

# Horology in Art 34

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

**H**ow could I resist? Several years ago at a local antiques auction, an original copy of Howard Pyle's 1887 *The Wonder Clock* was offered, and I was the sole bidder. I knew nothing about the book or the author, but the title was enough. Only when I got the book home did I learn that Pyle (1853–1911) was one of America's celebrity illustrators, known as the father of modern American magazine illustration. My book featured not only dazzling artwork by Pyle but also 24 stories, one for each hour of the day, adapted by him from traditional European folktales.

A hero to Norman Rockwell and greatly admired by Vincent Van Gogh, Pyle adorned books by Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and many others. Breaking with stiff traditional academic guidelines, he developed new techniques for depicting lighting, movement, and feelings. In addition to his work on fantasy and legends, he was deeply interested in scenes from American history. Commissioned by *Scribner's Magazine* to produce paintings for Henry Cabot Lodge's serialized stories on the American Revolution, he portrayed famous battles and also this 1898 candlelit view of Thomas Jefferson penning our Declaration of Independence.

Although Pyle sought historical accuracy, as well as capturing the emotional power of the moment, the tall clock in this large oil painting does not have a known connection to Jefferson and is of an unlikely and unusual style. The bonnet and painted dial are appropriate, but the top-heavy curved swelling of the case trunk is unfamiliar. Lower details are obscured in Jefferson's shadow.

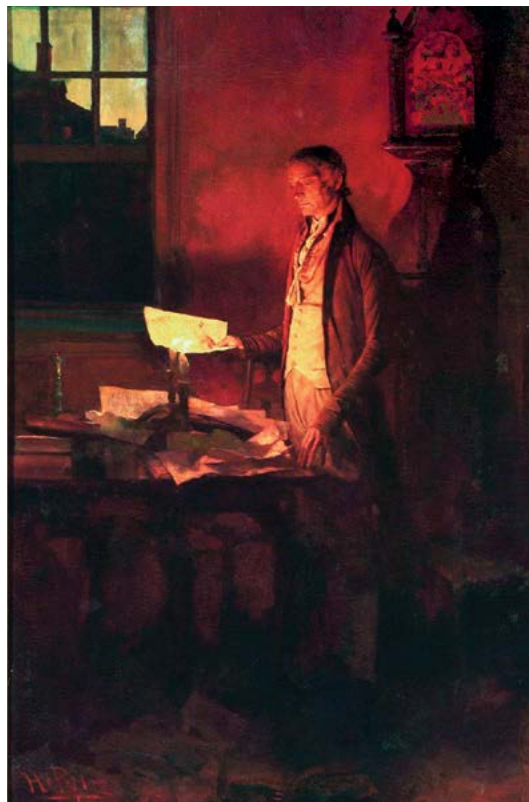
We do know of two tall clocks with Jefferson provenance, but not from the time of the Revolution. In 1778 he ordered an astronomical clock from David Rittenhouse but never got it. In 1812 Philadelphia maker Thomas Voigt, son of famed horologist Henry Voigt whom Jefferson knew, finally made him one, which now is a cherished possession of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. We also know of a more plain tall clock made in 1803 by Benjamin Ferris (dial signed Thomas Dring) that probably stood in the Monticello kitchen. Simon Willard was a friend of Jefferson's who produced a turret clock on Jefferson's order for the University of Virginia, but he made him no domestic clocks.

Plans already are commencing for a future NAWCC Symposium at Philadelphia's brand-new Museum of the American Revolution. We are grateful that Howard Pyle's painting, in which a tall clock witnessed one of our nation's most important moments, offers an ideal illustration for the proposed theme: "Horology and the American Revolution."

## About the Author

Bob Frishman has repaired, restored, collected, sold, and researched antique timekeepers since 1980. His business, Bell-Time Clocks,

is based in Andover, MA. He lectures regularly about the history, science, and culture of mechanical timekeeping, he has authored many articles for the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*, and he can be reached via [www.bell-time.com](http://www.bell-time.com). He is an NAWCC Fellow, Chair of the Ward Francillon Time Symposium Committee, and a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers.



**Figure 1.** *Thomas Jefferson Writing the Declaration of Independence, 1898*, Howard Pyle (1853–1911), oil on canvas, 36-1/4" x 24" (92.1 x 61 cm), Delaware Art Museum, Museum Purchase, 1912.