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Sandrine Girardier

The Jaquet-Droz Workshops and their Suppliers in the Eighteenth Century

The name of Jaquet-Droz holds a special place in Swiss history and, more generally, in the world of watchmaking. Their 'androids', still in existence and working, have contributed to the firm's mythology. But the aura surrounding Pierre Jaquet-Droz, his son Henry-Louis, and their collaborator and successor Jean-Frédéric Leschet, is also due to the complicated, refined



Lyre-shaped miniature clock, with singing bird and animated scene. Jaquet Droz & Leschet, London, late-eighteenth century. Musée d'horlogerie du Locle - Château des Monts, Le Locle. Photo R. Sterchi

and musical watchmaking production they carried out during the second half of the eighteenth century and sold as far as China.

It is important to acknowledge the significance of their workshops in order to understand why these three mechanics, native of the Neuchâtel Mountains, have entered the watchmaking pantheon.

The main phases of their vibrant career will set the frame of the talk. The focus will then be on the way the workshops in La Chaux-de-Fonds, London and Geneva operated on a local, national and international scale. Some 800 people orbiting around the workshops have been traced in the historical records, a workforce that can be compared with some of the biggest proto-industrial firms of this period. Who were they, where did they live and work, and how can we understand their role in the production process?

The diversity of matters expressed in the firm's documents concerning technical, promotional and commercial practices reveals a nuanced vision of Jaquet-Droz history, and ultimately exposes the plurality and complexity of the watchmaking world in the eighteenth century.

Sandrine Girardier was born in Lugano in 1983. She studied History, English and Ethnology at the University of Neuchâtel. Alongside her doctoral thesis, dedicated to the watchmakers Jaquet-Droz and Leschet, she has worked in several museums, curating temporary exhibitions, conducting educational projects and managing collections. She is the curator of two local historical museums and, as an independent historian, is in charge of cultural and editorial projects.

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