

# Harvard exhibit weighs in on history of colonial measurements

Maps, scales and other tools tell of Europeans' attempts to make sense of race, geography and the novel plants and landscapes in the New World.

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By Erin Blakemore

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Weights, measures and classification systems may seem like innocuous ways of taking stock of the world around us. But the tools are anything but objective, a new exhibition suggests.

[Measuring Difference](#), opening Oct. 20 at the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments at Harvard University, looks at the history of measurement during and after European colonization of the New World from the 15th century to the present. It shows how European colonists used measurements to quantify and explain their new discoveries — justifying everything from worker exploitation to eugenics along the way.

The exhibition uses historical artifacts from the museum's collection and a variety of loaning institutions to tell the story of colonial measurements. Maps, scales, surveyors' tools, rulers and specimen jars make up just a few of the objects on display.

All tell a tale of Europeans' attempts to make sense of race, geography and the novel plants and landscapes they discovered on their travels — and hint at ways settlers used those measurements to master the world around them.

The human urge to quantify and compare is well documented in the exhibition, which looks both at scientific tools and complex systems of measurement in a variety of contexts. Ultimately, the exhibit suggests, the biases and beliefs of the person conducting the measurement are as important as the measurements themselves.

“Often, it is measurements that help us explain or grasp the world around us, but measures, contrary to what we believe have not always been standardized, nor are they objective,” Gabriela Soto Laveaga, guest curator of the exhibition and a professor of the history of science at Harvard, says in a news release. “What and how we measure reflects what we value in our society.”