

Skinner, Marlborough, Massachusetts, and Schmitt Horan & Co., Windham, New Hampshire

Time Times Two: Clocks and Watches at Auction

by Bob Frishman

Photos courtesy Skinner and Schmitt Horan & Co.

Horology buyers had plenty of choices in a pair of October 2020 New England auctions. The results were surprisingly strong for both. Each auction house posted well-illustrated and well-described online catalogs, each offered restricted on-site previews following COVID-19 protocols, each offered many days of online bidding followed by a final active closing period, and each sold fine examples within and above reasonable estimates—not only as expected for luxury vintage wristwatches but also for antique clocks recently in the doldrums. But there the similarities diverged.

Collectors and sellers should be heartened by these signs of strength.

The online Skinner sale of clocks, watches, and scientific instruments was announced via emails and a snail-mailed 16-page printed brochure of highlights. As with the department's previous sale in April, there was no complete printed catalog. The bidding period for the 388 lots was held October 19 to 27 with a timed sequential closing starting at 7 p.m. Eastern time. On the final day by 8 p.m. the remote electronic action was over except for a few final lots of expensive fountain pens and lighters. These were kicked into overtime by bidders' last-minute clicks that added more minutes as an anti-sniping feature.

I reserved a one-at-a-time preview session with Skinner's clocks, watches, and scientific instruments department head, Jonathan Dowling, at Skinner's 81,303-square-foot headquarters in Marlborough. In a small area of the first-floor preview room, watches and tall clocks awaited examination, but my viewing of mantel clocks and other shelf-standing clock lots was done in Dowling's corner section of Skinner's huge storage areas. I could only bear to glance at his antique medical instruments—visually appealing but conceptually appalling—such as trepanning sets, amputation saws, bloodletting and cupping tools, and enema pumps.

Dowling and I discussed bidding strategies that we have observed. Some people bid early, typing in their maximum bid, and let the chips fall. They hope to avoid the emotional overbidding that can take over. Others wait and watch, not wanting to show their hands in hopes that firing in a late bid will be decisive, although at risk of heart overruling head. Dowling thinks it's about 50-50 on the two styles, and he cannot recommend one over the other. Either can offer victory but often brings disappointment.

As an early-style bidder, back at my computer I placed several starting bids and began watching the action, which opened immediately on many lots. Soon I received outbid emails confirming that I was not alone on those lots, and I postponed further bids until the close. On the evening of October 27, I watched those lots and nearly all others climb beyond my limits, fueled in part by the one-third of the winning bidders who were first-time buyers at Skinner. The sale total was \$876,244 (including buyers' premiums).

Skinner's top seller was a circa 1964 Tornek-Rayville TR-900 Dive watch that sold for \$75,000 (est. \$70,000/90,000). These continue to pop up at Skinner, bringing high prices, although probably 1000 were made and they have Swiss "mil-spec" Blancpain movements tweaked to adhere to military buy-American requirements. A second example went unsold, most likely because of its unsigned replaced non-radium dial, making it safer but less collectible. The next-to-top lot was a single-owner Rolex Daytona that sold for \$62,500 (est. \$50,000/70,000). The original owner and consignor had received the watch as a gift from his girlfriend in 1973. I married my girlfriend that same year but got no Rolex.

At Schmitt Horan & Co., the action began nearly a month before the October 24 close. The 316-lot sale had a comprehensive online presentation supplemented by the traditional all-lots-included, full-color printed catalog, with 144 pages this time. Company owner Daniel Horan believes that many of his followers use and expect the full monty, and, just as important, potential consignors can be handed a forever "book" demonstrating how nicely their treasures will be marketed. In the pre-Internet past, far more than 1000 catalogs were printed for each sale; this time around 500 were enough for marketing purposes and for customers still willing



Skinner has offered many Simon Willard (1753-1848) tall clocks over the years (including one that I was high bidder on), and this was a fine example with a mahogany case attributed to Thomas Seymour. The clock's original inside paper label was printed by the famous printer Isaiah Thomas Jr. (1749-1831). Bidders recognized its value, chasing it as expected to \$28,750 (est. \$20,000/30,000).



"Haverhill" imprinted on this John Osgood clock's dial created a bit of confusion about whether it was Massachusetts or New Hampshire since the maker had lived in both places. However, he did his adult clockmaking in New Hampshire, where this cherry-case tall clock is from. He also lived and worked briefly in my town of Andover, Massachusetts. The circa 1800 clock brought \$5313 (est. \$3000/5000). Skinner.



The sale had many Rolex watches for wrists and pockets. Most sold for higher prices than this California dial "Speedking," but they were more familiar and perhaps less interesting except to high-end collectors. Note this dial's combination of Roman and Arabic numbers. The relatively small 30 mm diameter case could be unfashionable for today's male wearers. With repainted dial and replaced crown, the watch still made \$1063 (est. \$200/400). Skinner.

to buy them and not rely just on the online version. Bidders reported that this was the best catalog ever, with big pictures and informative text.

More sharply contrasting with Skinner, Schmitt Horan closed its sale with a live auction that stretched nearly five hours. Daniel Horan, spelled occasionally by staffer Peter Ohl, hammered down each lot, frequently reminding remote watchers that the YouTube feed had a 30-second delay and should not be used if bidding. Nearly all of his bidders had to watch from home, but a small function room at Friendly Red's Tavern in Windham, New Hampshire, was the venue. Adhering to low-occupancy rules, the audience was 14 bid-takers and other workers joined by a few specially invited commission bidders. I was invited too, and as I sat there I remembered that these sales in the past were conducted for much larger crowds in the cavernous exhibition hall of a Manchester, New Hampshire, convention hotel.

Past previews also happened in that huge room in Manchester. Thousands of items were transported by truck from Windham, unloaded and unpacked, and displayed on long lines of folding tables. Then most were repacked and trucked back to Windham when sold to absentee bidders far from the salesroom those days.

Not this time. Because the sale was focused on fewer higher-value pieces, the invitation-only preview could be conducted in Horan's home-based headquarters, listed by Zillow at just 3444 square feet. Between its flagship semiannual auctions, Schmitt Horan now also conducts online-only sales where hundreds of lower-value clocks, watches, tools, and books are sold without fanfare or live bidding. Those recent sales also have produced strong results.

I took advantage of the in-person preview opportunity, viewing cases of watches, steel shelving loaded with clocks, pegboard walls of hanging clocks, and lineups of floor-standers. Crowded into those same domestic rooms were lots for future auctions and sold items still awaiting pickup. One of the invited bidding agents, Rick Merritt of Pennsylvania, brought a truck for his Saturday buys as well as for gathering his previous purchases, providing him more of an incentive to make the long drive and sit through the sale.



“Outbid” changed to “Lost” as this lot closed, shaming me for not trying harder. With its movement plate signed “Effingham Embree / New York No. 441,” this silver pair-cased watch is a scarce American late 18th-century example and includes a watch paper for Evans of Newark inside the case. The movement most likely is English, with Embree’s name engraved as the seller. I determined that the hallmarked case has a 1794 date code, a Chester assay mark, a sovereign head duty mark, placing it in the 1784-98 range, and the initials of case maker John Clifton of Liverpool. The watch sold for \$2000 (est. \$300/500). Skinner.



One of Skinner’s few pre-19th-century watches was this gold enameled key-wind piece by Jean Baptiste Baillon of Paris. Much rarer than later factory-produced timepieces, such early watches found in America usually are English, not French, owing to our Colonial heritage. I wanted this but not at \$3125 (est. \$1000/1500).



Clearly I wasn’t the only one who thought that this Illinois Watch Co. “Piccadilly” watch was attractive. The 14k gold-filled metal and 17-jewel movement were nothing special, but the unusual oval shape and placement of the seconds dial certainly were. It must also have appealed to Dr. F.T. Adams, whose name was engraved on the back. The watch reached \$1063 (est. \$200/300). Skinner.

Walter Durfee of Providence, Rhode Island, is an important name in Colonial Revival American clocks. Perhaps most important was his key role in reintroducing elegant grandfather clocks to Americans after floor-standing clocks had become unfashionable earlier in the 19th century. This mahogany clock by Durfee, however, was his circa 1910 reprise of the lyre-style banjo clock, which also originated a century earlier. Jonathan Dowling said it got the most presale interest, and it sold for \$11,250 (est. \$3000/5000). Skinner.



The oldest clock in the Skinner sale also was a top seller. Sunny Dzik, Boston-based author of *Engraving on English Table Clocks: Art on a Canvas of Brass, 1660-1800* (2019), was the disappointed underbidder. He kindly offered these details: “Benjamin Bell was born in 1634. He rose through the ranks of the Clockmakers’ Company becoming an Assistant (1670), Warden (1678), and Master in 1682. The basket top case and dial are typical of those seen in the last quarter of the 17th century. Bell’s movement has a most unusual, and possibly unique, early version of a mechanism for striking the hours and quarters on demand.” Dr. Dzik’s persistent competitor paid \$21,250 (est. \$4000/6000).



One of the final lots to sell at Skinner was pushed into overtime by repeat late bids. It was not a timekeeper but three Cartier limited-edition fountain pen sets that perhaps were used as Park Avenue stocking-stuffers in late December 2020. The three pens have original boxes, paperwork, and crystal holders. Luckily, the gods have spared me from fountain-pen collecting. These rang up at \$17,500, miles above the pessimistic \$500/700 estimate.

I again placed online bids when offerings first were posted, then I received outbid alerts not only via email but also with dinging text messages. As at Skinner, my lots joined the majority of others that met and exceeded estimate ranges and my maximums. This sale total was \$672,360 (including buyers’ premiums), producing a per-lot average that Dan Horan believes is a record for his sales. Only a small number of items were passed, including some complicated French carriage clocks and framed artworks that were outside the company’s usual offerings. A small group of pleasing folk-art portraits opened the sale but sold well below estimates, reflecting not only a possible mismatch with the horological offerings but also a weak market overall for long-dead unknown subjects by unknown artists.

There were, of course, some poor performers among the clocks too. Floor-standing clocks by E. Howard & Co., Boston, sold well below estimates that in the past would have been considered low themselves. This category has struggled recently, probably because the buyer pool for these big, pricey esoteric clocks is small and saturated. Large-dial Chelsea clocks also are facing the same resistance but may have been hurt here by cataloging inaccuracies pointed out to me by Andrew Demeter, Chelsea clock expert and author of two editions of *Chelsea Clock Company: The First Hundred Years*, the definitive book on the venerable American clock company. Two of these big Chelsea clocks didn’t reach their low estimates.

Regardless of those glitches, Horan told me that this was the strongest sale he can remember, and he believes that his “hybrid” approach greatly contributed. He had the multi-day online-bidding component but married it to a more conventional calling of the sale that averaged about 75 lots per hour. Impatient or busy bidders could simply log in their maximum bids and move on. Real-time computer bidders could watch and click as advancing bids were announced. Phone bidders, now old-fashioned but still present for some important lots, pushed those results substantially higher. And the few room bidders who waved paddles introduced some reality to the mainly virtual proceedings.

The top-selling clock of the Schmitt Horan sale was a 14-day skeleton clock by Silas B. Terry of Connecticut that brought \$24,000. It had been sold at Cottone Auctions in May 2015 for \$10,638.

Horan heard no complaints from former room bidders who might have felt left out. He noted among his absentee bidders many familiar names of regular attendees of past sales, so they continued to participate. However, they (like me) probably missed the socializing and information exchange that made the travel worthwhile and the previews more productive.

Horan explained more of his reasoning for how he conducted this sale. Like Skinner, he has his own proprietary bidding platform. This is operational during the advance-bidding period and the live sale. However, the Invaluable and LiveAuctioneers platforms were

in play too, and they work only in a live setting. He estimates that around 30% of his bids came on those platforms, even though those buyers pay an additional 5% buyer’s premium, and they were active for some of the priciest items. Without those outside auction services, and relying just on his own software and staff, his totals no doubt would have been lower.

Horan revealed that he had 415 bidders registered on his own platform, with an additional 525 on LiveAuctioneers and more than 200 via Invaluable. Those also provided him with many of his growing number of overseas buyers, not only from expected European locales but also from Japan, Tasmania, and places he needed to do an online search for. Using FedEx signature-required special services, he fortunately has not experienced problems with small-item overseas shipments going astray.

Collectors and sellers of horological material should be heartened by these signs of strength, also mirrored in recent clock and watch sales by other auction companies. While I may have to back-pedal—as prices rise—from advising that in a down market it’s a great time to buy vintage tickers, it is more gratifying to write of a reviving demand and appreciation for this segment of the antiques market.

To see online catalogs and sold prices, visit the websites (www.skinnerinc.com) and (<http://schmittthoran.com>).

AUCTIONS



Previewing at Schmitt Horan & Co. headquarters did not require much walking. Arranged in tight quarters by size and roughly in numerical lot order, these clocks could be viewed in a single glance. Note the two big round Chelsea clocks on the top shelf. Frishman photo.



For my “horology in art” collection, I should have portraits of watchmakers, but this one at Schmitt Horan & Co. went beyond my limit. Signed “N. Delins,” an artist I could not identify or date, the painting did not have enough artistic appeal for me to look at on a daily basis, especially with some canvas and gilt frame condition problems. The 31" x 25½" oil on canvas went to an online bidder for \$1320 (est. \$400/600).



Pocket watches sold strongly. Among the top sellers was this small rare crystal plate model, circa 1885, from American Waltham Watch Co., Waltham, Massachusetts. Despite its remade and cracked transparent movement plate, the watch sold to an Invaluable bidder for \$3500 (est. \$1500/2000). Schmitt Horan & Co.



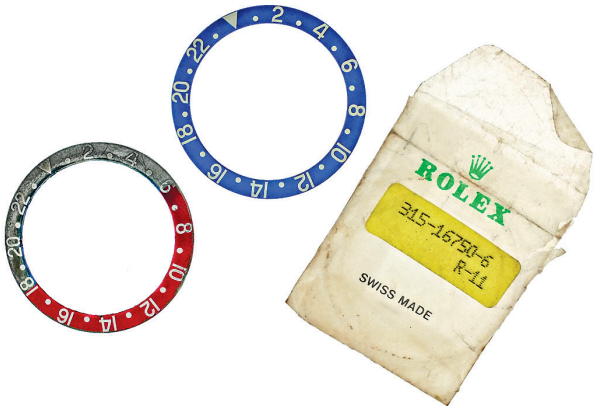
COVID-19 rules for Windham, New Hampshire, restaurants in October specified 50% occupancy limits, and the Schmitt Horan & Co. auction in Friendly Red’s function room seemed to meet the guidelines. I counted 14 auction staffers plus a few bidding agents at work. Daniel Horan is at the podium. Frishman photo.



The costliest clock at Schmitt Horan & Co. was this circa 1850 14-day skeleton clock, under a glass dome, by Silas B. Terry of Connecticut. It had sold previously in 2015 at Cottone Auctions. Very rare and featuring a large seconds beating balance wheel (not pendulum), the skeleton clock went on the phone for \$24,000 (est. \$8000/12,000).



Root beer was my favorite soft drink as a boy, but I doubt its taste mattered to the buyer of this “Root Beer” Rolex GMT Master, nicknamed for its distinctive brown colors. It’s also called the “Clint Eastwood” since he wore this model, which can be seen on his wrist in some films. Many Rolex wristwatches came to Schmitt Horan & Co. via the consigned collection of Edward P. Battoo, and all reached the strong prices we expect in the hot high-end wristwatch market. This 27-jewel watch, ref. 16753, 1979-80, has some extra bracelet links for large wrists and sold to a bidding agent in the room for \$8400 (est. \$5000/7000). That agent was John Kovacik, an expert watchmaker in Little Falls, New York, who also is one of Schmitt Horan & Co.’s principal catalogers.



It was easy to skip over the catalog photo of these two small Rolex GMT bezel inserts, but at least two bidders spotted them and wanted them badly. Such vintage Rolex parts can greatly enhance a watch’s value, as the price of \$14,400 (est. \$400/600) demonstrated. Schmitt Horan & Co.

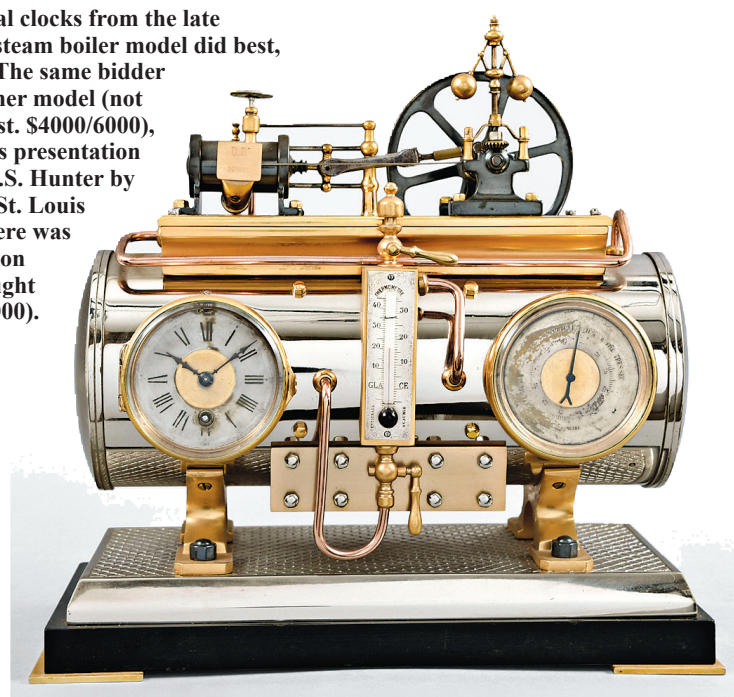


After the first 146 lots of art and watches, we got to the clocks and a big jump in scale. The tower was not included with a circa 1885 tower clock movement, with accessories, by Boston’s George M. Stevens & Co. Shown here is the red-painted cast-iron frame. Cast-iron movements by Stevens still can be found in old buildings around New England. The buyer, with a truck we hope, paid \$7800 (est. \$2000/2500). Schmitt Horan & Co.

Ten Hamilton Watch Co., Lancaster, Pennsylvania, electrics were offered in the sale. Nicholas Manousos, head of the Horological Society of New York, sent me his commentary. "The assortment at this sale of Hamilton Electric wrist watches really stands out to me. They represent a period in the American watchmaking industry that was very innovative and competitive. In 1957, Hamilton was the first brand that commercialized a wristwatch powered by a battery. (Its regulator remained the traditional balance wheel and hairspring arrangement.) A battery-powered wristwatch was space-age technology, and the futuristic asymmetrical cases were very appropriate. Unfortunately for Hamilton, just 3 years later in 1960, Bulova introduced their Accutron tuning fork watches." This "Ventura" style watch, in a 14k gold case, brought \$1200 (est. \$1200/1600). The watch is engraved on the back "R.L. Noonan" with a presentation date of June 1959. Schmitt Horan & Co.



Four French industrial clocks from the late 1800s sold well. This steam boiler model did best, selling on the phone. The same bidder bought a steam hammer model (not shown) for \$14,400 (est. \$4000/6000), perhaps boosted by its presentation plate, "Presented to J.S. Hunter by the Exhibitors of the St. Louis Exposition 1884." There was no similar dedication on this boiler, but it brought \$21,600 (est. \$4000/6000). Schmitt Horan & Co.



Size and scale can be a problem when viewing isolated catalog photos. Somehow I expected this eye-catching Swiss guilloché enamel desk clock to be bigger, so I offer my photo of it on display at the Schmitt Horan & Co. preview. Its small size—5¼" wide—actually is more appealing. Made circa 1920 by Schild & Co., the clock sold to an Invaluable admirer for \$937.50 (est. \$300/400). Frishman photo.

Monumental tubular-chime hall clocks from the Colonial Revival period are in oversupply these days and usually sell at small fractions of their previous values. Occasionally one rises to former heights, as did this top-quality walnut example from London, made probably by J.J. Elliott for the Goldsmiths Company. In the early 20th century it was donated to the Redwood Library and Athenaeum in Newport (not Providence, as stated in the catalog), Rhode Island, which consigned it. The clock sold to a phone bidder for \$10,800 (est. \$3000/4000). Schmitt Horan & Co.



The Schmitt Horan & Co. preview permitted efficient inspections and this opportunity to illustrate a variety of wall-hanging clocks. Among the favorites were the J.C. Brown & Co. hanging lyre timepiece (top row, second from left), \$2280; the Elmer Stennes lyre banjo (top row, second from right), \$3360; the E. Howard No. 14 Regulator (bottom row, center), \$9000; and the Seth Thomas No. 7 Regulator (bottom row, third from right), \$6600. Readers exploring the online catalog can do some self-education detective work to identify the others. Frishman photo.



The oldest clock offered at Schmitt Horan & Co. was this early 18th-century one-hand striking lantern clock sitting on a later wood bracket. More affordable than other clocks of their time, they have hanging weights and a swinging pendulum that are tempting attractions for cats and small children. This lantern clock sold for \$1920 (est. \$800/1200).

