



Measure for Measure: The Story of Imperial, Metric, and Other Units

Alex Hebra

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From the cubit used by Noah to build the ark to the angstrom in spectroscopy, units of measure have been integral to science and engineering. Throughout history, countless systems of measurement have been devised and then discarded as more precise and more logical systems have come along. While most of the world has adopted the metric system, the United States -- with the curious exception of soda bottles -- adheres to the imperial system, even though the country has officially been a metric nation since 1893, when Thomas Corwin Mendenhall declared metric prototypes the country's "fundamental standards of length and mass." The convenience of the base-ten metric system is undeniable, and so are the costs associated with not converting to metric. Yet, Americans still cling to inches, quarts, and ounces. Clearly, there is more to measurement than logic.

In *Measure for Measure*, Alex Hebra offers a delightfully engaging and instructive history of measurement systems from ancient times to the present, exploring how and why such units as the stadium, the span, and the parsec first came about. Tracing civilization's various efforts to calculate distance, volume, mass, energy, and time, he explains how units of measurement are applied in such fields as mechanical engineering, physics, optics, and astronomy. In particular, Hebra focuses on the development of the metric system, arguing that even the United States will eventually join the worldwide metric community. Deeply informed and imaginatively told, *Measure for Measure* chronicles humanity's imperfect search for the perfect system with which to quantify reality.

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