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Museum profile

The horological collection of the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan

The text and the captions in this Museum profile are based on material provided by Lavinia Galli, curator of the horological collection in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli. The photos were supplied by the museum.

The Poldi Pezzoli Museum is a house-museum located in the centre of Milan, close to the famous La Scala opera house. It owns over five hundred pieces illustrating the history of time measurement, of which more than two hundred are displayed in three rooms following a redesign in 2015. A multimedia station was added through which visitors can explore these objects and find out how they function.

The museum was created by Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli (1822–1879) as a sumptuous setting for his outstanding collection of European paintings and works of decorative art: weapons, carpets, glass objects, jewellery, chinaware and furniture, as well as some twenty clocks and watches, which included the famous Chariot of Diana, illustrated on the following page. As stipulated in Poldi Pezzoli's will, his house was opened to the public as a museum in 1881.

In 1973, the Milanese entrepreneur Bruno Falek donated his collection of 129 clocks and watches, dating from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. This select treasury enriched the collection of the museum, making it one of the most complete public collections of antique horology in Italy.

In 2017 the Poldi Pezzoli Museum received an important anonymous donation of watches that had been assembled by Luigi Delle Piane (Genoa, 1875–1961), a passionate collector and a very private person, who had been considered a pioneer among Italian clock lovers. The watches selected for the acquisition are characterised by precious jewellery decoration and original mechanisms signed by rare manufacturers.

Some highlights from the clocks and watches in the museum collection are illustrated and described in the following pages.

The museum also hosts a collection of more than two hundred sundials gathered by the Milanese architect Piero Portaluppi and donated by his daughter Luisa in 1978. These include among others ring dials and diptychs, as well as the beautiful ivory sundial shown below.

With this imporant horological heritage, the museum is planning in the coming years to mount temporary exhibitions on Italian night clocks and the iconography of Father Time, on winding keys and on nineteenthcentury Swiss watches, as well as a multimedia display of sundials.



Portable sundial called '*Navicula de Venetiis*', France, 1524. Ivory, 166 x 149 x 9 mm. Inscription: OP[VS] ORONTII F[INAEI] 1524. Inv. 4277. Donation Portaluppi 1978.

This beautiful ivory little ship (*Navicula de Venetiis*), signed in 1524 by the famous French mathematician Oronce Finé, was intended for the court. It bears the emblems of King Francis I, a salamander and the three lilies of France. When the ship is correctly orientated towards the sun, a plumb line with a bead falling from the mast casts its shadow on the dial. On the hull are engraved the hours and two zodiacal scales, while the signs of the constellations appear along the mast. This is hinged between the two panels forming the hull so it can be inclined depending on the seasons.

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Diana Triumphal chariot clock with automata. Southern Germany, c. 1610. Gilt bronze, silver, gilt brass, ebonized wood. $305 \times 410 \times 170$ mm. Inv. 1149.

The clockwork mechanism hidden inside the throne causes Diana's eyes to move, and when the inner spring is wound, the chariot moves forward, the bodies of the panthers oscillate back and forth and turn their heads side to side, and the monkey eats an apple. In a later version of this same automaton at the Yale University Art Gallery in Boston, Diana shoots an arrow when the chariot stops. The sculpted pieces resemble those by the goldsmith and clockmaker Achilles Langhenbucher (1579–1650), creator of a Minerva's chariot in the Habsburg imperial collections. It was purchased by Gian Giacomo Poldi Pezzoli before 1874. In 2015 the mechanism was restored and filmed in action.



Pendant watch. France? 1630. Gold, silver, enamel, 37 x 32 x 15 mm. Inv. 5898. Donation from the Luigi Delle Piane collection, 2017. This elegant pendant bides a watch. The case was

This elegant pendant hides a watch. The case was certainly made by a very skilled goldsmith. It is shaped as a *boteh*, a motif used in oriental textiles and rugs. The hinged front and back covers are engraved with a foliate motif with flying birds. Very unusual is the technique of the gold ground standing out on a transparent and translucent emerald green enamel. The silver dial is engraved with flowers, leaves and a snail at the bottom. The hour circle has Roman numerals from I to XII, while the lower central disk is decorated with flowers and has an elegant gold hand. The balance wheel cock and the saddle over the barrel are carved with floral motifs. This watch was probably produced in 1630s France, where the new enamel technique reached the highest quality.

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Table clock. Southern Germany, c. 1575. Gilt brass. $250 \times 132 \times 132$ mm. Inv. 3391. Donation Bruno Falck 1973. This clock has a rotating globe representing the moon placed inside a glass covering, with the hemispheres, half painted blue, showing the lunar phases. The four faces of this clock are engraved with branches and floral motifs amidst cherubs and other figures. The finest one shows Atlas pointing to the celestial sphere supported by Hercules taken from a series of engravings dated 1550 by Heinrich Aldegrever (1502–1561), an engraver and goldsmith who collaborated with Dürer.

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Pedestal Monstrance Clock. Andreas Rabe, Hamburg, Germany, 1638. Silver, gilt silver, rock crystal. 370 x 130 x 110 mm. Functions: hours, quarter hours, days of the week, days of the month, mon phases, hour chimes Inv. 3417 Donation Bruno Falck 1973.



Stationary and pendant neck timepiece with separate pedestal. Christophorus Schissler, Augsburg, Germany, 1562. Gilt brass and silver filigree. Ø 64 mm. Sundial: 'CS'. Inv. 3405. Donation Bruno Falck 1973.

It is equipped with a ring to be suspended from a chain as a large pendant. Alternatively, a grooved ring resting on three lion-shaped feet ensures a stable basis. On the cover, which is perforated to allow the time to be read, is a sundial compass compendium bearing the date 1562 and the initials of Christoph Schissler (c. 1531–1608), a famous manufacturer in Augsburg of sundials and scientific instruments.

On the following page: Altar clock with carillon. Wood, brass, copper, gilt bronze. 730 x 465 x 290 mm. Inv. 3430. Donation Bruno Falck 1973 This splendid example of Baroque Italian clockmaking is called an altar clock because it incorporates the architectural forms of church altars, with lots of frames with columns, tympanum, and a painted central 'altarpiece'. It displays the hours in a semicircle, the minutes are indicated along a large oval course by an engraved and gilded hand with an ingenious device that appropriately lengthens and shortens it. The clock is signed by Giovanni Pietro Callin, a German-born master living in Genoa and documented in the city in the last guarter of the seventeenth century. The perforated base contains a blue carillon (music box) that plays four melodies.

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Perpetuelle watch (self winding) with repetition of hours and quarters. Abraham-Louis Breguet, Paris, 1797. Gold. Ø 52 mm. Movement signed 'N.34 Inventé par Breguet à Paris', dial signed 'Breguet et Fils'. Mark on the case: 34. Inv. 6004. Donation from the Luigi Delle Piane collection, 2017.



Watch by David Bouquet, London, c. 1650. Enamelled gold, silver. Ø 64 mm. Donation Bruno Falck 1973.

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Pocket chronometer Ø 64 mm, mounted in gimbals, by Abraham-Louis Breguet, Paris, 1806-1815. Inv. 3565-3566. Inscribed 'Breguet N. 2180'. Donated by the Academy of Science at Turin in 1975.

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Two views of the redesigned Clock Room.