

# Poe's Pocket Watch Sells for \$250,000

by Bob Frishman

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was dirt poor for most of his short, tragic life. Perhaps he could have penned another fine ironic story had he foreseen that a gold pocket watch he briefly owned would sell for \$250,000 (including buyer's premium); the estimate was \$80,000/120,000.

At Christie's New York City sale of "Fine Printed Books & Manuscripts Including Americana" on June 12, a prominent collector in the room outlasted other bidders to add the watch to what has been called the world's finest private collection of Poe material. That person also bagged, for \$52,500 (est. \$20,000/30,000), the other Poe artifact in the sale, an 1841 letter to wealthy prominent Philadelphian Nicholas Biddle.

The watch, the sale's second-to-top seller, was not sold through Christie's booming watches and wristwatches department, no doubt because it's literary associations far outweighed its horological appeal. One vintage watch expert provided me with an estimate of the watch's current value, without Poe, at around \$1500 to \$2000. "Edgar A. Poe" engraved in script on the case's rear inside cover multiplied the timepiece's price by more than a hundredfold.

The obvious crucial issue, in cop-show terms, was "chain of custody." Much of Christie's catalog description, bolstered by documentation accompanying the watch and

by a podium-announced addendum of newly discovered provenance verifications, focused on assuring bidders that Poe's name was not added after the fact. The fact is the writer apparently owned the watch for little more than a year, during a brief period of prosperity from February 1841 to April 1842. He declared bankruptcy in December of that second year. The watch became part of his debt collateral or payments and traveled through the hands of several listed owners beginning with his Philadelphia tailor, J.W. Albright. The consigner inherited the watch sometime after it was sold in 1977 to Major A.W. Schmidt of Wisconsin.

The lengthy catalog entry reminds us of well-known Poe stories that feature clocks and watches and asserts that "Time itself is, of course, a recurring motif across his body of work." Little attention is paid, however, to the watch's actual attributes, which are generic and unexceptional. It was,



however, an expensive French (or Swiss) watch at the time of its purchase, costing upwards of \$100, but it possibly was bought used since the style may precede 1841.

The 51 mm open-face case is 18k gold, and its key-wind jeweled movement is a quarter-repeater, meaning that on demand it will sound the previous hour and quarter-hour. The cataloger got a bit carried away, claiming it chimed for Poe "every quarter hour," when in reality it chimed only when Poe triggered the mechanism. A few other minor errors pop up in the description, but these clearly were irrelevant to the bidders.

No other watch was offered, but there were many appealing and historic books, letters, and papers among the 233 lots, generating a sale total of \$3,478,750. The top lot, selling for \$350,000 (est. \$180,000/250,000), was a 1953 galley proof autographed by Watson and Crick of DNA fame. Published at the same time that Poe bought his watch, the French-language illustrated North American travel volumes by Karl Bodmer earned \$187,500 (est. \$100,000/150,000). A George Washington letter to Daniel Morgan brought \$100,000 (est. \$80,000/120,000), a Thomas Jefferson letter, \$85,000 (est. \$50,000/70,000), an Abraham Lincoln letter, \$81,250 (est. \$80,000/120,000), a first edition of *Great Gatsby*, \$43,750 (est. \$20,000/30,000), and a small Salinger archive, \$50,000 (est. \$50,000/80,000). The lot following the watch was another mechanical device, Philip Roth's IBM Selectric typewriter (est. \$10,000/15,000), but it failed to find a buyer.

The Poe watch's new owner promises to make it available for public display. We are fortunate that it survives and that its provenance seems solid. Many celebrity watches have appeared and sold over the years, but one will not. Walt Whitman's gold pocket watch was smashed to bits by a disgruntled heir.

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