

Part 31

by **Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)**

The tall clock has no hands in a 1940s painting by Edvard Munch, featured in Part 5 in the November/December 2012 issue of the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*. Paul Cezanne's 1869 *The Black Marble Clock* also shows a blank face, emphasizing the role of clocks as symbols of time's passage, regardless of what time they may have announced.

Cezanne (1839-1906) grew up in the southern French town of Aix-en-Provence, the son of a wealthy banker. As a young artist, he was heavily influenced and encouraged by Camille Pissarro who introduced him to impressionist techniques. His boy-hood friend was famed novelist Emile Zola, the owner of the French black mantel clock we see.

Like all of Cezanne's later still lifes, this relatively small oil-on-canvas—approximately 22" x 29"—is packed with serious juxtaposed symbols. Carefully composed of left-right contrasts and harmonies, it echoes the "vanitas" paintings of two centuries prior, which often included a watch or hourglass as reminders of human mortality. However, few paintings from Cezanne's era show clocks or watches, perhaps reflecting a resistance to the tyranny of timekeeping in their increasingly industrialized and hectic society.

Balancing the image, and nearly equal in size to the dull dark dominating mass of the clock, is a large conch seashell with a red gaping mouth—organic nature versus man-made artisanship. Continuing the theme in the center, a yellow lemon tilts downward while the adjacent crystal vase and porcelain cup each opens upward. These objects all rest quietly above large soft folds of white cloth.

Scholars speculate on the origin of these issues for Cezanne. His overbearing father was upset with his son's artistic aspirations, preferring him to pursue a legal career. His mother was much more supportive of his personal and professional choices. This conflict of values weighed heavily on the artist and seemed clearly

represented in his paintings. Fortunately, his father left Paul with a substantial inheritance, preventing the kinds of financial distress that afflicted contemporaries such as Van Gogh and Gauguin.

From its single winding hole, we know that Zola's clock was a simple timepiece, without hourly striking. These kinds of clocks occupied tens of thousands of mantels in France, England, and the United States. Examples appear at nearly every antique clock auction. Their high-quality round brass movements were mass-produced by well-known makers, such as Japy, Marti, and Vincenti, and then installed by smaller French firms in stone, metal, glass, and wood cases. Even without its hands, Zola's clock now has been immortalized, long outlasting its owner and the legendary French artist who painted it.

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 *NAWCC Bulletin and Watch & Clock Bulletin*, and he can be reached via 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. *The Black Marble Clock*, by Paul Cezanne, 1869.