

The 2015 History of Science Society Annual Meeting

San Francisco, California

Symposium on Sunday, November 22, 2015

Historiography of Cultural Diversity in the History of Science Victorian Room

Martina Schneider (SAW ERC project, SPHERE, CNRS & Université Paris Diderot, France & Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, Germany))

Dealing with cultural diversity in the history of mathematics: the case of Moritz Cantor

Abstract - During the 19th century history of mathematics was taken up by scholars from diverse fields. Philologists, philosophers, teachers, and mathematicians turned to mathematical sources, and engaged in transcribing, transliterating, translating, editing or interpreting them. Among the sources were rather recently discovered sources from ancient China, Mesopotamia and India – areas that had hardly been present in histories of mathematics before. How did the scholars deal with this new diversity of source material? In what way did it influence their writing of the history of mathematics?

Moritz Cantor (1829–1920), trained as a mathematician, became one of the first full-time historians of mathematics in 19th century Germany. He played a key role in the process towards the professionalisation of the history of science and mathematics. Very early on, at a time when Germany was struggling to become a nation state, Cantor embraced the concept of a “cultural history of mathematics” (Kulturgeschichte der Mathematik). In my talk I will explore what Cantor meant by this and how he implemented it in his writings.