

# TIMEKEEPERS IN HISTORICAL OBSERVATORIES

## Challenges in conservation, restoration and maintenance

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### **To Restore or not to Restore? A Hamlet Question with more than Two Answers**

Astronomical clocks (in a broad sense) and, more generally speaking, scientific instruments pose many questions. Some of these concern the conservation status of the objects preserved in museums, educational institutions and observatories. If perfect preservation (a curatorial mirage) should not require any actions, the presence of a number of “faults” — alterations, corrosion, deformations, fractures, lacks, biological attacks, etcetera — call for interventions.

Beside the “nomenclature” problem — i.e.: what “to restore” means according to either the dictionary or the law, a more practical evaluation should help to decide, by paraphrasing Shakespeare “whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles”, i.e.: to restore, and to what extent.

A restoration action can add or subtract information to and from a scientific instrument. In not so rare bad occurrences, it could produce more damage than inaction. Interventions can be useful from the historical and the educational viewpoint. As mere examples, by making an instrument capable of working again, a restoration may support the so-called “experimental history” or clarify the instrument functioning principles. But the same restoration may delete precious cultural information. For example, the alteration or substitution of original components can destroy a portion of the instrument material history and, to a broader extent, deprive historians of science and technology of relevant data.

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