

## MINUTES OF THE 20<sup>th</sup> PLENARY SESSION OF THE SCIENTIFIC INSTRUMENT COMMISSION

Held at the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, Stockholm, on 19 October 2001

In the Chair            Jim Bennett  
Present                 some 50 Corresponding Members

### 1. Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Robert Anderson, Vassily Borisov, Steven de Clercq, Dana Freiburger, Jean-François Gauvin, Julian Holland and Madge Webster. Silke Ackermann and Eftymios Nicolaïdis, who did attend the Symposium, had to leave before the plenary session.

### 2. Minutes of the last meeting

The Minutes of the 19<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session, held in Oxford on 7 September 2000, had been circulated in Newsletter no. 22 and were accepted.

### 3. Report of Activities

Newsletter no. 22 and the Seventeenth Bibliography of books, pamphlets, catalogues and articles on or connected with historical scientific instruments were published and distributed in May 2001, with the generous support of the Museum Boerhaave, Leiden. Both documents were added to the SIC Website, which was regularly updated through the efforts of Dana Freiburger.

It was agreed with Professor Paolo Galluzzi, director of the Istituto e Museo di Storia della Scienza in Florence, that the Commission will have a distinct and identifiable section within an annual issue of *Nuncius*. The first SIC section will appear in the second issue of 2001. Guest edited by Anthony Turner, it will contain papers read at the 19th Scientific Instrument Symposium in the session *Archives of Instrument Dealers and Collectors*.

Anthony Turner stated that information would be added on the papers of the instrument historian Maximilian Bobinger (1895-1973), which were deposited at the city archives of Augsburg and to which attention had been drawn at the symposium's poster session by Inge Keil.

The 20th IUHPS Conference was held in Mexico from 8 to 14 July 2001. It had proved impossible to organize a Commission session during the Conference. The Commission was represented by Dana Freiburger, and the chairman read parts of his report. Dana voted for Beijing (versus Budapest) as location for the 21st IUHPS Conference to be held in August 2005; the vote was 37 to 29 (1 abstention) for Beijing. He also voted for the acceptance of a new commission: Commission on the History of Meteorology. The chairman advocated that the Commission would have its annual symposium in 2005 as part of the IUHPS conference, and the meeting agreed that SIC should go to Beijing. Ronald Wittje, who had also attended the Conference, added his comments and concurred.

A workshop 'Making of the Spectroscope' was held in Munich, September 2001, under the auspices of the Commission. The chairman had been among the 25 participants and reported that it had been well-focused and successful. He expressed gratitude to the Deutsches Museum for its hospitality, to the Hans R. Jenemann Foundation for financial support, and to the organisers Charlotte Bigg and Klaus Staubermann. It was felt that the papers read at the workshop would make a good SIC section in *Nuncius* in 2002, and Klaus Staubermann confirmed that he and Charlotte Bigg would be guest editors.

### 4. Financial matters

The treasurer reported on the health of the Commission's finances, with the balance currently 1,133 Euros. Payments were still to be made for the distribution of the Newsletter and Bibliography. On the other hand, a grant from the IUHPS of as yet unspecified size was forthcoming.

## 5. Publications

The proceedings of the 16<sup>th</sup> Scientific Instrument Symposium, held in Liège in July 1997, were to appear before the IUHPS Conference in Mexico, but this has not been achieved. [Note: After the meeting, the secretary received notification that the volume will appear in December 2001].

The proceedings of the 18th Scientific Instrument Symposium, held in Moscow in September 1999, have not yet been published because of lack of funding. It was agreed that the secretary would ask the editor, Vassily Borisov, what the prospects are. Should publication in the foreseeable future seem improbable, contributors could be given the option to publish elsewhere.

### Bibliography and Newsletter

In previous plenary sessions, the Commission announced that at some point it would stop printing and distributing these documents and restrict itself to offering them on the SIC website. Most members will by now have routine access to the internet, and others can arrange to gain access and make print-outs. This will reduce the financial and administrative burden for the Commission, and unlike the printed version, one can search the accumulated bibliographies electronically. Following discussion, it was agreed that the 18th Bibliography and the 23rd Newsletter, due in Spring 2002, will be the last to be printed and distributed to the members on the address list.

## 6. Future activities

The 21<sup>st</sup> Symposium will be held from Monday 9 to Saturday 14 September 2002 at the National Hellenic Research Foundation in Athens. This will include an optional excursion to Syros island from Friday afternoon to Saturday evening. On behalf of the local organizers, Eftymios Nicolaïdis had brought printed announcements. The secretary would supply him with the address list to send out first circulars.

It had been agreed that the 22<sup>nd</sup> Symposium would be held in 2003 at the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia, USA. On behalf of the local organizers, Willem Mörzer Bruyns announced that the dates will be Tuesday 23 to Saturday 27 September [but see below]. This will include excursions/sessions on Friday at Colonial Williamsburg, and on Saturday at the Smithsonian / National Museum of American History in Washington. At the latter institution, Steven Turner agreed to act as local organizer.

A first circular will be handed out at the Athens symposium. Willem Mörzer Bruyns announced that there would be no fixed symposium themes, but some extra attention to nautical instruments is to be expected. He announced that together with Inga Elmqvist he would organize a session on the iconography of instruments.

Marvin Bolt reminded the meeting that these dates are inconvenient for US academics, but after discussion it was felt that there is no way of avoiding this inconvenience.

[Note: After the meeting, it was brought to the Commission's attention that in 2003, Rosh Hashanah starts at sundown on Friday Sept. 26 and ends at sundown on Sunday Sept. 28. To avoid a conflict of interests for some of us, it has been decided to postpone the meeting one week. The new dates for the Symposium are Tuesday 30 September to Saturday 4 October 2003].

Following the earlier proposal to have the 23th Symposium in September 2004 in Dresden, Germany, Peter Plassmeyer, Director of the Mathematisch-Physikalischer Salon, sketched the possible visits in and outside Dresden. He announced that a formal invitation was now on its way to the Commission, which the meeting agreed to accept.

As in the previous plenary meeting, Charles Mollan suggested to include a week-end, which would make it easier for some to participate; Anthony Turner concurred.

[Returning from Stockholm, the Commission found the invitation from Dr Martin Roth, Generaldirektor Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, and Dr Plassmeyer. The secretary has written to thank and confirm.]

As discussed under item 3, the 24th Symposium will in principle be held as part of the 21st IUHPS Conference at Beijing in August 2005.

An invitation was received from the Algiers Observatory, who are willing to organize a symposium. Anthony Turner, who with Françoise Le Guet Tully is involved in studying and cataloguing astronomical observatories, confirmed that Algiers is very interested to host a meeting. This could either be a regular symposium, which would be in 2006 at the earliest, or -- sooner -- a specialist meeting under SIC auspices, which could focus on the Mediterranean area.. The chairman agreed that both options can be discussed with the Director of the Algiers Observatory.

The chairman observed that specialist meetings under SIC-auspices appear a successful formula, witness the well-focussed workshops held in Florence on restoration and in Munich on spectroscopes. He announced that as president of the British Society for the History of Science he has suggested to that Society to have a joint meeting with SIC on (provisional title) 'Do collections matter in instrument studies?'. The meeting could address the dichotomy between keepers and cataloguers of instrument collections on the one hand, and the potentially (but not actually) interested practitioners on the other hand. The meeting supported this initiative and gave the chairman mandate to plan this event, which is likely to take place in London in the first half of 2002, possibly at the Science Museum or the Royal Institution.

Suzanne Débarbat announced that in Paris an exhibition is considered to mark the transit of Venus in June 2004, and wondered whether this could be an occasion for a SIC initiative. The discussion showed that there is no lack of similar initiatives throughout the world, and it was suggested that a possible SIC involvement could be an internet site with a virtual exhibition. A working party, consisting of Sara Schechner, Stephen Johnston and Steven Turner as members, was formed to take this proposal further and to report to the Commission. Klaus Staubermann favoured a specialist meeting on instruments and expeditions, which, it was suggested, might be a session at the Dresden symposium later that year.

Christina Halldén urged the Commission to continue the discussion on conservation issues. It was decided that she and Klaus Staubermann would be in contact with Paolo Brenni to arrange a session on this subject, possibly at the Athens symposium. The papers could be the substance of a forthcoming SIC section in *Nuncius*. Mara Miniati suggested that it could even be a special issue in the series *Bibliotheca di Nuncius*.

## **7. Online Register of Scientific Instruments**

The symposium folder contained information on this international database, which is developed and supported by the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford with SIC and can be visited at <http://www.isin.org>

The register currently contains records of over 6,000 objects from 15 institutions. Institutions with collections of any type or size are welcome to join the Online Register and add their instruments to the database. Enquiries are also welcome from private collectors.

Willem Mörzer Bruyns drew attention to thesaurus problems; for example, cross staff may be written in three different ways. The chairman stressed the need to 'browse creatively': the museum does not have the resources to police the register. It is up to the contributors themselves to weed out inconsistencies etcetera as a continuous programme of improvement.

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

Antony Turner drew attention to a small exhibition from 20 November 2001 to February 2002 at the Musée des Arts et Métiers in Paris, "Time in the temples of ancient Egypt", centered upon a recently acquired statuette, formerly in the Time Museum, Rockford.

Sara Schechner told the meeting that at Harvard a new building will be erected for the collection of scientific instruments, intended to open late in 2003. Potential collection researchers were advised to contact her soon, as access to the collection will be very restricted during building works.

Suzanne Débarbat announced that in October 2002 an exhibition on Foucault will open at the Paris Observatory, accompanied by a book by William Tobin in French and English.

The chairman informed the meeting that the Carl Zeiss Jena Foundation has reduced its support for the Optisches Museum at Jena, and that our member Helga Beez was made redundant. On behalf of the Commission, he has written to the various authorities and to the regional press to express the concern of the scientific instrument community over these events. He did not receive any replies.

#### **9. Any other business**

The chairman announced that he will stand down as President at the next plenary session at Athens in September 2002. This would take effect from 1 January 2003, by which time he will have served for five years. He felt that the Commission is now robust enough to have a frequent turn-over of Officers. This announcement led to some discussion of the Commission's constitution, and several members voiced interest in broadening involvement with work of the officers. The chairman undertook to discover what arrangements are made in other commissions and report back.