

## AHS London Lecture Thursday 15 September 2022

### Rossella Baldi, **Voltaire's watchmakers:** **The *Manufacture Royale de Montres* in Ferney**

Voltaire (1694–1778) was the most acclaimed writer of his time, as well as being a remarkably wealthy man. By the end of his life, while living in his castle in Ferney, a French village near Geneva, his love for money, his success and some well-orchestrated financial investments guaranteed him an annual income which was equivalent to that of a member of the French royal family.

In 1770, he welcomed to Ferney several dozen Geneva *natifs* artisans working for the local watchmaking industry (watchmakers, enamellers, engravers, etc.) called the *Fabrique*. They were banished from the city of Calvin after a period of rioting and strong social and political tensions. These citizens, who made up the bulk of Geneva's *Fabrique*, demanded recognition and civil rights that their status did not permit them; in particular, they were forbidden to sell their products within the city walls or to set up shops.

Always ready to fight against injustice, Voltaire put at their disposal not only his domain, but also his capital, his network, his wit, and his wiles. As he claimed in correspondence, he wanted to develop an ambitious project: 'to teach time to Europe', in an attempt to ruin the Geneva watchmaking trade and its monopoly. He therefore usurped the title of *manufacture royale* for his workshops, which started making decorated and low-cost watches in the Geneva style.

However, despite Voltaire's efforts and energy, the Ferney watchmaking adventure was to be short lived. The author and his craftsmen were soon to realize that exporting the culture of cheap and counterfeit watches from Geneva to France was no easy task, and many of the workers returned to Geneva even before Voltaire's death in 1778. During the Revolution, Abraham-Louis Breguet considered relaunching the factory, but did not follow through with his plan.



Portrait of Voltaire on a watch signed on movement 'Les Dufour / et Ceret / A. FERNEY, 1773'. Photo Patek Philippe Museum, Geneva.

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