Folk Art Horology: Clocks and Watches in American Folk Paintings

by Bob Frishman

ince the 13th-century invention of mechanical timekeeping, clocks and watches have appeared in art, never by accident or unintentionally. And even before their arrival, artist depictions of water clocks, sundials, and sandglasses also represented fleeting time, human mortality, technological sophistication, owner affluence, self-discipline, or even just the time of day.

My life in horology-the science of timekeepingbegan in 1980. Always more than a vocation, horology has important connections with history and culture that have drawn me to its broader significance.

Nearly 20 years ago, I began noticing horology in fine art from the past. A 1590 portrait by Annibale Carracci portrays a dark-skinned woman in servant's attire holding a small ornate gilt-brass table clock.¹ An 1812 Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825) late-night portrait of Emperor Napoleon, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., includes an elegant regulator standing with its visible high-

precision gridiron pendulum.² The surprisingly small painting by Salvador Dali of melting clocks attracts crowds of viewers at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.³ These and many others were discussed at the 2017 "Horology in Art" symposium I organized at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.⁴

My expanding "Horology in Art" digital image collection now exceeds 1800 pictures. Although 1800 sounds like a big number, such images actually are not common. I have walked museums or examined auction and exhibit catalogs and found none. Timekeeping devices are absent in entire art categories and genres: landscapes (except with distant clock towers), seascapes and marine paintings, most portraits, ancient and Biblical history, military engagements, wild and domestic animals,

and nocturnal art. Themes with known horological examples still often disappoint me: these include domestic interiors and public indoor spaces; still lifes; vanitas and trompe l'oeil paintings; and depictions of architecture, tradesmen, and eccentric old men.

Clocks and watches do appear in American folk art, often prominently, often reinforcing a narrative or serving as familiar symbols and metaphors. In those paintings, timepieces stand in corners, perch on mantels, hang on walls, dangle from chains and fingers, and peek from pockets. If affordable, clocks and watches were highly important possessions for Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries. Probate inventories demonstrate that timepieces, if owned, were among the most valuable household items. In American folk art a watch or clock spoke loudly to early viewers, as it still can today.

I own a few original examples, better than computer-screen images or printed pages and museum galleries. A recent acquisition (fig. 1) is a circa 1840 miniature on ivory attributed by Philadelphia dealer Elle Shushan to Samuel P. Howes (1806-1881). In the January 2020 issue of

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M.A.D., Lita Solis-Cohen pictured it in her article (p. 108) about the November 2019 Delaware Antiques Show, where I first saw this little gem.

Adding to the image's appeal is my learning that Howes painted the working people of Lowell, Massachusetts, just ten miles from my home in Andover. The unnamed sitter probably lived nearby. While I have come across several large folk-art paintings similarly depicting women with watches-symbolizing wealth and

sophisticationthis is the only such miniature I have seen, and I had to have it.

As in similar full-size folkart portraits, Howes's miniature shows a pocket watch in a small front dress pocket, secured to a very long gold chain draped around the sitter's shoulders and curling below her pocket. Half of the case is visible, whereas other images often reveal only the top bow, just hinting at a watch below.

A circa 1840 portrait (fig. 2) could be one of those larger American portraits, but instead I viewed it in January 2020 at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery in Hobart, Australia. The artist was William Buelow Gould (1801-1853), who produced artwork amazingly similar to many works painted here. He

was born in Liverpool and in 1827 was transported as a seven-year convict to Tasmania for having by "force of arms stolen one coat." He never returned to England or set foot in America. The watch of Eliza Biggs is tucked inside her broad belt of the same green color as her fashionable dress. The looping black watch ribbon echoes the lace halo framing her face.

According to Elle Shushan's printed description that accompanied my miniature, "Howes painted until the year of his death, creating honest portrayals of his workingclass neighbors. Now much soughtafter, Howes' work is represented in the New York State Historical Association/Fenimore Art Museum, the New-York Historical Society and the Whistler House Museum of Art in Lowell, Massachusetts."5 The Whistler House, the 1834 birthplace of artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler, mounted in 1986 an exhibit of 33 works by Howes. The associated catalog's introduction notes that on September 23, 1835, Howes advertised in Lowell's Journal and Weekly Bulletin that the cost of his portrait miniatures ranged "from 6 to 25 dollars each," based most likely upon the number of

Figure 1: Miniature portrait on

ivory by Samuel P. Howes (1806-1881), Lowell, Massachusetts, circa 1840. Author's collection.

Questions may arise about whether a shinv case was a watch or a locket. However, before the introduction of inexpensive photographic portraiture in the mid-19th century, round watch-form lockets were uncommon ways of keeping a loved one's visage

sitters and amount of detail.6

close to the heart. Miniature painted portraits were more likely to be oval and open-faced, while images inside covered lockets became widespread only later in the Victorian era. In folkart portraits where the object is fully out of the pocket, it is a watch.

A second original artwork of mine (fig. 3) also has local connections. Some years ago, it was for sale in a booth adjacent

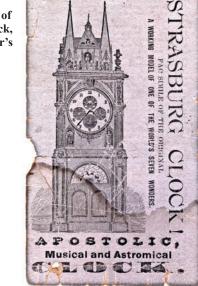
to mine at an antiques show. Written in pencil on the gilt frame's wooden backboard is "Drawn by Chas. Rundlett of Ports. NH." A yellowed, stained paper also is affixed to the back, on which is penciled "This was drawn by Chas. Rundlett of

FROM GERMANY TO AMERICA.

Portsmouth NH from the enclosed card."

The "card," also attached to the backboard, is a purple-toned illustrated ticket (fig. 4) announcing in various type fonts and sizes "From Germany to America, the Great Strasburg Clock! Fac Simile of the Original A Working Model of One of the World's Seven

Figure 4: Advertising card for the exhibition of the Strasburg clock, circa 1878. Author's collection.



Wonders. Apostolic, Musical and Astromical Clock." Rundlett is otherwise unknown, but his rendition of the clock is skillfully executed.

His watercolor may be too well done to have been based solely upon that 3" x 5" card. Vintage photographs (fig. 5) show the actual monumental clock on display in Boston's Horticultural Hall. One photograph has a handwritten description dated April 9, 1877. On the back of the other was pasted a clipping from the Pawtuxet Valley Gleaner, "Phenix, R.I., Saturday, Jan. 12, 1878," that recounted a tragic romantic story about the young German clockmaker.

Perhaps Charles Rundlett traveled the 60 miles to Boston and was inspired after viewing the clock, as shown in the photos looming about 10' tall in front of a backdrop of boldly printed drapery. The real Strasburg clock, one of the world's largest, rises nearly 60' tall in the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris. With its multiple dials and automata, it now is known as the "Strasbourg" clock since the city is French again. In the spring of 2019, I traveled to the cathedral only to find the clock fully covered by a painted shroud to conceal major restoration work happening behind. The adjacent decorative arts museum, another planned visit, was closed; its staff was on strike.



Figure 2: Portrait of Eliza Biggs (née Coleman) by William Buelow Gould (1801-1853), circa 1840. Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia. Author's photo.



Figure 3: Replica of Strasburg Clock by Charles Rundlett, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, watercolor, circa 1878. Author's collection.

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Figure 5: Pair of stereoview photographic cards showing the Strasburg clock on display at Boston Horticultural Hall, 1878. Author's collection.



Figure 6: Miniature portrait of mother and child by Clarissa Peters Russell (1809-1854), watercolor. Courtesy Andover Center for History & Culture, 1965.187.1.

The whereabouts of the German clockmaker's masterpiece are unknown, but a larger functional replica of the Strasbourg clock, built in 1887 by a Sydney, Australia, watchmaker, stands in that city's Powerhouse Museum.

I travel only two miles to appreciate a lovely miniature (fig. 6) owned by the Andover Center for History & Culture. In early 2017 the center mounted *Back in Time*, an exhibit of its horological holdings, where I peered with joy at this motherand-child painting in a gilt frame. The artist is Andover native Clarissa Peters Russell (1809-1854), an important American folk-art miniaturist also known as Mrs. Moses B. Russell, whose husband was a painter, too. Her many extant portraits of children suggest that these were her specialty.

In this double portrait, the gold watch is out of the mother's pocket and clutched by the child. If that grasp weakened, the mother had hold of the long black ribbon, less costly than a gold chain. Because of the woman's black dress and the familiar symbolism of a watch representing mortality, there is the possibility that this work was painted posthumously.

A 2016-17 exhibit at the American Folk Art Museum, *Securing the Shadow: Posthumous Portraiture in America*, focused on this theme. Included was a private-collection example of a boy holding a watch and chain, attributed to Aaron Dean Fletcher (1817-1902). The description, reproduced on page 113 of the exhibit catalog, stated that "In this example, surmised to have been



Figure 7: Portrait of a watchmaker, unknown artist, circa 1820. Courtesy Old Sturbridge Village, 20.1.19.

painted posthumously, the child no longer has time on his hands; instead the watch is suspended from a chain with the winding key pointing heavenward—a sign that it will be wound no more."

Another posthumous folk-art painting is a watercolor memorial to George R. H. Slacks, who died on May 8, 1829, at precisely 11:22, according to the watch hands. J. S. Tiles is the otherwise unknown artist who included a colorful striped ribbon with a suspended watch key and owner's seal. Vintage textile expert Lynne Z. Bassett informed me that the ribbon was a beautiful silk example with a picot edge, a type sometimes noted in "portraits of men in this period with a ribbon hanging out of their pocket, with a cluster of seals and such at the end."⁷

In the collection of Colonial Williamsburg and discovered in Washington, Connecticut, Tiles's painting was exhibited in 1969 at the Museum of Modern Art's show *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900.* This watercolor was the subject of my "Horology in Art Part 27" published in the July/ August 2016 issue of *Watch & Clock Bulletin,* the journal of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors.⁸

Also at Williamsburg is an 1831 oil on canvas by Thomas Jefferson Wright⁹ that portrays Elizabeth Thatcher Corbin Major Jameson (1803-1871). She made no effort to hide a large gold watch that rests conspicuously near her open book of musical notation.

Dangling as overtly is the watch in a circa 1790 portrait of Hannah Maley Cuyler¹⁰ at the Albany (New York) Institute of History and Art. The unknown artist added an oval portrait miniature as well as other signs of wealth such as a ring on her splayed index finger, a large earring, an elaborate chatelaine, a pincushion, a fan, a purse, and a country Chippendale chair.

Possibly from Vermont is a portrait of an actual watchmaker (fig. 7). The painting was purchased in that state and is in the collection of Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts. Neither the sitter nor the artist is known, but the ocean and hilly coastline viewed through the window make the painting's assumed inland origin somewhat questionable.

In a landmark 1992-93 exhibition at Old Sturbridge Village, *Meet Your Neighbors: New England Portraits, Painters, and Society, 1790-1850*, watches are seen in a few of the featured portraits (see catalog color plates 1, 3, 20), and watch chains are visible in others. A portrait (catalog no. 36) by Horace Bundy (1814-1883) portrayed the left-handed sitter repairing a watch. Jack Larkin's chapter "The Faces of Change" in the catalog noted that "Pocket watches, either prominently displayed or more genteelly hinted at by watch fobs, often appeared as more personalized icons of prosperity."

For horologists, the craftsman's tools are interesting; they include a magnifying loupe and brass doubleend calipers used for "truing" balance wheels. The watch proudly displayed by the watchmaker



Figures 8 and 9: English silver pair-case pocket watch (front and movement). Signed by Alexander Hamilton, London, hallmarked 1775. Author's collection.



appears to be a typical English timepiece in a thick multi-piece hinged hallmarked silver case, popular and prevalent in America during the hundred years before the Civil War. Few watches at that time were made in America; our "watchmakers" principally were repairers and sellers, as has been the case subsequently as well.

I own a few examples of such English watches, including one (figs. 8 and 9) signed by Alexander Hamilton, London (obviously not *our* Alexander Hamilton), with a 1775 hallmark stamp. Four early watch papers pressed inside the back cover are from New York and New Jersey watchmakers, establishing the object's long-term American provenance.

A Massachusetts clockmaker/watchmaker's account book is at the library of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.¹¹ On the May 1790 page, Samuel Mulliken (1761-1847) listed not only his repair customers but also the London makers and serial numbers of the watches. For him, English watches were the norm, as they were throughout New England for the next several decades at the same time that folk artists were busy at their easels.

Colonial Williamsburg owns an 1827 portrait of a mother and child¹² identified as Anna Webster Worthington Bull (Mrs. Isaac Bull, 1796-1830) and her daughter Rebecca Reed Bull (later Mrs. James L. Bowers). As in Mrs. Russell's miniature, the watch is fully visible out of Mrs. Bull's dress pocket, and with its thick gold chain, it competes well for viewer attention.

Children are the sole subjects of some paintings. Sold at a 2013 Skinner auction, a painting by Erastus Salisbury Field, one of our best-known folk artists, features a boy (fig. 10) living around 1850. Typically just one of his ears is visible, but the large watch and its thick ribbon are front and center. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art is an 1840-50 portrait of a boy with blond hair (fig. 11). The oil on canvas is unattributed, but the watch, if not a toy, seems at grave risk among his playthings.

Another little boy in 1830s attire was caught listening to a watch ticking.¹³ The description from the Minneapolis Museum of Art suggests that the portrait, attributed to Samuel Miller, is posthumous, not only because of the watch but also because of the pistol-form watch key.

When touring the American Museum and Gardens in Bath, England, in 2019, I saw yet another portrait of a boy with a watch to his ear (fig. 12). It is dated circa 1835 with attribution to Dr. Samuel Addison Shute (1803-1836) and/or Ruth Whittier Shute (1803-1882).

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Figure 12: Portrait of a boy with a watch by Dr. Samuel Addison Shute (1803-1836) and/or Ruth Whittier Shute (1803-1882), circa 1835, pastel, watercolor, pencil, and gilt foil on paper. American Museum and Gardens, Bath, England, 1958.123.

Clocks, not watches, are in two other child-only images. The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, owns the 1876 *Child in a Rocking Chair*¹⁴ by E. L. George. The oversize child appears to dwarf the Connecticut steeple clock standing on its wall bracket in the background. Better proportioned is Ella Emory's 1878 painting¹⁵ of the parlor of the 17th-century Cushing House in Hingham, Massachusetts. The painting, formerly in Nina Fletcher Little's collection, is now owned by Historic New England. A Massachusetts banjo clock is at the far left, atypically standing on a shelf rather than hanging on the wall.

Figure 10: Portrait of a boy in a blue outfit with a pocket watch by Erastus Salisbury Field (1805-1900), oil on canvas. Courtesy Skinner Inc., sale 2680B, lot 168, October 27, 2013.

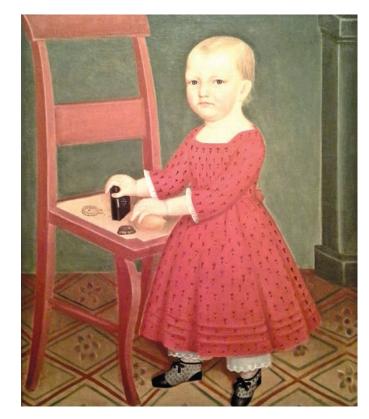
Figure 11: Portrait of a boy with blond hair, artist unknown, 1840-50, oil on canvas. Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973.323.5

A very similar banjo clock¹⁶ at the Concord Museum in Massachusetts is possibly the one Thoreau referenced in 1852 when he wrote of being housebound during an April snowstorm: "I can hear the clock tick as not in pleasant weather—My life is enriched."¹⁷ The clock belonged to John Thoreau, his father. The family timepiece was signed by a Willard competitor, Samuel Whiting (1795-1865) of Concord, who no doubt benefited from the invention's popularity. The Concord Museum also proudly owns relevant folk art on a cow horn. The powder horn (CM#A101) is signed "Samuel Jones / His Horn 1774." Seen among the horn's elaborate decorations is a scratch-carved drawing of a clock face.

A circa 1835 Joseph Davis painting of the Frost family is centered by a looking-glass clock, showcasing its bronze-powder stenciling and floral-painted dial (fig. 13). This raises the subject of folk art *on* clock cases, dials, and glasses, a subject perhaps for a future treatise. Whether the Frosts owned such a clock is uncertain; the painter easily could have added signs of affluence, such as the fancy-painted furniture and floor cloth, which may not yet have been in the family's inventory. While less expensive than a tall clock, a decorative shelf clock still could cost as much as \$10, more than nearly any other household item they owned. Rufus Porter, for example, would mural-paint an entire large room for less money.

From German-speaking Pennsylvania, a number of fraktur depict clocks with their traditional symbolism. One colorful example with an abundance of fine script (fig. 14) sold in 2019 at Skinner. It was a circa 1840 pen-and-ink watercolor birth letter from Pennsylvania titled The Spiritual Chimes. Another depicts a floorstanding tall clock amidst many heart-enclosed German inscriptions. This image was reproduced as No. 213 in American Radiance: The Ralph Esmerian Gift to the American Folk Art Museum (2001) and is fully described on page 491, where the inscriptions are translated into English. These "spiritual chimes" commenced with "I. The clock strikes one, O God, Three in One, help me to pay heed to one thing needful...." and continued in the same vein. The centerpiece clock is a folk-art masterpiece, although probably not strictly based upon reality. Clocks from that time and place can be highly decorative, but usually not to such an exuberant extent.

Clocks in towers and steeples also grace American folk art. *Before the Burning of the Old South Church, Bath, Maine* is attributed to John Hilling (1822-1894). According to Jeffrey Tillou: "This example is one of a series of three paintings depicting the destruction of



the church by a mob of 'Know Nothing' party members orchestrated by a street-preacher named John S. Orr. On the evening of July 6, 1854, the members entered the church, broke windows, rang the bell, hoisted the American flag and set the building on fire."¹⁸

The first violent event, indicated on two of the tower's clock dials, was at 6:28 p.m. The time was 8:57 p.m. for the third phase of Hilling's sequential paintings, which then showed the church fully engulfed in flames.¹⁹ Not apparent but vividly imagined by horologists was the destruction of the heavy brass and iron machine inside the clock tower. That movement probably was similar to ones made by George M. Stevens (1838-1917). His Boston-based company sold many such movements throughout New England (fig. 15).

The machine's colorful paint decoration could qualify as folk art, as could, like similar period weathervanes, my pair of old tower clock hands (fig. 16). Their original gilding is all but gone, exposing the verdigris copper beneath. When I purchased these at a garden antiques show, the dealer claimed that they came from an old church tower in Maine.

In January 2017 Professor David P. Jaffee died too soon at age 62. At the 2015 Historic Deerfield Decorative Arts Forum, I reveled in his deep scholarship on how material culture enlightens understanding of history. Reading his 2010 book *A New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America*, I appreciated his insights even more. In a statement entirely relevant to timepieces in American folk art, he asserted that artifacts were not "tossed in just as illustrations" and that if we "learn to look" we can gain much knowledge about the lives and culture of our forebears.²⁰

Bob Frishman was introduced to horology in 1980. In 1992 he founded Bell-Time Clocks for repair and sales. As a horology scholar and promoter, he has written more than 100 articles and reviews, lectured to public audiences more than 100 times, and organized related conferences at Winterthur, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Henry Ford Museum, and the Museum of the American Revolution. He is a Fellow of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, and a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, London, England. Presently he is researching and writing a book about Colonial Philadelphia clockmaker Edward Duffield. More is at his website (www.bell-time.com).

www.MarketplaceForCollectors.com

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Figure 13: Portrait of the Frost family, attributed to Joseph Davis (active 1832-37), circa 1835, watercolor on paper. Courtesy Skinner Inc., sale 2961B, lot 35, October 19, 2016.



Figure 15: Weight-driven tower clock movement by Geo. M. Stevens & Co., Boston. Private collection. Author's photo.

- 1. Annibale Carracci (1560-1609), *Portrait of an African Woman Holding a Clock*, 1583-85, oil on canvas. (www.tomassobrothers. co.uk/artworkdetail/781241/18036/ portrait-of-an-african-woman-holding)
- Jacques-Louis David (French, 1748-1825), *The* Emperor Napoleon in His Study at the Tuileries, 1812, oil on canvas. (www.nga.gov/collection/artobject-page.46114.html)
- Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931, oil on canvas. (www.moma.org/ collection/works/79018)
- 4. See symposium website (www.horologyinart.com).
- 5. Elle Shushan, December 10, 2019, invoice to purchaser.
- 6. This information was noted in the catalog's introduction, written by Paul D'Ambrosio.
- 7. April 19, 2016, e-mail to author.
- 8. The article is available online. (http://users. neo.registeredsite.com/9/7/2/22056279/assets/ Horology_in_Art_27.pdf)
- 9. Portrait of Elizabeth Thatcher Corbin Major Jameson, Culpepper County, Virginia, Thomas Jefferson Wright (1840-1916), 1831, oil on canvas. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2017.100.1. (https://emuseum.history.org/objects/102296/ portrait-of-elizabeth-thatcher-corbin-majorjameson-mrs-jo?ctx=69bae8f085cb58b9a60eaf07f dc2af9d7ece7038&idx=0)

 Portrait of Hannah Maley (Mrs. Johannes Cornelis) Cuyler, (b. 1769), circa 1790, artist unknown, oil on canvas. Albany Institute of History and Art, 1944.6. (www.albanyinstitute. org/details/items/hannah-maley-mrs-johannescornelis-cuyler-b-1769.html)

Figure 14: *The Spiritual Chimes*, watercolor and pen-and-ink fraktur birth letter, Pennsylvania, circa 1840. Courtesy Skinner Inc., sale 3278M, lot 774, August 11, 2019.

- Samuel Mulliken account book, 1785-92, Newburyport and Salem, Massachusetts. Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, MSS 505.
- 12. Portrait of Anna Webster Worthing Bull (Mrs. Isaac Bull), artist unknown, 1827, oil on tulip poplar panel. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1964.100.6. (https://emuseum.history.org/ objects/58581/portrait-of-anna-websterworthington-bull-mrs-isaac-bull?ctx=615d277544 96eb36b0a25a57622692e5e7e168e4&idx=0)
- 13. *Portrait of a Young Boy*, attributed to Samuel Miller, circa 1835, oil on canvas. Minneapolis Institute of Art, 98.239. (https://collections. artsmia.org/search/98.239)
- Child in a Rocking Chair, E. L. George, 1876. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 62.272. (https:// collections.mfa.org/search/objects/*/62.272)
- 15. *The Cushing House Parlor*, Ella Emory, 1878, oil on canvas. Historic New England, 1994.22. (www.historicnewengland.org/collectionssearch/?action=https%3A%2F%2Fwww. historicnewengland.org%2Fcollections-search&s earch=the+cushing+house+parlor&category=&pr eserve-filters=1)

- 16. Patent timepiece (banjo clock), Samuel Whiting, Concord, Massachusetts, 1820-30, mahogany, gilt pine, painted glass, brass, and steel. Concord Museum, TH0092. (http:// www.concordcollection.org/ShowImageView. aspx?244+OBJECTS)
- 17. Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, 1837-1861.
- See the website (www. tillouantiques.com/inventory/ burning-of-the-old-south-church-bath-maine).
- 19. *Third Phase, Burning of the Old South Church, Bath, Maine*, attributed to John Hilling, circa 1854, oil on canvas. The paintings depicting the first and third phases of the burning may be viewed on the "Maine Memory Network" of the Maine Historical Society (www.mainememory. net/artifact/5283) and (www.mainememory.net/ artifact/5208).
- 20. David P. Jaffee, *A New Nation of Goods: The Material Culture of Early America*, University of Pennsylvania, 2010, p. xiv.



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Figure 16: Antique tower clock hour hand. Note counterweighted tail to perfectly balance hand at its center hub. Author's collection.