

Part 6

Horology *in* Art

by Bob Frishman (MA)

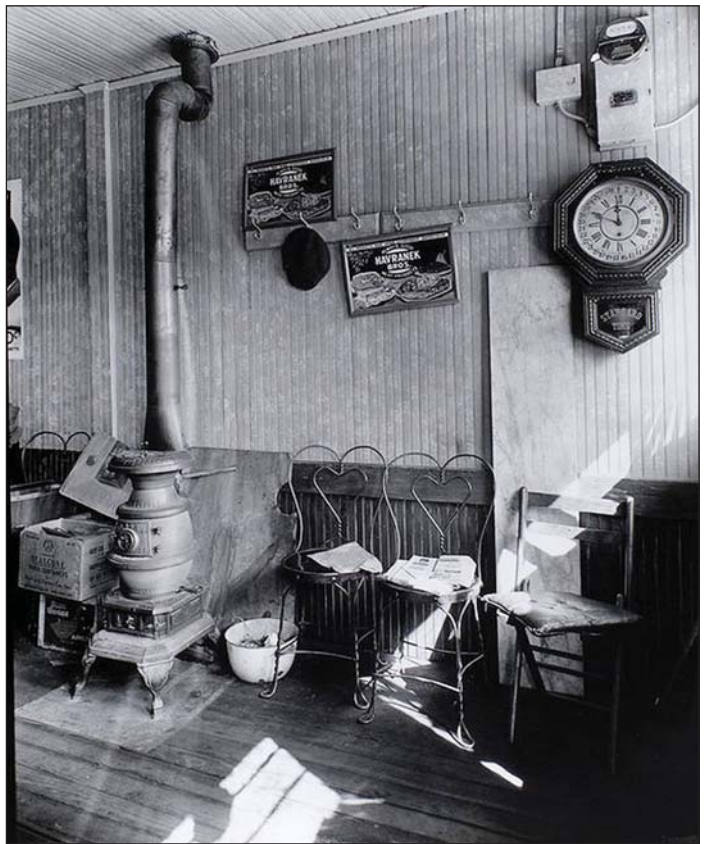
The debate ended long ago about whether photography can be considered an art, and there are several vintage photographs within my collection of fine art images with clocks.

Berenice Abbott (1898-1991) was a controversial figure throughout her long decades as an American photographer. She worked in a male-dominated profession, and her realist philosophy challenged photographers like Alfred Stieglitz and Edward Steichen whose pictorial style, in her opinion, was just weakly imitative of paintings and did not utilize the camera's unique ability to capture and preserve reality in an instant.

Abbott traveled to Paris as a penniless sculpture student in 1921, and in 1923 she became an assistant to the successful American photographer, Man Ray, who then was living in that city of artists. By 1925 she had a photography studio of her own, and more importantly for her future career and passion, she became aware of the photographs of Eugene Atget. (I will present a print by him, and more about his work, in a future article.) She returned to New York City in 1929, remaining there until her 1966 move to Blanchard, ME, to preserve her health.

In an essay about Atget, Abbott reveals her beliefs about the essence of photography as art. "The photographer's act is to see the outside world precisely, with intelligence as well as sensuous insight..... Atget began to understand the effects of light and shade, of texture and mood, of perspective and depth—qualities inherent in the art of photography..... Atget knew very well what to select and how to give it significance.... The photographer's punctilio is his recognition of the now—to see it so clearly that he looks through it to the past and senses the future."¹

Abbott's long career included important assignments as a science photographer. The MIT Museum recently had an exhibit of her work, and my collection includes a closeup by her of a high-grade Waltham pocket watch movement. But perhaps she is best known for her WPA-sponsored 1930s series "Changing New York," which documented the city at that time. Her insistence on "realism," as opposed to sentimental or arty images, brought a clarity to her subjects made possible only through the lens of a skillfully directed camera.



HTTP://DIGITALGALLERY.NYPL.ORG. REPOSITORY: THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY. PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION, MIRIAM AND IRA D. WALLACH DIVISION OF ART, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS. SOURCE: CHANGING NEW YORK: PHOTOGRAPHS BY BERENICE ABBOTT, 1935-1938.

Part of her New York series, the picture above shows the interior of "Ye Olde Country Store," built 100 years earlier by P. Tarantino and still owned by a descendant, located in Spuyten Duyvil, Bronx. The photo was taken in October 1935, but the artifacts are not of that time. In her description, she mentions the Cannon Ball stove and the wire chairs, designs from before World War I. Not mentioned, but prominent to us, is what almost certainly is a Gilbert "Admiral" oak drop-octagon clock illustrated in Ly from the company's 1910 catalog. Perhaps she stopped the clock to avoid the odd look of an off-center pendulum, but more likely this schoolhouse clock was as frozen in time as the rest of the scene.

As in all of my Horology in Art selections, the clock is not there by accident. An extremely deliberate photographer, Abbott could have used a different angle, or cropped and edited the negative, to omit it. Clearly, the "Admiral" was an important part of this Depression-era New York story.

1. Berenice Abbott, "The World of Atget," in *Berenice Abbott & Eugene Atget* by Clark Worswick, Berenice Abbott, and Eugene Atget (New Mexico: Arena Editions, 2002): 143.

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.