Chapter 15

Mirrors and Memories: The Chinese Mirror Cabinet at the Hermitage near Bayreuth

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Any contemporary account of the north-Bavarian town of Bayreuth will mention the *Spiegelscherbenkabinett* (Cabinet of Fragmented Mirrors), which is located in the *Altes Schloss* (Old Palace) of the Hermitage, an expansive property on the outskirts of the town. The interior of this cabinet seems highly unusual to contemporary viewers—and it was also quite remarkable when the room was fitted out in 1750 [Fig. 15.1]. What was seen as noteworthy, or even downright unusual, about the room’s furnishing was its dominant decorative element—namely the numerous mirror pieces in a variety of formats and irregular forms mounted on the room’s brown-varnished wooden paneling. These mirror fragments adorn the upper segment of the room’s five walls. They are clustered thickly, alternating with a few pastel-toned chinoiserie bas-reliefs. The similarly brown-varnished wainscoting underneath, featuring stuccoed and painted flower blossoms framed vertically or horizontally, forms a kind of pedestal zone. Slender cornices crown the top of the walls.

The reflective walls encompass a room that is nearly square, extended on the east side by a small niche that originally served as an alcove. One enters the cabinet room from the north side; two windows can be found on the southern wall opposite the entrance. A flat ceiling stretches across the entire room, again adorned with painted and sculpted chinoiseries from Adam Rudolf Albini (1719–1797) [Fig. 15.2]. It is owing to these East Asian-inspired decorative elements on the walls and ceiling that the cabinet was dubbed the *Chinesisches Spiegelkabinett* (Chinese Mirror Cabinet) in the eighteenth century.


2 The sculpted elements are made of soapstone.
Neither the wall’s iconography nor the images on the ceiling make any direct reference to the theme of hermitage in the sense of a secluded life of prayer. This can be said despite the fact that, when we analyse the room, we can only draw limited conclusions from its appearance today. This is because the cabinet room was restored by King Ludwig II (1845–1886), who in the nineteenth century installed a number of larger mirror pieces, for example those above the fireplace or between the windows. Therefore, we must assume that the walls of the original ‘cabinet’ were uniformly filled with mirror pieces, only clustered less densely. The niche that is now entirely glassed over was also adorned with smaller mirror fragments in the same manner. And finally, most of the mirrors distributed rhythmically across the walls had a shelf—and standing on these shelves were a total of over 300 small sculptures from East Asia, as well