



Title: Exotic Curiosities: Horology in China under the Qianlong Emperor (r. 1736-95)

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In 1601, the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) presented two chiming clocks to the Ming-dynasty emperor. Unlike anything the Chinese had seen, these “self-sounding bells,” so named for their ability to chime without anyone touching them, would become among the most highly sought-after objects in the imperial world of things. In the mid-seventeenth century, workshops were established within the

grounds of the palace to repair imported pieces and manufacture new items for imperial consumption. By the end of the eighteenth century, the imperial collection of clocks and watches numbered in the thousands.

This lecture will focus on clockmaking in China during the reign the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-95). Regarded as a golden age of Chinese horology, this period saw tremendous development marked by the growth of a native industry, the expansion of trade in clocks and watches with Europe, and technological advances that allowed for increasingly complex mechanisms and brilliant decorative flourishes. As an enthusiastic collector who used luxury items to underscore his status and power, the Qianlong emperor saw elaborate clockwork as an important part of this strategy. Their exoticism, cost, and exclusivity were all part of their appeal. Demand rapidly increased, fueled not only by the emperor’s insatiable appetite for clockwork and but also by scholar-officials and an emerging wealthy merchant class who used less costly pieces to emulate the material world of the Chinese ruler in their own homes. In response, manufacturing centers developed in the southern Chinese cities of Suzhou and Guanzhou, bringing an important technology to other areas of the empire. The Qianlong emperor had more than a passing influence on Chinese horology in the eighteenth century: it may be said that the desires and tastes of one man drove an entire industry and created clockwork’s golden age in China.

Catherine Pagani received her Ph.D. from the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto. She recently retired as professor of Asian art history at the University of Alabama, where she also served as chair of the Department of Art and Art History and as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs in the university’s Graduate School. Dr. Pagani has published and lectured widely on the arts of Asia, and her research examines the interactions in science, technology and the arts between Europe and East Asia from the late sixteenth through the early twentieth centuries. Her book, “Eastern Magnificence and European Ingenuity”: Clocks of Late Imperial China, is the result of research conducted at the Palace Museum, Beijing, where she not only was granted privileged access to the large collection of eighteenth-century elaborate clockwork, but also allowed to work with unpublished palace manuscripts.