

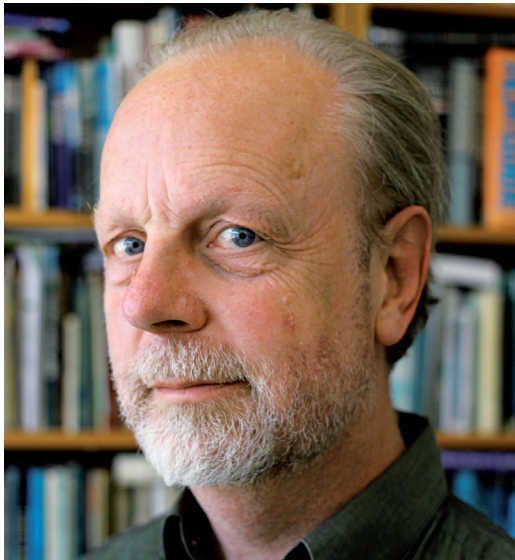
AHS London Lecture Thursday 22 January 2015

Stephen Boyd Davis

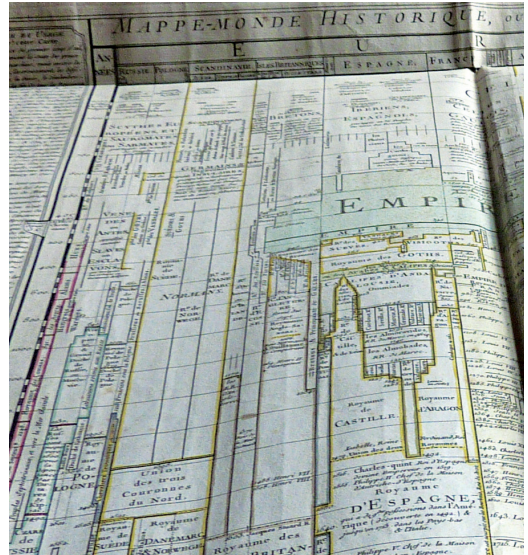
‘Almost at a Single Glance’ – Visualisation of Historic Time in the Eighteenth Century

In the 1760s, Joseph Priestley, theologian, dissenter, natural philosopher and radical, described a chart he had designed: ‘What words would do but very imperfectly, and in a long time, this method effects in the compleatest manner possible, and almost at a single glance.’ He was describing one of the first modern timelines – a linear diagram of history – and ushering in what has sometimes been called the Golden Age of Visualisation.

The lecture will explore analogies between the diurnal time told by clocks and the longer time of history represented by timelines and other chronographics. The multiple sources of the paper timeline will be traced, including the typographic, the pictorial, and – of increasing importance in the eighteenth century – the mechanical. Striking visual examples will be presented



Stephen Boyd Davis is professor of Design Research at the Royal College of Art. His own work is concerned with visualisation, in which he is directing research students working with museums and archives.



Detail from *Mappemonde historique ou carte chronologique, géographique et généalogique des états et empires du monde* / rédigée par le Sr Barbeau de La Bruyère, published in Paris in 1750.

from Germany, Italy, England and above all France, demonstrating the increasing fascination with mechanical approaches to knowledge and revealing the controversy that such approaches raised. Jonathan Swift was one of the first to question the trend. His Gulliver encounters a professor with a machine, with which ‘the most ignorant person at a reasonable charge, and with a little bodily labour, may write books in philosophy, poetry, politics, law, mathematics, and theology, without the least assistance from genius or study’. Yet despite Swift’s misgivings, the age of the machine was at hand, and representations of historic time would be transformed by mechanical thinking.

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