THE STRASBURG CLOCK MODEL

Sydney clockmaker Richard Bartholomew Smith (1862–1942) was only 25 years old when he decided to build a model of the Strasburg Clock as a centenary 'gift' to the state of NSW. He began work on Australia Day in 1887 and completed the clock in 1889. The next year it was on display at the Technological Museum (as this museum was then known), where it quickly became the chief attraction.

Smith based his clock on the famous astronomical clock in Strasbourg Cathedral, France. Strangely he never visited Strasbourg (which in his day was called Strasburg or Strassburg) and claimed to have based his design on a postcard and a book.

For more than a century, the Strasburg Clock model has delighted visitors to the Museum. Even though the vision it embodies strictly belongs to a past era of science and technology, the clock remains an object of fascination today.

How does it work?

The Strasburg Clock model marks the passage of time both scientifically and symbolically.

At five minutes to every hour the **procession of the twelve apostles**, in the uppermost alcove, represents the passing of the hours. During this procession each apostle turns towards Christ and then bows his head for Christ's blessing, except St Peter who turns his back, in denial. At this the rooster on the tower crows three times. Judas, the twelfth apostle (carrying his money bag) bows deeply to Christ. Satan appears in the window to the left of Christ for both St Peter and Judas. The accompanying music is from *Dawn mantras* by Australian composer Ross Edwards.

In the second alcove figures representing the **four ages of life** rotate into view every 15 minutes. In the next alcove the phases of the Moon and the tides are shown. Next is an **orrery** which shows the relative

positions of the planets as they orbit the Sun and underneath this is a dial which shows Eastern Standard Time.

The days of the week are represented by **chariots** driven by the deities from which we get our day names. At about 4.10 pm each day the chariot representing the next day advances to the front.

Underneath the chariots, the **Grand Astronomical Dial** *(pictured below)* shows the apparent movement of the Sun, the Moon and the stars across the southern sky. Also on this model of the clock are dials which give the local time in six major capital cities around the world and mechanisms which show the solar cycle, the equation of time and the lunar cycle. The two **cherubs** symbolise an older method of timekeeping: one has a sand clock (hourglass) and the other strikes a bell each 15 minutes.

The case of the clock is decorated with allegorical figures, such as the three Fates of Greek mythology, and portraits of the astronomer Nicholas Copernicus, the clockmaker J B Schwilgué who restored the Strasbourg Cathedral clock in 1842, and others.

The showcase next to the clock includes original parts of the clock that were replaced during restoration work by Richard Smith, and later by Museum staff, as well as photos of Smith and the ancient clock in Strasbourg Cathedral.

Further resources

Barrett, Des and Ward, Carey, *'Strasburg' clock model*, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, 1992

Davison, Graeme, 'The secret life of the Strasburg Clock', in *Yesterday's tomorrows: the Powerhouse Museum and its precursors*, edited by Graeme Davison and Kimberley Webber, Powerhouse Publishing, Sydney, 2005

For more information on the exhibition *The Strasburg Clock model,* visit the Powerhouse Museum's website http://www.powerhousemuseum.com

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