



ID de Contribution: 9

Type: Non spécifié

The flat and the relief : geometric material models in 19th century France

mardi 20 janvier 2026 11:30 (25 minutes)

This talk investigates several historical collections of geometric material models, drawings, photographs and other types of graphical representations in Paris at École polytechnique, Institut Henri Poincaré and Musée des arts et métiers.

The practice of model drawing played a key role in the development of descriptive geometry and, more generally, of mathematics from the mid 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century. For a long time, material models were competitors of professors and model drawing an alternative to lectures. Historical sources such as drawings (and later photographs and films), models (of all kinds, including relief drawings) and instruments, highlight the key role played by specific forms of non-textual knowledge in mathematics. These collections raise many questions concerning the role played by instruments in mathematics and its relation to other sciences, techniques and industry, but also to the fine arts. To be sure several instruments originated from the practice of geometric model drawing. More importantly, models and drawings themselves came to be considered as specific types of instruments by the end of the 19th century: graphical instruments.

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