Over half of the works discovered during the research for this book were pieces whose small size and luxury character suggest that they originally adorned residential interiors or were exhibits in collections. The majority of these pieces are today held in museums, and very few have a documented past going back further than the 19th century. With only two sources of information at our disposal – meagre details on the works themselves, and very general descriptions of the exhibits of earlier collections gleaned from inventories or travel diaries – it is not possible to formulate categoric conclusions regarding either their authorship or their actual history. What we can do is attempt to seek points at which these two ‘stories’ intersect, and generate conclusions regarding the functions played by these small-scale works of alabaster sculpture in their original and subsequent interiors and collections. My inspiration to attempt this came in particular from reading published 17th-century inventories from Antwerp and Amsterdam, which featured numerous “small alabaster tablets”.¹ In this situation an obvious question seemed to suggest itself: did this fashion also reign in other parts of Europe?

I sought answers to this question in sources documenting alabaster sculptures in collections and residential interiors. Above all I used inventories and descriptions of the Kunstkammern in Dresden, Prague and Berlin, as well as inventories of noble and bourgeois assets in the Polish and Bohemian lands.² Given that I restricted my search to collections in Central Europe, generalisations should certainly not be made on the basis of the results, but it is worth noting the shape of the groups of works that clearly suggest themselves among the alabasters occurring in secular interiors. These include copies of the antique and Renaissance sculptures, relief portraits, and sculptures on mythological and religious themes. Let us take a closer look at them.

Copies

Collectors in the Early Modern age discovering antiquity were fascinated not only by monumental sculpture functioning in the public space but also by the charm of small-format works such as
statuettes, cameos and medals. Owing to the limited supply and thus high price of surviving antique relics, for most collectors the only way of ‘procuring’ a work they desired was to buy a copy. It was for this market that the likes of Filarete, Antico and Il Riccio, made small scale bronze versions of Greek and Roman statues.3 Works by certain of the most sought-after contemporary artists were also hard to come by because their patrons would reserve themselves the ‘distribution rights’ to such masterpieces, and use them as political bargaining tools; one such case was that of the relationship between Giambologna and the Medicis.4 In such situations copies or replicas were widely accepted exhibits in collections.5 This is confirmed by documents such as that setting forth the opinion of Gabriel Kaltemarckt, the author of a seminal text on art collecting, the manuscript Bedenken wie eine Kunst-Cammer aufzurichten seyn möchte (1587).6 When Kaltemarckt, himself an adept copyist of Italian works, was in the process of persuading Elector Christian I to establish a true Kunstkammer in Dresden, he claimed that it could be done at little cost by commissioning copies of famous works of art from other courts.7 In his view, the primary purpose of the Kunstkammer was to serve as a collection of examples for study, hence the reason why the aspect of authenticity did not play a significant role.8 There was one more factor that boosted the popularity of small-scale works: the ambition of the creators of 16th- and 17th-century Kunstkammers for their encyclopaedic collections to operate as reduced models of the universe, encompassing all the creations of man and nature.9 The only way of coming close to this unattainable goal was to miniaturise one’s exhibits.

Objects made from alabaster also had the facility to charm with the beauty of their material. The ease with which it could be worked meant that it was not hard to achieve the coveted precision of detail that would dazzle the viewer. In terms of active reception, works of art made from light, transparent materials, of which alabaster is one, provoke the beholder to lift them up to the light to bring out their inner structure.

In the analysed inventories I came across several alabaster copies of ancient and Renaissance masterpieces. The first such example is to be found in the 1587 inventory of a Dresden kunstkammer established in 1560 during the reign of Elector Augustus.10 The primary interests of this ruler were science and technology, so around three-quarters of the collection is composed of scientific instruments, tools, and samples of minerals occurring in Saxony. Works of art, by comparison, were a distinct minority.11 The list of works