

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

Famous Faces

by Bob Frishman
Photos courtesy R.O. Schmitt

Not from *Time* magazine or a Ken Burns documentary, these are the faces of more than 1000 clocks and watches. They were sold at the October 21 and 22, 2017, auction by R.O. Schmitt Fine Arts at the Radisson Hotel in Manchester, New Hampshire. Prices ranged from \$138,000 (including buyer's premium) for a Charles Fasoldt regulator to \$5.75 for a non-timepiece rosewood melodeon, with most lots landing under \$1000. When the final lot (lot 1267) of 27 American pocket watches was hammered down for \$287.50, the two-day auction totaled over \$1.2 million and had consumed nearly 20 hours.

Owner and auctioneer Dan Horan did much of the selling, but two famous faces were seen on the podium too. Bob Schmitt, who passed this firm to Horan over a just completed five-year buyout period, returned to his familiar spot at the microphone. Making a debut, to audience applause, was Robert C. Cheney, whose final sale as head of the clock department at Skinner was described in my July 2017 *M.A.D.* article. Cheney now consults and catalogs for this venerable horological auction house, and he dusted off his auctioneering skills here.

Another new feature is professionally produced short videos of significant lots.

One large unreserved consignment was key to the impressive sale total. It was the source of the Fasoldt clock as well as many fine marine and pocket chronometers, watches, and scientific instruments listed in a dedicated section of the catalog. Bradley Ross of Winchester, Massachusetts, died on May 5, 2017. A longtime acquaintance of mine and many fellow horologists in our area, Ross amassed a very large collection, the scope of which none of us realized until this auction. In the past, we admired single pieces that he brought to our meetings; we witnessed his occasional important purchases; but we never were admitted to his home or invited to view multiple eye-poppers.

When Schmitt staff entered the house to review and remove the collection after Ross's death, they confronted a familiar collector scene of random piles in crowded rooms, under-bed storage, unassembled movement parts in various locations, descriptive but incomplete index cards, and treasures amongst the mundane. The trove, also extending to oversize safe-deposit boxes, was large enough that, if sold all at once, the market could not absorb it all, so some good material has been held back for the next sale in May.

Prices often were not as lofty as when Brad Ross had acquired many of his fine pieces, and auction attendees took advantage of the lower demand. Many of us remember values that were double, triple, or even higher for the same or similar items a decade or two ago. One sophisticated Massachusetts collector paid just \$862.50 for an A. Johannsen & Co. 1916 London military pocket watch, remarking that he has its twin, for which he had paid \$3000 years ago, so he was "dollar averaging." I took home for \$1534 an early 19th-century Parkinson & Frodsham marine chronometer. I have admired these in the past but resisted spending what they formerly cost. Horological dealer and illustrator David Penney from England was in the audience and actively bidding on important English material. I noted him buying pocket chronometer uncased movements by London makers John Glover and John Gordon.

A consignment of more than 40 higher-grade carriage clocks had its own section in the Sunday catalog. Beginning with its April 2017 auction, the firm has produced two catalogs per sale, one for each day, and separating the lots by type and value. The full-color catalogs have been upgraded with larger photos and more descriptive text for the better items and reduced print area for the lesser ones. All lots are more completely described and illustrated in the online catalog, most with clear condition reports. While these reports are quite helpful to bidders, some consignors have objected to "nitpicking" descriptions, which build buyer confidence but may depress values.

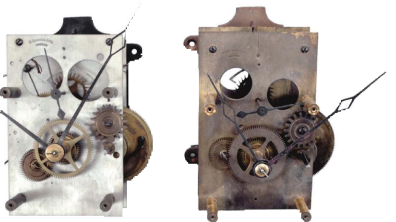
Horan stands by these condition reports, even if doing so sends consignors to auctioneers who are less diligent. He prefers to fully inform absentee bidders and prevent come-backs from those who do not care for bad surprises when they open their shipments. Lot 896, for example, was a lovely circa 1890 miniature French carriage clock, which sold to an



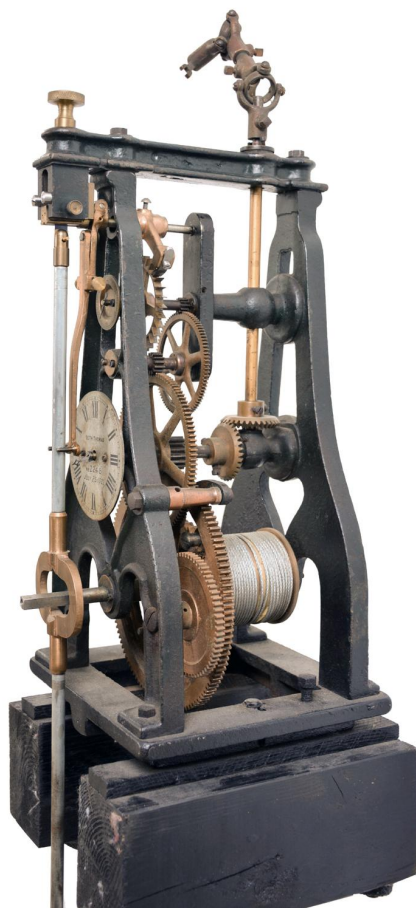
Clocks by New York maker Charles Fasoldt (German/American, 1819-1889) are rare and mechanically sophisticated. This example from the Bradley Ross collection merited its two-page catalog spread and top-lot position in the sale. It is the earliest-known example of his hanging wall regulators and the closest to original condition. A Massachusetts collector paid \$138,000 for it. He had dropped out of the bidding for another Fasoldt clock during the April 2017 clock auction at Skinner, but he seemed determined to buy this one. His card stayed in the air until Robert Cheney's phone bidder (reportedly that same Skinner buyer) quit this time.



Precision jeweler's wall clocks by E. Howard & Co., Boston, always bring strong prices. This circa 1890 No. 36 is 62" tall and features a mahogany case, eight-day time-only weight-driven movement, and a mercury pendulum for temperature compensation. Oddly estimated at a low \$3000/4000, the wall clock cost the high bidder \$18,400.



Sometimes parts bring more than complete clocks. In this lot the buyer got two high-quality movements by E. Howard of Boston plus three large and heavy pendulum bobs. The winning Internet bid was \$2760 (est. \$800/1000).



Not all collectors have the space for a large and heavy street clock movement, but a room bidder took home this 51" tall example. This No. 4 Seth Thomas iron frame, an eight-day model, dated 1922, has a pendulum that weighs 28 pounds. The new owner paid \$7705, more than triple the \$1500/2000 estimate.



Box loads of books often appear, and some bring good prices although still well below individual retail. This grouping included *The Marine Chronometer: Its History and Development*, signed by its author, Rupert T. Gould, which no doubt contributed to the \$632.50 (est. \$400/600) price. The Gould book is pictured separately in the online catalog and does not appear in this photo.

More Charles Fasoldt pocket watches than clocks are known, but they still are rare and unique. Many bear the chronometer label, reflecting their high accuracy. This circa 1865 19-jewel key-wind example, serial #132, brought \$4370 (est. \$3000/4000). A full page of the catalog offered enlarged photos of the dial and movement and a page from Fasoldt's relevant 1859 patent.





In general, prices for early Connecticut pillar-and-scroll shelf clocks have been quite depressed. Two factors proved otherwise for this lot—its miniature size (just 22" tall) and its desirable maker (Mark Leavenworth of Waterbury). Circa 1825 and with a 30-hour wood movement, it surpassed its \$2500/3000 estimate and sold for \$3680.



Robert Cheney called for bids, with spotting by auction company owner Dan Horan. Despite a podium array of three computer screens, a table of phone bidders, and another lineup of staff handling Internet and absentee customers, Cheney moved right along. His auctioneering skills were honed during the 11 years he spent as head of Skinner's clock department. Frishman photo.

English tavern or so-called "Act of Parliament" wall clocks are hard to find in England and scarcer here. J. Thwaites of London produced this ornately carved oak and mahogany example, circa 1788. The 50" tall clock has an eight-day time-only weight-driven brass movement. Estimated at \$3000/4000, it brought \$5750.



At this sale bidders could buy lots of multiple American pocket watches for almost nothing. However, if they wanted the best of the best, they had to pay, especially if the original box, papers, and extra parts were included. This 16-size American Waltham Watch Company Premier Maximus has nearly every desirable feature—23 jewels, fully adjusted movement, diamond end stones, and an 18k gold case. The watch sold just over its appropriate \$8000/10,000 estimate for \$10,637.50.



A small number of non-horological items usually are among the Schmitt offerings, and this sale featured some of Bradley Ross's rare coins. A proof set of five silver U.S. three-cent pieces (one shown), conservatively estimated at \$1500/1800, brought \$4830.

Sector clocks rarely appear at auction. The single hand takes 12 hours to glide across the 180-degree dial, then flies back to its starting point. This highly ornamental gilt-bronze circa 1900 French model is signed "Planchon a Paris." Its eight-day striking movement is regulated by a balance platform, not a pendulum. An in-room southern California collector paid \$10,925 (est. \$10,000/15,000).



Grandfather clocks, more accurately termed tall or long case, usually are bargains these days, and there were many in the first day's sale of "Important Clocks." But getting four for a total of \$80.50 (est. \$300/500) seemed truly ridiculous. Just two are shown here. Granted, these are modern, but the price still must have been a disappointment to the consignor and to the auctioneer, whose cataloging and handling costs certainly were not recouped.

online bidder for \$590 (est. \$200/300), despite serious publicized damage to its enamel panels.

Another new feature, inaugurated for the previous auction in April, is professionally produced short videos of significant lots. These videos not only help promote those lots in advance, they also are permanent online resources for researchers seeking information later. John Kovacik, a watchmaker and horological expert based in Little Falls, New York, provides the text and narration with classical music in the background. These may be viewed via the R.O. Schmitt Fine Arts website (www.roschmitt.com) and on its YouTube channel. Kovacik spends several weeks each year at the Schmitt office in Windham, New Hampshire, writing detailed catalog entries and condition reports.

American banjo clocks seemed particularly abundant in the auction. Many were cataloged by Robert Cheney, who is the country's acknowledged expert on Willard and other Boston makers of this iconic style. Perhaps because of Cheney's powers of description, a circa 1815 model, attributed to Aaron Willard and featuring a thermometer in its reverse-painted throat glass, sold for \$8050, within its strong \$7000/9000 estimate. There were bargains in this category too. For example, a circa 1870 George Hatch, North Attleborough, Massachusetts, banjo brought just \$373.75, below its modest \$400/600 estimate.

As with past Schmitt auctions, many audience members complained of the slow pace of selling. On Saturday the sale dragged on from 11 a.m. until nearly 10 p.m., averaging just 62 lots per hour and bumping into a televised baseball playoff game. Sunday was a bit better, with the average up to 67 per hour, but still far below the 100-plus rate at some other major houses. Horan blamed the Internet bidders and system, but other firms taking online bids are able to do better.

Between unnecessary descriptions of lots and waiting for slow online and telephone bids, the sale became a grueling endurance effort for those choosing to attend in person and perhaps even for those bidding from afar and waiting hours for their lots to come up. Also to avoid burning out his auction helpers, Horan hopes that in future sales he can greatly reduce the number of offerings, switching lower-value lots to an online-only platform. But we still feel that he must speed up the live sales as well, especially as he faces stiff competition from other New England clock and watch auctioneers such as Jones & Horan, Skinner, and Fontaine's.

Undaunted by the slow pace, however, was a Boxford, Massachusetts, couple who, with my encouragement, attended the Saturday preview and sale for the first time. They sat through several hours of selling, waiting for a German wall clock and enjoying the spectacle and learning experience. Eventually, they were the high bidder for their choice, and they likely will be back in the spring.

Especially when staring out over the sea of clocks at the opening of the preview, it was difficult to imagine a style and maker of clock not represented. Most were offered without reserves, and only a handful of lots were passed. The combination of abundant supply, affordable prices, and expert cataloging makes Schmitt auctions important occasions for attendees and for the large percentage of buyers who now bid from home.

For more information, see (www.roschmitt.com) or call (603) 432-2237.



Stretching almost to the horizon, tables of more than 1000 clocks, books, parts, tools, and watches greeted auction previewers. All offerings were transported to the convention center hall and organized by lot number. Some were taken away by room bidders, but on Sunday night the staff's job was not done until the remainders were repacked for trucking back to Schmitt's headquarters to await absentee bidders' payments and shipping. Frishman photo.



New Hampshire clock restorer and expert Steve Sanborn made close inspections of many clocks at the preview. He has retired from full-time repairing but not from horology. Frishman photo.



The accumulated horological knowledge and skills standing here were definitely worth noting. Bob Boyd of New Hampshire (left) and Jim Cipra of California have been regulars at these sales, and no clock's qualities and flaws escaped their examinations. Frishman photo.



Large jeweler's regulators by Seth Thomas join Howards at the high end. This circa 1886 Regulator No. 19 is in a 77" tall cherry case and boasts an eight-day weight-driven movement. These precision clocks never struck the hours since a striking gear train could impede accuracy and was undesirable in their usual commercial settings. Its \$17,250 cost was within the \$15,000/20,000 estimate. This was just one of dozens of clocks purchased by a Midwest dealer who is always seated in the front row of these sales.



The best by far of the Bradley Ross collection marine chronometers was this extremely rare center-seconds two-day model by Swiss maker Paul Ditisheim. It is in excellent original condition and ticks briskly. The catalog cited an identical example that sold in 2004 at Christie's South Kensington for \$25,668, but perhaps as a sign of the times, this barely reached the \$8000/12,000 estimate at \$8050. A southern California collector, bidding in the room, snapped up this bargain.

Dan Horan's wife, Celeste, recently quit her day job to devote full-time attention to their auction business. On Sunday, despite very little sleep, she permitted this photo of her on the job. Frishman photo.



I purchased this circa 1881 Seth Thomas Panama oak eight-day wall clock for a local 91-year-old client. Bob Schmitt, who cataloged it, informed me that the unusual model was part of the regular consignments from an English picker who combs his country for antique American clocks and ships them to New Hampshire to sell. Other bidders liked this one too, and I had to pay \$690 (est. \$350/550).



Bob Schmitt, former owner of this auction company, was at the podium when this Ansonia Excelsior came up. He claimed that it is the largest crystal regulator ever manufactured in America. Standing 20" tall in a gilt-finish brass case and with a visible Brocot escapement on its face, it sold for \$1380, inside its \$1200/1600 estimate.

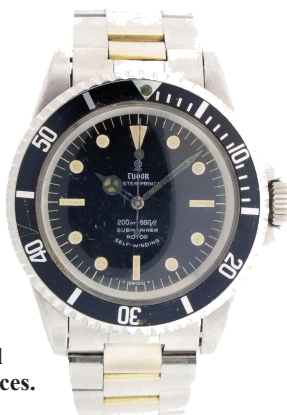


Ever since my collector friend Bob Frascatore (d. 2012) outbid me at a previous Schmitt auction for this James Arthur banjo clock, I have hoped for another shot at it. Now it was back, consigned by his widow. As chairman of the Symposium Committee of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, I introduce every year the "James Arthur Lecture," and I would like a clock by this important early 20th-century collector, hobbyist maker, and philanthropist. The \$2000/3000 estimate was enticing, but I could not outbid the room bidder's final price of \$5635.



The names Tiffany and Patek Philippe on a pocket watch make an almost unbeatable combination, especially when the Swiss watch is a five-minute repeater. This 31-jewel fully adjusted movement in an 18k gold case completed the package that sold for \$7475 (est. \$5500/7500).

Tudor wristwatches, made by Rolex for a slightly lower-end market, still bring strong prices. This Swiss circa 1968 Submariner doubled its \$2000/3000 estimate, selling at \$6325. At a previous Schmitt sale, my Tudor Tiger chronograph cost substantially less.



Among the many Bradley Ross collection pocket chronometers was this 1880 A.P. Walsh, London, keyless model in an 18k gold case. High-accuracy instruments such as these feature delicate detent escapements and free-sprung bimetallic balances. Chased by two prominent collectors in the room, the pocket chronometer finally sold online for \$6490 (est. \$3000/4000).



Dan Horan tries hard to appeal to the strong market for vintage wristwatches, and he had some nice examples in the sale. A colorful Omega Swiss 17-jewel manual-wind Seamaster "Soccer Timer" from an early circa 1970 series sold for \$1495 (est. \$1200/1600).

