Octant
Janet Taylor, 1845-1860
1996-1-0141
Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments
© President and Fellows of Harvard College

Octants, like this one, were popular navigational tools used by 18th and 19th century mariners while at sea to determine latitude by observing the height of celestial bodies. The design of this octant is typical for its time, but it is exceptional in one very important way - its maker was a woman. Janet Taylor (1804-1870) was a 19th century English maverick in the field of celestial navigation. In addition to an instrument maker, she was prolific writer and astute astronomer, teacher, inventor, compass adjuster and savvy businesswoman, distinguishing herself in a society and professions dominated by men. Still, despite international acclaim for her innovative lunar charts, she was never fully accepted by the elite of the British naval world. Taylor struggled tirelessly to overcome sex and class discrimination, petitioning (with little success) for official government recognition of her many practical contributions to celestial navigation.

Harvard Museums of Science & Culture (HMSC) is a partnership of four Harvard museums that present captivating programming for all ages and a dynamic array of permanent and changing exhibits. HMSC invites you to connect with Harvard University's distinctive collections and vital research on human civilizations, biodiversity, and the history of Earth and science.

Share your creations with us on social media #ColorOurCollections and #HMSCconnects

Continue exploring our museums:
HMSC connects!
Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments
Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East
Harvard Museum of Natural History
Peabody Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology