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Rasmus Sørnes' Astronomical Clock the Main Attraction at a New Museum in the USA

The Time Museum has purchased the clock from Jeløy for $50,000

On 27 May, a new science museum, The Time Museum, will open in Rockford, Illinois, an industrial town 120 km northwest of Chicago. Its centerpiece will be the last of Rasmus Sørnes' astronomical clocks.

The museum was donated to Rockford by a highly respected and wealthy businessman and banker, Seth G. Atwood. It is intended to be a historical museum of timekeeping instruments of every kind and from every country, illuminating the history of these measuring instruments throughout the ages.

Among its most valuable exhibits will be Rasmus Sørnes' astronomical clock, placed in the museum's most prestigious position, at the very centre.

There is a remarkable story behind this.

Rasmus Sørnes was born in Sola, Jæren. He was employed as a mechanic at Ullandhaug Radio Station, and this installation was transferred to Jeløy Radio. Sørnes lived at Jeløy until his death two years ago, aged 73.

Sørnes had a very modest technical education — an elementary technical day school in Stavanger — but throughout his life he acquired, through his own efforts, such great scientific and mechanical knowledge and insight that he was able to delve deeply into astronomy. He transferred astronomical phenomena and data to clocks. It is, in fact, the result of what Rasmus Sørnes built over more than 30 years, devoting his spare time to the construction of astronomical clocks.

All of this was created in a workshop in Sørnes' garden on Jeløy — a workplace which certainly made it possible to appreciate and admire what simple means a gifted designer and astronomer had used to create one of the world's most complete astronomical clocks.

American Scientific Expert: One of the Most Ingenious Clocks Ever Constructed; Anything Similar Is Unlikely Ever to Be Built

Seth G. Atwood Buys the Clock

The Time Museum's benefactor, Seth G. Atwood, learned of Sørnes' clock in January of this year through the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The Smithsonian Institution is one of the United States' most highly regarded scientific institutions. Founded in 1846, it includes a large library with international exchanges for scientific journals, an astrophysical observatory, a zoological park,

and museums of natural history, ethnography and art. It supports and rewards research of particular distinction and publishes scientific works. In this way it has always occupied a prominent place among higher government institutions in the United States.

After the Sørnes family's representative, Mr Knut A. B. Røsholdt, had contacted the Adler Planetarium in Chicago and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., one of the Smithsonian's scientific experts, Mr Silvo Bedini, drew Mr Atwood's attention to Sørnes' astronomical clock.

They had discovered that the clock provides an exceptionally extensive range of astronomical data unmatched by any other clock, with an accuracy that includes, among other things, consideration of the deviations that occur in the leap-year cycle every 400 years.

As regards the accuracy of the most important mechanisms in an astronomical clock — those that reproduce the motion of the moon and its many deviations from its normal orbit — Rasmus Sørnes' construction has solved the problems in a completely unique way. Furthermore, it stands out through the ingenious operation of the various functions and their integration into a single complete system. Through experiments and study over many years, Rasmus Sørnes solved the task in an elegant and original way, giving his clock exceptional reliability.

On the basis of the expert opinions Mr Atwood had obtained, he became convinced that Rasmus Sørnes' clock was among the most ingenious astronomical clocks ever constructed and that nothing comparable was ever likely to be built.

This assessment must be viewed in the light of the fact that the museum's collections also include classical masterpieces by Fromanteel, Breguet, Campani, Tompion, Hahn, Howard, Willard, and other great names in astronomy and horology.

Mr Atwood purchased the clock for $50,000 — approximately 350,000 Norwegian kroner. The sale was kept confidential until the purchaser had had the opportunity to take possession of and inspect the clock. Yesterday the confirmation arrived:

"Clock in position in Museum in perfect condition more beautiful and thrilling than I dared hope — Seth G. Atwood."

Photo captions

Rasmus Sørnes and his fourth astronomical clock. Photo: Bjørn Skovdahl.