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## Revisiting amber art from eighteenth-century Königsberg. New findings regarding a game box at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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**Słowa kluczowe:** Bursztyn, Królewiec, szkatuła do gier, Fryderyk Wilhelm Pruski, William IV Orański, Anna Hanowerska, Fryderyk II Wielki

### **Rewizja wiedzy na temat sztuki bursztynniczej w osiemnastowiecznym Królewcu. Nowe odkrycia dotyczące szkatuły z Rijksmuseum**

W niniejszym artykule analizowane są nieznane dotąd dokumenty Tajnego Archiwum Państwowego w Berlinie, które rzucają nowe światło na kwestię powstania bursztynowej szkatuły do gry zdeponowanej w Rijksmuseum w Amsterdamzie. Cenny przedmiot został zamówiony przez króla Prus Fryderyka Wilhelma I jako prezent dla Wilhelma IV Orańskiego i jego żony Anny Hanowerskiej latem 1738 roku. Został wykonany przez bursztynników z Królewca: Johanna Bernharda Welpendorfa, Jacoba Suhra, Johanna Georga Bulla, Ertmanna Hömcke i mistrza o nazwisku Zieloska. W ślad za odkryciem tego dokumentu przedstawiono również udział Welpendorfa i Suhra w dwóch dodatkowych pruskich zleceniach z lat czterdziestych XVII wieku – chodzi o ramę lustra do Bursztynowej Komnaty cesarzowej Elżbiety Rosyjskiej i duży ołtarz dla nieokreślonego katolickiego monarchy. Na podstawie atrybucji szkatuły do gry z Rijksmuseum zaproponowano powiązanie kolejnych bursztynowych obiektów z lat trzydziestych i czterdziestych XVIII wieku z warsztatami królewieckimi.

#### Abstract

This paper presents an hitherto unnoticed file at the Prussian Secret State Archives, Berlin, which sheds new light on an amber game box kept at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam: The precious object was commissioned by King Frederick William I of Prussia for Anne of Hannover, the wife of William IV

of Orange, in the summer of 1738. It was produced by the Königsberg amber craftsmen Johann Bernhard Welpendorf, Jacob Suhr, Johann Georg Bull, Ertmann Hömcke, and a master named Zieloska. Departing from this discovery, the paper traces Welpendorf and Suhr's participation in two additional royal Prussian commissions of the 1740s: a mirror frame for Empress Elizabeth of Russia's Amber Room and a large altar for an unnamed Catholic prince. Based on the Rijksmuseum game box, tentative attributions of further amber objects to Königsberg in the 1730s and 1740s are proposed.

In 2011, the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, acquired a large amber box for the game of *l'hombre* (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> This acquisition was particularly sensational because it is the only existing amber object that can be connected with certainty to the House of Orange, due to its heraldic décor: the allied coats of arms of Prince William IV of Orange (1711–1751) and his wife Anne of Hanover (1709–1759). Paired with Prussian royal eagles, this imagery has been thought to demonstrate that the game box was commissioned by King Frederick William I of Prussia (1688–1714) as a wedding gift to the princely couple of the Netherlands in 1734. The box is likely identical with one mentioned in an inventory of Princess Anne's belongings, which was compiled after her death in 1759: “[a] large and a smaller square amber box, each with four small quadrille boxes, with their fish, some of the boxes damaged on the corners.”<sup>2</sup> This mention in turn gave rise to the hypothesis that the precious object was specifically gifted to the princess.<sup>3</sup>

The recent discovery of an hitherto unnoticed file in the Prussian Secret State Archives, Berlin, reveals the game box's proper date of creation and the identities of its makers: It was commissioned by Frederick William I of Prussia and produced in August–December 1738, that is, four years after the presumed date. The box was jointly made by a number of amber craftsmen or *Inventirer* from Königsberg (modern Kaliningrad, Russia): Johann Bernhard Welpendorf (Wölpendorff), Jacob Suhr (Sauer), Johann Georg Bull (Boll), Ertmann Hömcke, and a master named Zieloska. This paper offers a summary of the newly unearthed source material from Berlin, which largely comprises letters exchanged between the amber craftsmen and officials at the royal court and Königsberg. Since it is extremely rare that an existing amber object can be linked to specific craftsmen with certainty, this paper also discusses some of the broader implications of this discovery. Above all, it can enrich our understanding of Prussian “amber

<sup>1</sup> In the seventeenth century, *l'hombre* (also ombre) and its four-player version *quadrille* became one of the most popular games at princely courts, enjoyed particularly by women. David Parlett, “Ombre: The original bidding game” and “Quadrille: Courtly game of French aristos”, <https://www.parlettgames.uk/histocs/quadrill.html> [accessed: 27.12.2024].

<sup>2</sup> Reinier Baarsen, *Games box containing four smaller boxes*, “The Rijksmuseum Bulletin” 2013, vol. 61, no. 2, pp. 206–207, <https://bulletin.rijksmuseum.nl/issue/view/375> [accessed: 27.12.2024].

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 206.



Fig. 1. Game box for the game of *l'hombre* or *quadrille*, Königsberg, 1738, 17.4 × 32.9 × 22.6 cm, 6.1 × 12.5 × 8 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, BK-2010-14, © Public domain

diplomacy”, that is, the use of amber artefacts as diplomatic gifts by the rulers of Prussia, as well as amber art from eighteenth-century Königsberg.

The Rijksmuseum’s game box rests on four feet, of which the badly damaged front pair is carved in the shape of Prussian royal eagles. The two ball feet at the rear appear to be later replacements (fig. 2). The base contains a drawer that can be opened to the front. The lid is adorned with maritime, vegetal, and foliate carvings made of opaque creamy amber. Its corners carry finials shaped like vases carrying fruit. The box contains four smaller boxes for the (lost) counters (fig. 3). The lids of all five boxes are engraved with the allied coats of arms of Prince William IV of Orange and his wife Anne of Hanover as well as the motto *Je maintiendrai* [“I shall maintain”]. All boxes are assembled from panels of amber in various hues, both opaque and translucent, which are arranged in decorative patterns. Most of the panels of translucent amber are expertly engraved from the back with maritime landscapes and scrollwork. The crude silver gilt mounts are also engraved with scrollwork.

The new evidence discovered in Berlin comprises thirty-six pages, which are kept in a blue cardboard file with the inscription “Regarding the amber *l'hombre* box with the arms of Orange and England, which His Royal Majesty ordered here and which was dispatched to Berlin on 1 December 1738 along with 12 pieces of raw amber, worth 962 Reichstaler 12 Groschen.” On 17 August 1738, King Frederick William I ordered his minister and provincial governor Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang (1681–1760) to send twelve pieces of raw amber of



Fig. 2. Game box, left side, Königsberg, 1738, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, BK-2010-14, © Public domain



Fig. 3. Small box for counters, Königsberg, 1738, 6.1 × 12.5 × 8 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, BK-2010-14, © Public domain

the highest quality as soon as possible. The shipment should comprise nine white pieces and three yellow pieces. He further requested a large amber box with the arms of the houses of Orange and England on the lid. It was to contain *l'hombre* counters made of amber, namely 120 pieces with fish shapes and 120 round ones. Crucially, the king's letter did not name the recipient or recipients of the game box.<sup>4</sup>

Von Lesgewang confirmed receipt of the order on 24 August and wrote to royal cabinet secretary Elias Schumacher (1686–1747) four days later. Having secured the services of an (unnamed) amber craftsmen for the commission, von Lesgewang sent a sample game box by the Königsberg master Johann Georg Bull<sup>5</sup> as well as a catalogue of questions about formal aspects: Should the game box be larger and made of higher quality amber than the sample? Should it rest on simple ball feet or should its feet be shaped like four eagles? Was it permissible that the large box be made of a wood core incrustated with amber, like the sample? The four smaller boxes could be made entirely of amber without a problem. Should the coats of arms be applied only to the large box or to all five boxes? Should the counters bear mottos or emblems (*Devisen*), as in the sample? Should the mounts be made of mercury-gilt silver, as in the case of the sample, or of pure gold? Could Schumacher send an accurate representation of the Orange coat of arms, seeing as there was none available in Königsberg? And should the lid should be flatter than that of the sample? Von Lesgewang concluded with a post-scriptum indicating that Bull's sample box was available for 100 Reichstaler.<sup>6</sup>

On 9 September, Frederick William I stipulated that the game box should be “larger and more impressive [than the sample] and adorned with sculptural ornaments”. The coats of arms should appear on the lids of all boxes and the large box should not have a wood core but be made entirely of amber, like the small ones. The counters should indeed be decorated with emblems and the mounts should be of mercury-gilt silver (fig. 4).<sup>7</sup> The large box should be “of a very beautiful appearance, and made with sculpted elements in the shape of eagles and other ornaments, which are elaborate [*artig*] and draw the eye.” The king also agreed to purchase Bull's sample box for the requested sum.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Frederick William I to Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang, Potsdam, 17 August 1738, Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fol. 1r.

<sup>5</sup> It is only revealed in a later source that Bull was the maker of this box (cf. footnote 11). Could this be the small box mentioned in the death inventory of Princess Anne (cf. footnote 2)?

<sup>6</sup> Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang to Elias Schumacher, Königsberg, 28 August 1738, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fols. 4r–6r.

<sup>7</sup> For a brief survey of the templates used for similar counters, which are preserved with their original box, see Joanna Grążawska, *Gra we flirt z kolekcji gdańskiego Muzeum Bursztynu/ Flirting game in the collection of the Gdańsk Amber Museum*, “Bursztynisko /The Amber Magazine” 2019, no. 43, pp. 78–81.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick William I to Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang, Potsdam, 9 September 1738, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fol. 10r.



Fig. 4. Counters, Königsberg, 1720s, Dresden, Grünes Gewölbe, III 88 a (various), <https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/mediencreate/2107919> [accessed: 28.12.2024]

One and a half months later, von Lesgewang announced that the game box would be ready in fourteen days. He apologized for the delay and explained that the selection of appropriate raw material and the engraver's work had taken some time.<sup>9</sup> Yet the minister's prognosis was overly optimistic and the king was forced to send an urgent reminder on 27 November.<sup>10</sup> Days later, the game box was dispatched from Königsberg along with the following instructions:

<sup>9</sup> Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang to Frederick William I, Königsberg, 23 October 1738, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fol. 11r.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick William I to Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang, Wusterhausen, 27 November 1738, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fol. 19.

The large game box is packed separately and attached to the bottom of the case with two iron screws, which must first be undone when the casket is to be taken out. The four small boxes, counters, and a small amber bowl for the counters are also packed individually in six cases, and the key to the large box is placed in case No. I. In order to set up the game box, 60 counters, that is, 30 fish and 30 round or heart-shaped ones, must be placed in every small box. The small bowl is to be placed in the drawer at the front bottom.<sup>11</sup>

According to the invoice, the (unspecified) amber craftsmen were to receive a payment of 740 Reichstaler. The (unspecified) goldsmith-cum-engraver invoiced 59 Reichstaler 12 Groschen. Johann Georg Bull invoiced 100 Reichstaler for his sample box. 122 Reichstaler 12 Groschen were due for the twelve pieces of raw amber. Moreover, the amber craftsman Johann Bernhard Welpendorf had added a large white snuffbox “with engraved edges” to the shipment, which he offered to the king for 46 Reichstaler.<sup>12</sup>

The box arrived in Berlin by 9 December. On this day, the broadsheet newspaper *Derby Mercury* reported: “M. Guidikens, Minister of the King of Great Britain, had the other day a private Audience of the King [of Prussia], and was graciously receiv’d by his Majesty. That Minister had the same Day the Honour of Dining with the King, who shewed him the magnificent Present of Amber that his Majesty designs to make to the Princess of Orange, that Monarch having a particular Esteem for her Royal Highness.”<sup>13</sup> There is no doubt that the “magnificent Present” and the present game box are identical. We also learn here that the box was intended specifically for Princess Anne.

On 14 December, Frederick William I confirmed receipt of the shipment amber and expressed his satisfaction with its contents. A receipt dated 22 December shows that a first instalment of 840 Reichstaler had been disbursed to Welpendorf for the game box, suggesting that he had coordinated the craftsmen working on the commission.<sup>14</sup> The remainder was paid by mid-January 1739 to the “amber bureau” (*Bernstein-Amt*), which had supplied the twelve pieces of raw amber.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the matter was not closed. On 5 February 1739, the king received a letter of complaint from the Königsberg amber craftsman Jacob Suhr:

I do not wish to force praise or brag about my own work; the quality of the four eagles, the flowers, and all sculptural work speaks for itself. If Your Majesty has graciously paid 243 Reichstaler and 30 Groschen to the five craftsmen [*Eventeurs*] who

<sup>11</sup> Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang to Frederick William I, Königsberg, 1 December 1738, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fol. 20r. The bowl’s whereabouts are unknown.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, fols. 20r–21v.

<sup>13</sup> The author would like to thank Dr Rachel King for drawing his attention to this source. *Derby Mercury*, Thursday, 21 December 1738.

<sup>14</sup> GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fols. 14–15.

<sup>15</sup> GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fol. 27.

Rahul  
Kulka

made the box – for which I offer my most humble thanks –, I am nonetheless deeply hurt by the division of that sum, as outlined in Appendix O. I do not wish to accuse those, who set up this division, but only my co-master Wölpendorff, who has slandered my name with Your Majesty’s Councillor Lilienthal and caused this distribution, although I drew the first design for the box and worked on the project from beginning to end. This is confirmed in [the] appendices by my two co-masters, who worked as much as I and testify that I have been treated unjustly by receiving only 33 Reichstaler, whereas the other three masters received 60 Reichstaler each. Because this calumny and disgrace breaks my heart and because my motivation is honest, I do not hesitate to address Your Majesty most humbly, although I have even been threatened in secret with imprisonment.

Suhr explained that Johann Georg Bull had voluntarily ceded 6 Reichstaler 60 Groschen from his own share; he demanded that the other masters Welpendorf and Zieloska be required to do the same. Moreover, he hoped that the king would find appropriate means to punish Welpendorf’s disgraceful slander.<sup>16</sup>

Suhr’s *Appendix O* is cited here in full:

Appendix O

Distribution

What the 840 Reichstaler granted by His Majesty are given for:

100 Reichstaler to Mr Bull for the small box

740 Reichstaler for the large box

840 Reichstaler

[For the large box]

433 Reichstaler 30 Groschen for the amber

63 Reichstaler 30 Groschen expenses as specified

243 Reichstaler 30 Groschen wages

740 Reichstaler

The wages are to be distributed, as follows:

60 Reichstaler for Mr Wölpendorff

60 Reichstaler for Mr Bull

60 Reichstaler for Mr Zieloska

30 Reichstaler 30 Groschen for Mr Öhm [Hömcke?]

33 Reichstaler for Mr Suhr

243 Reichstaler 30 Groschen

Distributed in Königsberg, 22 December 1730

Lilienthal<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Jacob Suhr to Frederick William I, Königsberg, 5 February 1739, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fols. 33r–34r.

<sup>17</sup> Appendix O: “Kriegsrat Lilienthal”, *Repartition*, Königsberg, 22 December 1738, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fol. 34v.



As indicated by Suhr, the other two appendices comprised signed statements by the amber craftsmen Johann Georg Bull and Ertmann Hömcke, which confirmed that Suhr had worked no less than the others. Only Hömcke had been taken ill for three weeks and had subsequently worked less.<sup>18</sup> Despite his efforts, Suhr's complaint was dismissed, although he was encouraged to appeal to his colleague's good-will in order to obtain his desired compensation.<sup>19</sup>

Regrettably, the sources do not reveal if there was any special occasion for Frederick William I's precious gift. In 1738, Prussian foreign affairs were haunted by an international alliance which aimed to strip the king of the duchies of Jülich and Berg in Western Germany. Although Emperor Charles VI (1685–1740) had repeatedly guaranteed Prussia's right to these lands, on 10 February 1738, the emperor himself, Britain-Hanover, France, and the Netherlands had resolved that the duchies should be ceded to the princes of the Palatinate-Sulzbach.<sup>20</sup> Frederick William I resisted this demand and increased his military presence along the Rhine. In July, the king and his two oldest sons, including the future Frederick II (1712–1786), inspected the Prussian troops at Wesel. At the end of the month, on their way home, they visited William IV and Anne of Orange at Het Loo. Commissioned less than a month after this visit, it is possible that the game box was a belated acknowledgement of the hospitality than the king and his sons had experienced.<sup>21</sup>

The cited documents reveal in great detail the various operations involved in the selection and creation of diplomatic gifts under King Frederick William I, including the remarkable personal involvement of the so-called "Soldier King" who is generally decried as embarrassingly frugal and denied any sense for aesthetic matters. By using amber artefacts as diplomatic gifts, Frederick William I followed in the footsteps of his forefathers, who had capitalized on their privileged access to the sought-after natural material in a similar manner.<sup>22</sup> Most famously, in 1716, the king gifted the wall panels of his father's now-legendary Amber Room, which were installed in the royal castle of Berlin at the time, to Tsar Peter I (1672–1725).<sup>23</sup> Whilst the Amber Room constituted a "ready-made"

<sup>18</sup> Appendices II and III: Testimonials by Johann Georg Bull and Ertmann Hömcke, Königsberg, 10 February 1739, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fols. 35r–35v.

<sup>19</sup> GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 996, fol. 36v.

<sup>20</sup> Johann Gustav Droysen, *Geschichte der Preussischen Politik*, Vierter Theil, Dritte Abtheilung: *Friedrich Wilhelm I. König von Preussen, Band II*, Leipzig 1869, pp. 271–364.

<sup>21</sup> Precious new insights might be gained from the correspondence of Abraham Georg Luiscius, Prussian ambassador to the Netherlands, in 1737–1739. GStAPK, I. HA, Rep. 96, Nr. 2C, vol. II.

<sup>22</sup> Susanne Netzer, *Bernsteingeschenke in der preussischen Diplomatie des 17. Jahrhunderts*, "Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen" 1993, Bd. 35, pp. 227–246; Alexis Kugel, Rahul Kulka, *Amber. Treasures from the Baltic Sea, 16<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> Century*, Paris 2023, pp. 22–70. Although the specimens requested by Frederick William I may not have formed part of his gift to the princes of Orange, it is worth noting that the rulers of Prussia frequently conferred pieces or larger quantities of raw amber that could be worked by the recipients themselves or their court artists. Kugel, Kulka, *Amber. Treasures from the Baltic Sea...*, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> Kugel, Kulka, *Amber. Treasures from the Baltic Sea...*, pp. 134–137.

Rahul  
Kulka

gift, as it were, Frederick William I also presented other custom-made amber objects to foreign dignitaries. In 1728, he surprised King Augustus II “the Strong” of Poland (1670–1733) during his visit to Berlin by installing a large amber cabinet in his apartment (fig. 5). The drawers were lined with mirrors and filled with various *objets de vertu* that were also made of amber. The creation of this spectacular piece has been discussed extensively by Jutta Kappel.<sup>24</sup> It is likely that “Erdtmann Sönnke”, whom Kappel mentions as one of the two amber craftsmen who delivered the cabinet to Berlin, was in fact the



Fig. 5. Large amber cabinet, Königsberg, 1728, Dresden, Grünes Gewölbe, III 88, <https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/117069> [accessed: 28.12.2024]

<sup>24</sup> Jutta Kappel, *Der große Bernsteinschrank*. “...Etwas nie Gesehenes und Unschätzbare” [in:] *eadem*, *Bernsteinkunst aus dem Grünen Gewölbe*, Dresden–München–Berlin 2005, pp. 27–37.

ailing Ertmann Hömcke or “Mr Öhm”, who is recorded as one of the makers of the present game box.<sup>25</sup>

Crucially, the new sources allow us to count the Rijksmuseum game box among the exclusive group of extant amber objects that can be dated and attributed to specific craftsmen with certainty. This opens up various paths for further investigation, especially regarding the output of amber craftsmen from eighteenth-century Königsberg. Despite Suhr’s dramatic complaint against Welpendorf, the two men continued to work as business partners throughout the 1740s. In March 1745, Empress Elizabeth of Russia (1709–1762) asked Frederick II (“the Great”) of Prussia to send an amber mirror frame, which she desired for the Amber Room at its new location in the Winter Palace, St Petersburg.<sup>26</sup> Known through a preparatory drawing (fig. 6), the original design comprised a combination of military trophies and putti, yet the Prussian ambassador to St Petersburg questioned the appropriateness of such a decorative scheme.<sup>27</sup> After consulting the imperial Russian councillor Ernst Johann von Münnich (1708–1788), a new design was produced which is described as follows:

I. Centre top:

1. The Russian Imperial Crown, which is held by two men armed in the ancient Roman manner.
2. Below the crown, on a ceremonial pillow, the imperial sceptre and sword.

II. On the top corners:

1. Grotesques of all kinds of maritime snails, shells, corals, fruit, and foliage.

III. At the centre of the sides:

1. The goddess of war on a globe.
2. The goddess of peace on a pedestal, both in Roman poses, alongside various symbols of war and victory, which reference the last war in Finland and the glorious peace brokered by Her Imperial Majesty.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> The present author has not been able to view the following files, which should contain the relevant information: GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 989 (Purchase and delivery of amber for an amber cabinet of King Frederick William I, 1721–1727), Nr. 991 (Production of an amber cabinet as present for the king of Poland, June–October 1728), Nr. 992 (Rückgabe eines Bernsteinspiegels durch den König, March–April 1728).

<sup>26</sup> Frederick II to Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang, Potsdam, 6 March 1745, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 997, fol. 7r.

<sup>27</sup> Draft of a letter by Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang to Frederick II, Königsberg, 5 May 1745, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 997, fols. 20r–20v.

<sup>28</sup> GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 997, fol. 45r. The final design may have been by Zeichenmeister Anton Reich of Königsberg, who received 20 Reichstaler on 29 May 1745 for producing a drawing (*Riß*) for the frame. However, it is also possible that he simply produced a working copy of the preparatory drawing. GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 997, fol. 25r.

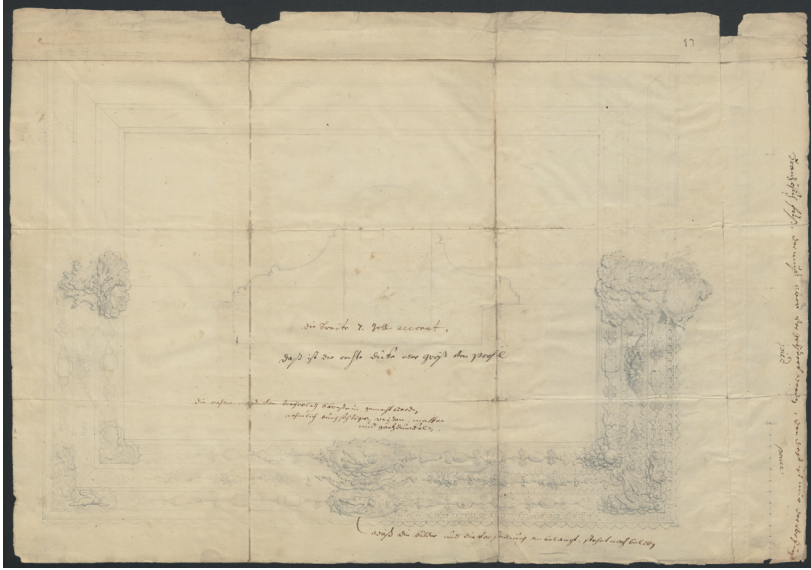


Fig. 6. (Disregarded) Preparatory drawing for the mirror frame for the Amber Room, Berlin, c. 1745, Berlin, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 997

The mirror frame was executed by none other than Welpendorf and Suhr, whose relationship had apparently recovered since their falling-out. Given the predominance of figural imagery, it is possible that the two craftsmen were chosen for this project because of their proven skill in the creation of sculptural elements, as witnessed by the Rijksmuseum box.

The frame was completed by 8 October and the business partners received a payment of 1,000 Reichstaler.<sup>29</sup> Suhr was also chosen to oversee the precious artefact's transportation to St Petersburg and its installation in the Amber Room. This was also deemed advisable in case the frame incurred damages during the journey or should the measurements provided by the Russians turn out to be faulty.<sup>30</sup> Suhr departed from Königsberg on 19 October and reached Riga on 4 November.<sup>31</sup> He arrived at St Petersburg on 25 November and received a room at the Prussian ambassador's palace. The frame had survived the journey undamaged, but its dimensions were indeed off. Suhr and a court carpenter therefore enlarged it by 1.5 inches on the sides, so it would fit neatly into its designated space. On 11 December, Suhr spent all morning and afternoon installing the frame in the Amber Room, complaining that he had been

<sup>29</sup> Payment receipt, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 997, fol. 24r.

<sup>30</sup> Apparently, Vice-Chancellor Mikhail Illarionovich Vorontsov had deemed the frame too large for the designated space. Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang to Axel von Mardefeld, Königsberg, 20 October 1745, fol. 43v.

<sup>31</sup> Jacob Suhr to Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang, Riga, 10 November 1745, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 997, fols. 56r–57v.

left starving: “[B]ut I spent the day living like the angels in heaven because I was given neither food nor drink”.<sup>32</sup> In a second letter, dated 28 December, he reported that he had been presented to the empress herself, who had listened to him graciously, and that he had been asked to repair damages on the original panels of the Amber Room from Berlin. Progress was slow because his work kept being interrupted by meetings (*Consilia*) that were held in the space.<sup>33</sup> Back in Königsberg, von Lesgewang began to worry that the craftsman was enjoying himself too much: “[O]nly it appears that he is having a good time there and is therefore not in much of a hurry. He would be better served if he received frequent reminders to work more diligently [...]”<sup>34</sup> Suhr finally returned to Königsberg on 26 February 1746.<sup>35</sup>

On 22 January 1749, Frederick II bade von Lesgewang to oversee the creation of a large amber altar intended for the chapel of a “certain Roman Catholic *puissance*”.<sup>36</sup> The complex structure comprised a central field with the Holy Trinity, which was framed by six Corinthian columns supporting a dramatic baroque entablature and two full-length angels holding censers (fig. 7).<sup>37</sup> Its height of 9 ft would have made it the most monumental work in amber after the Amber Room. Once again, Welpendorf and Suhr were approached – the former as team leader –, this time along with a third master named Friedrich Roggenbug (Roggenbuch).<sup>38</sup> Assisted by three journeymen, they were supposed to complete the task in one and a half years. They were to receive a studio prepared specifically for them at Königsberg Castle, presumably in order to ensure that they would work diligently and that they would resist the temptation of siphoning off surplus amber for their own use. The craftsmen questioned the feasibility of this timeline and presented an alternative plan for an altar that was about half the size and significantly cheaper

<sup>32</sup> Jacob Suhr to Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang, St Petersburg, 7 December 1745, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 997, fols. 67r–67v.

<sup>33</sup> Jacob Suhr to Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang, St Petersburg, 28 December 1745, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 997, fols. 59r–60v.

<sup>34</sup> Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang to Axel von Mardefeld, Königsberg, 28 January 1746, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 997, fol. 61v.

<sup>35</sup> Jacob Suhr’s expense report, Königsberg, 2 March 1746, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 997, fol. 78r.

<sup>36</sup> Frederick II to Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang, Berlin, 22 January 1749, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 998, fols. 1r–1v.

<sup>37</sup> The sheet preserved in Berlin could be Martin Cerulli’s copy of the original design. The East Prussian printmaker received 2 Reichstaler for copying a design of the altar on 7 March 1749 (“wegen eines zu der königl. Bernstein-Arbeit abcoupirten Rißes”). GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 998, fol. 2r. Ernst August Hagen, *Über Schreibe-künstler und Quodlibets-Maler*, “Neue Preußische Provinzial-Blätter” 1846, pp. 50–52.

<sup>38</sup> Contract and instructions for Welpendorf, Suhr, and Roggenburg, undated, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 998, fols. 10r–13v.



Fig. 7. Martin Cerulli (?), Preparatory drawing for an amber altar, Königsberg (?), 1745, Berlin, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 998, fol. 2

(1,866 instead of 2,790 Reichstaler).<sup>39</sup> However, shortly after, the project was indefinitely postponed and it was never executed.<sup>40</sup>

Regrettably, the amount of craftsmen involved in the making of the Rijksmuseum game box makes it difficult to derive reliable stylistic criteria that would allow for the attribution of further works to any one of the named makers. Yet certain objects demonstrate such compelling similarities with the box that one may reasonably suspect the participation of one or more of

<sup>39</sup> Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang to Frederick II, Appendix A, Königsberg, 14 March 1749, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 998, fol. 44r.

<sup>40</sup> Frederick II to Johann Friedrich von Lesgewang, Potsdam, 25 March 1749, GStAPK, XX. HA, Rep. 5, Nr. 998, fol. 58r.

the named craftsmen. For instance, an amber box at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, is virtually identical with the Rijksmuseum's small amber boxes in terms of construction, colour composition, and iconography (fig. 8). Certain parallels can also be observed with an elegant chessboard at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (fig. 9). The dark squares made of translucent orange amber are likely back-engraved with the same kinds of emblems as adorned the *l'hombre* counters.<sup>41</sup> The outer edge is adorned with identical cartouche-shaped panels of translucent amber, whilst the rosettes made of a strikingly speckled amber variety strongly recall the quatrefoils from the same material on the game box. If Hömcke was indeed involved in the creation of the large Dresden amber cabinet, this could also explain the similarities with a small box forming part of its contents, although these are less compelling than in the case of London box.<sup>42</sup>

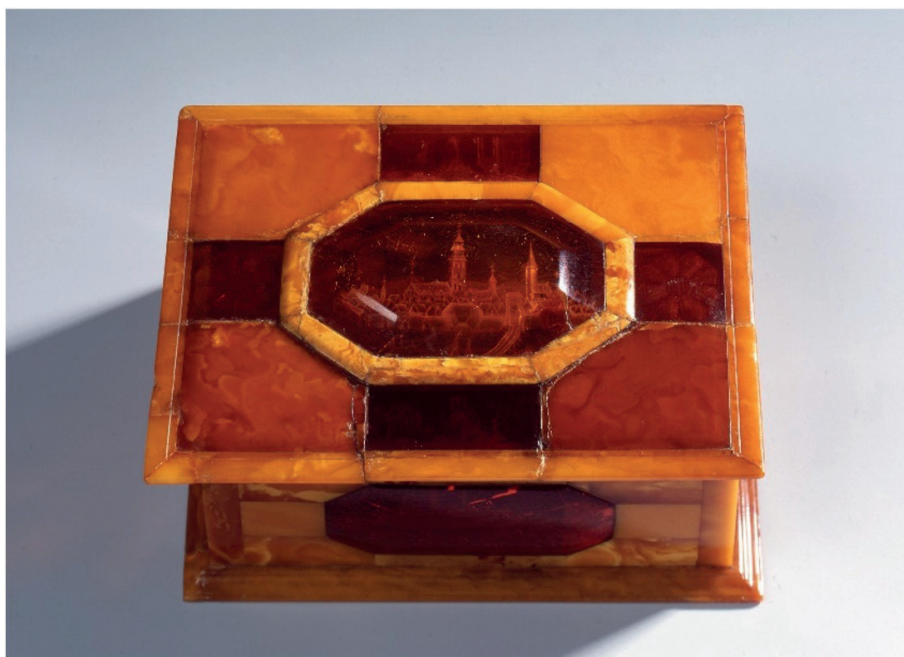


Fig. 8. Casket, Königsberg, 1730s/40s, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Alfred Williams Hearn Gift, C.44-1923, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O110369/casket-unknown/> [accessed: 28.12.2024]

<sup>41</sup> They are derived from the same publication as the emblems on the contemporary amber counters preserved at Dresden: *Devises et emblèmes anciennes et modernes [...] Oder: Emblematische Gemüths-Vergnügung [...]*, Augsburg 1699, fig. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Box, Königsberg, 1720s, 4.3 × 12 × 9.6 cm, Dresden, Grünes Gewölbe, III 88 ii, <https://skd-online-collection.skd.museum/Details/Index/231282> [accessed: 28.12.2024].

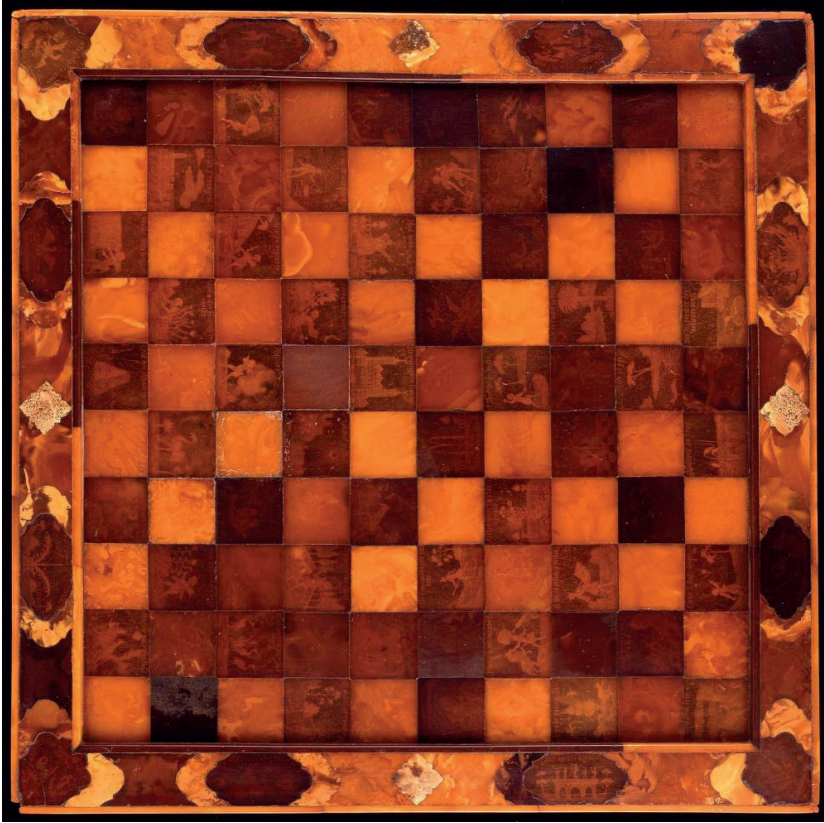


Fig. 9. Chessboard, Königsberg, 1730s/40s, 37 × 37 cm, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Bequest of William Buffum, Acc. No. 02.205a, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/55412/gameboard;jsessionid=90EA23276439B76C4105F078202F77D6> [accessed: 28.12.2024]

## Conclusion

Although the Rijksmuseum game box has certainly left an exceptionally long paper trail, its story shows that new insights regarding Prussian amber art can still be extracted from the archives. Contrary to the wideheld assumption that the eighteenth century was a period of decline, the aforementioned examples show that the period in fact produced some of the most ambitious projects in amber that were ever conceived. Whilst these may be fewer in number than their seventeenth-century predecessors, they appear to have left rather more detailed documentation. It is therefore to be hoped that the findings presented here will provide an incentive for further engagement with the little-studied subject of amber art in the eighteenth century.

The game box's provenance is particularly compelling given how little is generally known about amber art in eighteenth-century Königsberg. It is commonly



stated that the capital of Ducal Prussia, later known as East Prussia, had been eclipsed by Gdańsk as the main centre of amber art by the mid-seventeenth century. However, the examples presented here show that important diplomatic gifts continued to be sourced from Königsberg artisans.

Despite their bumpy start in 1738, Welpendorf and Suhr grew into a kind of “dream team” and received multiple royal commissions in the 1740s. Welpendorf appears to have died before 1755, while Suhr’s death date remains to be ascertained.<sup>43</sup> A certain Johann Welpendorf, presumably a relative of Johann Bernhard, and the aforementioned Friedrich Roggenbug are known to have worked on the Amber Room at Tsarskoye Selo after 1755. The latter proudly inscribed a panel with the words “Frederic Rogenbuck maitre et inventeur, *fecit anno 1760*”.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the maintenance of the old panels of Frederick I of Prussia (1657–1713) and the creation of new ones to fill the much larger space at the Catherine Palace was a large-scale and long-term project. It cemented the imperial court’s development into an important centre of amber art in its own right.

## Epilogue

Although William IV of Orange was one of Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia’s preferred correspondents in the second half of the 1730s, their letters do not contain any mention of the game box or any related gift exchange either.<sup>45</sup> By contrast, the crown prince’s correspondence of 1739 reveals that he sent the French philosopher Voltaire and his no-less illustrious lover, Marquise Emilie du Châtelet, a number of amber artefacts, including a writing set and a game box for the game of quadrille (*l’hombre* for four players):

*May or 1 June 1739*

My dear friend [Voltaire], I have but a moment on my own to assure you of my friendship, and to ask you to accept the amber writing set and the other small items that I am sending you. Have the goodness to give the other box, which contains the game of quadrille, to the marquise. We are so occupied here that we barely have the time to breathe. In fifteen days I will be able to be more prolix.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Otto Pelka, *Die Meister der Bernsteinkunst*, Leipzig 1918, p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> Maurice Remy, *Mythos Bernsteinzimmer*, Berlin 2003, p. 59.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Briefwechsel Friedrich des Grossen mit dem Prinzen Wilhelm IV. von Oranien und mit dessen Gemahlin, Anna, geb. Princess Royal von England*, ed. Leopold von Ranke, Berlin 1869.

<sup>46</sup> Crown Prince Frederick to Voltaire, May or 1 June 1739 [in:] *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, vol. 21: *Correspondance de Frédéric avec Voltaire*, ed. Johann David Erdmann Preuss, Berlin 1853, p. 327, <https://friedrich.uni-trier.de/fr/oeuvres/21/327/text/> [accessed: 3.12.2024]. One might note that the game box is gifted to a female recipient. This could support the notion that the Rijksmuseum game box was also intended for a female recipient, Princess Anne, amongst whose possessions it was found upon her demise.

Voltaire's response constitutes a unique testimonial of the many layers of meaning associated with the royal gifts of amber. They inspired him to compose charming verses that combined a commentary on the mythical origins of the fossilized resin with flattery of the crown prince:

1739 Brussels, July

Monseigneur, Emilie and fragile me, have received, amidst the pleasures of Enghien, the greatest pleasure that could ever flatter us. A young man who has had the fortune to see my young Marcus Aurelius [Frederick] has brought us from him a charming letter, accompanied by amber writing sets and game boxes:

With how much impatience  
Monsieur Girard saw us seize  
These instruments of science,  
As well as those of pleasure!  
All is within our abilities.

Thus, monseigneur, we are playing with your counters [*jetons*] and we are writing with your amber pens.

This amber was formed, it is said,  
From the tears shed by  
The sisters of the brilliant Phaethon,  
When they turned into pine trees,  
Undoubtedly, in order to serve as pyre  
To the most unfortunate coachman  
Whom the gods ever overturned.

Every day, the gods overturn those coachmen who try to lead us, yet they rarely find friends who mourn them.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Voltaire to Crown Prince Frederick, July 1739 [in:] *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, vol. 21: *Correspondance de Frédéric avec Voltaire*, ed. Johann David Erdmann Preuss, Berlin 1853, p. 339, <https://friedrich.uni-trier.de/fr/oeuvres/21/339/text/> [accessed: 30.12.2024].

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