More than Mensing?
Revisiting the Question of Fake Scientific Instruments

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In 1956 Derek J. Price announced that antique scientific instruments had attained the status of fine art in one specific and unwanted sense: they were being faked. As Price lamented in the opening sentences of his paper:

'It is unhappily only too well known that paintings, antique metal-work and other art objects can be faked. There are also cases, even more upsetting to scholarship, in which manuscripts, printed books, and even direct scientific evidence such as the Piltdown skull have been shown to be forgeries. Such trouble is uncommon in studies of the history of science which rely on the written word; it does however exist amongst the valuable evidence afforded by antique scientific instruments.'

Price’s discovery was based on his work at the Whipple Museum of the History of Science, which had been opened in 1951, the year that Price joined the staff. Amongst the Whipple’s collection Price found evidence that five instruments were fake, and moreover that these were of a piece with similar fakes in collections across Europe and in the United States. Strikingly, these could all be traced back to a single source: the dealership Frederik Muller & Co., under the direction Anton Mensing, two of whose sales, in 1911 (of the Strozzi collection) and 1924 (of Mensing’s own collection), seemed to be linked to all of the questionable instruments Price found.

Although Price was tentative in his conclusions, he effectively opened up all collections and sales of historical scientific instruments to a scrutiny entirely unknown before. As Price pointed out, this revelation could be hugely damaging, not just for the pride of collectors and curators of early instruments, but for scholars working in the relatively young field of the history of science.

After Price’s initial foray, however, the problem of fakes seemed to loom less large. Work on instruments became mainstream, even crucial in large areas in the history of science – yet the authenticity of high-value and often decorative early-modern instruments seemed, if anything, less and less likely to undermine any of the main claims made for the role of craftsmanship in the growth of natural knowledge. Rather, the problem became curatorial and commercial.

In the 1990s a group of curators, scholars and dealers returned to Price’s work. Price had argued that there had been a single source for all of the forgeries that he had found, and that, whoever that person was, Anton Mensing had been a consistent if innocent intermediary. Because Mensing had been involved in numerous sales of instruments over the years, and had in the end sold the remainder of his collection to the Adler Planetarium, Chicago, in 1929, the question had lingered: how many more ‘Mensing fakes’ were there in collections around the world? Between 1992 and 2003 the ‘Anton Mensing Scientific Instrument Project’ sought to provide an answer.

Through exceptionally diligent work they found that although Price had been wrong to suppose that there had been a single source for the forgeries, he had not in fact revealed ‘the tip of an iceberg’ – rather he had ‘already collected the majority of the notable specimens’ in his 1956 paper. But as the name of the Project suggests, it was confined to a single provenance – Anton Mensing – even as the net was widened when it came to the actual forger.

In this paper we present initial findings of research that re-opens the question posed by Price – not just how many fakes were associated with Anton Mensing, but whether there were fakes from other sources. We show that if provenances beyond Mensing are included, it becomes clear that the question of fake antique scientific instruments...
has by no means been solved. We begin with a brief account of how and why Price came to look at the instruments he did, as it was by following some of the leads that Price opened up that we first managed to make progress. One dealership in particular seems to have supplied a number of dubious instruments, namely Antique Art Galleries, Grafton Street, London, which was run by the Nyburg family. In conclusion we offer some remarks about the ongoing problem of fake scientific instruments, and the role their detection and analysis can play in helping us better understand the history of major instrument collections.

The Prolific Joannes Bos

How was it that Price came to make his discovery? A partial answer to the question comes from looking at his career trajectory, which took him from South West Essex Technical College, where he was a lab assistant and then a student, to the University of Cambridge, where he began his researches into the history of science. Price began his research around Easter 1951, working under Rupert Hall, the first director of the Whipple Museum. Although Price was soon to become well known for his work on medieval astronomy, and later his pioneering research into the 'Antikythera mechanism', he began with a study directly into the craft of scientific instruments: the working title of his research project was 'The History of Scientific Instrument Making'.

As early as August 1951 Price was in discussion with colleagues at the Cavendish Laboratory over metallurgical analysis of instruments. Why did he become so suspicious so quickly? To our knowledge Price never reflected publicly on his exact motivations, but Hall claims that the first instrument that appeared doubtful was a small astrolabe, signed 'Joannes Bos I / 1597 / Die 24 Martii' (Fig. 1).

This instrument, Price noted in his 1956 paper, was listed as item 33a in the 1924 auction catalogue Collection Art. W. M. Mensing, sold by Frederik Muller & Co. But note the very specific date: 24 March 1597. In addition to the 1924 Muller sale astrolabe and the Whipple astrolabe, Price was able to identify two more Bos astrolabes with the very same date. Hence there were 3 or possibly 4 astrolabes made by Joannes Bos on the very same day (the uncertainty over the total number stemmed from the fact that Price couldn’t be sure whether the astrolabe pictured in the catalogue was one of the ones he had identified). This was the first clue, and from here on Price was hot on the trail:

'We started with a very few suspect instruments, found where these had been purchased, and investigated instruments which had been bought from the same source at the same time. We then sought the cooperation of the dealers concerned and traced the collections back, all the time discovering that associated instruments fell into the same category of Strozzi-Mensing copies.'

Although Price’s findings were striking, in 1956 he did not reveal all that he had found — or all that he suspected.

Following The Leads

We already know from the Anton Mensing Project that Price was wrong to suppose that there had been a single source of fake scientific instruments behind the group that came through Mensing’s hands. But were other dealerships, possibly acquiring from sources unrelated to Mensing, also selling fakes?

Above we quoted Price explaining his methodology: ‘We started with a very few suspect instruments, found where these had been purchased, and investigated instruments which had been bought from the same source at the same time.’ In the archives of the Whipple Museum there is a tantalizing glimpse of this research: a letter from the dealer Antique Art Galleries, Grafton St, London, dated 16 February 1955 (Fig. 2). This curt letter is a reply to Price’s inquiry into the provenances of eight instruments – supplying minimal information on six of them. But these instruments do not have any connection to Anton Mensing, nor are they mentioned in the 1956 paper. Clearly they are instruments that Price doubted or was intrigued by, but which he never followed up. Taking Price’s letter as our lead, in 2014 we returned to these and a range of other objects in the Whipple Museum’s collection. Our critical investigation of them included both traditional techniques of curatorial analysis – exploring provenance; cross-comparison with other collections; scrutiny of engraving accuracy; palaeographic style, size, and quality of craftsmanship – and metallographic analysis conducted by researcher on early
mathematical instruments John Davis. Of the eight instruments listed in the letter to Price, we have discovered that one is certainly a forgery (the silver globe, Wh.0365 [Fig. 3]), one is almost certainly a forgery (the silver shepherd’s dial, Wh.0776 [Fig. 4]), two would be best described as modern ‘imitations’ (the astrolabes, Wh.1144, 1145), two are potentially a composite of original and modern parts (the universal dial, Wh.0781 and the astrolabe, Wh.1147), and two are almost certainly authentic (the Volckmer dial, Wh.0574, and the compass, Wh.0570).

X-ray fluorescence analysis of the two silver objects was particularly revealing. Both had previously been identified by specialists other than Price as suspicious, but the range of evidence drawn together was not conclusive. Robert Jenks had questioned the attribution of the terrestrial globe as an important sixteenth-century survival from Italy, using cartographic and palaeographic analysis to suggest alternative origins in either sixteenth-century Germany or nineteenth-century England. Ernst Zinner identified the pillar dial as suspect at around the same time that Price was working, describing it as ‘Wohl ein falschung’ (‘probably a forgery’), likely recognising the engraving to be far below the standard of other instruments bearing the signature of Christopher Schissler (a name which in addition is misspelled on this instrument). Decisively, we found both objects to be manufactured from modern sterling silver that had then been rhodium electroplated. Since rhodium electroplating is a technique first deployed commercially in the 1920s, we can surmise that these objects were manufactured as deliberate forgeries for the collectors’ market immediately preceding Robert Whipple’s purchase of them from Antique Art Galleries in 1927 (globe) and 1935 (dial) for the considerable
in 1950, and that they then charged Whipple for the astrolabe purchased from Christie’s that Antique Art Galleries paid 18 guineas for in the Middle East in the nineteenth-century for angeries, perhaps produced in the Mid-acterised as ‘imitation’ pieces rather than forgeries, perhaps produced in the Mid-eenth-century but most likely at a century later (Fig. 6). In these cases it might be best to call the objects ‘misattributed’. Others, meanwhile – including the two rhodium-plated silver objects and two of the ‘Mensing’ fakes from Price’s 1956 paper – are more serious cases. In total nineteen of Whipple’s Antique Art Galleries purchases (that is, nearly a quarter) are either known to be dubious or have strong doubts hanging over them. What’s more, having said that in some cases they may have been dupes, there is some evidence that the Nyburg family had prior experience selling fakes.

‘A Gang of Forgers’?

It is time to turn our attention to the activities of Antique Art Galleries, and the family Nyburg (Fig. 7). The origins of the shop are not at all clear. As can be seen from the letter, Price had received a reply from Henry Nyburg – but it was Henry’s father Solomon Nyburg (still listed as Managing Director) who had originally set up shop. If we look again at the letter we see ‘Established 40 Years’ at the top. But a receipt dated 1930 has just the same announcement. Already this takes us back to 1890. It seems from what we know about Solomon Nyburg’s activities that the ‘40 years’ claim likely refers to the total length of time he had been trading.

Tracing the background of the Nyburgs themselves gets us a little further. Solomon Nyburg was born in 1866 in Oxford, though the family seems to have had strong ties to the Netherlands. In the early 1890s Solomon moved to America, returning soon afterwards with over $6,000 won in damages from another antique dealer. This is the first of a few clues that are hard to interpret but paint an increasingly disquieting picture. By 1908 things had gone badly wrong, and Solomon’s company went into receivership. His stock was sold by Puttick and Simpson, and the title of the catalogue reveals the wide range of objects on offer:

Catalogue of the first portion of the collection of works of art of Messrs.  S.N. Nyburg & Co. of 5, Regent Street by direction of the receiver: including old cut glass, Dresden and Sèvres china, Chelsea and Worcester […], Faience and Delft pottery, Battersea and Dresden enamels […], fine bronzes, Louis seize and Empire clocks, candelabra, ewers, vases, figures and groups, impor-tant marble statuary, engravings, histori-cal and other paintings, inlaid and other furniture. 51

Around the same time Solomon’s brother Jacques set up his own business – a do-it-all antiques firm offering a wide range of goods. 52 Soon the records of this company come to an end, replaced with only a record of the authorities trying and failing to make contact. One tantalizing clue, however, is that Jacques Nyburg’s activities listed in the original company documents include not only selling but also making electro-plated goods.

Even more revealing, however, are the court records of a number of trials invol-

Fig. 6 This miniature portrait was described in G.C. Williamson’s catalogue of the Pierpoint Morgan Collection as “portrait of Nicholas Kratzer, school of Hans Holbein the Younger’, and was therefore sold by Christie’s to Antique Art Galleries as such. Subsequent analysis has called Williamson’s attribution into question, suggesting it may rather be from the school of Horenbout, or even from the early eighteenth century, and not of Kratzer at all. Image © Whipple Museum of the History of Science, University of Cambridge (Whb.0791).

Fig. 7 16 Grafton Street, 1960s. This building, subsequently demolished, had been the home of Antique Art Galleries at the time that Whipple was purchasing from them.
ing the Nyburgs. Jacques, for instance, was called as an expert witness in 1909 in a dispute about the authenticity of a snuff-box that had changed hands for £250. Although the box purported to be eighteenth century, Jacques claimed that it had been made in Paris thirty years beforehand. ‘The business of selling faked boxes,’ had been, he said, ‘successful’.

Solomon Nyburg, later to run Antique Art Galleries, had no less colourful a career. In 1901 he brought a case against two men to whom he had sold a silver plate bearing a mark dating it to the end of the seventeenth century. Nyburg’s customers had taken the piece but subsequently refused to pay the price of £226, claiming the plate was a fake. Nyburg argued that he had never made any claim about the date of the piece – he also told the court that he himself had paid £175 for it. He was successful, and the court ordered the buyers to pay up. More revealing even than this, the ultimate recipient of the plate, a jeweller and silversmith, who had not seen it before, he agreed to buy it, claimed that when he examined the plate he knew it was ‘brand new, made within a year or two’. He said that he ‘had no feeling against Mr Nyburg’. But when cross-examined he was forced to admit that he knew Nyburg as ‘one of a gang of forgers’ with whom he had previously refused to do business.

Subsequent to these intrigues the records become sparse. Judging by auction results, which were recorded in The Times and can be searched at the British Library, the 1920s and 1930s were boom years for Solomon Nyburg and Antique Art Galleries – tens and then hundreds of pounds were regularly spent on a range of antiques. Scientific instruments must have formed a rather small part of the company’s trade, which was focused on jewellery and objets d’art, in particular snuff boxes. In fact, Whipple was still purchasing from Antique Art Galleries into the 1950s. Five of the suspect instruments were purchased by Whipple in 1952, including two of the so-called ‘Mensing fakes’. These transactions were with Henry Nyburg, as Solomon had died in 1950. A letter survives in the A.R. Hall archives at Imperial College, London, dated 6 June 1951, in which Whipple says that he has just been to see Henry Nyburg, who is said to have ‘intimate contacts on the Continent’, and to have just sold a Habermel astrolabe. The company is known to have been wound up in 1964, and its extensive holdings sold over the next few years.

Taken together, the evidence must be recognised as circumstantial with respect to the Whipple Museum’s forgeries. Most striking, perhaps, is the fact that the Nyburgs had experience of electroplating – the process used in the two rhodium-plated silver forgeries we have identified. However, our claim is not that Antique Art Galleries was the source of forgeries – rather we wish to highlight the implicit and explicit claims made by the Nyburgs themselves that the authenticity of objects was not necessarily a priority.

Conclusions

Following the trail of Antique Art Galleries has allowed us to uncover a number of additional composites and forgeries, and to make a tentative foray into the complex task of piecing together networks of collectors, restorers, dealers and forgers who operated in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The clandestine and quotidian nature of these networks makes them exceptionally hard to reconstruct, and the sheer number of different kinds of forgery, imitation, replica and composite only adds to the confusion. Forgeries certainly passed

Fig. 8a,b: ‘Mensing fakes’, after Erasmus Habermel, sold as such by Christie’s in 2011, and now in the collections of the Science Museum, London. Above: hour-conversion table (inv. no. 2012-33); below: sundial (inv. no. 2012-32).
through the hands of a number of the era's best known scientific instrument dealers, including Gertrude Hamilton (trading as 'Mercator'), Percy Webster, and Antique Art Galleries.\(^{37}\) But knowing which parties amongst this diverse network were doing the deceiving, and which were being deceived, is very difficult to assess. One thing is for sure – the web linking fake scientific instruments to major museum collections encompasses more than the notorious Anton Mensing milieu.

It is also important to note that the problem has not gone away. The methodology deployed by Price, which relied upon the marshalling of multiple corroborating strands of evidence, has become above all the purview of curators and especially experts in the antiques trade, for whom the detection of forgeries has remained a direct professional concern. Would-be fine instrument experts by Erasmus Habermel. \(^{1}\) Derek J. Price, ‘Fake Antique Scientific Instruments’, *Papers of the Museum of the History of Science* 2, No. 7 (1987), pp. 380–94. See also W. J. Mörzer Bruyns, ‘Frederik Muller & Co and Anton Mensing’, *Quaerendo* 43 (2004), pp. 211–39.

3. Ibid.

4. On Mensing see Mörzer Bruyns (note 3), and ‘The Amsterdam Scheepvaartmuseum and Anton Mensing: The scientific instruments’, *Journal of the History of Collections*, 7 (1995), pp. 235–41. Another important collection with a Mensing connection underwent many transformations over their lifetimes; on the other, traces of provenance and alteration should not be removed in order to get closer to the untainted original. Outright forgeries lie on a continuum with the most carefully provenanced survival, and in both cases it is the life-history of the instrument that interests us. In a few cases we can identify the source and method of forgery, but in many more cases we cannot – here the history of the trade and tastes in collecting must step in. A similar situation holds for the matter of blame, but here we are further from certainty: perhaps only in the fascinating case of Lloyd Evans Williams – a convicted forger who made instruments in the 1970s - can we claim to know something like the whole story of a group of fakes.\(^{40}\) So our purpose should be to remain open with regard to the question of authenticity and inquisitive with regard to the question of responsibility. In spite of the difficulties of interpretation these objects present, one thing is certain: the case of fake antique scientific instruments remains an open one.

**Acknowledgments**

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**Notes and References**


Fig. 9 R.S. Whipple purchased this very crude dial in 1935 for 10 shillings. Despite carrying the inscription “Tempus Fugit 1659” it is quite obviously a modern imitation in the ‘antique’ style. Given the price paid, R.S. Whipple presumably recognised it as such, but we can only guess at his motivations for adding it to his collection. Image © Whipple Museum of the History of Science, University of Cambridge (Wh.0794).


8. Mensing himself was exonerated by Mörzer Bruyns, who writes in his 2004 article (op. cit., note 3) that ‘there is no reason to believe in Mensing’s personal involvement’ with the fakes (p. 211).

9. Of course, another method is to look at the work of lesser known collectors. See, for example, the fascinating recent treatment of David H.H. Felix: Julian Holland, 'The David H.H. Felix Collection and the Beginnings of the Smithsonian’s Museum of History and Technology', *eRilinearbousse*, 25 (2015), pp. 1–18.


11. Ibid., p. 115.


17. We are extremely grateful for John’s considerable contributions and his ongoing collaboration, as well as his continued insights into the lessons that can be drawn from X-ray fluorescence analysis of metal instruments. Some of John’s important work in this field, and details of his technical setup, can be found in: John Davis and Michael Lowne, ‘An early English astrolabe at Gonville & Caius College, Cambridge, and Walter of Elveden’s Kalendarium’, *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, 46 (2015), pp. 257–290; John Davis, ‘A royal English medieval astrolabe made for use in northern Italy’, *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, 48 (forthcoming Feb. 2017).

18. Only the compass-box of Wh.0781 is certainly old brass; the remainder of the instrument may post-date its purported maker, Johan Simon Lubach. Bryden (ibid., no. 367) and Price (1958, p. 368) both accept Wh.1147 as genuine; however the rete is purely decorative and recent XRF analysis suggests that only the mater of the instrument is original (dated 1122 AH = 1710 AD), with the plates, rete, alidade, and inset shackles compass all modern replacements.

19. Wh.1144 and 1145 were identified as recent imitations by D. J. Bryden, see his *Standards and Related Instruments: Whipple Museum of the History of Science Catalogue 6* (Cambridge, 1988), nos 388 (Wh.1144) and 387 (Wh.1145). Recent XRF analysis corroborates this assessment and suggests a modern date of manufacture for both (probably twentieth century).


23. It is of course possible for a dealer to polish and electroplate a genuine antique silver object. In this instance the range of corroborating evidence suggesting forgeries, combined with the purity of the silver used, make this highly unlikely.


25. Whipple paid Webster £3 in 1925 for an inclining dial (Wh.0226) bearing the signature of George Adams Snr., later identified by David Bryden as a forged inscription added to a cheap nineteenth-century instrument. See Bryden (1988), no. 377.


29. Found online at www.delcampe.net; unfortunately the listing for the receipt, which was being offered for sale, has since been deleted.


31. The sole copy recorded on WorldCat is held at the Grollier Club, New York. Incidentally, research could profitably be undertaken into Puttick and Simpson, who were pioneering in the scientific instrument trade – Lewis Evans’ annotated copies of relevant auction catalogues are held at the Museum for the History of Science, Oxford. For an account of the firm see James Coover, *Music at Auction: Puttick and Simpson (of London)*, 1794–1971 (Warren MI, 1988).

32. The records are at the National Archives: ‘Company No: 95790; Nyburg and Sheraton Ltd. Incorporated in 1907. Dissolved before 1916’, reference BT 31/12196/95790.

33. *The Times*, 9 March 1909, p. 3. At this trial another witness, one Mr Rochelle Thomas, spoke for the genuineness of the snuff-box. The snuff-box must have been executed by a great artist,’ he said. ‘It was unmistakably genuine… The box spoke for itself. No evidence is so good as the evidence that cannot speak.’ The Christie’s expert, meanwhile, dodged all questions, saying that he was an auctioneer, not
an expert.

34. *The Times*, 22 June 1901, p. 17. All quotations are from this reference.


36. See https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/43464/page/8765/data.pdf


39. We are aware that the terminology surrounding fakes/forgeries is itself problematic. Following Price, we have not been strict in our usage. Gerard Turner, for instance, proposed that the term ‘fake’ should refer to instruments that have been amended for the purposes of deception (for example when a false signature has been added); ‘forgery’ would then mean something more when a false signature has been added); to instruments that have been amended for proposed that the term ‘fake’ should refer in our usage. Gerard Turner, for instance, proposed that the term ‘fake’ should refer to instruments that have been amended for the purposes of deception (for example when a false signature has been added); ‘forgery’ would then mean something more fundamental - an instrument made from scratch to deceive. However, this introduces a distinction that does not reflect common usage and is hard to deploy consistently. It also does not solve the further problem that there are countless other classes of what we could most broadly term ‘false’ instruments.


**Current and Future Events**

Details of future events, meetings, exhibitions, etc. should be sent to the Editor. For up-to-date information of Society’s events, see the SIS website, www.sis.org.uk.

**Friday 10-Sunday 19 March 2017, Maastricht, the Netherlands**
TEFAF Maastricht fair of art and antiques including some of the top dealers in scientific instruments.

**Sunday 30 April 2017, London UK (cancelled)**
Spring Antique Scientific Instrument Fair at the Double Tree by Hilton, 92 Southampton Row, London WC1 has been cancelled because of refurbishment of the venue. The next fair will be on **Sunday 22 October 2017**, from 10 am to 3pm. For more about the fair click on scientificfair.blogspot.com

**Friday 19-Sunday 21 May 2017, Baltic Trip**
Provisional Programme: Friday: am: delegates arrive at Hamburg airport and travel to Rostock to check into hotel; 12 noon: visit astronomical clock in Marienkirche in Rostock; pm: coach out to Bad Doberan to see surviving clock face in Münster (Minster) of Bad Doberan; group lunch in Bad Doberan, ride on narrow-gauge railway, explore Bad Doberan, tea break, coach back to Rostock in the evening. Saturday: am: coach to Stralsund; visit Stralsund Museum to see Löwen Collection (coffee break included); 12 noon: visit astronomical clock in Nikolaikirche in Stralsund; group lunch in Stralsund; pm: coach on to Greifswald, visit Pomeranian Museum to see collection of Caspar David Friedrich paintings; tea break, return by coach to Rostock evening. Sunday: am: coach out to Wismar, visit Wismar town square, coffee break, back on coach to Lübeck; 12 noon: Visit modern reconstruction of the astronomical clock in the Marienkirche in Lübeck, delegates to find their own lunch, explore Lübeck UNESCO world heritage site; pm: either: delegates to make their own way from Lübeck to Hamburg and fly home from Hamburg airport, or: group coach transfer to Hamburg airport.

Late interest to be expressed to the Executive Officer asap.

**Sunday 25 and Monday 26 June 2017 Summer event and Annual General Meeting**
On the **Sunday** morning visit to Combe Mill (www.combemill.org), the original sawmill and workshop of the Blenheim Palace Estate, followed by the AGM (11.30-12.30). In the afternoon visit to either the Pitt Rivers Museum (www.prm.ox.ac.uk) or the Museum of the History of Science (www.mhs.ox.ac.uk). On **Monday** visit to Waddesdon Manor (waddesdon.org.uk), the original sawmill and workshop of the Blenheim Palace Estate, followed by the AGM (11.30-12.30). In the afternoon visit to either the Pitt Rivers Museum (www.prm.ox.ac.uk) or the Museum of the History of Science (www.mhs.ox.ac.uk). On **Monday** visit to Waddesdon Manor (waddesdon.org.uk), leaving by coach at 9.20 and departing at 3.00 pm. For details see the flyer in this *Bulletin*. Please complete the enclosed booking form and return it to the Executive Officer by 7th May 2017 at the latest.

**Sunday 10-Friday 15 September 2017, Annual Conference South Wales**
For the very exciting programme see the flyer in this *Bulletin*. **Anyone who would still like to express a late interest in Wales should get in touch with the Executive Officer asap.**

**Friday 10 November 2017, London, UK**
The 5th Turner Memorial Lecture will be delivered by Dr Silke Ackermann at the Society of Antiquaries, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1J 0BE. Lecture title to be announced.