

Book Review

Comtoise Uhren [Comtoise Clocks]

By Siegfried Bergmann, Photography by Felix Somieski

Published 2005 by LaPendule GmbH, D-52223 Stolberg, Germany (www.la-pendule.de); hardbound, dustjacket, 480 pages, over 700 illustrations virtually all in color; ISBN none. 150 Euros.

Comtoise clocks, often also referred to as Morbier and sometimes as Morez clocks, must be one of the clock types produced in the highest volumes anywhere. These unplated, iron posted/brass wheeled, weight driven, 8-day pendulum clocks were made for a period of about 230 years in the Franche Comté region of the French Jura (hence the name), which includes the towns of Morez and Morbier. During the peak production years (1860-1880), probably over 80'000 clocks were made each year; overall, several million were manufactured. Comtoises have an unusually sturdy movement and a significant number of these clocks survive to the present. While ubiquitous in France, they are frequently found throughout continental Europe, less so in the UK or in the USA.

Given these huge numbers, there is a surprisingly small number of books dedicated specifically to this type of clock: The classic text on the subject was published in French in 1930 by Jean Moreau, and updated in 1976 by Francis Maitzner (La Comtoise – La Morbier – La Morez). It was translated into English by Larry Seymour, and published in the USA in the late 1980s as “Comtoise Clocks” (no stated publisher or publishing date). To date the Seymour translation is the only major work on the subject ever published in English. (There is also a smaller book by Steve Nemrava, published privately by the author in Oregon 1975). The only other major French book dedicated to this subject is Alain Claudine’s “La Grande Horloge” (in French, Editions de l’Amateur, Paris, 1992, ISBN 285917 136 3) which deals with these timepieces primarily as pieces of furniture.

The other leading Comtoise scholar was Gustav Schmitt in Germany. The second edition of his “Die Comtoise-Uhr” (in German, Villingen, 1983, ISBN 3 920662 05 9) has long been the global gold standard for scholarship on the Comtoise, but it is over 20 years old. Bergmann’s new book pays homage to Schmitt by adopting his classification scheme and terminology. Much has happened and much has been discovered in the meantime. There have been two major exhibits on the subject in Europe recently: One at the MUMM Museum in Oberhofen (Switzerland) in 2003 (with a catalog in video format), and one at the NGZKM in Schoonhoven (Netherlands) in 2004 (which also resulted in a delightful little catalog in Dutch, “Met Franse Slag”, 35 pages).

The time was ripe for a major new overview book on the subject of Comtoise Clocks, and the German collector and expert Siegfried Bergmann has now filled the void. Although not cheap, the new book, written in German is worth its price, even for a non-German speaker.

The book is certainly massive and comprehensive. The production quality is very high, well bound, heavy paper, highest quality printing, and some nice details seldom found nowadays, like multiple bookmark ribbons bound in. The first impression is dominated by the large number of excellent color photographs. The vast majority of them were obviously made specifically for this publication, and they were not collected haphazardly

over time. Therefore they are in uniform style, of studio quality, very well lighted and with excellent depth of field. No effort was spared to visually document the pieces in a comprehensive manner. Many of the clocks shown are illustrated five or six times (case/dial; movement front, back, strike side, time side, plus sometimes a close-up of an interesting feature). The author is obviously a passionate collector of this type of clock, and an infinite variety of them seem to have passed through his hands.

The book starts with a chronological overview of the history of the Comtoise (60 pages), followed by 40 pages on the various dials, and 35 pages on the various pendulums. The core of this book clearly is the approx. 150 pages devoted to the decorative dial surrounds that characterize a Comtoise. Separate chapters deal with the early sawed fretwork, the cast brass surrounds of the middle period, and the later stamped brass style. Significant space is allocated to the iconographic and political interpretation of the motives used, such as the cock, the sun, the eagle, the jacobine hat, the shield of the house of Bourbon etc. , which sometimes allow dating a clock within a time span of a few years.

Separate sections deal with the movement (30 pages) and with accessories (hands, bells, weights, keys). Some 90 pages are devoted to variations (such as month-going, miniature or maxi-sized clocks) or oddities (such as musical and automaton clocks, calendar dials, center seconds, even a Comtoise with a cuckoo). Three short essays on specialized related subjects (1. Production cost savings as the driving element of new designs; 2. The competition between the clockmakers of Franche Comté and the Black Forest; 3. The overseas export market, including Turkish numeral clocks) conclude the book. Relatively meager indices and a short bibliography are also included.

In spite of its glorious pictures, this is not a pretty coffee table book, but a must-have reference work for anyone seriously interested in classifying, identifying or dating Comtoise clocks. Obviously, the collector who does not read any German is quite handicapped, but given the pictorial focus of the book will still gain much knowledge and insight from this publication. An English language edition would sure be nice to have, but is probably unrealistic given the economics of horological publishing. For this reviewer's taste the sections dealing with the history of clockmaking in the Franche Comté region are rather sparse. The subject of the societal impact of the availability of reasonably priced, robust clocks in France of the 19th century also begs for more in depth coverage. Mostly missing from this book is any discussion of the kind of cases these clocks were usually housed in (they were typically sold as clockworks only, with the purchasers procuring their own long-case style enclosure from a local cabinetmaker). In spite of these minor shortcomings, the sheer number and variety of examples presented by Bergmann, together with the thoroughness and quality, make "Comtoise-Uhren" a unique and very valuable addition to the world's horological literature.

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