

## Horology and Diplomacy: How Time Pieces Helped Shape History

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*Magnificent 18K gold, pearl, and painting-on-enamel, "Vase" clock with singing bird rising and singing every hour or on demand. Signed Ilbery, London. Movement attributed to Freres Rochat and enamelling by Jean-Louis Richter, Geneva, circa 1815. Sold at auction in 2003 for ChF 1,800,000. Photo courtesy Osvaldo Patrizzi.*

Timepieces have long been symbols of power and knowledge, messengers of culture, tokens of friendship and gages of peace. Animated pieces actually played an important role in establishing diplomatic relations with China in the Thirteenth Century. In 1253, King Louis IX of France dispatched a Flemish priest named Guillaume de Rubruquis as his ambassador to the Grand Khan of Tartary. An account of the voyage, preserved in the British Museum, states that among the prisoners of the Tartars was a skilled goldsmith from Lyon who constructed for the Emperor a monumental animated scene known as an automaton. His skill saved his life. The automaton featured four silver lions at the foot of a great tree with silver leaves and fruits, and mare's milk flowing from the lions' half-opened jaws. Four conduits rose to the top of the tree and descended in the form of gilded serpents, from whose mouths ran precious liqueurs that filled silver vessels. It was activated by a bellows, worked by a man hidden in the base of the tree, while servants replenished reservoirs with the liqueurs. De Rubruquis' account of the goldsmith's feat is the first document proving the existence of an automaton made to order for an Oriental personage.

Christianity and horology are also entwined; at the end of the Thirteenth Century, missionaries in China used their much-envied knowledge of astronomical instruments for measuring time to gain favor with the Chinese aristocracy, passing on horological gifts with the actual goal of spreading Christianity.

Up until 1514, when routes to the Far East were opened by the Portuguese, there were water clocks in China, the oldest of which date from the Tenth Century, but no trace of mechanical watch-making is to be found before the middle of the Sixteenth Century. A Jesuit missionary, Father Matteo Ricci, is considered to be a key figure in changing that. Born in Macerata, Italy, in 1552, he established himself in Shao-Ch'in 1583 and later transferred to Shao-Chou, where a close friendship with the Confucian scholar Chu T'ai-Su gave him entry into high circles of Imperial officials. He moved to Peking in 1601 where he was received by Emperor Wanli after only four days—reportedly because he bore gifts of clocks and watches.

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