

Skinner, Marlborough, Massachusetts

Time and Tools

by Bob Frishman
Photos courtesy Skinner

“What the hell.” With that soft outburst, a friend sitting next to me bid again, \$27,000 this time, risking bank account and marriage, he confessed. Luckily or unluckily for him, the phone bidder quickly replied with \$28,000, and the war was over. They were competing for lot 154, a Lemuel Curtis, Concord, Massachusetts, girandole banjo clock. It was the top lot at Skinner’s April 20 sale of clocks, watches, and scientific instruments, which brought a total of \$657,158.

For clock and Americana collectors used to seeing rare Curtis girandoles sell much higher than its final \$34,440 price (with buyer’s premium), it may have seemed like a bargain. Back in 2013 one sold at Christie’s in New York City for \$578,500. The Skinner clock boasted a signed movement, lovely original reverse-painted glass throat tablet, carved giltwood eagle, and parcel-gilt case decoration showing gold at the front but natural mahogany side panels. However, the convex painted glass in the lower door was absent, as were two small rosettes normally at the tops of the brass side arms. The telephone bidder was not identified, but we can expect the clock to resurface someday with the parts expertly replaced. Two lovely examples out of possibly 100 made by Curtis are owned by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where a restorer could view those components in place.

Another possible clock bargain was lot 51, a Joshua Wilder, Hingham, Massachusetts, dwarf clock. In the past these too have sold for ten times the \$6150 (est. \$10,000/15,000) single-bid price paid online by Connecticut collector Howard Cohen. At the preview he and I studied the 49” tall mahogany clock, comparing it to two others in his collection. He liked the unusual calendar feature and the movement’s offset verge and center arbor, but he had concerns about the finish and fact that the rear case door was not hinged. Other experts questioned the case feet, missing movement components, and the painted metal dial that did not have the usual flag-shield spandrels. Cohen looks forward to further research on the clock in his living room.

This was not a major horological sale, with only 189 lots of clocks and watches. Sadly, the cover lot, last in the group, stalled at a \$75,000 reserve, well below the \$100,000/150,000 estimate. Standing 8’ tall, the circa 1880 Tiffany astronomical master regulator was a rare and imposing timekeeper, maybe too rare and imposing. Actually produced in Tiffany’s shop, as opposed to most Tiffany-signed products made elsewhere, it had multiple dials and indicators, but it looked to me more like a 1960s IBM mainframe computer than a late 19th-century antique. Oddly, it was powered by mainsprings, not the usual descending weights that provide more even power for most true regulators.

More than half of the horology total, 132 lots, were watches and watch movements. The first 36 were collected by John E. Gelson, the last chairman/CEO of Hamilton Watch Company, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He died in 2005 at age 74. He had saved and documented rare pieces after the company closed. Room, Internet, and absentee bidders paid well above estimates for rare and experimental models, some marked “sample.” Pocket watches by famous European makers also did well, including several by top Swiss firm Patek Philippe & Co.

An unusual quartz-movement gold Rolex Cellini model, among a small number of wristwatches on offer, sold to an online bidder for \$3936 (est. \$1000/1500).

Navigational timepieces were represented by seven chronometers and deck watches. Two-day and eight-day boxed chronometers by famous English maker Dent brought \$4305 and \$5228 respectively on \$3000/5000 and \$4000/6000 estimates. Most interesting by far was a circa 1840 double-balance two-day experimental chronometer by another famed London maker, Charles Frodsham, which sold for \$7995.

I contacted two relevant experts about that one. Jonathan Betts, British author of the new definitive book *Marine Chronometers at Greenwich* (2018), had not personally examined the chronometer but noted, “With that dial it would surely have originally been rated to sidereal time and would probably have been used by an astronomer or possibly someone requiring sidereal time for survey purposes.” Anthony Randall, author of *The Time Museum Catalogue of Chronometers* (1992), wrote then about this

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timepiece as No. 67 in his book, and he added in an e-mail to me from Switzerland, “The arrangement of two balances could hardly be worse from the point of view of air resistance and atmospheric pressure changes. Charles Frodsham certainly had some queer ideas....”

This auction should have included “tools” in its title. Hundreds of early European hand tools, lots 190 to 540, were offered singly and in small groups from the collection of Laurent Adamowicz. Now downsizing, he lectured at an evening preview and provided copies of his self-published 2017 softbound book *Codes & Symbols of European Tools: Roman Period to 19th Century*. He has researched not only the uses and provenance of the tools but the often overlooked markings indicating trade, fraternal, religious, symbolic, secret, and Classical associations. From Roman Empire iron nails to 18th-century French Eucharistic bread irons to woodcarving chisels like the ones exhibited by Samuel Addis at London’s 1851 Crystal Palace, the sale offered a thorough education in the subject.

Readers should know that tools are just his hobby. Born in France, Adamowicz is a Senior Fellow of the Advanced Leadership Initiative at Harvard University. His two TED talks, watchable on YouTube, summarize his serious battles against obesity and excessive sugar consumption. He now has me closely scrutinizing those food package labels that he is seeking to augment with bolder, simpler warnings about harmful ingredients. Back to his tool collection: despite many lots that were passed or stalled at high reserves, he wrote afterward that he was very pleased by the results, and he thanked Skinner for finding new homes for most of his treasures.

If not for a competing tool auction elsewhere, and electronic glitches, some tool lots might have garnered more bids or not been passed. At the preview I met a New Hampshire tool dealer who wrote down lots to bid on online. She could not attend the sale because on that same Friday there was a major tool auction by Martin J. Donnelly. Many other important tool dealers were there with her in Nashua, New Hampshire. Afterward she sadly reported that her attempts to register and bid on Friday were frustrated by weak cell phone signals and problems on the Skinner site with loading pages and placing bids.

Not surprisingly, with such a massive cataloging task for hundreds of obscure tools, I had reports of some inaccuracies. I recently employed the services of James Reid-Cunningham of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and contacted him about a few lots of bookbinding tools. Formerly at the Boston Athenaeum, he describes his work now as “a bookbinder and conservator specializing in the conservation of rare books and manuscripts.” He wished that the photography had better shown the tool faces, and he puzzled over lot 415’s four “creasers and polishers.” After some checking around, he reported to me that

“the large tool is a mason’s jointer for raking out old lime mortar when old brickwork or stonework is to be repointed. The small ring-tools are for wood turning. The knife is just a knife.”

“Scientific instruments” in the sale title definitely was appropriate. Coming up late in the sale, they included eye-candy devices such as microscopes, barometers, telegraphs, model engines, compasses, gauges, and some whose names and uses—thermopile, manometer, clinometer, circumferentor, etc.—required research. Anatomy and phrenology could be studied with body, organ, and head models on offer. The back cover lot was a lacquered brass 19th-century German craniometer that performed detailed skull measurements. Against a \$4000/6000 estimate, it swelled to a \$12,300 final price.

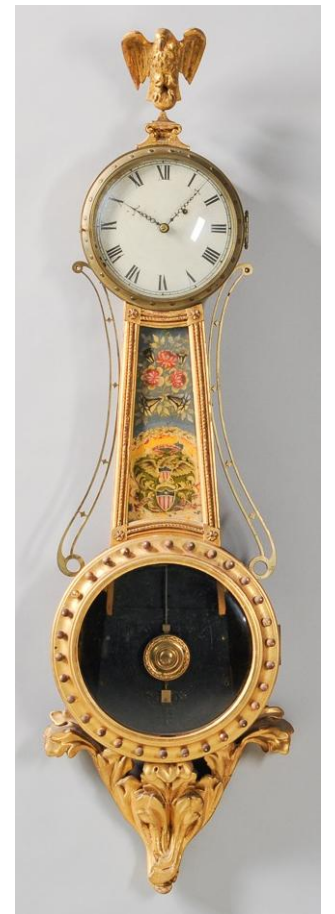
I and others questioned why this many-hour live, 728-lot sale was not shortened by sending lesser lots to the kind of online auction now common at Skinner. In a recently published interview, Skinner CEO Karen Keane praised Skinner’s online format, especially for reaching new and younger buyers who shop 24/7. For this auction, however, Skinner wanted to keep all the tools together for easier access by European tool buyers and not make those potential bidders search two catalogs.

This sale was the department’s first one managed by Jonathan Dowling following the departure of Robert Cheney, his boss and mentor, after his last sale in the fall. It occurred to me that “Jonathan” seems to be a popular name in today’s horology: Snellenburg and Darracott at Bonhams; Betts, Flower, and Carter in the U.K.; Burford at Heritage. For American antiques in general, there are Prown (Chipstone) and Fairbanks (formerly at the MFA, Boston), who both also have professional interests in old clocks.

Dowling’s actual title seemed unclear on auction day. In the printed catalog he was “specialist”; on the Skinner website he was “Director Pro Tem”; and a brief announcement in the April 13 issue of *Antiques and The Arts Weekly* stated that this 17-year Skinner veteran was now “director of clocks, watches and scientific instruments.” For the third option, I joined others who congratulated him, complimented his work on this sale, and wished him well in the future. His department’s next auction will be in October.

For more information, go to (www.skinnerinc.com).

Not shown, a Joshua Wilder dwarf clock sold for \$6150 on a single bid, but there was a bit more action on this tall clock by the Hingham, Massachusetts, Quaker, that sold in the room for \$13,530, below the \$15,000/25,000 estimate, which reflects the overall depressed state of the tall clock market. I would have paid real money for the Walter H. Durfee & Co. letter accompanying the clock. Durfee of Providence, Rhode Island, played a major role in the revival of American interest in tall clocks in the late 19th century.

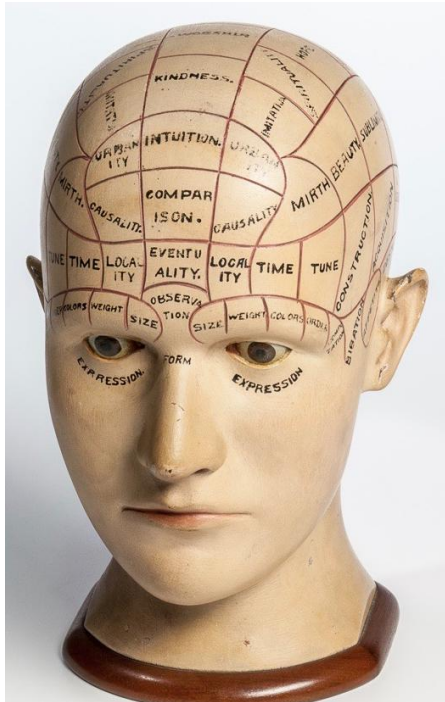


Last year we celebrated the 200th anniversary of Lemuel Curtis’s 1817 patent for his girandole wall clock. Some assert that this is the most beautiful American clock design. The auction’s top lot, this Curtis was missing its convex églomisé glass but still made \$34,440; the phone bidder did not agree with the \$7000/9000 estimate.





Rittenhouse is a famous name in the clock world, referring mainly to David Rittenhouse of Philadelphia in the late 18th century. Both he and his brother Benjamin did much more than make clocks. Jeffrey Lock in Ohio has been researching and restoring important compasses from this period. He relayed the following about this vernier compass, stating that it is "one of the earliest-known compasses showing a collaboration by both Benjamin Rittenhouse and William Lukens Potts. Potts joined Benjamin as his apprentice in 1786." On a \$2000/3000 estimate, it sold for \$5535. Frishman photo.



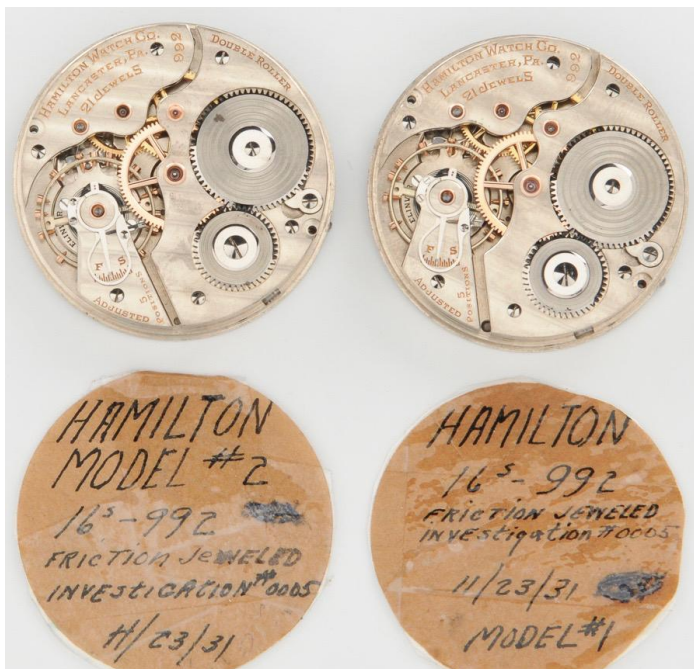
This carved wood New England phrenology head, full size and painted, made \$5535, just an eyebrow above its \$3000/5000 estimate. Nineteenth-century psychiatrists assessed human mental characteristics based on cranial dimensions and locations.



Not all timekeepers tick, and some need sunlight. Until relatively recently, clocks and watches were corrected with sundials, and sometimes that sundial was portable, although it needed to align with a location's latitude. This late 17th-century silver pocket sundial by Michael Butterfield, Paris, brought \$1845, a shadow beyond the \$1000/1500 estimate.



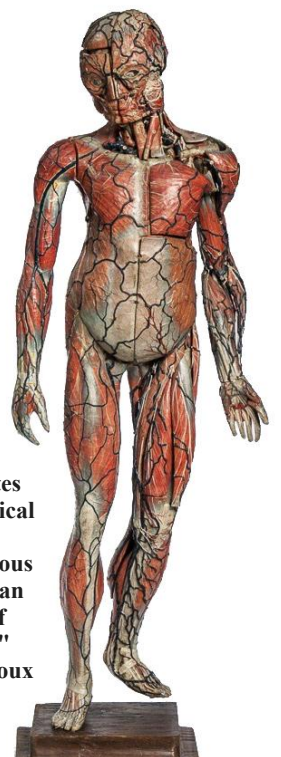
In June 2005 clock auctioneer Bob Schmitt chose not to sell his own collection of high-end antique skeleton clocks but instead consigned them to Christie's in New York. I was present when his English three-train eight-bell quarter-chiming Westminster Abbey frame by William Frederick Evans of Handsworth sold for \$36,000. This similar circa 1870 model by John McConnell, Belfast, in comparable fine condition, sold here for \$9840 (est. \$10,000/12,000). It is a great time to buy.



The auction opened with Hamilton Watch Company material collected by John E. Gelson, the firm's final chairman/CEO. This pair of watch movement samples and related handwritten factory tags whirred past the \$300/400 estimate to sell to an online bidder for \$6150. "Adjusted 5 Positions" indicates that accuracy was assured no matter how the watch was sitting or dangling. The 21 jewels were not bling but served as low-friction long-wearing bearings for the gear shafts.



In chapter 15 of tool conignor Laurent Adamowicz's book *Codes & Symbols of European Tools*, he discussed how ancient armorers often incorporated spiral imagery to symbolize life and death. He described this French iron ax, dated 1613, as one of the oldest-known dated tools, complete with its original elm handle. Like many tools in the sale, it sold under its aggressive estimate. Estimated at \$5000/7000, it brought \$2952.



The Skinner catalog notes that such full-body medical teaching models were needed because of religious objections to using human corpses and shortages of corpses. This French 34" model by Dr. Louis Auzoux (1797-1880), circa 1847, sold for \$11,070 (est. \$8000/12,000).



This Mattheus Greuter (1564-1638) celestial table globe, made in Rome circa 1636, was among the sale's top lots. The 10" globe, on a wood base, features zodiac signs and cartography based on heavenly observations by Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe. It went beyond its \$10,000/15,000 estimate to sell for \$17,220.

A nice Rhode Island couple at the preview asked my advice on this circa 1890 walnut Waterbury Regulator No. 4. It looked fine to me, and they were glad to pay \$399.75 (est. \$600/800) for a large wall clock.





There were just three vintage Chelsea clocks but only one that also bore the name of a Quincy shipbuilding company on its dial. A colleague who lives in Quincy, Massachusetts, asked me to bid for him up to \$400 on this 1911 engine room timepiece, within the \$300/500 estimate. We missed out when it sold online for \$2091.



Most such pocket watches were Swiss, but this one was from Leroy et fils, Paris. An 18k gold chronograph, the doctor's watch could quickly time your pulse while you wondered how much that watch cost him. At Skinner, Doc would have paid \$2829, as did the online bidder not restrained by the \$1000/1500 estimate.



Among the sale's small number of wristwatches was this Hamilton 17-jewel "Jump Hour," an early digital. A similar Illinois case was thrown in. It all brought \$2706. The \$300/400 estimate was typically low.



The eyes move on this 19th-century Bradley & Hubbard Connecticut lion clock, and that is why people pay so much for what otherwise is a low-quality novelty. With original paint on its cast-iron body and a \$1500/2500 estimate, it sold to dealer John Delaney in the room for \$2829.



Posing next to the Joshua Wilder tall clock is Jonathan Dowling, who heads up the clocks, watches, and scientific instruments department at Skinner. Frishman photo.

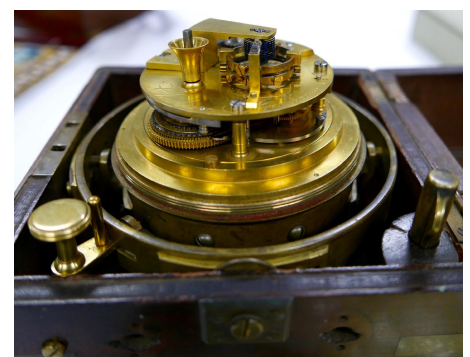
Eight-day marine chronometers are much less common than their two-day cousins, and they usually bring higher prices. Case in point, the Dent two-day in the sale (not shown) brought \$4305; this weekly wind model earned \$5228 (est. \$4000/6000). Dent was one of London's premier clock-making firms, verified by "Chronometer Maker to the Queen" engraved on the silvered dial. The dual-scale thermometer inside the lid is quite unusual.



Clockmaker Nathaniel Mulliken of Lexington, Massachusetts, placed his name circa 1765 on the engraved brass dial of this tall clock. The 88" high cherry case would have been made by an area joiner. West Townsend, Massachusetts, dealer John Delaney, bidding in the room, snagged it for \$9225, no doubt happy to pay less than the \$12,000/18,000 estimate. Frishman photo.



The tool collection was displayed in the Skinner salesroom and conveniently remained on view during the auction. Closest to the camera, facing the podium, was consigner Laurent Adamowicz, who monitored the progress of his deaccessions. Frishman photo.



What made the Charles Frodsham chronometer so rare and interesting was its two balance wheels, visible here, which reportedly did nothing to improve the accuracy of these precision instruments. Needing some costly specialist repairs, it sold for \$7995 (est. \$2000/2500) to an online bidder. In October 2004 when Sotheby's in New York continued to disperse the Time Museum holdings, it had sold for \$5400. Frishman photo.



Among the tools I found most interesting were four Eucharist bread irons used by European town bakers to cook hosts for church masses. This 18th-century iron from the United Kingdom is engraved with "Maria IHS" and a heart, flowers, and a cross, and is 28 1/4" long with 7 3/4" diameter plates. This particular culinary artifact once was owned by Surrealist artist André Breton, whose tool collection numbered in the thousands. The irons brought \$1230 (est. \$1200/1800).



Consigner Laurent Adamowicz spoke at a preview reception about his passion for old European tools. His book is visible on the podium. A voluntary donation for the book will go to his Harvard-based foundation that develops and promotes policies against obesity and poor nutrition. Frishman photo.

Fourteen generations of the Bottle family, from the 16th century to the present, are covered in the Adamowicz book *Codes & Symbols of European Tools*. Living in Kent County, England, they are among the best-known families of artisans. Of horological interest, one Bottle home (still standing in Harrietsham) is known as the "Dial House" because of a large white sundial mounted on the front of the brick house. Six 18th-century family-marked woodworker's tools sold for \$3198 (est. \$3000/5000).

