

**INTERNATIONAL UNION OF THE HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE  
SCIENTIFIC INSTRUMENT COMMISSION**

Minutes of the 21st Plenary Session, held at the National Hellenic Research Foundation in Athens on 12 September 2002

In the Chair            Jim Bennett  
Present                 some 50 Corresponding Members

**1. Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Olov Amelin, William Andrewes, Marco Bresadola, Rand Evans, Dana Freiburger, Andy Marlborough, Alessandro Paoletti and Klaus Staubermann.

**2. Minutes of the last meeting**

The Minutes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session held in Stockholm on 19 October 2001 had been circulated in Newsletter no. 23 and were accepted.

**3. Report of Activities**

Newsletter no. 23 and the Eighteenth Bibliography of books, pamphlets, catalogues and articles on or connected with historical scientific instruments were published in Spring 2002, with the generous support of the Museum Boerhaave, Leiden. These were the last such documents to be printed and distributed in the traditional fashion. Both documents were added to the SIC Website, which was regularly updated through the efforts of Mr Dana Freiburger.

'Do collections matter to instrument studies?' Under this title, a joint meeting was held by the British Society for the History of Science and the Scientific Instrument Commission at the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford, on 29 and 30 June 2002. Jim Bennett reported that the meeting was a success, being attended by more than 60 participants, which even caused some capacity problems for his museum.

**4. Financial matters**

The Treasurer reported that the Commission had received three grants from the IUHPS: \$ 600 for the Website and/or Newsletter, \$ 300 for running costs and \$ 1,000 for the Athens symposium; the latter was transferred to the Local Organizing Committee. She recorded expenses for secretarial costs and for the distribution of the Proceedings of the 18th symposium, and stated that the Commission presently has a balance of 1600 Euros.

**5. Publications**

Apart from the Bibliography and Newsletter (see under 3), three SIC-related publications appeared.

TURNER, Anthony, ed., *The archives of scholars, collectors and dealers: their place in the study of the history of scientific instruments. Papers from the XIXth Symposium of the Scientific Instrument Commission. Nuncius. Annali di Storia della Scienza XVI* (2001), 673-765. This is the first SIC-section in *Nuncius*. While stock lasts, copies can be ordered from the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford @ 7.50 Euro or £5 incl. postage.

DORIKENS, Maurice, ed., *Scientific Instruments and Museums. Proceedings of the XXth International Congress of History of Science (Liège, 20-26 July 1997), Volume XVI* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2002). 338 pages. ISBN 2-503-51369-7. Twenty-seven contributions, divided over three parts: The History of Gnomonics (7 papers), National Inventories of Historical Scientific Instruments (8 papers), and Miscellaneous (11 papers). This volume is on sale from the publishers @ 50 Euro.

The Proceedings of the 18th Scientific Instrument Symposium, held in Moscow in September 1999, came off the press in 2002. The Chairman congratulated Vasily Borisov for this achievement. While stock lasts, copies can be bought from the Museum of the History of Science, Oxford @ 7.50 Euro or £5 incl. postage.

As reported in the last plenary session, the second SIC-section in *Nuncius* 2002 vol. 2, will contain a number of papers read at the workshop 'Making of the Spectroscope', held in Munich, September 2001, under the auspices of the Commission. Klaus Staubermann and Charlotte Bigg act as guest editors. It seems likely that the third SIC-section, to appear in *Nuncius* 2003 vol. 2, will contain further papers from that workshop.

## **6. Future activities**

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Symposium will be held in 2003 in Newport News, Virginia, USA, from Tuesday 30 September to Saturday 4 October 2003. A First Circular was available at the desk, and two members of the Local Organizing Committee, John McKnight and Steven Turner, added explanations on the locality, travel arrangements and thematic sessions proposed or considered so far:

- (1) 'Instruments in Iconography', organized by Willem Mörzer Bruyns
- (2) 'Conservation problems with materials on modern instruments', organized by Randall Brooks. Christina Halldén gave some further details and ideas at the meeting.
- (3) 'Technology Transfer' (between Europe and the USA) is being considered as a topic of a third session

The 23th Symposium will be held from Monday 6 to Saturday 11 September 2004 in Dresden, Germany. Peter Plassmeyer, Director of the Staatliche Mathematisch-Physikalischer Salon, announced that details will be given in due course on the website of his museum (<http://www.staatl-kunstsammlungen-dresden.de/deutsch/musmps.htm>).

The 24th Symposium will be held as part of the IUHPS conference in Beijing, August 2005

Possible locations mentioned for future symposiums were Algiers, Poland (suggested by Ewa Wyka) or Harvard (suggested by Sara Schechner), but none was discussed or explored in any detail.

Stephen Johnston reported that the Transit of Venus working party, formed after last year's symposium, intends to create a data-base driven website, to which individuals and institutions can submit materials. He had persuaded the Academic Computing Development Team of Oxford University to develop the website, which represents a major commitment of resource to the project. The first phase would begin early 2003, the official launch would be Autumn 2003. He invited expressions of interest, and stated that details will follow on the rete maillist.

## **7. Composition of the Commission**

As announced in the last plenary session, Jim Bennett will step down as SIC President. He asked his probable successor, Vice-President Paolo Brenni, to leave the meeting, and explained the situation. The formal appointment of Commission Presidents is done by the General Assembly or the Executive Committee of the IUHPS/DHS, and the Commission can only propose a successor. He reported that Paolo Brenni is prepared to take over, and that his soundings of the instrument community suggest that there is ample support for Paolo's candidature. Unless voices would be raised against this during the present meeting, he would in his letter of resignation to the General Secretary suggest that Paolo be appointed. He told the meeting that at the same time Peter de Clercq will step down as Secretary (but offers to continue preparing the SIC bibliographies), and that Sara Schechner has agreed to take his place. Marian Fournier will continue to act as Treasurer.

Charles Mollan suggested a time limit on the office of President, possibly 5 or perhaps even 3 years. Suzanne Debarbat suggested a period of 4 years, to coincide with the IUHPS congresses. Jan Tapdrup advocated flexibility, as much depends on the availability of suitable candidates. Sara Schechner suggested that such details should be put aside for consideration at a later date because they were the substance of By-Laws for SIC, and without a formally constituted membership it was premature to debate these matters.

Efthymios Nicolaidis, the IUHPS Treasurer, told the meeting that the Union is considering to introduce formal membership of Commissions (although not necessarily implying payment of membership fees), which would make voting possible. He indicated that the General Assembly would be open to suggestions from Commissions on such constitutional matters as now under discussion.

After Charles Mollan and Gloria Clifton had expressed explicit support and praise for Paolo Brenni, the Vice-President was invited to rejoin the meeting.

## **8. On-line Register of Scientific Instruments**

Jim Bennett reminded the meeting of the existence and continued success of this self-help, self-run facility, and repeated his earlier invitations for contributions from both small and large institutions.

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## **9. News from members (developments, plans, problems)**

Steven Turner reported that the Smithsonian Institution has granted \$ 30.000 to scan and place on the web instrument trade literature of the period 1800-1914; twenty-six catalogues will go on-line. With Paolo Brenni and Ronald Wittje, he wants to create a tri-lingual thesaurus of instrument terms, based on Max Kohl catalogues, and he invited comments. Paolo Brenni added that it should be possible to report further on this project in the next symposium. He announced that, to expand the thesaurus, they may approach curators or other experts for special terminology, for example nautical instruments. Ronald Wittje suggested that interlinks be made to other on-line instrument catalogues, such as the 'virtual laboratory of experimental psychology', placed on the web by the Max Planck Institute.

Jan Tapdrup reported on an initiative of the Danish National Conservation Department and the Danish National University to start a conservation project to address the problem of composite objects, in which materials interact or require different storage facilities, e.g. plastic and metal. Scientific instruments could figure prominently in this project. He is looking for funding for a pre-conference, hopefully to be held in Spring 2003, which would be followed by a bid for money in 2004.

Julian Holland drew attention to a symposium "Sir Thomas Brisbane and the Sciences: A reappraisal", to be held in Sydney on Saturday 7 June 2003. This is a few weeks before the International Astronomical Union Congress being held in Sydney. Sir T. Brisbane established Par(r)amatta Observatory in 1822. This petered out in the 1840s. The meeting is being held by the Australian Science History Club and it is proposed to publish the papers together with a detailed catalogue of the Parramatta Observatory instruments, many of which survive. Julian said that participants to these events might want to take the opportunity to visit his Macleay Museum in Sydney.

## **10. Any other business**

Charles Mollan told the meeting that Gloria Clifton, whose *Directory of British Scientific Instrument Makers 1550-1851* (London, 1995) is such a valued tool of reference, has a large amount of similar data on British makers for the period 1850-1914. She would be happy to prepare a follow-up publication, provided funds can be found to arrange for a sabbatical for her from the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich. The meeting agreed that the production of this volume would be most welcome and hoped that it may prove possible to find the required funds.

David Pantalony drew attention to an international symposium 'Mundi Subterranei. Scientific Instrument Collections in the University', to be held at Dartmouth College, USA, 24-27 June 2004. A first circular was available at the desk, for updates see [www.dartmouth.edu/~mundi](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~mundi).

The local organizers presented the following draft resolution:

*To whom it may concern*

*The Scientific Instrument Commission supports the efforts that have been made for the establishment of the Museum of Science and Technology of the University of Athens.*

*The Scientific Instrument Commission considers that the preservation of the "Palαιο Chemio" building and its installations, the rescue of the apparatus and the completion of the Museum of Science and Technology are of great importance.*

*For the above reasons the Scientific Instrument Commission invites every person concerned and all people interested in the goals of the Museum of Science and Technology to contribute to this effort.*

Before the plenary session, a number of delegates had visited what is wishfully called the Museum of Science and Technology in the Old Chemistry Laboratory in Athens, guided by Dr. Chrysoleon Symeonidis. The building dates from the late 19th century and contains a huge lecture theatre and much disused apparatus. Both building and collection are in severe disrepair and disarray and not open to the general public. On their impressions, the resolution was carried, and the Secretary would send a number of copies of this resolution to the organizers, to be directed as they see fit.

Paolo Brenni told the meeting about the recent earthquake that had hit Palermo. During the symposium, he had telephoned with the curator of the Observatory Museum in the old Palazzo di Normanni, which houses among others the famous Ramsden circle. He was told that the museum was closed after the earthquake, but that the instruments suffered no damage.

The meeting was aware that the recent floods in Eastern and Central Europe had hit Dresden and Prague. Peter Plassmeyer confirmed that the Mathematisch-Physikalischer Salon was badly affected, but that the collection had been brought into safety. As for Prague, Petr Hadrava could give no definite information on the effects on the scientific heritage in that city. Severe losses were reported for manuscripts and books, for instruments no clear information was as yet available.

The Chairman closed the meeting at 20 hr 40. The President elect, Paolo Brenni, then reminded the meeting of the efforts and successes of the Commission during the period 1997-2002 in which Jim Bennett was President and Peter de Clercq Secretary. He invited the meeting to give a standing ovation for the two retiring officers.