

Horology *in* Art

by Bob Frishman (MA)

Unlike Jacques-Louis David's 1812 metaphorical painting of Napoleon, which was the subject of my first feature, this circa 1817 family portrait is neither by a world-renowned artist nor of people recognized outside the quaint New England town of Bolton, Massachusetts. *The Peckham-Sawyer Family* was painted by portraitist Robert Peckham, whose only famous subject was John Greenleaf Whittier.

Strangely, Whittier never saw his finished portrait, but was skeptical about its quality –he later recalled Peckham as “eminently artless.” These words are included in a lengthy article about Peckham by Laura C. Luckey in the September 1988 issue of *The Magazine Antiques*, which is the source of much information included here.

Many other citizens of the time must not have agreed with Whittier. Peckham was not an itinerant folk artist using strong colors and bold drawing to overcome lack of skill. His style was derived from the academic tradition, and he created many well-executed portraits, ranging from 1809, when he was 24 years old, to Whittier's, done in 1833, to the early 1850s when he worked in his Worcester studio as an accomplished painter of “likenesses.” He also was a Congregational church deacon in Westminister, Massachusetts, but eventually was excommunicated for his ardent support of abolition.

Still a young man when he executed this 27"x32" oil on canvas, Peckham may have painted it as a memento of mourning for his young daughter Elizabeth, shown at her mother's knee, who had recently died. The shutters are closed and faces are sad. Because this painting descended through generations of the family before entering the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the names of nearly everyone present are known.

Also known is the name of the maker of the longcase clock towering in the corner. Different from Peckham's unadorned portraits, the scene features many domestic details. In the parlor of Peckham's wife's family home, a house still standing at 698 Main Street, just a few doors from the Bolton Historical Society, “John Barton, Marlboro” is legible on the white dial of a Roxbury-style case. A maker of this name is recorded, but a birth date of 1808 would rule him out for this 1817 setting, and the clock's whereabouts are unknown.



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While Robert Peckham faithfully recorded an event of personal importance, he also provided an important historical record from middle-class New England life in the early nineteenth century. Longcase clocks were significant possessions as well as symbols of prosperity and stability, and we are fortunate to have this artwork to study and appreciate.

About the Author

Bob Frishman has restored and sold vintage clocks since 1980 and is a past-president of New England Chapter 8. He is a frequent contributor of articles and newsworthy items to the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*. His “Clocks in Art” program was presented at the 2011 NAWCC National Convention. Bob can be reached at www.bell-time.com.