

The Harvard Crimson

Museum Exhibit Dials In on Time

By Jessica A. Barzilay, CRIMSON STAFF WRITER March 7, 2013



These sundials are just a few of the timepieces displayed in Time and Time Again, a new exhibit curated by the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments. The show is meant to explore both scientific and cultural perception of time in human society.

The resounding punch of the time card machine punctuates the silence as each spectator clocks in to the exhibit. Directly ahead, a model of a chicken sits between a suffragette's calendar and an authentic gramophone. Bronzed sundials adorn the room's back display cases.

These objects are part of an ambitious interdisciplinary exploration of one of history's most ubiquitous themes: time.

The installment, “Time and Time Again,” is a collaboration between the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, the History of Science Department, and the Harvard Museums of Science and Culture. The exhibit features a broad array of time-related objects ranging from primitive Bedouin calendars to Japanese timekeeping devices.

The exhibit is one of the first efforts by the Museums of Science and Culture to establish Harvard’s museums as part of an integrated network.

“By bringing together Harvard’s museums in this one consortium, we could make it so much greater than the sum of its parts,” said Jane Pickering, executive director of Museums of Science and Culture.

Nearly a year ago, Sara J. Schechner ’79, curator of the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments, began brainstorming ways to utilize Harvard’s extensive collection of sundials and pocket-size clocks.

With the help of a team including CHSI committee leader Peter L. Galison ’77 and CHSI director of administration Jean-Francois Gauvin, Schechner amassed a collection from the Museums of Science and Culture and beyond.

“This is a place where we can do experimental, interdisciplinary exhibits,” said Galison, who is also a professor of physics and of history of science. “It’s a way for people to think of tangible objects as openings for bigger intellectual questions.”

The exhibit will feature a series of events and host several science and music classes over the course of its nine-month run in the Science Center’s second-floor gallery. Programming will begin on Saturday with a family festival on stories through time.

“There’s a sort of playfulness to get people to think about the topic of time in ways they might not otherwise,” Schechner said.

The installment also features its own smartphone app, “Time Trails,” intended to help unify the six outposts of the Museums of Science and Culture.

As part of the initiative, a series of labels are scattered throughout the other museums in the consortium.

Museumgoers can then scan the labels with their smartphones to trace the theme of time among Harvard’s various exhibits.

“This is all part of our attempts to explore things in very open-ended ways,” said Galison.

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