

Bonhams, New York City

Great Auspiciousness Confirmed for Chinese Tribute Clock

by Bob Frishman
Photos courtesy Bonhams

An 18th-century enameled silver and tortoiseshell Chinese tribute clock was the top clock lot and the top lot overall in the Bonhams auction on March 4 of furniture, silver, clocks, and decorative arts in New York City. The 19" tall mantel clock sold for \$161,000 (including buyer's premium) to a persistent and well-heeled phone bidder who also snapped up other high-end clocks in the sale.

This writer's expertise and passion is horology. The 61 timekeeper lots, representing a large percentage of the approximately \$1.85 million sale total, are the focus of this report. Information on other lot categories in sale No. 22389 is available from Bonhams.

Early in the 17th century, the Chinese court was introduced to European clocks, which they called "auto ringing bells." Emperors built large collections of exotic clocks, some imported and others manufactured in royal workshops staffed by Jesuit missionaries, who also trained local artisans. High court officials commissioned clocks as one of the most desirable of tribute objects. Ones such as the Bonhams example rarely come to market. The case probably was made in Guangzhou; the eight-day fusee movement appears to be English; and the Chinese characters signify "great auspiciousness." Four Western caricatured gentlemen kneel in obeisance as they support the waisted gourd shape of the upper case symbolizing longevity.

The majority of the consigned clocks, although not the Chinese ones, were from the collection of Ruth Hirschfield of Brooklyn, New York. She did own other top-selling clocks that went to the same buyer. In second and third place in the sale's top lots, two French clockwork warship automatons brought \$81,250 and \$56,250. Both of these late 19th-century marine models, selling at multiples of their high estimates, displayed the time accompanied by spinning propellers, wagging rudders, and revolving turrets. Hirschfield had many requests to sell these rare so-called "French industrials" privately in recent years, but her decision to go the auction route obviously paid off.

Hirschfield, recently widowed, was unusual as a woman in a collecting field traditionally dominated by men. Her husband, Dr. Alan Davis, was supportive but not the collector. His nephew was responsible for sparking Ruth's clock interest several decades ago. The son of Alan's brother began finding clocks to sell to his helpful uncle, and as the house filled

and the expenses mounted, she began taking time from her professional social work career to learn more about the antique clocks invading her life.

Soon Hirschfield was traveling cross-country in her station wagon buying and selling at shows, auctions, and the many meetings of the National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors. She claims that she was well accepted by the men, who often turned to her for help as she grew more knowledgeable.

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Her collection, mostly formed 30 and 40 years ago, spread throughout her 1850s Brooklyn Heights home, but in 2015 the time had come to let the clocks go.

The proceeds of the sale are entirely dedicated to the college educations of her four grandchildren, the oldest of whom is soon to graduate from high school. Her collections of fine art and Maurice Sendak material still keep her company, however, as does her online bookselling business.

The breadth of Hirschfield's collection is indicated in the glossy sale catalog. French clocks joined marine chronometers, watchmaker escapement models, Connecticut brass and wooden works shelf clocks, antique and quality reproduction banjo clocks, Howard hanging regulators, and three tall-case clocks. Now in her mid-80s, she retained only a few clocks for her family members, who are happy to see the collection shrink. She also recently sold other clocks from her collection privately and through dealers including Steve Sadowski of Maspeth, New York, a longtime friend. He has many stories to tell about this "savvy girl's" aggressive pursuit of clocks, bolstered by her recognition of quality, her spending power, and her strong interest.

When asked about her favorites in the Bonhams sale, which she attended with family members, Hirschfield pinpointed the E. Howard & Co., Boston, Model 6 figure-eight wall regulator. A form of banjo clock, this distinctive style was made in five sizes, and this is the largest at 59" long. These weight-

driven non-striking timepieces were designed for commercial and institutional venues but now are avidly sought by collectors. The larger sizes were made to special order so are far rarer than the smallest mass-produced Model 10. Perhaps reflecting the persistent general weakness of the market for many American antiques, hers brought \$17,500 on a \$15,000/20,000 conservative estimate. Just last October at a semiannual auction of antique clocks by R.O. Schmitt Fine Arts, another Howard 6 hammered at \$35,000. Two others of her Howards sold within estimate, but the fourth, a Model 59 with 8" black dial, was passed at \$3500.

Overall, however, Hirschfield was very pleased with the outcome. She praised Jonathan Snellenburg, director of clocks and watches for Bonhams, New York, whom she has known from "way back" when he was a dealer and sometimes a competitor for clocks she wanted. Snellenburg also pleased another consignor, the owner of the clock section's opening lot. A gilt-metal crucifix clock, made in Augsburg, Germany early in the 17th century, sold for \$22,500; it was in the best and most original condition of any that the expert has handled. It easily could have been included in the Peter Guggenheim collection of fine Renaissance clocks offered recently at a Christie's auction (see *M.A.D.*, May 2015).

A younger and energetic collector, as described by Snellenburg, consigned a small number of exotic French late 19th-century mystery clocks in order to upgrade and redirect the remainder of his horology collection. This genre has ingenious mechanical methods of moving hands and swinging pendulums in unobvious ways. A 1950s plug-in electric version, the Jefferson Golden Hour, is an affordable Modernist collectible with hands that seem to float in a flat circular glass.

The strongest selling mystery clock in this sale was a *bras en l'air*. The gilt-bronze woman's arms slowly rise to point to the hours and minutes on curved tracks to each side of her. This clock came from the portion of the dispersed Time Museum collection that was auctioned at Sotheby's in October 2004. Back then it brought \$13,200; this time it sold for nearly the same amount, \$13,750, and also went to the new owner of the Chinese tribute clock. This anonymous collector now has some wonderful additions to his or her collection.

For more information, contact Bonhams at (www.bonhams.com) or Jonathan Snellenburg at (212) 461-6530.



Estimated at \$80,000/120,000 and bringing \$161,000, the star of the show was the Chinese tribute clock, produced in the late 18th century as a royal gift. The English time-only movement featured a center seconds hand, chain-driven fusee, and a cylinder-escapement balance. Clearly more important was the rarity and quality of the ornate case, suitable for an emperor.



When it sold far above its \$20,000/25,000 estimate for \$81,250 it became second-highest lot of the auction. This rare French naval cruiser automaton clock was affectionately known as the "yellow submarine" during its presale time at Bonhams. Although clearly a surface vessel, it is from a genre of French industrial clocks, many by André Romain Guilmet, that portrayed several types of machines, ships, locomotives, etc. and did far more than tell time.



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Large scale models of watch escapements are unique showpieces usually made by watchmaking students, although this lot was signed "Bennett," a well-known London horology firm. These models demonstrated the form and function of much smaller real-life components ticking thousands of times every hour inside watches. This one sold for \$3500. I was underbidder on this lot, and the next, another fine model, losing both to the same phone bidder who carried off the Chinese tribute clock and other top-selling clocks.



Possibly a bargain at \$562, this model sold at the low end of its \$500/1000 estimate. In 1641, Galileo's son produced a drawing based on his father's idea for applying a pendulum to mechanical timekeepers. No working movement based in the drawing was made at the time, but the concept was applied in Holland later in the century and led to multi-fold increases in timekeeping accuracy. This brass model, 11 3/4" high and based on the drawing, is 20th century.



A famous white marble sculpture, executed around 1770 by Étienne-Maurice Falconet and now in the Louvre, was the inspiration for this French gilt bronze and marble Three Graces clock from the late 19th century. The time is indicated on slowly rotating horizontal annular dials at the top. It sold for \$15,000.



Compendium carriage clocks add barometers, thermometers, compasses, calendars, etc. to the more standard time indicators of French carriage clocks. This late 19th-century example was pictured on page 95 of Derek Roberts's 1999 reference book *Mystery, Novelty & Fantasy Clocks*. It sold for \$6000.



Howard No. 6 walnut figure-eight regulators have been known to sell for much more, but this one still was within its \$15,000/20,000 estimate at \$17,500. It was a favorite in the consignor's collection and perhaps went to a collector hoping to own all five sizes of this distinctive style.



The gilt movement's engraved "HS" monogram on this early 17th-century crucifix clock points to Hans Schlottheim (c. 1547-c. 1625) of Augsburg, Germany as the likely maker. Two early features, hog-bristle regulator and stackreed to equalize mainspring power, remain in place. The consignor, a good friend of mine, had bought it at a 1999 Jones & Horan auction, where he was told by its former owner, an older gentleman, that he in turn had bought it at Sotheby's several years before that. This time it sold for \$22,500.



One ancestor of common modern German 400-day or anniversary clocks, with their slowly oscillating brass balls, is the torsion-spring candlestand clock patented in 1852 by the Terryville Manufacturing Company in Connecticut. These early clocks were fragile, fussy, and inaccurate, so few were made and fewer remain. The rarity is reflected in the cost today, \$4375.

Tall-case clocks by early 19th-century Massachusetts maker William Cummens already are desirable, but clocks of that region and age are further enhanced by dials painted by John Ritto Penniman, whose initials on the dial back of this clock were not discovered until after the auction catalog went to press. But bidders were informed in time to push the price close to the middle of the \$12,000/18,000 estimate range, \$13,750.



Carriage clocks that sound Westminster chimes on the quarter hours are extremely rare. This model has small bells hidden in its base, similar to one shown on page 197 of the 1989 edition of *Carriage Clocks: Their History and Development*, a comprehensive resource by Charles Allix. The carriage clock brought \$6875.



The first of the Howards in the sale, this walnut Model No. 60 regulator, had an incorrect Seth Thomas two-jar mercury pendulum but still got close to its \$30,000 high estimate at \$27,500. Most of these large special order commercial timepieces by E. Howard & Co. of Boston bring strong prices because of their rarity and extremely fine quality.



Ruth Hirschfield, of Brooklyn, New York, was the collector who consigned the majority of the clocks in the auction. One clock that stayed with her is a regulator by William "Bill" Scolnik, a maker of unique high-precision timepieces. Photo courtesy Larry Hirschfield.



Third place in the auction at \$56,250 was another French automaton warship clock, this one with the distinctive underwater ram on the battleship's prow. This clock was retailed by Kendall & Dent, London.



A *bras en l'air* French mystery clock beat its \$8000/12,000 estimate at \$13,750. The female beauty's arms now show the time as 7:42. When the arms reach the top, they drop and start their slow ascents again.