

The End of SIC?

Reports of SIC's death have been greatly exaggerated (to butcher Mark Twain's famous phrase). At least, this is the conclusion that a lively panel discussion on 'the End of SIC' reached at the Museum Boerhaave on 4 September during the Commission's 37th symposium, *Instruments and the 'Empire of Man over Things'*. In response to the Commission's call for analyses of the success of SIC at putting material heritage on the intellectual map, three short 'pitches' (10 minutes each) probed the character and outputs of scientific instrument histories in recent years.

Klaus Staubermann (ICOM Germany) laid out the Commission's part in investigating as well as the *material culture* of science the broader concept of *maker* culture – looking not only at the object but also at the skills and craft that have gone into it. SIC participants have led the way in this respect and continue to do so. He advocates a history of both material and immaterial knowledge, treating the histories of science and technology as living, dynamic disciplines in which instrument study could and should play a key role.

The kinds of work Klaus championed stemmed from the perceived expansion of the focus of history of science from intellectual narratives to the pragmatic elements of science and its tools. My own pitch drew on a survey carried out in collaboration with Laura Volkmer (National Museums Scotland / University of Edinburgh) that tested whether this purported 'material turn' in history of science had led to a significant increase in the appearance of material culture analyses in peer-reviewed publications. If this has become widespread, then perhaps it is indeed time for SIC to pack its bags and become absorbed into more general history of science?

Concentrating on the highest-impact Anglophone journal in the history of science, *Isis*, we found, however, that a small minority of its authors have been writing about scientific instruments. And yet clearly historians of scientific instruments have been active and prolific (judging by this and 36 previous symposia). Ali Boyle (Science Museum, London) in her pitch showed where this sort of work *is* being published, by sampling the published outputs of winners of the annual Paul Bunge prize awarded by Gesellschaft Deutscher Chemiker (not just their prize-winning contributions but all their traceable oeuvres). She found that instrument scholarship is distributed widely across different journals and presses.

After lively discussion the room agreed that SIC was not yet spent; far from it, the Commission plays an important role in generating and communicating knowledge about the material culture of science. The presence of early-career professionals is most welcome as the Commission reinvents itself and remains at the forefront of scholarship with new people, new objects, new questions. But in order to remain cutting edge and valuable, participants need to disseminate the result of their work widely, in various fora and media, in print and online. This work should remain close to other work in the history of technology as well as the history of science.

The Commission provides a unique meeting point and publication venue for curators, university-based historians, collectors and others. Long live SIC, we concluded.

Sam Alberti (thanks to Ali Boyle, Alison Morrison-Low, Klaus Staubermann and Laura Volkmer)