

Bonhams, Christie's, Sotheby's, and Swann Galleries, New York City

Days of Clocks and Watches

by Bob Frishman

I could have stayed home in Massachusetts. Like many, if not most, auction previewers and buyers these days, I could have looked and watched online. I would have saved eight hours of driving, 15 miles of walking, money spent on a hotel, parking, and restaurants, as well as time. But I would have missed so much, and I would have none of my treasured acquisitions and photos from those three full days—December 2-4, 2017—in “The City.”

Here is a quick itinerary, with details and photos to follow. Saturday: Sotheby's watches preview, with rooms of exotic cars also on view in the Life of Luxury sales displays; Bonhams' preview of watches, clocks, and history of science

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and technology auction; Christie's preview of watches; then dinner with three Bonhams watch experts. Sunday: The Met Breuer exhibit of Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863-1944), featuring his painting *Self Portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed*; returned to Christie's to preview books and manuscripts. Monday: Bonhams' live Art of Time auction; Swann Galleries' preview of maps and atlases and illustration art; evening lecture by famed independent English watchmaker Roger Smith at the Horological Society of New York.

From my own desk I easily could have scrutinized every online auction lot, and I did some of that research in advance. But as in nearly all online shopping, wide-ranging browsing and serendipity rarely come into play. Linear progressions of screenviews would never have brought me to the unexpected places, people, and purchases resulting from my traveling beyond the cyber world for those three days.

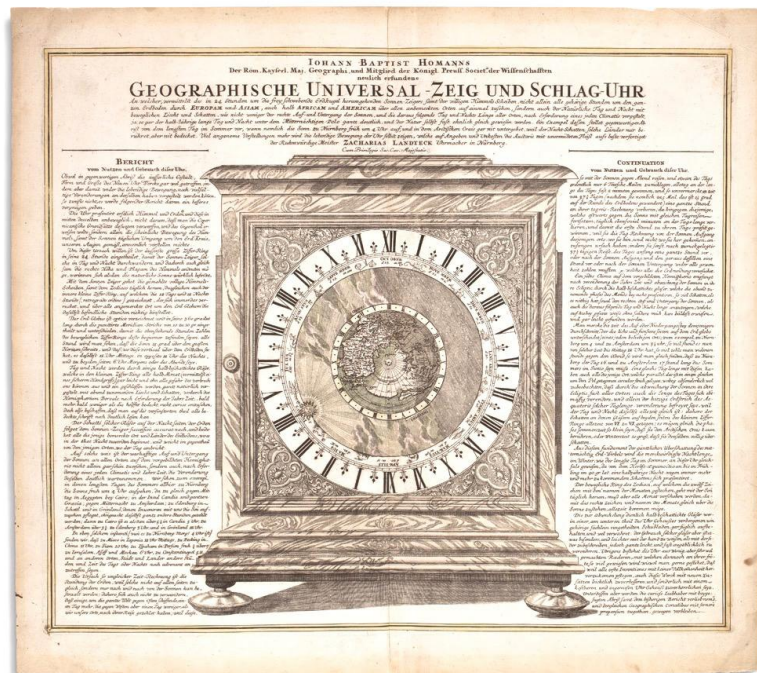
At Sotheby's, I chatted with Daryn Schnipper, longtime leader of its watch department. She provided details on lots I had overlooked, we discussed the state of the horology market, she led me to printed background materials not in the auction catalog, and she introduced me to colleagues. I experienced the buzz and excitement of many fine timekeepers (and fancy cars) dramatically displayed in one place.

At Bonhams, I greeted department head and friend Jonathan Snellenburg and met two of his colleagues in town from the London gallery. We examined vintage watches and highlighted small Art Deco clocks by Cartier and Black, Starr & Frost, as well as the Simon Willard lighthouse clock on offer. I also was shown the outside and inside of a pocket watch by Albert Potter (1836-1908) of New York and Geneva sitting among the exhibit of watches soon being offered at Bonhams' New Bond Street sale.

Next, at Christie's, adjacent to Rockefeller Center, I was greeted by watch department friends John Reardon, Rebecca Ross, and Brandon Frazin in another dazzling display of timekeepers. Boldly lit glassed cases and enclosed



Anybody who knows about the Hindenburg disaster can understand why zeppelin timepieces are extremely rare. This boxed 1912 trio of highly accurate Patek Philippe silver open-face pocket watches served on “ZR-3,” U.S. Zeppelin *Los Angeles*, the only American Navy airship that escaped disaster. The Christie's auction catalog devoted six pages to Lot 46, but the set sold to an absentee buyer for just \$250,000, under the \$300,000/600,000 estimate. The navigator of that 656' long flying machine would have simultaneously viewed the exact local time, Greenwich Mean Time, and sidereal time.



I cannot read old German, but I know a fantastic clock graphic when I see one, complete with world map on the clock face. (The map shows California as an island.) At Swann Galleries, I held in my hands this 22" x 25" engraving by Johann Baptist Homann (1664-1724), printed circa 1730 in Nuremberg, and I knew it would have to be mine. Lot 80 of Swann's December 5 sale of maps and atlases, natural history, and color plate books sold to me for \$593.75 (est. \$400/600). I am informed by Dr. Johannes Graf, curator of a wonderful Black Forest clock museum in Furtwangen, Germany, that “the clock depicted on the print you can see at the International Museum for Horology at La Chaux-de-Fonds. It is probably the first world time clock....”

pedestals contained many of the world's fine watches, and some of those were associated with famous previous owners. The 100 “exceptional” top lots were offered live on December 7; other displays held online-only offerings that gathered bids over several surrounding days. I learned that watch live-auction participants are nearly all male, but many women buy expensive preowned watches online, perhaps unwilling to do battle during an auction, preferring a less ego-driven and more deliberate decision-making process sitting at home.

Back at Christie's the next day, I joined my wife—*M.A.D.* reporter Jeanne Schinto—to preview the December 5 rare book auction. I was surprised and thrilled to see that Lot 172 was a 1773 first edition of French clockmaker Ferdinand Berthoud's classic treatise on marine chronometers. For many years I have lamented turning away from a \$5000 example of this same tome that I saw at a book fair in Boston. This time, I examined every page, including many exquisite fold-out plates, took many photos, and lobbied in a bid

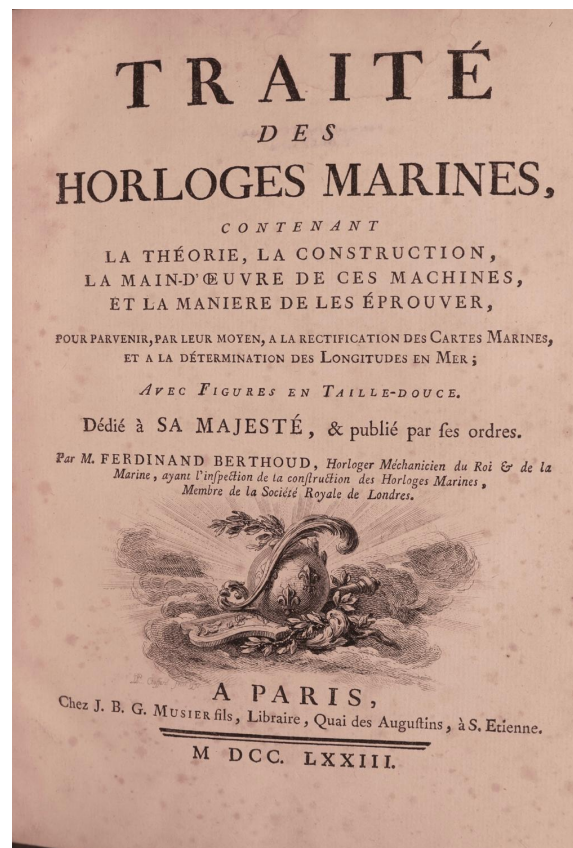
under the \$4000/6000 estimate. Watching the live sale a few days later at home, I celebrated being the sole bidder, and new owner at \$4000 (including buyer's premium).

Monday morning I sat, with just a few other salesroom attendees, through 139 lots of the Art of Time live auction at Bonhams on Madison Avenue, right around the corner from the heavily guarded Trump Tower. (The final lot was numbered 140, but Lot 16, a brass lantern clock, was withdrawn as not authentic.) Most of the bidding action was on the phones and Internet, but an older gentleman seated behind me landed a few choice lots, while cursing steadily as other offerings rose beyond what he thought they were worth. Obviously, winning bidders on those items disagreed with his valuations.

My previewing and absentee bidding continued on Monday afternoon at Swann Galleries down on East 25th Street. I had noted two appealing lots in thick catalogs sent by mail, but I resisted



If size matters with Cartier Art Deco-style clocks, then that would partly explain why Sotheby's Lot 783, a stunning mystery clock, made \$250,000 (est. \$125,000/200,000) as compared to one less than half its size at Bonhams that brought about 20% less. Previewers could view an original 1984 Cartier invoice showing the clock's purchase price when new of \$198,000, plus \$12,870 in sales tax. Sotheby's photo.



Largely because of Dava Sobel's 1995 book *Longitude*, English clockmaker John Harrison (1693-1776) gets most of the credit for proving that mechanical clocks could be made accurate enough to determine a ship's location at sea. Ferdinand Berthoud (1727-1807) was his lesser-known French counterpart, and Berthoud's extremely rare 1773 treatise, dedicated to his king, was Lot 172 at Christie's December 5 auction of fine printed books and manuscripts. This reporter was the successful absentee bidder at \$4000.

bidding without personal examinations. I would not now own these lots without having seen them “in the flesh.” Both are the kinds of horological art that appeal to me as much as actual clocks and watches, being important parts of the history

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and culture of my clockmaking profession. The first is a circa 1730 Nuremberg engraved map and celestial chart imposed on the dial of a mantel clock. The second is the original Anatol Kovarsky (1919-2016) watercolor artwork for the March 11, 1961, cover of *The New Yorker*, depicting a watchmaker at work in his shop.

The culmination for me was the Monday evening lecture. Roger W. Smith (b. 1970), who gave the lecture, was the mentee of world-famous watchmaker George Daniels (1926-2011). Smith now develops and produces small numbers of superb mechanical watches in his shop on the Isle of Man. His illustrated talk, “The Development of a Practical Watch Escapement,” was not at all dry and technical as

could be feared. In this age of quartz watches, makers and collectors of geared spring-driven timekeepers continue to appreciate this centuries-old art in which innovations still are pursued and appreciated. The crowded room full of attendees, many appearing to be under 35, confirmed this. There is more about Smith online (www.rwsmithwatches.com).

Here in New England, I continue to attend live auctions where I can handle and study tempting lots. Printed and online catalogs, no matter how detailed and lush, cannot for me replace reassuring physical contact. I order plenty of stuff on Amazon, but when it comes to serious antique material, my driving and walking and hotel beds and meeting people are all part of the costs and benefits, and well worth it.



Brandon Frazin is an associate specialist in Christie's watch department. He wanted us to be sure to notice his nice wristwatch while standing by cases full of online offerings. Note the large counter mirror available for other shoppers to check how they might look with one of those high-end watches.



“An Evening of Exceptional Watches” at Christie's was just part of its “Luxury Week” in New York City. However, most of the huge crowds admiring the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree just a half-block away were otherwise occupied.



Roger W. Smith and his team of watchmakers on the Isle of Man now produce about ten watch masterpieces each year. Smith told us about that, and much more, during his lecture to a sold-out audience at the Horological Society of New York. The society holds monthly meetings with speakers (including this reporter last year) and also offers watch repair classes.



Bonhams' Rupert Banner usually focuses on motorcars, but he was on duty as auctioneer for the Art of Time. Here he was hammering down the Cartier clock to a typical nearly empty salesroom. Much of the action was via the Internet, and he often gazed up at the web camera to address those folks directly. This reminded us of old-time auctioneers taking “chandelier bids” from nonexistent bidders; however, now there really are people watching from auction-room ceilings.



Jonathan Snellenburg (left) of Bonhams, New York City, assisted previewers. Several of the older watches and clocks in the December 4 sale were from the collection of Samuel P. Epstein (1896-1977), a top executive of the Bulova Watch Company from 1918 to 1959. He cofounded in 1945 its watchmaking school to train wounded veterans of World War II.



Edvard Munch is famous for four versions of his painting *The Scream*. The Norwegian artist was extremely productive, and many examples of his work were on view at a special Met Breuer exhibit. The painting *Self Portrait: Between the Clock and the Bed*, created near the end of his unhappy life when he was pondering how to spend his final days, is a favorite of my “Horology in Art” project.

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Paul Newman never had on his wrist this circa 1969 “Paul Newman” Rolex Daytona stainless steel chronograph. The one he did actually wear sold recently at Phillips for \$17.8 million, a new Rolex record. This watch, Lot 969 at Sotheby’s December 6 watches auction, still made a respectable \$162,500 on an \$80,000/120,000 estimate. Sotheby’s photo.

In this photo, my Saturday evening dinner companions were about to be busy with phone bids during the Bonhams Art of Time sale. At the right is Jonathan Snellenburg, who is in charge of watches and clocks in New York City. Antonia Bechmann and Jonathan Darracott flew in from England to assist.



One of America’s most skilled 19th-century watchmakers was Albert H. Potter (1836-1908), but he decided to move to Geneva in 1876 to fully realize his potential. Few of his New York watches are known, but he is believed to have made approximately 600 in Switzerland. This circa 1880 pocket chronometer, No. 59, reveals many of his unique innovations. It sold as Sotheby’s Lot 807 for \$27,500 (est. \$20,000/30,000). Sotheby’s photo.



The current market for wristwatches certainly is much hotter than the market for pocket watches, but pieces popping up in the latter category still command and deserve strong bidding. German watches in general are not as appreciated as better-known Swiss brands; A. Lange & Söhne is an exception. Sotheby’s sold this rare pink gold circa 1885 calendar model for \$60,000, above the \$30,000/50,000 estimate. The catalog reproduced the relevant Berlin 1883 patent that was granted to designer Otto Fleischhauer. Sotheby’s photo.

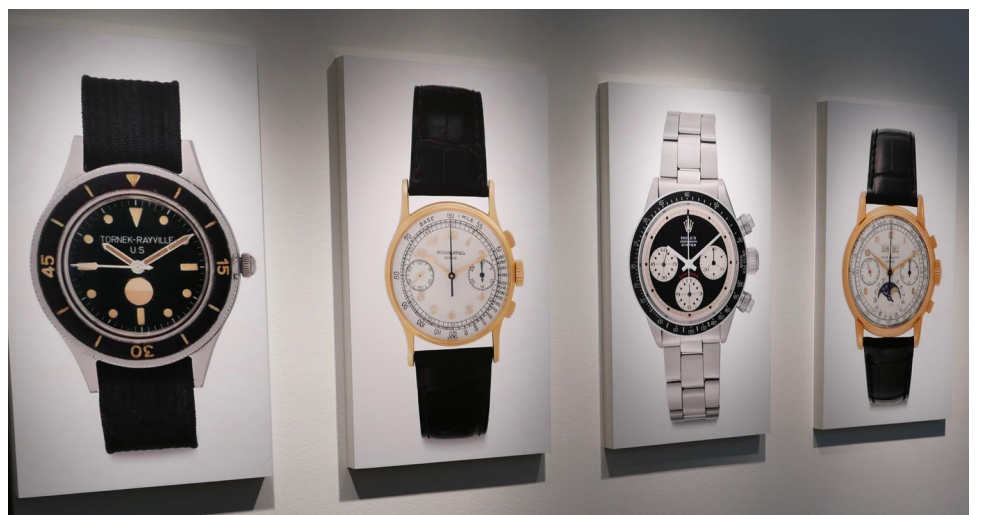


A Bonhams phone bidder paid well over the high estimate for this small chinoiserie Art Deco desk clock. Selling at \$110,000 (est. \$30,000/50,000), it was retailed in the 1930s by carriage-trade jeweler Black, Starr & Frost, and it had been part of the Samuel P. Epstein collection. Made from 18k enameled gold, rock crystal, coral, and diamonds, it shows the time on Chinese numerals. The snake-like minute hand was not missing, just loose and held for safekeeping. A similar chinoiserie desk clock (not shown) by the more famous Cartier made \$212,500 on a low \$40,000/60,000 estimate. The miniature Cartier enameled silver gilt “Pendulette,” shown with its case, went for \$5625 (est. \$5000/7000).



Simon Willard lighthouse clocks are rare, mainly because they were not commercially successful and relatively few were made. This example, Lot 25 at Bonhams’ Art of Time auction, had later alterations, which held its selling price to \$20,000 against a too-strong \$25,000/50,000 estimate.

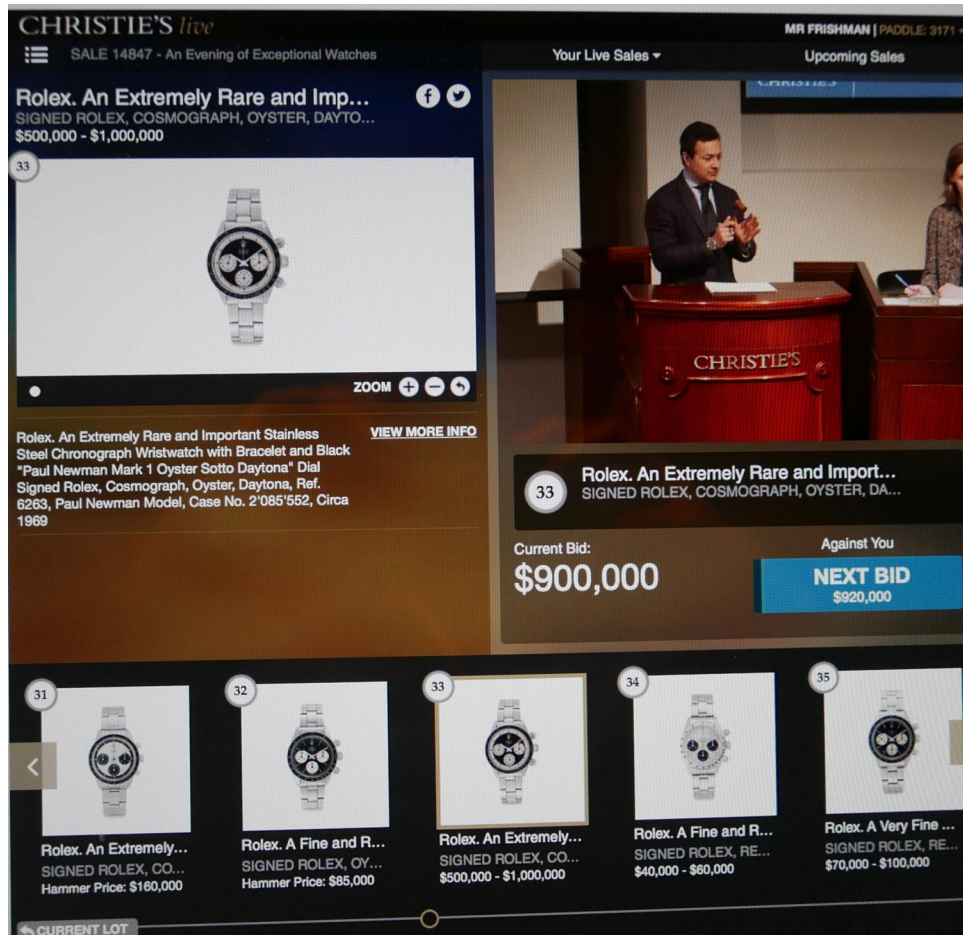
In case you forgot your magnifier or eyeglasses for wristwatch examinations, Christie’s decorated its preview room with several enlarged photos. These prints were not for sale.



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If you bid in real time from your own computer, this is how you watched and heard Christie's selling \$9,909,000 worth of watches on December 7. A simple click on the blue "Next Bid" button would have bumped this Rolex (Lot 33) even higher. It stopped at the hammer price of \$900,000 to become the evening's top seller. With premium, it made \$1,092,500, (est. \$500,000/1,000,000). Among the hundred watches offered, several others sold deep into the six figures. Christie's invited auction attendees to enjoy a complimentary beverage afterward, perhaps to drown the sorrows of those heading home empty-handed.



The buyer of the clock in this 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300SL Gullwing received the rest of the car for free. He or she paid \$1,352,500, within estimate, for Lot 134 of the RM Sotheby's December 6 Icons auction. We wondered how \$45.5 million of Ferraris, etc. made it to the tenth floor of Sotheby's York Avenue building.

Joe DiMaggio's 18k gold wristwatch (Lot 5) merited its own display case at Christie's, not just because of its provenance but as a historically important 1947 Patek Philippe chronograph. Head watch specialist John Reardon took the winning \$225,000 phone bid for it (\$281,250 with buyer's premium, within the \$150,000/300,000 estimate). Other celebrity timepieces offered once belonged to Mamie Eisenhower (Lots 1 and 2), Amelia Earhart (Lot 9), and American stock car champion Marvin Panch (Lot 4). Lot 68 was a Richard Mille circa 2015 "Rafael Nadal" model but not the actual watch worn on court by one of the world's tennis greats.

The Bonhams watches and jewelry were on the second floor. Two floors down were the offerings of the December 6 history of science and technology sale. Lot 10, sold for \$8750 on an \$8000/12,000 estimate, was an 1872 orrery and armillary sphere by Henry L. Bryant of Hartford, Connecticut.



Sotheby's knows that luxury watch buyers want to see their vintage choices nicely displayed, just as they might view brand-new models at Tiffany's or Tourneau in New York City. There were no jumbled box lots here.

