

R.O. Schmitt Fine Arts, Manchester, New Hampshire

Thousands of Tickers

by Bob Frishman
Photos courtesy R.O. Schmitt

As if 1792 lots were not enough, the actual number of clocks, watches, tools, barometers, music boxes, and books was easily triple that number at the R.O. Schmitt Fine Arts auction. Many lots consisted of multiple items selling, in auction parlance, “for one money.” The sale in Manchester, New Hampshire, October 26-28, 2018, was the firm’s largest ever.

The expo room at the DoubleTree by Hilton Manchester Downtown hotel was bursting with table-loads stretching to the horizon. By the end of the third day, auction workers were exhausted, and some committed buyers had sat through nearly 22 hours of bidding. The overall 80-per-hour selling pace reflected the rapid-fire first day of in-room knock-downs—a “Discovery” sale with no phone, Internet, or absentee bidders—and then a much slower pace on Saturday and Sunday while phone and Internet bidders were allowed to ponder their next moves.

Friday’s “old-fashioned” sale, a new experiment, was needed to liquidate a huge number of non-special timekeepers. Company owner Daniel Horan could not afford to again pack and move thousands of items after the sale, as was likely if bidders were not required to be present and to promptly haul off their booty. This reinforces the hope, expressed in previous reports on these auctions, that someday soon R.O. Schmitt Fine Arts will have its own building large enough for on-site storage, processing, display, and live auctions.

Because many of the Friday lots, the first 679 of the marathon sale, were not cataloged or photographed in advance—just small-type printed sheets were provided along with listings on the company’s website—there was a late realization that attendees would be bidding blind if there no were no images shown as usual on the room’s video monitors. Horan credited Harry Hepburn, a Maine clock dealer and repairer who takes his turn at the auction podium, with the “virtual runner” idea that was utilized. A hand-held video camera in the draped-off preview area was pointed at each lot as it came up, with that image showing on the screens during the bidding. Unfortunately, that camera’s feed kept timing out, and sometimes the audience had to look at a gap in the curtains where staffers hoisted clocks into view.

Nonetheless, and despite fears that few buyers would show up on Friday, the room was crowded with bidders, unlike the sparse groups of bidders present in the past several years and on the following Saturday and Sunday. Bidding was spirited, and most lots reached or exceeded posted estimates. Of course, there were bargains, but not the “bloodbath” that I had heard predicted in the days leading up to the sale. If nothing else, here was proof that bidders will travel and gather and buy if they cannot sit at home in their pajamas and bid at their computer screens.

The next two days were a return to normal, with noticeably fewer attendees. Customers then could refer to the thick, printed full-color catalog, which improves with every auction, and to even more details and photographs on the website. Better clocks were sold on Saturday, up to lot 1224, although on that day, too, some lots offered more than one item for the money. Sunday continued with advertising material, marine instruments, jewelry, tools, and then a parade of wristwatches and pocket watches, some again in multiple-item lots. The best lots of higher-end single items boasted their own full pages of the catalog, sometimes with supplementary illustrations.

I counted just a few passed lots when it all finally ended Sunday afternoon just before 5 p.m. The sale total exceeded \$1.1 million, taking into account buyers’ premiums that varied from 15% for on-site cash or check payments to 23% for bidders using Internet platforms. No sales tax is charged in New Hampshire. We await this spring’s sale and innovations. For more details, visit (www.roschmitt.com).

Bidding was spirited, and most lots reached or exceeded posted estimates.

A major disappointment of the sale was the weak showing for a group of large important standing and hanging American regulators. The sale of this circa 1875 Howard No. 61 astronomical regulator for \$161,000 back in May 2009 was reported in *M.A.D.*; at this sale it made just \$46,000 (est. \$60,000/90,000). Other big clocks by Howard and Seth Thomas sold well below estimates too, despite full-page catalog treatments. One theory is that the relatively few collectors of these chunky high-end sophisticated timepieces have run out of space, time, or money, and there are even fewer new collectors who today have all three. This was the sale’s top lot. There were only ten lots hammering at \$10,000 or higher, indicating that it was volume, not headliners, that pushed up the auction’s total revenue.



The Ansonia Brass & Copper Company in Connecticut produced this circa 1877 novelty alarm clock. At the selected time, a match would strike and light a small lamp, or if the owner was unlucky, the lit match would fly across the room and set the curtains ablaze. Artist and polymath inventor Rufus Porter (1792-1884) patented a similar concept clock back in 1833. This complete example, rarely found, sold for \$1610 (est. \$700/900).



In order for the Warren Telechron Company, Ashland, Massachusetts, to sell its plug-in electric clocks in the 1920s, power stations needed to produce alternating current at precisely 60 cycles. Variations would greatly affect the accuracy of those clocks. Telechron made regulators for those power plants, allowing the operators to adjust the generator’s revolutions per minute and to adhere to the required frequency output. This oak model sold for \$920 (est. \$400/600).



Several nice American and European tall clocks were sold, including this circa 1795 Simon Willard for \$11,500 (est. \$15,000/20,000). Simon Willard’s tall clocks often sell for more, but those usually have fancier mahogany cases and iron dials, with moon phases, painted in Boston rather than in England.



Many lots of multiple wristwatches were offered. Most collectible of Bulova Accutrons are the Spaceview models, which permit viewing of the electronic tuning-fork movements, and three were sold here for \$546.25 (est. \$400/600). Buyers should know that these watches are easily faked by fitting more common Accutrons with clear dials.



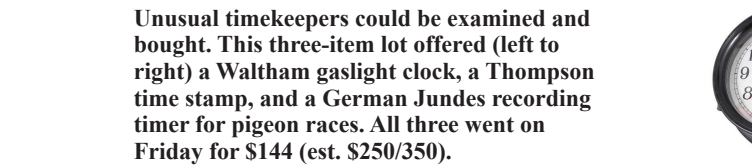
For clock repair practice or target shooting, one lot of 33 alarm clocks (18 shown) sold on Friday for \$172.50 (est. \$200/300). Makers included Westclox, Ingraham, Ansonia, Waterbury, Swiza, and LeCoultre.



Lia Downey, age 11, posed with a brass English marine clock that she got with three other items for \$172.50 (est. \$150/250). She and her mother, Lisa, attended the Friday sale on my recommendation. Lia has chosen clock repair as her independent school project, and she has some visits planned to my shop for instruction. Frishman photo.



Modern clock radios are not the first to be illuminated at night. All of these, from early in the previous century, have flashlight bulbs powered by batteries. The lot sold for \$115 (est. \$250/350).



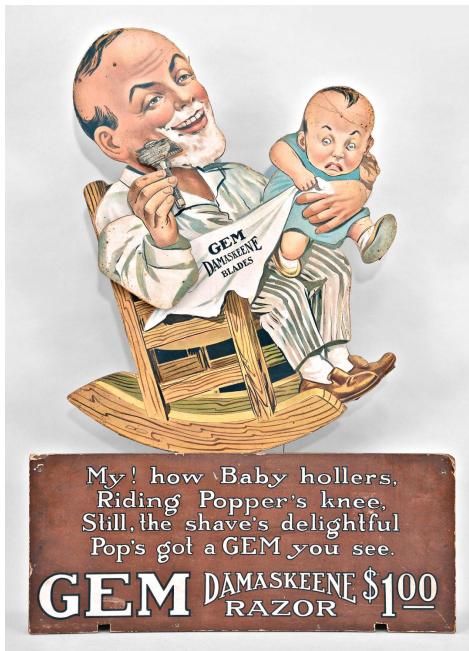
Unusual timekeepers could be examined and bought. This three-item lot offered (left to right) a Waltham gaslight clock, a Thompson time stamp, and a German Jundes recording timer for pigeon races. All three went on Friday for \$144 (est. \$250/350).



Typical of Friday's multiple-item lots was a lot with 11 Mark I deck clock examples (six shown) from the mid-20th century that sold for \$1610 (est. \$700/1100). Much of this material had come from remnants of the M. Low marine supply company in New York City, where it had been stored since the firm closed.



Keep this photo in mind if wondering about the value of a typical ogee shelf clock from 19th-century Connecticut. Several lots of eight clocks each were needed to dispose of this lineup on Friday. Lot 563, for example, sold for \$115 (est. \$250/350), about \$15 per clock. Frishman photo.



Opening the bidding on Sunday was this animated advertising display, circa 1912. The pressboard father figure rocks and shaves, driven by a simple spring-wound pendulum movement. This lively sign went for \$3220 (est. \$1000/1500).



The auction catalog's page 42 features a full-page image of the painting *Farewell of Hector to Andromache and Astyanax* by Carl Friedrich Deckler (German, 1838-1918). The opposite page pictures and describes this gilt bronze and marble French figural clock portraying the same mythological scene. Circa 1805, attributed to Claude Galle (French, 1759-1815), and an imposing 24" wide, the mantel clock made \$16,675 (est. \$10,000/20,000).



A large collection of 18th- and 19th-century Morbier and Comtoise French wall clocks was consigned, most with unusual features making them far more appealing than the standard ones, which today suffer from very low values. This one's dial shows the then newly named ten weekdays decreed by the revolutionary French government, a system that quickly was withdrawn after widespread public resistance. Note the Phrygian caps on two of the hands. The clock brought \$2530 (est. \$1500/2000). By coincidence, I recently viewed a similar collection of unusual Morbier clocks that had been newly donated to a horological museum in Switzerland. Frishman photo.



Robert Cheney (left), former head of the clocks department at Skinner and now in charge of the Willard House & Clock Museum, is part of the auctioneer team at Schmitt. At the preview with Chris Bailey (right), former curator of the American Clock & Watch Museum, he examined the posted-frame movement of a circa 1762 tall clock by Nicholas Blaisdell of Amesbury, Massachusetts. The clock, in a primitive and plain softwood case, sold to a dealer in the room for \$3910 (est. \$1500/2500). Frishman photo.



Tom Wilcox, executive director of the National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors (NAWCC), was the high bidder on the unique 87½" high drumhead regulator made by James Arthur. (For more about James Arthur, refer to Jeanne Schinto's four-part series in *M.A.D.* on Arthur that started with the November 2018 issue.) The clock was previously sold at a Skinner auction in June 2012 for \$4444. Wilcox prevailed over a determined phone bidder and paid \$12,100 (est. \$6000/8000) for it. The clock soon will be displayed at the NAWCC museum in Columbia, Pennsylvania, along with many other fine clocks and watches already on view and originally from the Arthur collection at New York University. A reduced buyer's premium offered to the museum by Dan Horan was appreciated. Frishman photo.



I had bid for a customer who wanted this Birge & Fuller circa 1845 steeple-on-frame Connecticut shelf clock, although I warned him that these wagon-spring clocks are risky and that I would not want to service it. If those powerful leaf springs let go, the consequences are dire. Fortunately, we were outbid when the winner paid \$1380 (est. \$1000/1500).



My first good wristwatch as a boy was a Mathey-Tissot, thanks to an uncle who worked in New York City for an importer of this brand. The Swiss maker also produced this circa 1920 enameled miniature travel or desk clock with a 15-jewel minute-repeating movement and original green leather box. While similar clocks by Cartier sell for more, this one made \$6555 (est. \$2500/3500).



Most of the marine chronometers and deck watches in the sale were made by Hamilton in Pennsylvania, but this small two-day model came from Ulysse Nardin in Switzerland. Marlène Rüfenacht, *archiviste-documentaliste* at the horological museum in Le Locle, Switzerland, the town where the instrument was made, informed me that this chronometer was shipped from the factory to New York City in July 1945. She and I agreed that this was an interesting date, given that the war had just ended in Europe, perhaps allowing a delayed shipment to finally occur. The chronometer sold for \$1955 (est. \$1400/1800).

Best by far of the wristwatch offerings was a Universal Geneve Swiss wrist chronograph made famous by Nina Rindt, a Finnish model and widow of German racecar driver Karl Jochen Rindt. Her photo wearing the watch adjoins the watch closeup on the catalog page dedicated to this collector piece. A special video about her and the watch was created by the Schmitt staff before the auction and may be viewed on YouTube. The Compax model sold to an Invaluable online bidder for \$18,450 (est. \$15,000/25,000).

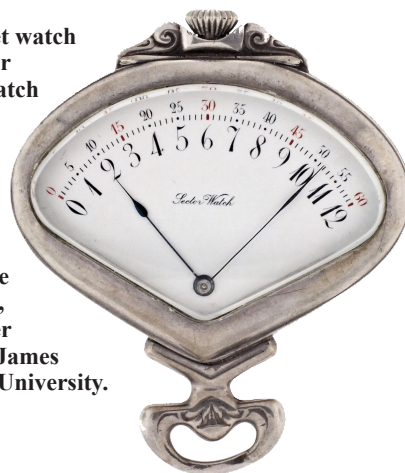


At the preview, Susan Murotake-Rollins held and photographed a circa 1920 Swiss pocket chronograph made by Vacheron & Constantin for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. She reported that while recently in Switzerland, she held in her same hand the original handwritten order for this timepiece. This watch sold, not to her, for \$1150 (est. \$800/1000). Susan Murotake-Rollins photo.



This E. Terry & Sons pillar and scroll shelf clock is now at a clock museum in Furtwangen in Germany's Black Forest. I had bid on the museum's behalf after hearing the museum director say that the museum had been looking for such a clock. I was happy to help add to the few American clocks that the museum exhibits. I paid \$747.50 (est. \$400/600), well under the museum's maximum, and spent another \$709 for FedEx to fly it there.

A favorite in the unusual pocket watch category is the circa 1912 Sector pocket watch by the Record Watch Company of Switzerland. The retrograde hands advance to the right and then fly back at the end of their travels. This one sold for \$2990 (est. \$1600/2000). A nearly identical example on view at the NAWCC museum in Columbia, Pennsylvania, accession number 83.82.461, was formerly in the James Arthur collection at New York University.



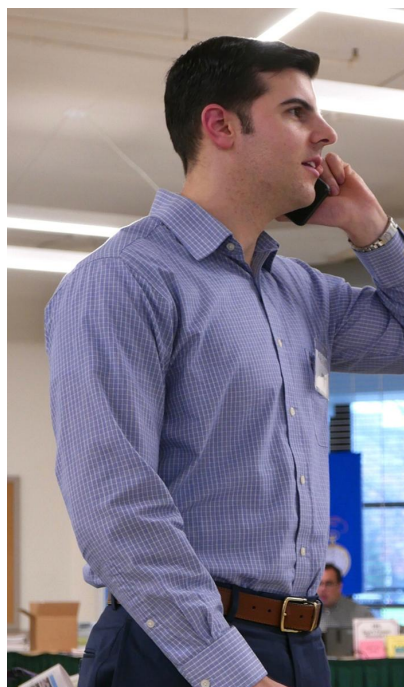
On a recent flight home from Zurich, I overheard Susan Murotake-Rollins tell her seatmates that she was returning from a Geneva watch show. I learned that she is the assistant store director of Boston's famed jeweler Shreve, Crump & Low, and I told her about this auction and encouraged her to attend. Shown here at the preview, she clearly was happy to see the caged automaton birds, and she left some absentee bids. Frishman photo.



If you preferred chirping to ticking, two birds in cages came along with a reproduction swinging clock, all from Germany. The lot sold for \$172.50 (est. \$250/350).



The 2019 convention of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors (NAWCC) will be held June 27 to 30 in West Springfield, Massachusetts. Two of the principal organizers, Lu Sadowski and Tom McIntyre, were promoting the event at the auction. Lu's husband, Steve, a longtime clock dealer and collector, was busy bidding. Frishman photo.



Phone bidding was just one of the tasks performed by Brendan Sullivan, new president of the board of directors for the American Clock & Watch Museum in Bristol, Connecticut. He assists in many aspects of the Schmitt auctions, moonlighting from his graphic design work at Aetna in Hartford. For this auction, he put in more than 43 hours on the auction floor. Frishman photo.

