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Hidden Treasures: The tale of Florentine Thermometers 150 years after their crafting

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The rediscovery of seventeenth-century Florentine thermometers in a warehouse of the Pitti Palace in Florence in 1829 marked a significant point in preserving scientific heritage. Uncovered by the physicist Vincenzo Antinori, these artifacts, presumed lost, miraculously survived over 150 years. Antinori identified these thermometers as formerly belonging to the Accademia del Cimento's meteorological endeavours, based on drawings left by the academicians. This rediscovery prompted a resurgence of interest among scholars outside Italy, and many thermometers left Florence. The transfer of instruments and objects between scientific communities was not uncommon at the time. However, the concept of "historical-scientific heritage" still did not exist, and objects were transferred with utmost ease. It is noteworthy that in few cases, an original manuscript proves the dispatch of these thermometers.

In this paper, I will present the journey of a small Florentine "*termometro cinquantigrado*" which is now housed at the Whipple Museum of the University of Cambridge. Donated by Henry Babbage in 1872, it was strongly sought by the visionary James Clerk Maxwell for the new Cavendish Laboratory, of which he was director. This case study highlights the collaborative nature of scientific networks in the nineteenth century and the pivotal role of individuals like Antinori and Maxwell in preserving and promoting scientific heritage. Furthermore, it underscores the cultural significance of integrating historical artifacts with experimental apparatus and their role in understanding the evolution of thought and methodology, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical experimentation.

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