

New Exhibition Opens: “The Schuitema Collection”

David Rance

Fate can sometimes be cruel. Sadly, after a long illness, renowned Dutch collector and author IJzebrand Schuitema (1929-2013) died two months before an exhibition dedicated to his famous collection opened in Bonn, Germany.

Legacy of the “Champion Collector”

A spur of the moment buy in a flea market in 1984 was the catalyst for IJzebrand’s collection. Not being a man for “half measures”, he then spent 30 odd years compiling a slide rule collection, whose quality and diversity had few peers in Europe or possibly the rest of the world. Sadly, some family tragedies and increasing personal health issues forced IJzebrand to face the question every collector dreads, *What will happen to my collection when I am gone?* In IJzebrand’s case, this was a loaded question because he was determined that his collection would not be broken up.

Arithmeum Saved the Day

When he approached the leading technical museums in Holland, surprisingly they showed little or no interest in the collection. Alternatives, like opening a private museum, proved infeasible. Then a fellow collector reminded IJzebrand that the Arithmeum museum in Bonn, Germany, had a rich history in mathematics and calculating. Discussions followed, and IJzebrand soon realised he had found a sympathetic and grateful home for his entire collection¹.

Therefore, in 2008, as part of a major international removal exercise, IJzebrand’s collection of over 3000 slide rules and an extensive library of associated books and documentation were relocated to Bonn.

A Mountain to Climb

Cataloguing and archiving is the lifeblood of any museum. However, I suspect the Arithmeum has never had so many new items arrive on the same day, therefore, to know where to start must have been difficult for the museum staff and volunteers! They took literally years to examine and meticulously record every item. However, in 2012, the cataloguing was completed

and plans could be made for the Arithmeum to stage a special exhibition dedicated to “The Schuitema Collection”.



FIGURE 1. IJzebrand’s Collection 1999



FIGURE 2. Arithmeum

Such exhibitions typically take more than a year to plan and set up. The Arithmeum also called on the specialist help of two leading German slide rule experts and collectors, Peter Holland and Werner Rudowski. They helped shape the themes running through the exhibition and provided much of the explanatory information for the specially prepared exhibition catalogue.

Grand Opening – 19 October 2013

The Arithmeum sent out invitations to interested dignitaries and collectors. A large international audience, including IJzebrand's daughter Annemarie and her partner, was there for the opening.



FIGURE 3. IJzebrand Attends the Opening



FIGURE 4. Guests Attending the Opening

The opening day programme was as follows:

- 11:00: **Opening** by Professor Dr. Ina Prinz
Director of the Arithmeum
- “IJzebrand Schuitema – The Champion Collector”**
by David Rance
- 12:00: **“The Poet and his slide rule”**
by Werner H. Rudowski
- 14:00: Guided tour of the exhibition
- 15:00: **“From Sicilian sand to landing on the Moon”**
by Peter Holland
- 16:00: Hands-on session on how to use a slide rule

However, because the exhibition will run until 30th April 2014 and next year is the 400th anniversary of Scottish noble John Napier's invention of the logarithm, the Arithmeum opened the exhibition on a very Scottish note.



FIGURE 5. Bagpipes and Drum

What is There to See?

The exhibition was staged in an intimate gallery area on the first floor of the museum and consisted of:

- 9 large wall-mounted display panels,
- 4 wall-mounted demonstration slide rules,
- 4 floor-mounted display cabinets,
- 2 freestanding “tower” display cabinets.

Along the walls, the display panels are arranged according to a series of interesting themes ranging from: *Slide Rules for Engineers* to *Slide Rules / Calculator Hybrids*. Not only are the slide rules attentively and visually attractively mounted, but also the Arithmeum clearly went to considerable trouble to label every item painstakingly in English and German².

The floor mounted display cabinets mainly show how the slide rule developed through ages³. The two tower display cabinets hold respectively cylindrical/circular slide rules and some mouth-watering 1st edition rare books⁴.

Exhibition Catalogue

A star in its own right is the specially prepared catalogue (30 x 24.5 cm – 244 full colour pages)⁵ that the Arithmeum published in honour of the exhibition. Many museum catalogues are little more than a listing of the often-cryptic museum cataloguing. However, “*Slide Rules in the Arithmeum – The Schuitema Collection*” is much, much more⁶.



FIGURE 6. Guided Tour by Anna Meier in Full Swing

The quality of the printing and the resolution of the coloured plates are superb. Poignantly, a transcript of an interview about his hobby, held with IJzebrand in June 2013, follows the Preface. After the transcript is a series of excellent in-depth articles by Holland, Rudowski, and Arithmeum staff members on each of the featured themes of the exhibition. In the last part of the catalogue, each of the 277 items on display is described in the context of item's theme. However, besides the typical inventory and maker information, the history and purpose of each item is also recorded alongside. Copies can be ordered online⁷.

On Reflection

Knowing the enormity of IJzebrand's collection, I had expected the exhibition to fill a hall rather than just a gallery of the museum. However, this initial disappointment was more than compensated by the catalogue and the professional, thoughtful, and interesting way the 9% of the entire collection that is on display, is exhibited.

Moreover, after the exhibition closes, the Arithmeum intends to reallocate an existing wall-long permanent display cabinet in the main part of the museum to an "ever-changing" mini-exhibition of items out of "*The Schuitema Collection*". The Arithmeum's intention is also that in the future the digitised inventory information on all the items in the collection will be made available online to collectors and the public.

Postscript

The opening also attracted media journalists and a film crew. To the delight of the Arithmeum, half-page accounts, with images from the opening, came out in the weekend edition of the "*General-Anzeiger*" and in the 22nd of October edition of the "*Bonner Rundschau*" newspapers. The video unit from the University of Bonn decided they wanted to shoot some extra retrospective shots of how the exhibition was staged. No date is known, but when finished, the film will be released as a freely available video podcast on the "*Uni-Bonn TV*" website.





FIGURES 7 and 8. The “Schuitema Collection” Exhibition Area



FIGURE 9. Front Cover of Catalogue

Notes

1. Schuitema, IJzebrand, *My Collection Has a New Home*, *Journal of the Oughtred Society*, 17:2, 2008.
2. For visitors not part of a guided tour, the museum provides English and German plasticised information sheets.
3. These cabinets also include some items from the private collection of Werner H. Rudowski.
4. The books are from the museum and not part of “The Schuitema Collection.”
5. Prof. Dr. Prinz, Ina (Editor), *“Slide Rules in the Arithmeum – The Schuitema Collection”*, ISBN 978-3-89479-832-1 (German version) / ISBN 978-3-89479-833-8 (English version), Euro 24, Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung GmbH, 2013.
6. Before he passed away IJzebrand saw and sent in comments and corrections on a pre-publication version of the catalogue.
7. URL for ordering the English language version: <http://www.nicolai-verlag.de/slide-rules-arithmeum-p-475.html>.