

A monumental clock

by Osvaldo Patrizzi

Horology is truly an intriguing field – capable of giving us precise instruments necessary for finding longitude on the sea, instruments for making astronomical observations, or simply to help organize one's daily routine by decorating one's wrist or waistcoat with a stylish time-piece. It is a world of science, as well as a world of beauty. It is fascinating, as well, for its extremes – masterpieces made in miniature, like the 2 line movements (4.45mm) such as the Jaeger LeCoultre Calibre 101, or the monumental clocks such as the Astronomical World

Time Clock. This latter clock is the biggest and most spectacular clock that I have ever seen for an interior space, and is the subject of this article and one that I enjoy!

It was made by L. Charvet Aîné in Lyon, France. Mr. Charvet began making electrical and mechanical clocks in 1852 and produced tower and church clocks. He worked with companies that were specialized in this area, such as Cretin-L'Ange and Bailly-Comte, in the French Jura. Mr. Charvet gained his fame for having built the town clock for Lyon in 1864, the clock which carried his name and told the time for that city for over 140 years. It became a tourist attraction and amused Lyon's inhabitants with folkloristic mechanical puppets of local and Italian characters. Guignol, Gnafron, Pulcinella, and Arlecchino animated the hour in automaton style.

It was a few years later that Mr. Charvet produced the Astronomical World Time Double Pendulum Clock, for the 1871 Lyon Universal and International Exhibition, to be displayed in the main exhibition hall, and it was later probably housed in the railway station. This grand clock measures 3.80 meters (approx. 12 1/2 feet) high and is 1.80 meters wide at the base (approx. 6 feet). It is double sided and housed in solid, carved walnut decorated with stylized scroll motifs and garlands of flowers, topped with 2 shell motifs, in the classic Napoleon III style. The clock is made with 2, eight day movements. One movement powers a very large, brass-steel gridiron compensating pendulum of 5 steel and 4 brass rods measuring 1.90 meters long with a 90 cm. diameter bob. Its corresponding face is centered with a large dial giving the local time and a concentric indication of the months, and it is surrounded by 10 smaller, 24 hour dials indicating the time in the 10 most important cities around the world. Above the "12" of the central dial is a 3-dimensional moon showing the actual phase; below the "6" is another dial showing the solar time and this dial is flanked by 2 smaller ones which indicate the day of the week and the day of the month. The other movement is regulated by a similar pendulum having 3 brass and 2 steel rods, measuring 98 cm long with a brass bob of approx. 40 cm. in diameter and set with a thermometer. This movement controls the other side of the clock and displays the local time on an 80 cm. in diameter dial. Both movements have Graham lever escapements, and all of the dials are in white enamel. What is really impressive about this clock is its majestic personality - the impact made by its numerous time zones and its unusual size.

The business of Mr. L. Charvet Aîné was sold in 1906. Where this clock spent the next decades is a mystery, but it spent many recent years in the main lobby of the InterContinental Hotel in Geneva, Switzerland. It greeted many international guests and important political figures, and witnessed many major events there. The hotel just recently underwent reconstruction, and now this unique, monumental clock is for sale.

