

Schmitt Horan & Co., Manchester, New Hampshire

## Ultra-Precise Time Is Money

by Bob Frishman

Photos courtesy Schmitt Horan & Co.

In 2004 when I attended a landmark Sotheby's sale, "Masterpieces from the Time Museum," one deep-pocket bidder was unknown to the horological experts crowding the room. He grabbed many of the top lots and was identified as Cameel Halim, an Egyptian real-estate investor from Chicago.

In October 2017, more than a decade later, Halim unveiled the Halim Time & Glass Museum in Evanston, Illinois, just over the Chicago city line. I toured the museum last fall, and I viewed clock masterpieces from those Sotheby's sales and subsequent important auctions. At the Schmitt Horan & Co. auction of clocks, watches, and antiques on May 18 and 19, I witnessed absentee bidder 3105—later revealed as Halim—spend nearly \$300,000 to snag 17 of the top lots.

This time, as Halim confirmed with me in a phone chat, he was filling gaps in his collection of early and rare electro-mechanical timepieces. While the technology is complicated and difficult to achieve, the concept is simple. Until the mid-20th-century advent of quartz and atomic clocks, pendulum clocks had dominated precision timekeeping for 300 years since their introduction in the 1650s. However, pendulums can be affected by temperature, vibration, shape, materials used, air pressure, and resistance, and by how they are kept swinging. Most pendulums simply are impelled by a "crutch" pushing them back and forth, but this can produce errors, as can the other listed factors, making those clocks unreliable for use in astronomy and other scientific endeavors. The finest electro-mechanical clocks, appearing in the late 1800s, used electricity and magnetism to swing pendulums, and combined with solid mounts and airtight containers, they delivered accuracy to just fractions of seconds for a month and better.

Not all early electro-mechanical clocks were designed and marketed for the ultra-precision market. Others, more attractive and far less costly, simply used those forces to keep the clocks running, replacing the springs, weights, and certain gears of their more conventional cousins. As long as battery power lasted, these early 20th-century clocks by Bulle and ATO in France, for example, kept excellent time without audible ticking that could bother people sitting or sleeping nearby.

Electro-mechanical clocks of both categories were offered at the sale, nearly all from the large and impressive California collection of Arthur Bjornestad, president from 1995 to 1997 of the National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors. In dedicated pages of the full-color printed catalog, the clocks were lavishly pictured and described with historical references and detailed condition reports. No doubt these provided Halim with the confidence to bid without being present to preview and inspect his intended acquisitions.

Only a minor portion of the 1034-lot sale was electro-mechanical or went to Illinois. An additional grouping of Bjornestad material came much later in the two-day sale and focused instead on rare long-duration mechanical clocks with horizontal balance wheels or slowly oscillating pendulums. Swiss Atmos clocks, powered by changes in room temperature and barometric pressure, are relatively common, but not the early and unusual models seen here. "Anniversary" or "400-Day" clocks are even more common, but again not these versions. There were none of the typical German postwar glass-dome four-ball versions that are best bought at yard sales, but instead we saw exotic models, mostly more than 100 years old, with different designs, styles, and pendulum shapes. Nobody I asked could recall ever seeing, for example, a 400-day banjo clock, but at the sale there was one made around 1910 in Schwenningen, Germany. Estimated by guesswork at \$400/600, it made \$1534 (with buyer's premium).

For collectors of better-known American and European clocks, there certainly were hundreds of offerings. New England clocks by E. Howard, Seth Thomas, Aaron Willard, and many other familiar names sold well. English and French clocks were abundant, although the star of that group, a circa 1690 ebonized bracket clock by London maker Joseph Knibb, was

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bought in below its \$30,000/50,000 estimate. A nice group of French carriage clocks sold mostly within estimate, including the best one, a Drocourt hour-repeater with side-panel portraits of young women that sold online for \$2596 (est. \$1800/2500).

Passes and buy-ins were rare, with most lots unreserved, and there were many bargains, too, especially in the ailing tall-clock category. Their size, old-fashioned appearance, and loud, busy chiming continue to depress values to surprisingly low levels, often well below even realistic estimates. A circa 1910 Walter Durfee, Providence, Rhode Island, nine-tube carved mahogany hall clock—once highly desirable because of Durfee's key role in marketing this style—brought just \$2950 with a \$5000/7000 estimate. The price would have been twice that number in the recent past.

Vintage wristwatches continue to be horology's hot spot, with active international collectors pushing up prices for the major brands, even for ones sold new not long ago. A handful of top models were offered during the sale's Sunday session, including a Swiss Parmigiani Fleurier, two from Germany's A. Lange & Söhne, a Breitling Navitimer, a Rolex Sea-Dweller, an IWC Portugieser Automatic, a Patek Philippe gold Calatrava, and a Zenith El Primero Chronomaster with original box and timing certificate. A much larger number of pocket watches and pocket watch movements also found buyers and encouraged the hope that wristwatch collectors may be branching out into older, bigger, historically important portable timekeepers.

Schmitt Horan & Co. introduced its own proprietary online bidding platform at the sale, and it seemed to work fine. Continuing the online theme, and in an effort to reduce the number of lots in its live semiannual sales, it recently introduced online-only auctions in which were sold many lower-priced items that otherwise would have extended this auction even longer. Even so, it was a marathon of many Saturday and Sunday hours, with little improvement on the 70-plus-lots-per-hour rate experienced in the past. Slowing the pace was the usual majority of lots selling by phone or computer, bringing slower bidding than hectic paddle waving in the room.

This auction also inaugurated the firm's name change. Ten years ago company president Dan Horan began his multiyear buyout of R.O. Schmitt Fine Arts from founder Bob Schmitt, and with the acquisition complete, now Horan wants his own name included in the company name. The Schmitt name remains first and biggest on the logo, but Horan and Co. joins it. We could not help noting that this makes the third New Hampshire antiques auctioneer with "Horan" in the name, including Jones & Horan (another horological seller) and Bourgeault-Horan Antiquarians & Associates (recent successor to Ron Bourgeault's Northeast Auctions).

The new name certainly did not deter bidders. This sale exceeded all previous records for the firm, totaling \$1,572,615.50.

We also continue to hope that soon the new name will hang on a company building. The massive grueling job of moving all those lots from storage units and the company's home-base headquarters to the hotel center in Manchester was worsened this time by a shortened one-day move-in schedule. Staff worked long and hard to be ready for the Saturday morning preview and to move out all the absentee purchases on Sunday night. Clearly, no large hall is needed since there were no more than 50 room bidders at the peak, and by Sunday afternoon I counted just nine, who were far outnumbered by staff executing bids and handling material. A centralized warehouse, cataloging office, and salesroom would be another great step forward as Schmitt Horan & Co. battles to compete and grow.

The next semiannual auction is October 26 and 27. For more information, visit the website ([www.schmitt-horan.com](http://www.schmitt-horan.com)).

The sale's top lot will be exhibited at the Halim Time & Glass Museum. High bidder Cameel Halim bought it for \$106,200 (est. \$60,000/80,000). He would have had it for much less if it had not been strongly underbid by an agent for possibly the world's foremost horological museum, the International Museum of Horology in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland. The clock is a wonderful demonstration of the amazing efforts made by London's Synchronome Co. to achieve near-perfect timekeeping in the early years of the 20th century. The photo shows the vacuum tank in which the pendulum swings; the lot included the more traditional-looking cased clock and dial that accompanied it so that the time could be read. The next lot (not shown), a similar clock by famous German maker Clemens Riefler, sold for nearly as much (\$100,300), but it was not a Halim buy; he has a similar one already.



As one of the top sellers and heading out to the Halim Time & Glass Museum, this circa 1850 skeleton clock earned a full page in the auction catalog. Alexander Bain was an English scientific pioneer and did much with electro-mechanical devices, including this one. With an \$8000/12,000 estimate, it sold for \$53,100.



King of the luxury wristwatches at the sale was this German A. Lange & Söhne Datograph 40-jewel chronograph. Every bit as good as Swiss competitors, these watches made in Glashütte obviously have serious collector appeal. In an 18k rose gold case, it sold for \$31,860, within its estimate of \$25,000/35,000. Not pictured is the sale's other A. Lange & Söhne watch, the next lot, a Lange 1 Moonphase without stopwatch functions. It did fine at \$20,060 (est. \$10,000/15,000).





Company founder Bob Schmitt came from Arizona to attend the auction and take turns at the podium. He stands here with a circa 1911 English Synchronome Co. astronomical regulator. Estimated at \$8000/12,000, it was one of Cameel Halim's buys at \$23,600. Frishman photo.



Lenzkirch is the name on some of the most desirable late-19th century German clocks, and this open-well eight-day wall hanger is an especially attractive specimen. Its walnut case has been gussied up with a wealth of cast brass trim, and its fancy dial displays individual enamel cartouche hour numbers. Circa 1895, it reached \$5664 (est. \$2000/3000), far above current values for more typical German wall clocks of the period.



Company president Dan Horan stands proudly at the auction podium. Formerly the venerable R.O. Schmitt Fine Arts, the firm includes Horan's name in the logo now that he has completed the takeover. Frishman photo.



Marine chronometers made in this country are rare, as are any kind of handcrafted high-precision timepieces from mid-19th-century America. Sumner Smith of Hartford, Connecticut, made this one, and it now is in the collection of the American Clock & Watch Museum in nearby Bristol, Connecticut. It almost got away, but a room bidder who strongly believed that it should be in a public institution could not bear to see it disappear to an absentee bidder. He bravely bought it for \$3540 (est. \$1800/2500), and then a small group of us in the room stepped up and kicked in enough to add to the museum's underbid and get the piece to where it belongs. Happy ending but close call.



Atmos clocks by famed Swiss watchmaker Jaeger LeCoultre still are made and sold, but not ones like this circa 1935 predecessor. Jean Leon Reutter developed the concept of a "perpetual" clock that would not need winding, and this early model demonstrates the concept. Mercury and ammonia in a glass tube do the work using temperature changes. The mercury and ammonia, along with its oval glass dome, present serious shipping challenges. The high bidder, who we hope carefully hand-carried it home, paid \$11,800, slightly under the \$12,000/16,000 estimate.



Robert C. Cheney, moonlighting from his director/curator job at the Willard House & Clock Museum, assisted at the auction preview and podium. He stands with an Aaron Willard Jr. Boston, Massachusetts, shelf clock, which previously was offered as a possible donation to the museum. Cheney explained that the museum owns six other examples, and because the museum displays all the clocks it owns, it could not use a seventh. The consignor instead will receive most of the \$5900 price (est. \$3000/5000), easing the pain of rejection. Frishman photo.



Dr. Edward "Eddy" Odell traveled from England to view and chase some of the rare clocks on offer. He stands here in front of a table load of brass and glass examples, and he managed to high-bid three to take back home to London, where he teaches oral pathology and medicine at King's College. An article by him will appear next year in *Antiquarian Horology*, the magazine of the U.K.'s Antiquarian Horological Society. Frishman photo.



Circa 1860 Connecticut cottage clocks are everywhere, but not ones like this, and an Internet bidder paid \$3540 (est. \$700/900) to prove it. This Seth Thomas features an alarm that strikes a match and lights the top-mounted lamp at the selected time. Unrecorded is the number of homes incinerated when this malfunctioned. Polymath artist and inventor Rufus Porter patented the same idea in 1833; an exhibit devoted to Porter opens in December at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art in Brunswick, Maine.



Clocks and watches were not the only temptations. Marc Bourgue, longtime consultant to the company for information technology and software development, spent some time "testing" the circa 1993 Bally Twilight Zone pinball machine. It sold to a phone bidder for \$5310 (est. \$3000/4000). Frishman photo.



Tom Manning, curator of the American Clock & Watch Museum in Bristol, Connecticut, was delegated to bid on the museum's behalf for this circa 1998 modern walnut wall clock by James Borden of Minnesota. Video of a similar clock recently went viral when a visitor at the museum of the National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors accidentally pulled it off the wall and then fled the scene. Manning got this one for \$3068 (est. \$1500/2500). Frishman photo.



A customer of mine seeks a nice Westminster-chime bracket clock, and this Scottish example fit the bill. Circa 1910 and signed by Thomas Middlemass, Edinburgh, it has great eye appeal with its mahogany veneer and complex inlays. Three fuseses in its substantial movement help to even out the mainspring power. Sadly, another bidder was willing to pay more than my guy, and it went elsewhere for \$1416 (est. \$900/1200).



Is it a slant-front desk or a tall clock? It's both! Crafted of heavy solid cherry, this Connecticut Chippendale combo possibly is a unique take on a desk clock. Pennsylvania dealer Rick Merritt recalled its being sold at his family's antiques shop around 30 years ago; he didn't like it then, and he still thinks it's weird. Another room bidder disagreed, paying \$1888 (est. \$1000/1500).



Bidders could take home a tower clock movement. The sale's first lot was this 38" tall time-only model made circa 1865 by Stone & Marshall in Cazenovia, New York. Russ Oechsle, an expert on and collector of clocks from that area, could not prevail against a determined Internet bidder, who paid \$4012 (est. \$1500/2000).



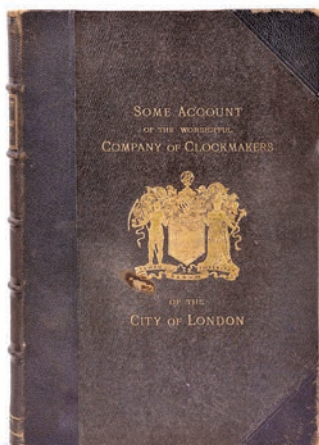
Steve Sanborn, a longtime but now retired clock repairer in New Hampshire, gave me a grin as he inspected a circa 1830 E. & G.W. Bartholomew, Bristol, Connecticut, 30-hour wood-movement shelf clock. Sanborn recently was honored as a Fellow of the National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors (NAWCC). The clock sold, not to him, for \$354 (est. \$300/400). Frishman photo.



One of three antique trade signs in a lot, this one advertised ale from the Waterbury Brewing Company, not to be confused with the well-known clockmaking firm in the same Connecticut city. The brewery obviously wanted us to make the clock connection. All three signs went for \$531 (est. \$300/400). Frishman photo.



Rick Merritt always fills his van or truck at these sales, buying for private customers and for Merritt's Clocks and Repair Supplies in Pennsylvania. He underbid this circa 1860 Muirhead & Son, Glasgow, hour-striking astronomical regulator, losing it to another room bidder, who paid \$8850 (est. \$4000/6000). Frishman photo.



Several good books and book lots were offered. As a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, I was strongly attracted to this 1881 book about this ancient London guild. Luckily, almost nobody shared my interest, and I now own it for just \$147.50 (est. \$200/300). Icing on the cake, written inside is the name "F. Hope-Jones," an eminent British horologist from a century ago.



This may look like a familiar wall regulator, but it is not. Circa 1930, this "Master Clock Type B" was manufactured by Warren Telechron Co. in Ashland, Massachusetts, to hang in electricity-generating stations to help keep the AC current steady at 60 cycles. Otherwise, all the Telechron clocks in homes and businesses would be fast or slow. I have one of these on my own wall, so I was happy to see it sell strongly for \$1652 (est. \$900/1200).



We hope that a dog lover ended up with this French marble Art Deco mantel clock topped by a pair of cast metal German shepherds. Included with a clock garniture set, it sold for \$531 (est. \$400/600). Frishman photo.