
Workshop

A MATHEMATICAL WALK IN “MUSEUM BOERHAAVE”

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The Dutch National Museum for the History of Science and Medicine (Museum Boerhaave in Leiden) is the home of a large collection of instruments and objects from the history of science and medicine, the oldest dating from the 16th century. It also owns a collection of mathematical instruments and devices, such as an enormous quadrant from 1610, made by Willem Jansz. Blaeu. Museum Boerhaave wants to attract a broad range of visitors and organizes special exhibitions and programs for children of different ages and for school classes. Some years ago it started a project around its mathematical objects, wanting to attract more attention for these objects and to interest children for the history of mathematics and to show them the relations with cultural history and school mathematics.

This resulted in a mathematical walk in the museum. Participants receive a 20-pages tour guide on A3-format which guides them along the different mathematical objects of the permanent exhibition. The tour guide contains not only explanations about the objects, but also interesting facts and stories about the history connected with these objects, assignments that can be made with these objects, maps, plotting paper to work on etc. Since the children are obviously not supposed to work with the original objects, they are for the tour equipped with a suitcase containing (simplified) replica of the original objects, which can be used to do the assignments.

The mathematical walk is intended for schoolchildren around the age of fifteen in the middle classes of secondary school, an age in which it is often difficult to interest them for mathematics. It is hoped that by showing them that mathematics can also be fun and has interesting history gives them a more positive attitude towards mathematics. So far the mathematical walk seems to be a success; the museum is now preparing a mathematical walk for primary school children and a centre where school classes can work on (historically based) problems, including hands on activities.

In the presentation we will give you a short introduction to the Museum Boerhaave and its collection of mathematical objects. We will take you on the mathematical walk through the museum, present the tour guide and the suit case with the replica's and works on one of the assignments. At the end we will discuss the evaluation on the whole project and the plans and ideas of the museum to develop more educational activities for mathematics around its historical collections.