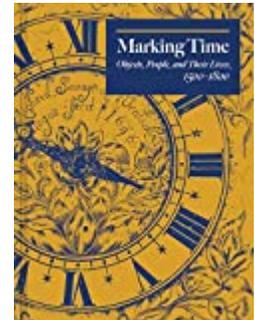




Edward Town, Angela McShane, eds. *Marking Time: Objects, People, and Their Lives, 1500-1800*. New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 2020. 518 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-25410-5.



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We have recently passed the one-year mark of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past year time has taken on new meaning in our lives. Headlines have lamented “stolen time,” “lost time,” a sense of being “stuck in time,” while op-eds have argued that, for some, COVID has enabled us to spend more time with family, untethered from restrictive minute-by-minute family schedules.[1] Time seems to have simultaneously expanded and contracted in our lives; nostalgia for times of togetherness intermingle with anxieties about when we will see friends and family again. Both the passage of time and significant moments in time have been marked by shared endeavors like nightly, weekly, and monthly clapping for medical professionals, and by personal moments of reflection on major holidays, birthdays, or the passing of a loved one. Pandemic time is fluid and complex, both deeply individual and felt as a community. What has become evident over the past year is that it is hard to pinpoint a single, technologically driven, shared understanding of time that stands alone. Instead, there appears to be an abundance of time(s), over-

lapping, layering, and shifting into different temporal constellations.

It is this constellatory sense of time that Edward Town and Angela McShane bring to the fore in *Marking Time: Objects, People, and Their Lives, 1500-1800*. Originally intended to be the catalogue for an exhibition at the Yale Center for British Art that was cancelled due to the pandemic, this beautifully illustrated volume conveys “the richness, variety, and complexity of the early modern experience” of time (p. 13). Spanning 300 years and over 450 objects—primarily from England, with select examples from Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, all of which are part of the John H. Bryan II collection housed at Crab Tree Farm, Illinois—this project is shaped by a seemingly simple question: why were so many of the objects in Bryan’s collection dated? Why, in other words, did Britain produce an abundance of dated material objects between the mid-sixteenth and the mid-eighteenth century, many of which are otherwise seemingly inconspicuous? How can weaving together the dated cutlery sets, shoehorns, tobacco boxes, weights,

scales, bellows, fishing reels, stay busks, and the hundreds of other objects included in this collection help to inform our understanding of early modern time?

Answers to these questions are offered both explicitly and implicitly in this volume. The first section of the book is a collection of seven essays, each of which pulls at one thread of early modern time consciousness. In these essays it becomes clear that, as Glenn Adamson notes, early modern time was “not moving at a uniform speed or in a uniform direction” (p. 37). Though there were important moments of technological advancement in the period, time remained plural, both marked and shaped by a multiplicity of objects. Calendrical time with its saint’s days and movable church feasts printed in cheap almanacs intersected with daily and weekly communal time experienced aurally through the ringing of church bells. In her essay, “Narrative Time: The Intersecting Lives of Early Modern Objects,” Gavi Levi Haskell discusses what she terms the narrative density of early modern objects. For Haskell, a single object can reflect the “intersecting lifetimes of the many people who made, used, and interacted with them” (p. 57). In the process of laundering, for example, textiles would pass through the hands of laundry maids, lady’s maids, nursemaids, and chambermaids before returning to be used by various members of the household. This cycle would take place a number of times in the life of linens or a bedhanging. By viewing objects as imbued with this narrative quality, Haskell suggests that it becomes possible to consider the temporality inherent in the life cycle of a single object.

Angela McShane’s essay explores another strand of early modern temporality in its discussion of objects of measurement. Until the introduction of the so-called imperial system in 1824, early modern people were faced with a wide variety of “standard” measurements. A “common sense” approach to measurement meant that things which should have the same measurement often did not

(p. 71). As McShane shows, the many dated measurement tools that survive today were commissioned by both governmental authorities and individual traders and merchants in an attempt to “establish what the proper volume or capacity should be and to issue an accurate and replicable standard to enforce it” (p. 74). In other words, by dating a measurement device with the date a new legislation about weights was passed, tools took on a sense of authority, the date acting as authentication. Highlighting the layers of meaning embedded in a single object, McShane notes that while the goal of these dated objects was to achieve a replicable standard, they could also be intensely personal, enabling “their owners to engage directly with scientific revolutions in measurement and precision, while the dates with which they were inscribed declared each individual’s unique position in the brave new world of early modern time” (p. 79).

The catalogue accompanying the essays runs nearly four hundred pages and is organized thematically rather than chronologically; four themes bring together objects associated with life stages (Childhood & Youth, Courtship & Marriage, Hearth & Household, and Death & Afterlife) while the additional four themes focus on the social, political, religious, and commercial aspects of early modern time (Fashion & Friendship, Crown & Church, Power & Dominion, and Measurement & Law). Through this careful thematic curation, the objects are allowed to speak for themselves. A silver spoon records the births of Mary and Elizabeth Harcum; Mary arrived on June 20, 1706, in the early afternoon and Elizabeth is recorded as being born June 23rd. Mary, Elizabeth, and their mother were buried just days later, transmuting this object from a celebratory gift for a father into an object of remembrance. A simple wooden walking stick inscribed with “Culloden Moor|April 16th|1746” marks the Hanoverian victory at the Battle of Culloden (p. 333). Intriguingly, it is not known when the inscription was added. This walking stick thus illuminates the early modern tendency of an ob-

ject's inscribed date to both differ from when it was initially made and to hide the "nonlinear and episodic" nature of artisanal time used to craft material objects, as discussed in Edward S. Cooke's essay (p. 85). An ankle iron and key with the inscription "Deverall Corn Street Bristoll, 1733" makes it viscerally clear to readers that people of African descent were brought to Britain as enslaved servants (p. 384). Further, it not only marks a moment in time, 1733, but it is illustrative of the labor, and therefore time, that was stolen from enslaved men and women, and which underpinned the creation of many of the objects made for British consumption in the early modern period. As these three objects illustrate, the deeply researched catalogue is much more than a reference work; it is a constellation of the everyday objects used by early modern men and women to mark time.

Marking Time does much to advance scholarship on the interwoven histories of time and material culture in early modern Britain and, like all compelling work, provokes as many questions as it answers. We learn of the violent and oppressive nature of enslavement, and thus how "time was a stolen commodity," in Justin M. Brown's contribution to the book, but we learn far less about African temporalities (p. 48). Future work might ask how enslaved and free women and men of African descent mobilized material goods in their understanding of time. If, as Keith Wrightson notes in his introductory essay, early modern time was heterogeneous, scholars could question the ways in which African or Indigenous time consciousness, for example, was similar or dissimilar to the perhaps more Euro-centric pluritemporalities highlighted in this work. *Marking Time* has succeeded in its goal of countering any sense of a neat and tidy grand narrative history of time, but to fully uncover the richness of early modern temporalities—and the role that material objects play in overlapping time(s)—we must integrate "non-Western" time consciousness into our new narrative. Time is an omnipresent force that permeated both the mundanities of daily life and shared moments of

social, political, and cultural inflection, but, as the objects included in this volume suggest, it was not experienced uniformly. Pushing the conclusions in this book further to think holistically about the diverse populations present in the British Atlantic world will uncover an even richer early modern temporal world.

Marking Time is an important addition to the histories of time, temporality, and the social, cultural, political, and economic history of early modern Britain. Scholars of gender, administration, law, religion, and material culture and the decorative arts will all find value in this work. The attention to detail shown throughout the book, both in the research and the presentation, makes this volume a beautiful temporal object in its own right and an impressive resource that should be widely read across a wide range of disciplines.

Note

[1]. Rebecca Tan and Rachel Chason, "Families are reuniting at nursing homes. But covid-19 has stolen time they can't get back," *Washington Post*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/03/24/nursing-home-vaccine-visits/>; Daniel Arkin, Caitlin Fichtel, and Shamar Walters "The lost year: How Covid-19 left many Americans 'stuck in time,'" *NBC News*, Dec 29, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/lost-year-how-covid-19-left-many-americans-stuck-time-n1252152>; Clint Edwards, "How Quarantine Has Brought My Family Closer Together," *The New York Times*, updated May 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/parenting/coronavirus-family-quarantine.html>.

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