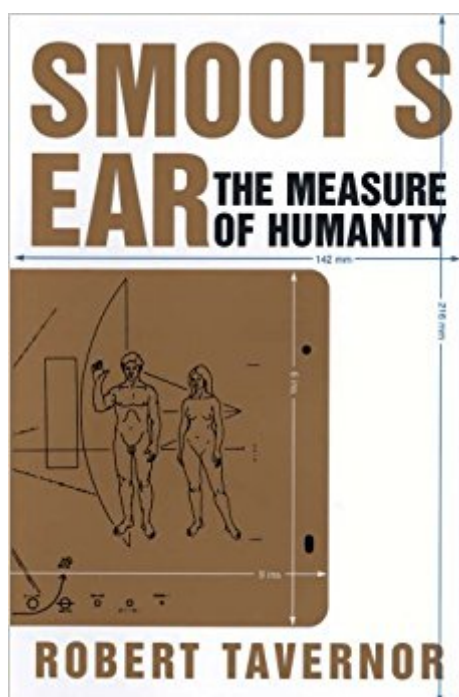


The book was found

Smoot's Ear: The Measure Of Humanity



Synopsis

Measures are the subject of this unusual book, in which Robert Tavernor offers a fascinating account of the various measuring systems human beings have devised over two millennia. Tavernor urges us to look beyond the notion that measuring is strictly a scientific activity, divorced from human concerns. Instead, he sets measures and measuring in cultural context and shows how deeply they are connected to human experience and history. The book explores changing attitudes toward measure, focusing on key moments in art, sculpture, architecture, philosophy, and the development of scientific thought. It encompasses the journey of Western civilization from the construction of the Great Pyramid to the first manned flight to the moon. Beginning with a review of early measuring standards that referred to the feet and inches of ideal bodies, the book then tracks how Enlightenment interest in a truly scientific system of measure led to the creation of the metric system. This 'rational' approach to measure in turn has inspired artists, architects, writers, and others to seek a balance that takes the human story into account. Tavernor concludes with a discussion of measure in our own time, when space travel presents to humankind a direct encounter with the unfathomable measure of the universe.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

An exciting preface gets this history of measurement underway, describing how a 1958 fraternity initiation ritual at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology led the construction industry's adoption of the Smoot, a length equal to Oliver Smoot's 5'7" body, which was used to measure the length of

the Harvard Bridge (360 "Smoots" plus the length of his ear). Following this, London School of Economics professor Tavernor too often gets bogged down in a long-winded defense of his contention that measurement has been dehumanized, "culturally removed from the mainstream experience of society," losing focus and momentum as he does. To buttress this argument, Tavernor takes a broad swipe at history, beginning in the sixth century B.C., which picks up steam with France's invention, in the aftermath of the Revolution, of the metric system. A long chapter on defining the meter makes a compelling account-every locality had its own standards, wreaking havoc on commerce throughout France-and leads Tavernor into interesting discussions of the system's influence on culture (especially architecture), the "Anglo-Saxon resistance" with which the system was met and the evolving philosophy of measurement. An interesting but diffuse look at the unexpected controversies of measurement, Tavernor's volume is best for patient students of history and architecture. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"At the book's heart is the changeover from ancient methods of measurement based like Smoot on the human body, to the metric system, derived from a more 'scientific' measurement of the earth's dimensions. It's a story that Tavernor tells well, with an acute awareness of the ironies and human failings it contains.' Nick Rennison, The Sunday Times 'Tavernor writes with commendable clarity and economy.'" Tibor Fischer, The Sunday Telegraph 'Tavernor's raw material is fascinating, and his argument appealing.' Jonathan Sale, The Independent" --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

As peculiar as the subject matter is, the book contains everything I want to know, and more! Tavernor is excellent, love his language, good research, excellent references, insightful thoughts. 5-star for the content, 1 star off for the paper. The choice of paper, regrettably, is wrong - matt art coated paper. The book is mainly text, the handful of images on the book are 1C black. It's totally ok for the whole book to be printed on off-white uncoated stock, like those used for say 'Istanbul' by Pamuk.

The title of this book is unfortunate. It would lead you to believe you are getting a book discussing measurement down through the ages. If that is your goal, the book will only partly meet your needs. Basically the author is an artist/architect type who rejects the dehumanization of the Metric system. But the book is extremely interesting so let me describe it...The first chapters of the book are about

ancient measuring systems. Archaeologists came to realize that measuring ancient ruins with modern units left too much out. Say you built a room 60'x30'x15', maybe because you felt the proportions were magical. That is a lot less evident if you write down that the room was 18.29x9.14x4.57 meters. This leads to a fascinating history of the metric system, which had its birth during the French Revolution. Some of the scientists involved in attempting to create the metric system died on the guillotine, others fled the country, others managed to keep making progress. Their goal was to create a decimal based measuring system based on some "ideal" unit, like a fraction of the earth's diameter. Unfortunately, Newton warned them that the earth was not round, but flattened at the poles, and changing all the time. So they tried the sweep of a pendulum with a one second rate... unfortunately that's not constant either and varies with temperature, pressure, etc. So whatever they settled on, it was never had any invariant ideal basis. What's fun to read about is they also tried to make a base 10 calendar! 10 months, 10 days to a week, 10 hours to a day. And the revolutionary government wanted to start the calendar over with Bastille Day as Day 1, Year 1. Well these ideas were all dropped after a few short years. The bulk of the book is about this struggle to settle on and popularize the metric system. But the author argues that this is all pretty arbitrary. The UK only went metric because they needed to cooperate with their European trading partners in the 60's. There's a small section at the end about artists' input on the topic, and Le Corbusier's own measuring unit, the "Modulor". It too was based on average human dimensions, not an abstract scientific value. The last sentences of the book hold out the United States as the world's last hope for a more reasonable measurement system! Boy is that a breath of fresh air!

I cannot imagine anybody who would benefit from reading this book. It is poorly written; the prose is turgid and dense. The author jumps backwards and forwards in time for no apparent reason, leading to unnecessary confusion. My primary reason for rejecting this book is the author's agenda, which I find most objectionable. Mr. Tavernor hates the metric system because it's scientific and cold. He prefers a measurement system built around an idealized human body. Mr. Tavernor spends much of the book explaining the process that led to the creation and adoption of the metric system. His tale is peppered with snide remarks about everyone associated with the process, especially the scientists. Because Mr. Tavernor does not adequately understand the science underlying the metric system, some of his explanations are botched. He also errs in several historical facts. The rigor of Mr. Tavernor's thinking is best revealed by his assertion that the metric system is "irrational". If my short review is inadequate to convince you, perhaps this quotation from the book will:

“Neither scientists nor historians have considered measure as an art; as a

commentary on changing social and political conditions, or as a potent instrument of creativity in the hands of artists, painters, sculptors, and architects, who provide cultures with their tangible imagery and physical legacy. Can you imagine the world Mr. Tavernor recommends, in which standards of measurement change routinely and are defined by a cacophony of artists? That is not the kind of world I would like to live in.

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