

Trades, guilds and the regulation of the crafts

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The rise of the industries carried by the refugees led the Geneva authorities to organise the trades. The craftsmen of a given trade were progressively grouped into *maitris* (guilds), equipped with regulations that laid down the conditions of apprenticeship, access to master status, quality standards and professional discipline.¹ The goldsmiths, whose work involved precious metals, were subject to particular supervision, because fraud on the fineness of metals threatened the confidence of buyers. Watchmaking, which developed at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century, received regulations of its own in turn.²

These regulations pursued several objectives. They guaranteed the quality of products and protected the reputation of the city on external markets. They framed the training of apprentices and ensured the transmission of know-how. They limited competition, sometimes to the detriment of newcomers. And they gave the authorities a means of controlling a large artisan population.

The history of Geneva watchmaking illustrates the way in which an industry born of the reception of refugees could become a pillar of the city's economy and identity. It also shows the importance of a reputation for quality, protected by rules and controls. The *Poinçon de Genève* (Geneva Seal), instituted at the end of the nineteenth century to certify certain watches produced in the canton, continues this tradition.³

The parallel with the financial centre is direct. A financial centre that sells trust must protect the quality of its services through professional rules, controls and sanctions. Training requirements, the codes of conduct of professional associations, self-regulatory organisations and supervision by the authorities today perform a function comparable to that of the guilds of former times. Like them, they can also become barriers to entry, which justifies constant attention to their proportionality.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Horlogerie” (Fallet, Veyrassat): the watchmakers’ guild was created in 1601, the chain-makers joining it in 1690; Fondation de la Haute Horlogerie, “Genève, une immense Fabrique de montres” (hautehorlogerie.org): the watchmakers separated from the goldsmiths’ guild in 1601, with a minimum apprenticeship of five years; the Encyclopédie (1757) attributes more than 5,000 people to watchmaking, and Geneva exported more than 60,000 watches a year around 1790. ↩
2. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Horlogerie”: watchmakers’ corporation created in 1601, corporations of case-makers (1698) and engravers (1716); division of labour in place from 1660. ↩
3. Poinçon de Genève, “Provenance” (poincondeneve.ch): Geneva law on the optional inspection of watches proposed on 6 November 1886 by the Council of State; the Bureau de contrôle is “responsible for affixing the official seal to watches presented by manufacturers established in Geneva”; current legal basis: law I 1 25; management entrusted to TimeLab (Les Acacias). ↩

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