

Christie's, New York City

# Early Clocks, One Day Late: The Abbott/Guggenheim Collection

by Bob Frishman  
Photos courtesy Christie's

Twenty-six hours was not too long to wait. The New York City snowstorm abated so bidders a day later could try for clocks rarely available to buy or even to view in museums. Described as a "New York Kunstammer," the Abbott/Guggenheim collection, belatedly offered at Christie's on January 28, included 59 preindustrial clocks in its 117 lots. The other lots were equally important sculptures, mostly bronzes, also collected for decades by Drs. Peter Guggenheim and John Abbott of Warwick, New York. Eighty-five lots sold, 50 clocks among them, for a sale total of \$11,454,875.

Guggenheim, a psychiatrist and professor of psychiatry, died at age 84 in 2012, survived by his partner of over 60 years, John Abbott, whom he married in 2007. Related to "the" Guggenheims (his great-uncle Solomon's museum is on Fifth Avenue, and his aunt was Peggy), Peter received his first clock at age six and never stopped collecting. He was an amateur repairer who

amassed and generously lent a collection of mostly German 16th- and 17th-century timekeepers, many with additional complications, functions, and automation. Such clocks, fabricated by masters working long hours before mass production and division of labor, were inaccurate and ornate, costly and few, owned solely by royalty and the very wealthy. Other such collections are unlikely to appear on the market anytime soon, and now this one has been scattered.

Two iconic museum exhibits had showcased many clocks from the collection. From January 4 to March 28, 1972, the Metropolitan Museum of Art mounted *Northern European Clocks in New York Collections*. The thin softcover catalog, written by assistant curator Clare Vincent, described the show's 81 clocks, 27 of which belonged to Guggenheim, and 21 of those clocks were in the recent Christie's sale. Vincent remains a curator in the Met's department of European sculpture and decorative arts, and she is preparing another clock exhibit for later this year. In the Christie's auction catalog's opening pages, Dr. Klaus Maurice refers to her as "the female pope of clocks and watches."

Maurice had been closely associated with the other major exhibit, *The Clockwork Universe: German Clocks and Automata, 1550-1650*, which graced the

Smithsonian's National Museum of History and Technology from November 7, 1980, to February 15, 1981. As noted in the captions, many Guggenheim clocks were on view and also were described in the large related book of the same title by coauthors Klaus Maurice and Otto Mayr.

Another smaller exhibit had included three Guggenheim clocks. From December 18, 1999, to March 19, 2000, at the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science in Greenwich, Connecticut, *The Art of Time* displayed what now became Christie's lot 30, selling for \$62,500 (with buyer's premium). It is a gilt-brass and ebony German striking and automaton clock by Paullus Schiller of Nuremberg, 1620-30, with the figure of the goddess Urania pointing to the passing hours. The other two Guggenheim clocks pictured in the Bruce Museum booklet were

not in the current sale. I lent two American clocks to the Bruce Museum exhibition, and although I never met Peter Guggenheim, I may have been in the same room with him if he attended the opening reception at the museum.

Another lender, 19 clocks, to the 1972 Met exhibit was Winthrop "Kelly" Edey of New York City. This eccentric collector of mainly French Renaissance clocks passed away in 1999. He donated a small but valuable clock collection and a large archive to the Frick Collection in New York City. He authored two books on French clocks, and I have been researching his unpublished writings and notes, which may still be of use. In his papers, I have seen many references to Peter Guggenheim as they collaborated and competed. A 1965 Edey receipt for a clock purchase noted, in an unintended admission of auction pooling, that it was "bought jointly by me and Peter Guggenheim, then auctioned between us for \$11,000."

The Christie's catalog weighs in at more than four pounds, with beautiful full-color four-page photographs and detailed listings of features, provenance, exhibitions, and related literature. It instantly has become a valuable reference resource and joins a small number of volumes that constitute most of the available concentrations of material on these



Second-highest clock, and third-highest lot overall in the sale, was this German gilt striking and astronomical table clock from Augsburg, 1560-70. Jump bids by the same phone bidder as for the top-selling clock were ultimately successful, again at a multiple of the \$200,000/300,000 estimate. It sold for \$725,000. Number 13 in the 1972 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit, the clock has a lengthy description of its many features and functions in that exhibition catalog by curator Clare Vincent. It is number 41 in *The Clockwork Universe*. Philip Poniz reported that the price is a record for this style and justified by its remarkably good condition despite a few later changes to the case.

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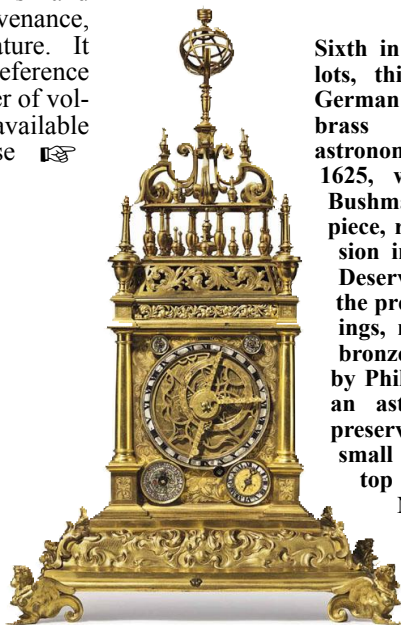


The top-selling clock, and second only overall to a bronze Hercules that sold for \$2,045,000 (see p. 33-C), this 1580-90 German gilt striking and automaton lion clock by Philipp Miller went to a determined phone bidder who steadily jumped bid increments until the hammer fell far above the \$150,000/250,000 estimate. This clock earned \$965,000.

The lion's eyes, jaw, tongue, and foreleg also would jump into action as each hour rang out. It was number 25 at the 1972 Metropolitan Museum of Art clock exhibit and number 90 in the 1980 Smithsonian *The Clockwork Universe*.



Toby Woolley, head of Christie's clock department, appeared thrilled to be standing with the Bushmann masterpiece. Based in London, Woolley was in New York for the preview and sale. Frishman photo.



Sixth in the sale's top ten lots, this large Augsburg German gilt bronze and brass quarter-striking astronomical clock, dated 1625, was maker David Bushmann's masterpiece, required for admission into the elite guild. D deservedly displayed at the preview among paintings, not the clocks and bronzes, it was described by Philip Poniz as having an astonishing state of preservation except for a small missing bit of the top armillary sphere. Number 30 in the 1980 Smithsonian *The Clockwork Universe*, it sold for \$569,000.



One of the few French clocks in the sale, this gilt-brass and copper striking table clock by Nicolas Plantart is circa 1600 from Abbeville. It was number 2 in the 1972 Met exhibit and was pictured and described in Winthrop Edey's 1967 book on French clocks when it was already in Guggenheim's collection. Edey noted that it signified a new square shape, superseding the older hexagonal form. The engraved illustration portrays Christ meeting pilgrims on the road to Emmaus. It brought \$100,000.



This circa 1680 month-duration ebony long-case clock by famed maker Joseph Knibb had been in the Wetherfield collection. Eric Bruton's book noted several originality problems typical of Wetherfield's clocks that often were severely restored, some say "butchered." Selling under estimate at \$149,000, the Knibb retained its waist door sticker from New York dealer Arthur S. Vernay, who purchased nearly half of the famed English collection. Wetherfield had strongly hoped that all his clocks would remain in England, not be sold to "persistent American millionaires," but we do not know if the high bidder is repatriating this example.

earliest mechanical timekeepers.

At three and a half pounds is the Patrizzi & Co. May 24, 2009, hardcover auction catalog of "Pre-Pendulum European Renaissance Clocks." This sale, also a single-owner collection, was auctioned in Milan, Italy. It benefited from the consultations of horological expert Philip Poniz, a friend who also has worked with Sotheby's and Antiquorum. He kindly provided observations on several of the Christie's lots. I chatted with him during the preview as he was closely examining one of the lots, and after the sale he e-mailed me to add, "Clients and friends bought a considerable number of them. I will be busy restoring them for a long time."

Philip Poniz's four-page introduction to the Patrizzi & Co. catalog provides an excellent overview of the history of mechanical timekeeping and the importance of these early clocks, beginning in the early 14th century. He equates their significance with combustion engines and computers. This history is far too complex and lengthy to summarize here, but the Guggenheim clocks also provide a short introduction to the subject.

Several thick volumes of Sotheby's multipart sale of the Time Museum collection also contribute to my bookshelf sag. Three of the Christie's lots (59, 78, and 98) had been in that disbanded museum's collection that was sold off more than a decade ago.

At another Sotheby's sale, "The Justice Warren Shepro Collection of Clocks" on April 26, 2001, a circa 1720 English table clock sold for \$19,150. As lot 77 at Christie's, it was passed at \$11,000, well below its \$20,000/30,000 estimate. Although the prestigious name Daniel Quare appears on the dial, the auctioneer announced that the clock was in the "manner of Daniel Quare," clearly halving its value.

The weightiest volume, at nearly seven pounds even in softcover, is the Italian-language exhibit publication *La misura del tempo; L'antico splendore dell'orologeria italiana dal XV al XVIII secolo*. The 2005 show in Trento, Italy was mounted and cataloged by Italian horology expert Giuseppe Brusa. I deeply regret not traveling to view the show, but I can peruse the book's 669 pages to view detailed material on Italian clockmaking, which made many early contributions to the science. A lengthy English review was prepared by Fortunat Mueller-Maerki, another friend and colleague, who chairs the Library Collections Committee of the National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors.

Fortunat Mueller-Maerki attended the Christie's sale. He noted that there were few clock people among the small audience and that phone and international

Internet bidders were the norm. I too saw the auctioneer address online bidders in California, Belgium, Spain, Germany, Denmark, and Singapore. Although Fortunat made no purchases, preferring to spend his money on horology books and ephemera, he commented on a disturbing evolution. Fewer major auction houses have regular specialty clock auctions or related catalogs available to subscribers. Except for the occasional strong collections, clocks mainly appear singly in furniture and decorative arts sales, where they are difficult to locate and track. This may then reinforce the idea that clock people are not a good target group and that fewer resources should be devoted to that category and to experts who can accurately assess and estimate values of old clocks.

The situation is very different for vintage watches, a hotter collectible with their own auctions and expert teams. However, some auction houses such as Skinner and Bonhams do continue with concentrated clock sales, perhaps mixed with watches, scientific instruments, and vintage technology. The trend may benefit lower-tier horology auctioneers, such as R.O. Schmitt Fine Arts, that cater specifically to clock and watch enthusiasts.

Toby Woolley, Christie's head of clock department, is based in London and has been with the firm for nearly 25 years, specializing in furniture and decorative arts. He has been its clock director since November 2011. He enjoys the multi-century range of clocks, unlike other specialties that are confined to shorter periods. He kindly escorted me through the preview, offering additional information and a few looks inside and under the gilt cases. He never met Peter Guggenheim but revealed that there was no question that Christie's would get this consignment. From a dealer friend of mine who knew Guggenheim well, I was told that Guggenheim and Abbott sold their entire collection of antique French furniture when they moved out of New York City and that Christie's ably handled that sale for them.

By my calculation, the total for the 50 sold clocks was \$4,352,125. Of the nine not meeting reserves, two are most worth describing. Lot 78, passed at \$48,000, had been sold as lot 166 at Sotheby's on June 19, 2002, in part two of the sale of the Rockford, Illinois, Time Museum collection. This miniature English ebonized timepiece could not reach its \$70,000/100,000 estimate. Its early 18th-century London maker, Samuel Watson, was a maker of complicated astronomical clocks and had several pages devoted to him in Cedric Jagger's 1983 book *Royal Clocks: The British Monarchy and Its Timekeepers, 1300-1900*.

Lot 114 passed at \$100,000, not close to its \$200,000/300,000 estimate. This miniature English table clock had been from the David Arthur Wetherfield collection of clocks dispersed in 1928. By the time Wetherfield died that year, he had accumulated 232 fine English clocks that filled his home in Blackheath, South London. Perhaps his best was Thomas Tompion's William III towering long-case clock, now at Colonial Williamsburg. The passed lot, only about 6" tall and made circa 1740 by Richard Peckover of London, was number 49 in a 1981 comprehensive book about the Wetherfield collection by British horologist Eric Bruton. The clock also had Metropolitan Museum of Art provenance as number 53 in the 1972 exhibit, and it is shown as fig. 97 in the R. W. Symonds 1986 edition of *Masterpieces of English Furniture and Clocks*.

As a full-time restorer and seller of antique clocks, I always am asked whether an old clock runs and "keeps good time." This is a reasonable question for factory-made clocks from the 19th and 20th centuries. I do my best to keep these antique machines running 24/7, even after millions of ticks and bongs, although I believe that Seth Thomas and all those other makers would be amazed that people still are attempting to use clocks, really "appliances," that they manufactured 100 or 200 years ago. Certainly in the year 2115 there will be no televisions or washing machines or SUVs made today that anybody still will be trying to use.

There was absolutely no mention of the running condition of any of the clocks in the Christie's sale, nor in any other of the exhibit and sale books and catalogs that I have referenced. While collectors may attempt to operate these ancient timekeepers on occasion, and to have them professionally restored by Philip Poniz and the few others capable of this level of work, the value of these clocks is in the history, art, and craftsmanship they represent, not in whether they can tell the same time as on your wrist, wall, or phone. Just as the Smithsonian does not fly the *Spirit of Saint Louis* nor the U.S. Navy sail the U.S.S. *Constitution* out into the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, these centuries-old clocks deserve to rest and bask in their glory, not to risk further deterioration and damage. Except for a few running examples that are carefully maintained and monitored, most museums and collectors adhere to this concept.

Fortunately, I heard nobody at the preview loudly asking why the clocks were not ticking and keeping time. In a very real sense, they still are keeping time.

For more information, contact Christie's at ([www.christies.com](http://www.christies.com)).



Bacchus may be drowning his sorrows for selling under the \$120,000/180,000 estimate at \$112,500. Made by one of two Kreitzers of Augsburg, Germany early in the 17th century, the clock has a later base, which may have restrained bidding. The drinker's eyes moved with each tick, and his right arm hoisted the bottle to his mouth every hour. This was number 27 in the 1972 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit and number 98 in the 1980 Smithsonian show.



Two Dutch clock experts, whom I recently visited in the Netherlands, both extolled this ebony wall clock, 1680-90, by Pieter Visbagh of The Hague. According to Hans van den Ende, only three such examples are known, and this one's finials and feet are French and later. Its revolving chapters, indicating the time, are integral with the dial painting of a Bacchic feast. The artwork, signed "C.P.," could be by well-known Dutch artist Cornelius van Poelenburgh or one of his students, Cornelis Palmer, said to have used the same initials. The clockmaker succeeded Salmon Coster, who made the first pendulum clock for Christiaan Huygens in 1657, and the movement is quite similar to that original groundbreaking design. A brief Peter Guggenheim article on this clock was published in the December 1969 issue of *Antiquarian Horology*, the magazine of the Antiquarian Horology Society in England, and this clock was pictured on the cover. The clock, not a "night clock" with internal illumination although similar in appearance, also is extensively covered in Reinier Plomp's 1979 book *Spring-driven Dutch Pendulum Clocks, 1657-1710*. It sold for \$62,500.



Another lion automaton with moving eyes, tongue, and jaw on each hour, this Augsburg German gilt-metal and ebony clock, circa 1630, was one of the few selling to a room bidder. Number 28 in the 1972 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit, here it sold for \$155,000. The silvered dial shows 24 hours.



The English clocks in the sale were of uneven appeal, but this circa 1685 London table clock by Joseph Knibb exceeded, with premium, its high estimate when it sold for \$221,000. The maker's prominence in English clockmaking history and the clock's unusual "double-six" striking contributed to the strong price. Designed to extend mainspring power, "double-six" counted the hours only from one to six, then started over. Most of us could figure out that six dings in the middle of the day or night actually signals twelve o'clock, but obviously the concept did not catch on.

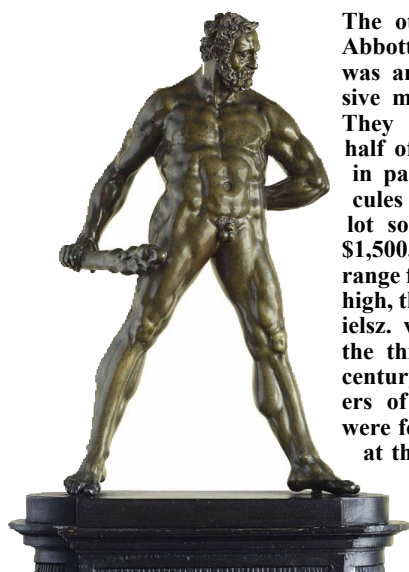
**- AUCTION -**



Philip Poniz spent several days prior to the auction laboriously examining the clocks for himself, colleagues, and clients. Here he is shown in one of the small preview rooms studying lot 16, which passed at \$55,000. One of nine clocks failing to sell on auction day, it could not rise to its \$80,000/120,000 estimate. Circa 1630 by Nikolaus Schmidt the Younger of Augsburg, Germany, it featured two polychrome brass figures flagellating Christ, along with hour-striking and alarm functions. It was number 67 in *The Clockwork Universe* exhibit. According to another friend who visited Peter Guggenheim's home, this clock customarily was the final presentation to his guests. Frishman photo.



Philip Poniz was very surprised at the low winning bid for this mid-17th-century German square table clock with "grande sonnerie" striking. Its maker, Abraham Scheirlin of Augsburg, holds a special place in German Renaissance horology, and the clock was in excellent condition with a spectacular enamel dial. Poniz knows of only one other example, housed in the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford, England, and he believes that the true value of this one is at least five times the sale price of \$18,750. The new owner must be happy.



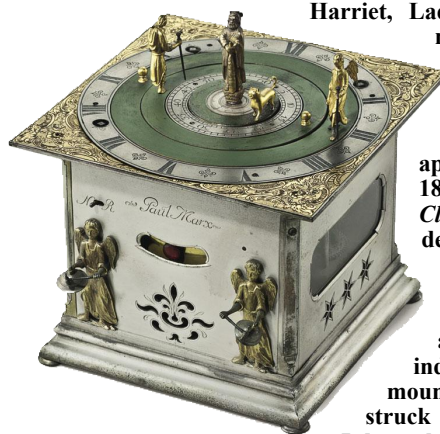
The other half of the 117-lot Abbott/Guggenheim collection was an assortment of impressive mostly bronze sculptures. They contributed more than half of the sale's total, thanks in part to this standing Hercules Pomarius, which as top lot sold in the middle of its \$1,500,000/2,500,000 estimate range for \$2,045,000. Just 15 1/4" high, the figure by Willem Danielsz. van Tetrode was cast in the third quarter of the 16th century. This and several others of the collectors' bronzes were featured in a 1988 exhibit at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.



*The Knight's Dream*, 1650, Antonio de Pereda. I research, collect, write about, and lecture on fine art images with clocks. One favorite is this painting rich with symbols and allegories. At its center is a table clock, a reminder of mortality, nearly identical to the Augsburg clock that brought \$62,500. This style, also known as "türmchenuhr" ("little tower clock") was made to resemble steeples housing great urban turret clocks.



Early 17th century, probably from Augsburg, this German gilt-brass table clock features quarter-striking and alarm. Its architectural form was popular during the "golden age" of German clockmaking. The auction catalog reproduces a page from the consignors' archive with Guggenheim's snapshots and handwritten notes about this clock. It sold for \$62,500.



Harriet, Lady Fellows, an English noblewoman who died in 1874, had owned this Paul Marx German circa 1700 table clock. It was described in the appendix of E. J. Wood's 1866 book *Curiosities of Clocks & Watches*, where it deserved to be mentioned because of the unusual revolving top figures of angel, dog, pilgrim, and St. Christopher indicating the time. Front-mounted automaton angels struck the hours and quarters. It brought \$40,000.

Yet another rampant lion automaton clock, this gilt-brass and ebony circa 1640 German example is by Christoff Miller. Eyes wagged with ticking; jaws opened with hour striking. Derek Roberts, in his 1999 Schiffer book *Mystery, Novelty & Fantasy Clocks*, devoted a full page and three photos to this clock. Peter Guggenheim's competitor collector Winthrop Edey owned a virtually identical clock, which was number 31 in the 1972 Met exhibit. This one sold for \$81,250.



Another of the nine clocks selling for more than \$100,000, this German gilt-brass striking and astronomical "monstrance" table clock by Nikolaus Schmidt of Augsburg dates to circa 1580 and sold for \$118,750. To determine the time would be challenging amid the calendar, zodiac, lunar, and astrological indications.



Two views at Christie's 20 Rockefeller Plaza headquarters. One photo shows how the clocks and bronze sculptures complemented each other as they must have for Drs. Abbott and Guggenheim in their Warwick, New York, farmhouse. Frishman photos.