

AHS London Lecture Thursday 17 March 2016

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Metals for Horology: a History of the Brass and Related Industries



Writing Box, Gilt brass, Germany, ca. 1550,
depicting a wild man and scenes of chaos,
Mus. No. M.2823-1931

Brass is a versatile metal. It is both a working metal and a decorative one. Its use in horology reflects its qualities as a soft metal ideal for engraving dials on precision instruments. Candlesticks cast in moulds and basins beaten into form from sheet represent an industrial metal marketed for a range of mass-produced items. Exquisitely chased tobacco boxes and bowls reveal brass as an 'art' metal.

Before 1600, European brass manufacture flourished in southern Germany, where local councils protected trade zealously. Venice was the centre of trade with Muslim countries to the east, whose decorative styles influenced Italian engravers, who in turn had a profound influence on other European design. In England the industry developed slowly until around the late 17th century, when new techniques and new foundries in

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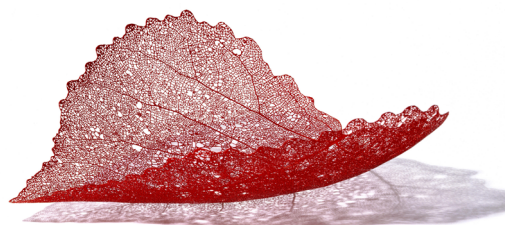
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Birmingham and Bristol rapidly expanded brass manufacture. Brass production was both a driver and a casualty of the Industrial Revolution.

The look of brass carries resonance. Brass production was revived in the 19th century, particularly for church furnishings, as a symbol of Britain's medieval past. The Arts and Crafts movement of the early 20th century revived the use of brass for household furnishings and gave rise to a tradition of brass evoking Ye Olde England that survives in many a country pub.

This paper presents an illustrated history of brass manufacture, its supply networks, sources of ores, principal markets and the infinite variety of products for which it was used. Links will be made between clockmakers and other domestic brass manufacturers including those who made machinery for the hearth. Brass production was never controlled by a hallmarking system but brass production in general attests to an extremely high degree of skill and craftsmanship.



'Lehti' (Leaf) Fruit Bowl, powder coated brass,
Maria Jauhainen, London, 2004,
Mus. No. M.7-2004

The 2016 AHS London Lecture Series is supported by the kind sponsorship of Ben Wright.