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The many lives of an old instrument: the armillary sphere refigured and recontextualized

This paper explores how, from the seventeenth century onwards, the armillary sphere was refigured and recontextualized into a Copernican mindset, while retaining its symbolic character as an emblem of astronomy, and its educational value as a model to demonstrate the essential celestial motions from a geocentric perspective. The modern history of the armillary sphere is addressed in its intersections with the development of the orrery, the growth of market niches for educational instruments and toys, and the emergence of the notion of discovery as a driving force of astronomical science. Overall, it is shown how, through the agency of varied practitioners, educators, and instrument makers and traders, an ancient instrument was repurposed so that it could fit into the tenets and discourses of modernity –even if with varying, and often limited success.

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