

When science was a vital pastime of monarchs and emperors of Europe

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Centuries ago, princes had a favorite way of showing off their wealth and status — science.

From the 16th to 18th centuries, European courts were filled with gadgets galore. Scientific instruments, lavish clocks and cutting-edge mechanical objects showcased princely prosperity while providing entertainment and education for their courts.

Now, about 170 of those objects are on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. “Making Marvels: Science and Splendor at the Courts of Europe,” on display through March 1, brings together opulent displays of wealth and innovation. Along the way, it paints a picture of the important role science played in royal life.

Like modern-day tech enthusiasts, royals collected expensive, tech-savvy toys. Where today’s tech is sleek and often understated

(think Teslas and iPhones), yesterday’s was ornate and encrusted in precious metals and jewels. The objects weren’t just baubles: Even as they telegraphed the wealth and privilege of their owners, they also upheld the most modern scientific notions of their day.

A must-have for every prince was a *Kunstkammer*, a room devoted to artistic and technological marvels. In a time before public museums, these cabinets of curiosities preserved and showcased collections of natural specimens and items like Jost Bürgi’s equation clock. Made of gilded brass and silver, it was commissioned by princely astronomer William IV, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel, in 1591. The clock relied on the era’s most cutting-edge understanding of the universe, showcasing Nicolaus Copernicus’s then-new model of a sun-centered solar system around which planets orbit.

Other rulers favored alchemy — an ancient branch of natural philosophy and a predecessor to chemistry — or entertained their courts with human- and animal-like mechanical objects. These marvelous devices imitated real life using cutting-edge clockwork. Tiny spiders and June bugs imitated real insects; breathtaking writing machines achieved perfect penmanship through mechanical means.

Royals didn't just show off science: they financed it. Throughout the period, artisans competed for princely favor by making technological breakthroughs. In turn, their inventions burnished royal reputations, and many kings and princes became scholars in their own right. The gadgets they left behind are a glistening reminder of the dizzying possibilities of scientific discovery — and humans' endless urge to show off what they know.