

The British Museum Clocks

By David Thompson

Published 2004 by the British Museum Press, London; hardback, 174 pages, ISBN 0-7141-2812-0, available at British Museum web site (www.britishmuseum.co.uk), product 28120) for approx. \$35 or borrow from the Library & Research Center at the National Watch & Clock Museum.

The British Museum in London is unquestionably one of the truly great and broad-based depositories of human culture in the world. But unlike most others players in this league it also houses an outstanding and relatively broad collection of timekeepers. This is not only a reflection on the comparatively high esteem in which antiquarian horology has traditionally been held in English society, but also the result of the generosity of a hand-full of early clock collectors, such as Sir A.W. Franks (who was also a curator at the British Museum in the mid 19th century), Octavius Morgan, Sir C. Fellows, and Courtenay A. Ilbert, one of the greatest horological collectors in the early 20th century. These private collections formed the core of what has grown to be one of the largest arrays of significant horological artifacts held by a general purpose museum anywhere (more than 1000 clocks and over 4000 watches).

Unfortunately, only a tiny portion of these treasures is part of the permanent exhibit in the galleries of the museum, but unlike at most other institutions there is a semi-public access option: The "Horological Students Room" in the basement of the museum not only houses the rest of the collection, but is open to any horological scholar by appointment. This is also where one usually finds our author, David Thompson, the Curator of Horology of the British Museum.

This new book by Thompson is part of a laudable effort by the museum to make its timekeeper collection more accessible. It is overdue, because the last clock publication by the museum (Hugh Tait, *Clocks & Watches in the British Museum*, 1983) is not only over 20 years old, but is a slim volume of 72 pages. The new book is more substantial, both in format and in content. Nevertheless, it was conceived as a title for the general public rather than for the horological specialist. A decision was reached to devote at least two pages to each clock chosen, including one full-page color photograph, and at least two smaller pictures. This resulted in a book describing 67 different clocks on 174 pages, which means that Thompson faced the challenge of selecting the most representative 6% from the museum's collection. The majority of the choices were obvious, including the signature pieces of the museum, such as their Carillon Clock by Habrecht (Strasbourg, 1589) or their nef (i.e. an automaton ship model) by Schlottheim (Augsburg 1585). 20 examples were chosen from the pre-pendulum era (i.e. before 1653). Another 16 clocks represent the earliest pendulum clocks and the golden age of British clockmaking in the few decades before and after 1700, with such well known makers as Knibb, Fromanteel, East, Thompion, and Quare. Some 20 pieces represent the 18th century, including such masters as Graham, Mudge, Earnshaw and Arnold, followed by a few Breguets early in the 19th century. All of these clocks are of a kind even a serious collector is unlikely to see anywhere except in museums. In the opinion of this reviewer, Thompson has chosen wisely: these clocks are representative of their type, are important, and are highly interesting timepieces. Arranged in roughly chronological order, they can be considered a fairly representative history of mechanical timekeeping from about 1450 to about 1810.

However, in my opinion, the last 25 pages of the book are much more problematic. Space constraints forced the author to cover the bulk of the 19th century and all of the 20th century with a mere dozen examples, an inherently impossible task. During these 100plus years the variety of clocks produced around the world exploded with uncountable styles and huge quality differences. The collection of the British Museum is clearly not as rich in this period as in the earlier eras, but enough good examples would have been at hand if the publishers had wanted a book of about 200 pages. This was not to be, and the last section of the book contains 15 disjointed, seemingly arbitrary examples of clockmaking during the last 200 years around the world. There are e.g. two Japanese clocks, one cuckoo clock and two American clocks (an 1880 Ogee by Jerome and a 1930 Plato clock). In my opinion these do not provide enough points of reference to tell any story.

The book is well organized, and the quality of the photography (by Saul Peckman) is very good. In most cases the full-page picture shows the complete clock, with smaller pictures showing details of movement, dial or case. Thompson's text balances factual accuracy and scholarly, technical details with more anecdotal information on the maker or his era, a necessity for making the book appealing to any serious reader, even if s/he is not a horological specialist.

This is *not* primarily a scholarly publication, nor a comprehensive catalog of the horological holdings of the British Museum. While some of the pieces have been described or shown in several other anthologies, I would estimate that the majority of the 67 clocks described have not appeared recently in print. Those horologists who have been to the British Museum may well want to buy this book to refresh their memories, while -for the others- its reasonable price makes the book much cheaper than a trip to London, which is the only alternative to see these wonderful timepieces.

Review by Fortunat Mueller-Maerki, Sussex NJ
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