

AHS London Lecture Thursday 24 November 2016

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The making of the modern clock and watch dial 1550–1770

By around 1770 clock and watch dials had become more-or-less uniform in terms of design. This was a trend that was to continue throughout the nineteenth century as methods of mass production were developed. Rather than focussing on the longevity of this uniform design, my research concentrates on the variety of factors which led to its coming into being.

There were of course numerous designs used for dials across the period 1550–1770, but not all of the attributes of these styles secured a place on the uniform dial arrangement. In a sense it is those widely discarded attributes that are the most interesting. Multiple forms of lunar calendar and astronomical symbols, for example, were highly significant to both makers and users during the period in which they were represented on dials. However, owing to a variety of influences certain attributes became less popular and eventually either disappeared entirely or survived on only rare examples. Contemporary texts and diagrams provide a method for identifying these influences.

In this lecture I will consider the way in which clock and watch makers of the past were inextricably part of the wider context of experiment, knowledge formation and exchange which characterised the early modern period. Highly literate, highly skilled and an integral part of wide-ranging and highly-connected networks, early modern clock and watch-makers played an active role in

disseminating, validating and discrediting ideas and practices. This was evident in their dial designs. As particular ideas and associated practices prospered and declined, the effect was mirrored not only in texts and diagrams but also on dials. The uniform design of 1770 was as much a product of what makers had chosen not to include as that which they had.



Jane Desborough is Associate Curator of Science at the Science Museum. She is currently completing her PhD thesis at the University of Leeds which focusses on the development of early modern clock and watch dials.

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