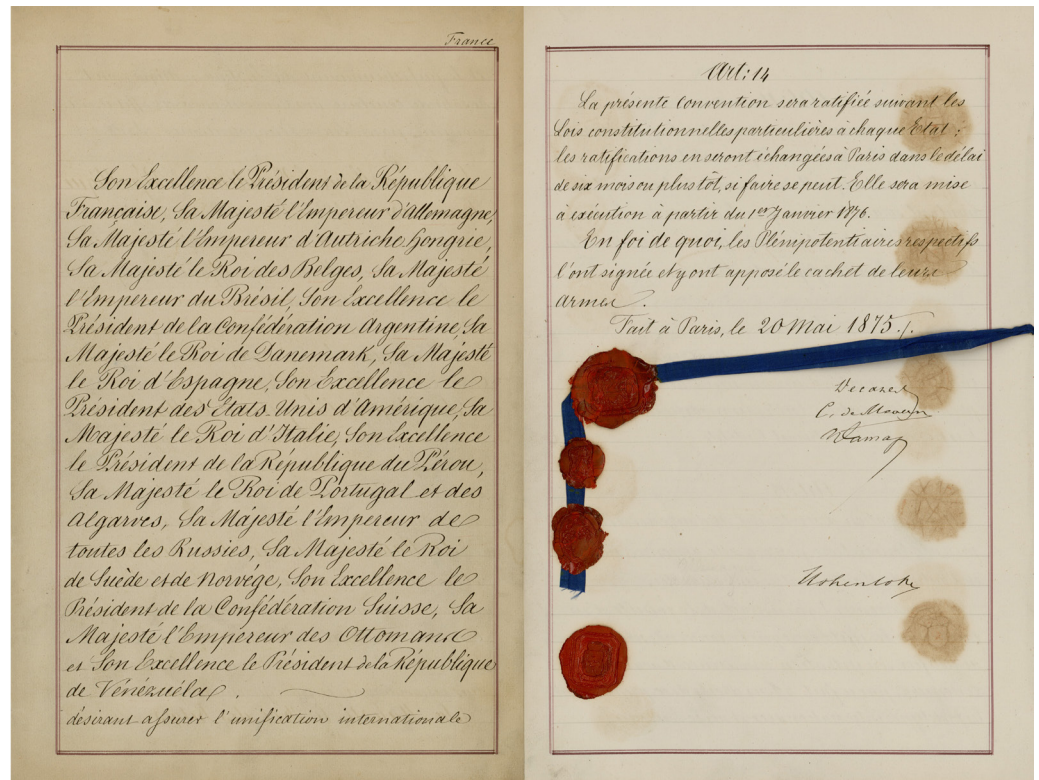


↳ THE
REEDUCATION
OF EYES, 1870S

EMANUELE
LUGLI



The Meter Convention of 1875, signed by seventeen heads of state, including "His Majesty the King of Italy" (Sa Majesté le Roi d'Italie) and "His Majesty the Emperor of the Ottomans" (Sa Majesté l'Empereur des Ottomans). French Ministry of Foreign Affairs at 37 Quai d'Orsay, Paris. Bureau international des poids et mesures, BIPM. Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères – La Courneuve.

Sometimes dates do not reveal that much besides providing a convenient, if misleading, sense of beginning.

This seems to be the case for May 20, 1875—the date of the much-celebrated metric convention, when seventeen countries (including the Ottoman Empire and Italy) agreed to adopt the metric system to spur commerce and facilitate technological cooperation. The date is often heralded as an important steppingstone in the history of globalization, but it is now clear that the event was mostly a diplomatic gesture since the signatory countries had already adopted the new standard. The architects of the Italian states were forced to use it under Napoleon's rule and extended its employment even after his exile, pleased as they were to finally rely on a standard that enabled to overcome regional divisions. In 1861, with the unification of the peninsula, the meter became the official standard of the new nation of Italy. The Ottoman Empire adopted it in 1869, retiring the arşın (ني شرا), the length employed by architects until then.

So, the 1875 meeting simply acknowledged practices that had already been endorsed by the individual governments and hardly marked a new beginning. Changing measurement, however, was hard: it required the rewiring of the brains of all the communities that make up a nation. Eyes had to be re-educated, too, since measurements are not just quantitative descriptors of the real, but epistemological tools, the very filters by which reality is experienced. And once the perceptual modules changed, so did the buildings and the shapes of cities. Doorframes widened, floors raised: everything adjusted to the divisions and the multiples of the new system. The process was far from smooth. Many people put up a fight, and both countries went through decades of resistance since changing measurement is always a change of the self.

About the author

Emanuele Lugli is Assistant Professor at Stanford University, where he researches the history of technology and the politics of measurement. His latest book is *The Making of Measure and the Promise of Sameness* (University of Chicago Press, 2019).