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Instruments of Insight: Revealing the Tangible Dialogue Between Books and Instruments in Libraries

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While libraries are celebrated as havens of textual knowledge, they often also house a surprising array of instruments—from paper tools like volvelles embedded in books to robust three-dimensional objects such as globes, astrolabes, and sundials. This presentation serves as an open call to the scholarly community to remain vigilant in uncovering these hidden presences—whether encountered in actual collections, catalogues, or even in the idealized conception of libraries. By spotlighting examples from institutions like the Laurenziana in Florence and the library of D. Teodósio in Vila Viçosa, the talk will explore pressing questions: Why do instruments appear in library contexts, and in what ways do they complement or transform the role of books? How does their interplay reflect broader practices of knowledge in the early modern era? Ultimately, the talk aims to ignite an inquiry on the multifaceted dialogue between texts and instruments in libraries.

Keywords

Mathematical instruments, library collections, volvelles, knowledge practices, material culture of knowledge, scholarly cabinets

E-mail

samuel.gessner@gmail.com

Affiliation

CIUHCT, University of Lisbon

Position

Short Biography

Samuel Gessner is an assistant researcher at the CIUHCT in Lisbon, invited professor at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at ULisboa, and the book review editor of the journal HoST. He specializes in the study of the material culture of science. In his current project Cultures of Mathematics, he focuses on the diverse mathematical cultures in medieval and early modern Europe and how they interacted by studying the role of mathematical instruments as conceived by both theoreticians and practitioners. Alongside textual documents he uses artefacts of material culture, in particular mathematical and astronomical instruments, as primary sources and as the starting points for research. He recently published “Multiple Meanings of Precision” in the Annals of Science (vol. 81, no. 1-2, 2024, p. 30-59). His latest edited volume, in co-editorship

with Nikolaj Bijleveld and Arjen Dijkstra, is *Devotees of Science. Cultivating and Communicating Natural and Technical Knowledge around 1800*, Amsterdam University Press (2025). He is co-organizer with Rossella Baldi of the upcoming conference *Beyond Books: Instruments and Knowledge in Libraries*, at the Musée d'Histoire des Sciences, Geneva, 14-15 January 2026.

Primary author: Samuel Gessner (CIUHCT, University of Lisbon)

Presenter: Samuel Gessner (CIUHCT, University of Lisbon)

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