



The Blood of Medusa
The Corals of Ambras Castle

26 June 2026–31 October 2026

Ambras Castle Innsbruck

Corals: mysterious, precious, and of mythical origin. In times of climate change, we usually encounter them as endangered wonders of nature. Over 500 years ago, however, they were regarded as treasures from the depths of a still largely unexplored sea, as enigmatic as they were coveted. The ancient myth that corals were born from the blood of Medusa lent them a special aura, somewhere between a natural phenomenon, a legend, and an art object.

The special exhibition *The Blood of Medusa: The Corals of Ambras Castle* explores this multifaceted history, spanning from ancient tales and early modern Cabinets of Wonders to contemporary issues of climate change and species extinction. The starting point is the extraordinary coral collection of the Tyrolean sovereign Archduke Ferdinand II (1529–1595), which remains one of the most significant in the world to this day. Ferdinand owned nearly a hundred coral objects – both natural specimens and elaborately crafted works of art.

Around 50 objects from the Ambras collection are now presented alongside selected loans and scientific perspectives. In carefully staged rooms, which utilize light, colour, and sound – complemented by insights into the underwater world and walk-in ‘coral cabinets’ –, a multi-layered dialogue unfolds between art and nature, between historical collectibles and highly topical subjects of research.

The special exhibition is a collaboration between the KHM-Museumsverband and the Natural History Museum Vienna.

Endangered beauty

The very first room introduces visitors to the fragile beauty of coral reefs. As ‘architects of the seas’, corals provide habitats for countless species and are among the most important ecosystems on Earth. At the same time, the exhibition highlights the dramatic threat they face from rising sea temperatures, coral bleaching, and the global decline of reefs. Specimens from the Natural History Museum Vienna illustrate the fascinating diversity of forms of these organisms and their ecological significance.

The myth of their origin

The second room focuses on the question of what corals actually are: plant, stone, or animal? For centuries, their nature remained a mystery. Ancient authors such as Ovid and Pliny described them as masters of transformation between sea and land. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid recounts how the severed head of Medusa turned sea plants to stone – the origin of coral. Visitors encounter this myth, for example, in the precious coral sabre from Archduke Ferdinand II’s Kunstkammer, whose red precious coral alludes to the story of Medusa.

Scientific exhibits and hands-on stations from the Natural History Museum Vienna provide an introduction to modern coral research. Microscopes, wet specimens, and historical educational panels trace the path from mythological interpretation to scientific classification. A turning point is marked by Carl von Linné, who in the eighteenth century was the first to unequivocally classify coral as belonging to the animal kingdom.

Pharmacological use, superstition, and Christological significance

The third room is dedicated to the symbolic power of coral. Due to its red colour, it has been regarded since antiquity as a protective remedy against illness, misfortune, and the ‘evil eye’. Coral amulets accompanied children, whilst powder made from red coral found its way into pharmacopoeias and medical formulations. Philippine Welser’s famous pharmacopoeia documents these applications impressively.

In Christianity, coral acquired a profound significance: as a symbol of the blood of Christ, it became a symbol of sacrifice, redemption, and eternal life. The highlight of the room is a crucifixion group made of blood coral from Ambras Castle, complemented by reproductions of Renaissance paintings in which the infant Jesus wears coral jewellery.

Corals in Archduke Ferdinand II’s Cabinet of Wonders

The highlight of the special exhibition is the fourth room, featuring Archduke Ferdinand II’s famous coral cabinets. These precious cabinet pieces combine natural history and art in a spectacular manner. In one of the rooms, a fantastical underwater world unfolds, featuring sea creatures and mythological figures crafted from red coral, mother-of-pearl, and pearls; at the

centre stands Venus Marina as mistress of the seas. Alongside this are coral landscapes designed to appear more natural, complemented by natural history specimens from the Vienna Natural History Museum such as starfish, sponges, and sea urchins.

Further highlights include the so-called ‘coral mountains’, in which corals appear to grow out of mountainous landscapes, as well as precious cabinet pieces such as the writing set featuring Neptune or Sicilian coral inlays from Trapani. These works particularly highlight how closely the observation of nature, artistic craftsmanship, and a passion for collecting were intertwined in the early modern period.

Too much nature in art?

With the Enlightenment, the focus shifted: marvellous art objects increasingly became subjects of natural history study. Classification and scientific order came to the fore, whilst coral lost its place in the Cabinet of Wonders. Today, in the face of the dramatic destruction of coral reefs, it once again appears as a symbol of a threatened world. Forecasts suggest that most could disappear by the middle of the 21st century – with serious consequences for the entire ecosystem and for humanity.

Let a coral reef grow!

The special exhibition deliberately concludes on a positive and participatory note: visitors are invited to become part of a growing coral reef themselves. Crocheted, folded, or moulded coral objects gradually expand a collaborative installation – as a poetic symbol that the protection and conservation of these fragile ecosystems is a shared responsibility.

In addition, guided tours every Friday and Sunday provide in-depth insights into these complex topics.

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Daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

<https://www.schlossambras-innsbruck.at/en/exhibitions/the-blood-of-medusa>

PRESS PHOTOS

Press photos for topical reporting are available for download on our website:

<https://www.schlossambras-innsbruck.at/en/press>



Cabinet of Coral
Second half of the 16th century
Coral (a.o. *Corallium rubrum*), mother-of-pearl,
pearls, wood, glass
Ambras Castle Innsbruck
© KHM-Museumsverband



Coral branch
16th century
Red precious coral (*Corallium rubrum*);
Base: plaster, wood
Ambras Castle Innsbruck
© KHM-Museumsverband



Writing set with coral
Second half of the 16th century
Silver, coral
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Kunstkammer (Ambras
Castle Innsbruck)
© KHM-Museumsverband

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Small table from Trapani
Inlay: red and white coral, enamel, brass
circa 1600
Ambras Castle Innsbruck
© KHM-Museumsverband



Coral mountain: Martinswand near Zirl
Coral (*Corallium rubrum*, among others), wood,
plaster, linen, painted
3rd quarter of the 16th century
Ambras Castle Innsbruck
© KHM-Museumsverband



Infanta Maria Anna of Spain
Juan Pantoja de la Cruz, 1607
Oil on canvas
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Picture Gallery (Ambras
Castle Innsbruck)
© KHM-Museumsverband



Coral saber with scabbard
red precious coral (*Corallium rubrum*), steel, gold-
plated, velvet, brass
circa 1560
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Imperial Armory (Ambras
Castle Innsbruck)
© KHM-Museumsverband

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OPENING HOURS AND ENTRANCE FEES

Open Daily, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Closed in November

Current opening hours and entrance fees can be found on our website at:

<https://www.schlossambras-innsbruck.at/en/visit-tickets>

Tickets are available in the online ticket shop:

<shop.khm.at/en/tickets>

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