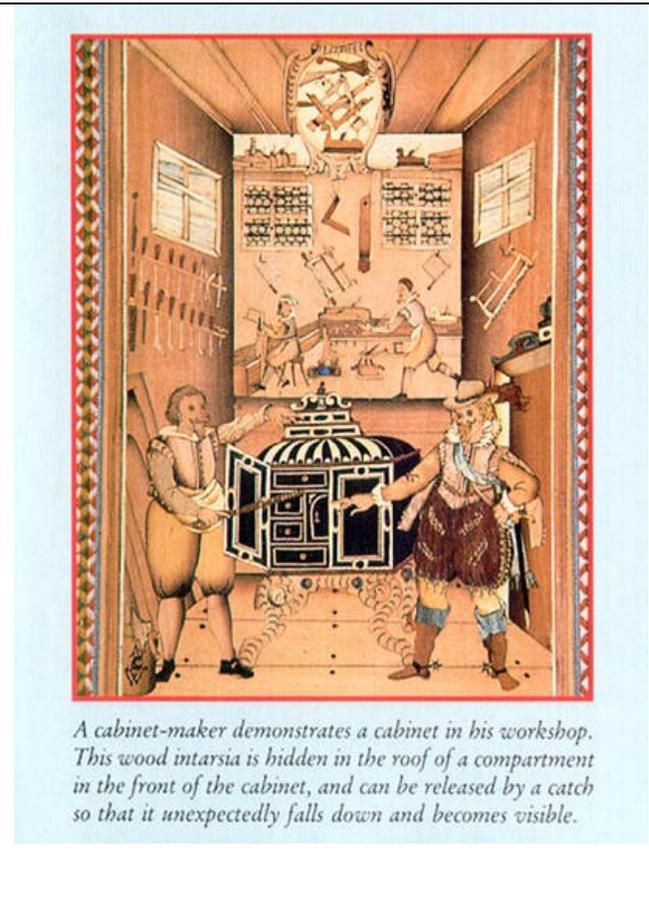
A sample could as easily have been taken from the handkerchief in which "the inconsolable Queen Maria Eleonora kept the King's heart," according to the label next to the bloody cloth. The substance of the battlefield is present in the mud still clinging to the hem of Charles XII's cape. Substance is also eventful, in these examples, as a visible stain or trace of a powerful event. What these objects "know," they know by virtue of having been there.

Had the button been found close to the time that Charles XII died, it might well have been reunited with the other pieces of his battle apparel to provide the most focussed souvenir of the wound, along with his blood-stained gloves. He was wearing the new style of infantry uniform (plain, blue broadcloth), three-cornered hat, high leather boots, and a sword. Had the button been associated with a lesser person in an even earlier period, the seventeenth century, for example, it is just the kind of thing that might have been collected for the spectacular art cabinet on display today at the Museum Gustavianum, in Uppsala. Indeed, item #68 in the inventory of objects gifted to the art cabinet after it came to Sweden is a button for a coat.

The Augsburg art cabinet, as it is called, was a gift from the Augsburg city fathers to Gustavus Adolphus in 1632, when he visited the city. It had literally to be performed to be known. The man who had it made and filled it with marvelous things was Philipp Hainhofer. Hainhofer would demonstrate the cabinet and its marvellous contents to visitors –and eventually to its new owner, the Swedish king himself. Just how such a demonstration was performed can be seen in a painting commemorating the showing of an art cabinet to Philipp II of Pomerania. (Alm, Fogelmarck, and Losman 1982, 4)



After Gustavus Adolphus died at the Battle of Lützen in 1632, the cabinet was brought to Sweden. It did not however come by itself. A skilled cabinetmaker, who literally knew the cabinet inside out, was responsible for the safe transportation and care of the cabinet and its contents, as well as for demonstrating its clever construction. The cabinetmaker stayed at the Swedish court until he died, twenty-three years later. Above all this cabinet is a masterful puzzle. It is so complicated, with its hidden catches and compartments and its clever surprises, that it required a cabinetmaker to show its many features, and, not least of all, to put it back together again after it had been taken apart. First and foremost, it is the cabinet itself, the storage container, that was on display. The collection was made for the cabinet, not the other way around. The objects in the collection fall into two broad categories, the natural (made by God) and the artificial (made by man), but the arrangement of that collection is determined by the furniture. It could be said that the intelligence, the logic, lies in the construction of the cabinet itself.



*A cabinet-maker demonstrates a cabinet in his workshop. This wood intarsia is hidden in the roof of a compartment in the front of the cabinet, and can be released by a catch so that it unexpectedly falls down and becomes visible.*

We know of no written guide or inventory of the collection that might have accompanied the cabinet to Sweden. The cabinetmaker was the guide. So integral was he to the cabinet that he not only accompanied it for the rest of his life, but was also enclosed inside the cabinet itself. Thanks to an image on a wood intarsia "hidden in the roof of a compartment in the front of the cabinet," he can be seen demonstrating the cabinet in his workshop to another person, possibly Hainhofer, the man who commissioned it to be made. (Information Office, Uppsala University, 1990; Boström 1982, 17) This panel "can be released by a catch so that it unexpectedly falls down and becomes visible."(Information Office, Uppsala University, 1990)

To demonstrate the cabinet is to perform the knowledge of its construction and in the process to *disclose* its contents. Today, the cabinet has been separated from its contents. The collections have been removed and the cabinet contains only parts of itself that have been "left over" because no one knows any longer where they belong. First, the minerals were taken away in the eighteenth century and eventually added to the systematic collection of the geology department. In the eighteenth century, such collections would also have been exhibited in cabinets, but of a very different kind. A few metres from where the art cabinet stands today, an eighteenth-century Royal cabinet, a *naturalieskåp*, in Rococo style, marks just how out of style the art cabinet had become by the time Charles XI gave it to Uppsala University in 1694. The eighteenth-century natural history cabinet consists of regular set of identical drawers, thirty-two of them, for the systematic arrangement of natural specimens. This system is also built into the furniture, but this time the furniture makes that system visible. Like the maze of Renaissance gardens, the art cabinet is designed to be difficult to navigate. In contrast, such counterparts to the natural history cabinet as the book and the garden have in common orderly arrangements of systematically classified specimens.



This principle is beautifully demonstrated at the home, now a museum, and garden of Carl Linnaeus in Uppsala. His words, "if you do not know their names, you will lose knowledge of the things," are immortalized on a text panel in his library. This knowledge is displayed, in the style of the Enlightenment, so that nothing is hidden –or rather, if anything is to be hidden, that hiding place is Latin. Linnaeus organized his garden according to what he called the sexual system, based on the visible reproductive structure of plants, to produce twenty-four classes. The arrangement of the garden was tantamount to spreading a complete book out so that all the pages could be visible at the same time. To read this living botanical textbook, it was necessary to walk the grid--to navigate the classification by foot.<sup>3</sup> Nothing could be further from the secrets of the art cabinet and from its fundamentally depositional character. Moreover, Linnaeus's system had mnemonic value because it was

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<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Eva Björn, curator at the Linnémuseet, for talking with me at length about the museum.

based on a few legible principles. Remembering how to take the art cabinet apart and put it back together again required an approach to memory more akin to fitting the parts of a puzzle together than filing specimens within a limited number of consistently generated categories.

Recently, items removed from the art cabinet are being returned to it. But where do they go? Not back into its tricky compartments, but into twentieth-century glass vitrines. A history of showing based *disclosure* has given way to *exposure*. The cabinet is displayed today as furniture and as such it is opaque. One cannot see into or through it. Even if it were possible to penetrate beyond the first layer or two of its compartments, it is only the cabinet itself that would be disclosed because its drawers and compartments are for the most part empty. The cabinet can today disclose only itself, not its collections. Consistent with the technology of the museum, the cabinet of our time, today the collection can be seen altogether, at a glance, on glass shelves that hide nothing.

The art cabinet has inspired others to add to it over the years. Some 100 items, in the spirit of the original collection, have been donated since it was given to Uppsala University in 1694. Over the last three hundred years, the number of items in the collection of the art cabinet is estimated at about 1000. I recently spent a morning in the storage area of the Museum Gustavianum, thanks to the good offices of Annika Windahl and Anne Stenkula. They are the cabinet's caretakers today and they showed me its collection, now in little boxes on shelves in modern cabinets with glass doors. One item, undated, but probably nineteenth-century, stands out. It is a sealed envelope, item #70 in the inventory of items added between 1701 and 1913. There is really nothing to see, but if you feel the envelope, you can detect something small and hard inside, together with a letter of explanation, also sealed into the envelope.

What is in this envelope? The fragments of a gold thimble and a story. The story is in a letter from Carolus Noring, a pastor in London, who sent the thimble fragments from England. His letter explains that a very tame hen used to sit on the shoulder of the lady of the house. If the lady teased the hen, it would try to nip her finger. One day, as the lady was sewing, she failed to move quickly, and the hen managed to pluck the gold thimble from her finger and swallow it whole. What was to be done? The lady locked the hen in a room, put white paper on the floor, and waited for the thimble to appear. The hen was quite ill for a time, and even after several weeks, there was no sign of the thimble. Finally, in the eleventh week, as the letter explains, the hen left the treasure that she had kept so well and did so in several spots, so that what had once been a whole thimble was broken up into smaller and larger pieces. According to the pastor, this big white hen was immortalized in Windsor, not far from London, where it could still be found, stuffed, with a thimble under its bottom. (Böttiger 1913, 70) The original thimble –the fragments, that is –were sent to the art cabinet.

How many stories once associated with items in the original art cabinet, like the one about the gold thimble, are now forever lost? The treasures that were once secreted away in the compartments of the art cabinet, to be removed as they were shown and then returned, are presented today, without labels, in a state of perpetual visibility. Objects that have become opaque are exhibited in completely transparent furniture--on glass shelves in glass cases. They can be seen with greater ease than ever before, but they can no longer be known in the way they once were, because the knowledge connected to them had to be performed--not unlike the legends associated with the button. That kind of knowledge was never delegated to an inventory. As a result, these objects are now easy to expose, but difficult to know. Gone is the cloak of knowledge that once warmed the objects. (Tapsell 1997, 329) Gone too is the distinctive attitude to the pleasures of scientific uncertainty that was housed in a fabulous puzzle of a cabinet.

Had the button not been associated with a king, it might have ended up in the collection of the art cabinet, either at the time the art cabinet was created in the seventeenth century, or as a later addition, along with the gold thimble. The button would have been valued as a mnemonic for the legend and the legend would have been valued precisely for its ambiguous and speculative character. Or, had the button been found during the nineteenth century, the stories associated with it could well have provided the basis for a compelling exhibit at one of the wax cabinets so popular in Stockholm at the time. Whether in the form of a bust, full figure, or tableau, the display would provide a chillingly realistic wax portrait of Charles XII, dressed in his muddy blue cape. The tableau would show the full figure of Charles XII at the moment of death. He would be sitting in a trench, his head leaning on his hand, the hole in his temple visible, with the button lying nearby and dramatically lit, if possible. The story of his death by button being so well known, it might not have needed repeating in the catalogue to the exhibition, but it would have been invoked on posters advertising the wax cabinet.

Scenes like this are featured in the exhibition *Ett resande vaxkabinett* at the National Museum of Antiquities (Statens historiska museum) in Stockholm (17 March-31 December, 1999). Based on an extraordinary collection in private hands, this exhibition is devoted to the wax museums that traveled around Sweden and parts of Scandinavia between the 1870s and the 1920s.<sup>4</sup>

The assassination of Gustav III would also have been a perfect subject for the wax museum, with its deathly realism and penchant for the lurid. However, had Gustav III's assassination occurred in the seventeenth, rather than the eighteenth, century, the assassin would have been exhibited in the Anatomical Theatre, completed at Uppsala University in 1663. Like the art cabinet, his body would have been opened up and the parts exposed and explained—his anatomy demonstrated. In the presence of about two hundred spectators, including not only medical students but also the general public, his body would have subjected to the indignity of a public autopsy and his organs passed around for inspection. As a finale, his intestines would have been hoisted up with a hook, attached to a rope and pulley, from the pit of the theatre to the top of the dome, to exhibit their full length. He would then have been given a proper burial.<sup>5</sup>

Like the button that was thrown away, only to be found 206 years later, it is thanks to inattention, whether the waning of interest or the passing of fashion, that the splendid Baroque Court Theatre at Drottningholm, with its complete stage machinery, survived in tact. Backstage, in the wings, below the stage, and in the attic can be seen the ropes, the pulleys, the winches, and the capstans. This very human technology produces *deus ex machina* effects. The theatre is one big machine, more like a ship than anything else. Indeed, it is now thought that shipbuilders constructed it. Their knowledge of ropes and pulleys and sails has been transposed from the seafaring vessel to the "sea in motion" stage machinery. Like the ship, this theatre is an example of knowledge, of intelligence, being distributed throughout the machine and its crew. When all the stage "machinery is in use at once, for example, in an opera that calls from the full range of possibilities, the production calls for up to forty stage-hands!" (Hidemark, Edström, and Schyberg et al 1993, 96)

Not all significant objects, collections, and museums arise from failure or neglect. Some were formed in the present with an eye to the future, to mention only Carl Wrangel's fabulous armoury—a collection of what were state of the art weapons when assembled in the seventeenth century—and Wilhelmina von Hallwyl's collection of antiques. Even dust has become an artifact and it is scrupulously maintained at the Hallwylska Palatset. There, on display at the time of this writing, is a bottle of brandy, unopened (and never to be opened) in a vitrine. It has been brought up from the wine cellar. Covered with the dust of time, it is part of an exhibition on Wilhelmina's husband's cigars, including the kind he smoked on his eightieth birthday—one of these cigars is resting on an ashtray, as if he had just left it there. The dust, the curator explained, is "part of the object."<sup>6</sup> Even in the few decades that she lived in the house, Wilhelmina had a sense of the house itself becoming historical. At the time that she installed a new water closet, she placed it next to the old dry toilet, which she preserved as part of the history of the house.

Both Wrangel and Hallwyl had the resources and the power to ensure that their *Gesamtkunstwerk* would endure long after they had passed away. Hallwyl worked obsessively on her catalogue, while Wrangel's armoury was sustained by the living knowledge of generations of keepers. Wrangel's daughter stipulated in her will that Skokloster Slott, the most precious of the family estates, was to be maintained in perpetuity just as it had existed during her father's life during the seventeenth century. Her father's armoury, which was at the height of aristocratic fashion in the seventeenth century, but lost favor in the centuries that followed. The will required that a keeper of the armoury would maintain the weapons, clean and repair them, and fire them once a year to demonstrate that they were in good working order, even though it was unlikely, after Wrangel's death, that any of them would ever actually be put to work. The armoury consisted not only of the collection of arms, but also of tools and parts for maintaining the weapons *in working order* and thus were they kept until Skokloster Slott was acquired by the Swedish government in 1967. The keeper's work is what the Maori of New Zealand might call a cloak that shrouds the precious item in "warmth of knowledge." (Tapsell 1997, 329) This is living knowledge embodied in the active practices of keeping the weapons "in working order."

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<sup>4</sup> This exhibition raises pressing issues that will be taken up at length elsewhere. I would like to thank Inga Lundström, Head of the Research and Production Department, and Katerina Svensson, Assistant Head of the Research and Production Department, for taking the time to talk with me at length about the exhibition and Anders Ekstrom for his insights when we viewed the exhibition together.

<sup>5</sup> My thanks to the inimitable Mikael Norrby, Visitors Coordinator for Uppsala University, military historian, and guide extraordinaire, for his memorable tours of the Anatomy Theatre, Skokloster Slott, and other historic sites in Sweden.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Ingalill Jansson, Head Curator of Hallwylska Museet, for taking the time to show me the museum.



The unfinished banquet hall at Skokloster Slott, precisely because it is unfinished, shows itself, its construction and building techniques, complete with tools and scaffolding. The experience of walking into this room today is beautifully captured by Arne Losman, former director of Skokloster Slott. The unfinished banquet hall stands...as if in a time warp, a frozen moment of seventeenth-century Swedish history, a building site where the echo of the foreman's last order has barely died away and where the mason's clinking trowel and the carpenter's banging hammer have just this minute fallen silent. The people have left the rooms. Their tools are still there. Nearer than this to the toils and skills of the hard-working artisans of three hundred years ago we cannot come. (Losman 1988, 87)

Not only was this banquet room "new" at the time, it was newer than new. It was in a state of becoming. Time was arrested as if by a stroke. And, it has been kept thus for more than 300 years.

Similarly, in the case of the *Vasa*, a ship that sank in 1628 within minutes of being launched, as much if not more can be learned from its colossal failure as its anticipated success. The wood, sails and rope, preserved in the brackish water of the Stockholm archipelago, were recovered in 1961. After the materials were treated and the boat reconstructed, they were placed on display in a museum built specifically for the great ship. The *Vasa* could be said to have performed its knowledge by failing. Why did the *Vasa* sink? Like the button, the ship that sank opens up a space of ambiguity and speculation that continues to animate this monumental artifact to this day.

The discarded, outmoded, or forgotten, the unfinished or failed, and the damaged by bullets or blood make for compelling exhibitions because of the particular way they perform (and are made to perform) knowledge. They, like the testimony of the button, speak to the differences and connections between things and words. Such are the pleasures of thinking in Swedish museums.

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