

# Auction News

A recent survey of NAWCC members revealed that the majority of respondents identified themselves as timepiece collectors. Auction News acknowledges their interest in knowing the value of their collections and individual items with its focus on top auctions and their results. However, this feature is also sure to appeal to anyone curious about the auction prices of certain watches and clocks today. FNAWCC member Bob Frishman's article is followed by photos and brief descriptions of items and their auction prices from various auction houses. Anyone who is interested in writing about an auction they attended may contact Editor Therese Umerlik at [tumerlik@nawcc.org](mailto:tumerlik@nawcc.org) or the Publications Department, 514 Poplar St., Columbia, PA 17512.

## Splendor of the Chinese Tribute Clock

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

An eighteenth-century enameled silver and tortoiseshell Chinese tribute clock was the top clock lot and the top lot overall in the March 4, 2015, Bonhams auction of furniture, silver, clocks, and decorative arts in New York City. The 19" tall mantel clock sold for \$161,000 (including the buyer's premium) to a persistent, well-heeled phone bidder who snapped up other high-end clocks in the sale.

My expertise and passion is horology. The 61 time-keeper lots, representing a large percentage of the approximately \$1.85 million sale total, are the focus of this feature.

Early in the seventeenth 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.

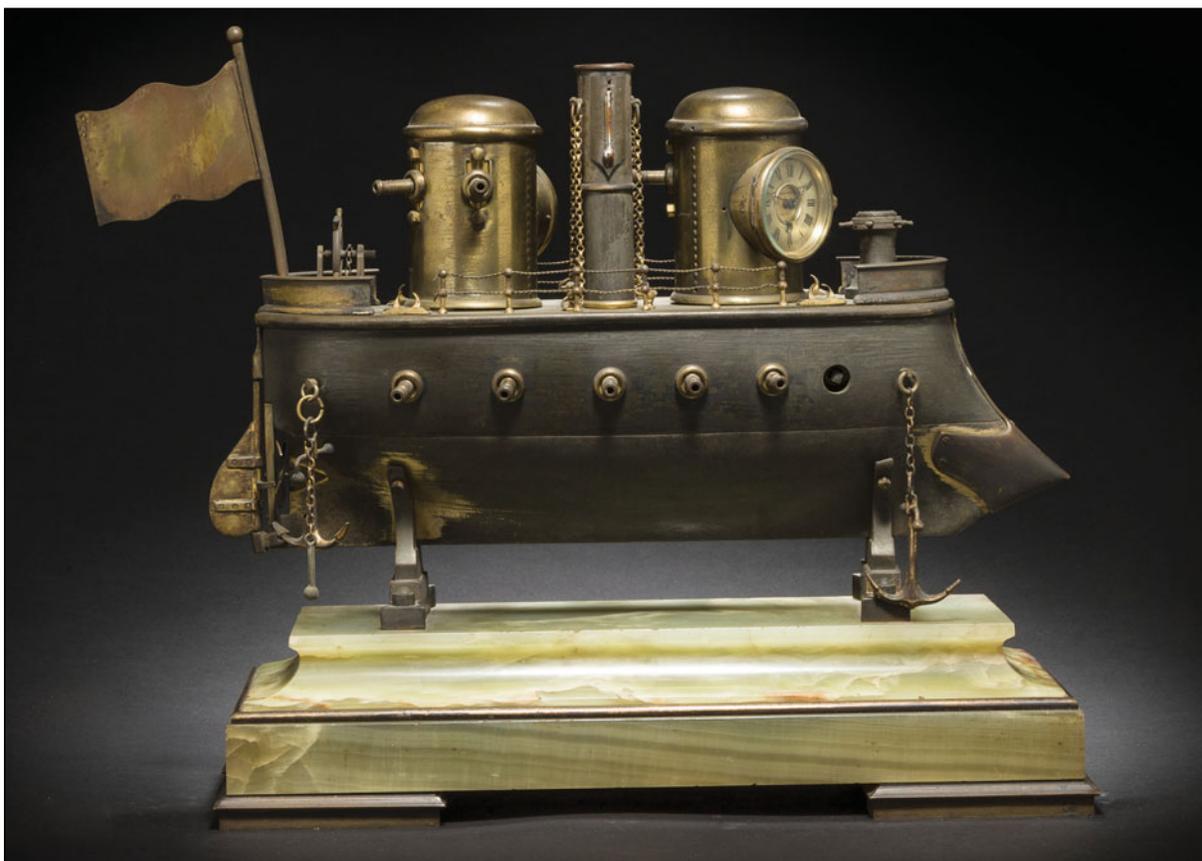
Ones, such as the example in Figure 1, rarely come to market. The case probably was made in Guangzhou, the 8-day fusee movement appears to be English, and the Chinese characters signify "great auspiciousness." Four Western caricatured gentlemen kneel in obeisance as they support the gourd shape of the upper case symbolizing longevity.

The majority of the consigned clocks—not the Chinese ones—were from the collection of Ruth Hirschfield of Brooklyn, NY. She owned other top selling clocks that went to the same buyer.

Taking second and third place in the sale's top lots were two French clockwork warship automatons at \$81,250 and \$56,250 (Figure 2). Both late nineteenth-

**Figure 1.** Estimated to value between \$80,000 and \$120,000 and bringing \$161,000, the auction's star was the Chinese tribute clock, produced in the late eighteenth century as a royal gift. The English time-only movement featured a center seconds hand, chain-driven fusee, and cylinder escapement balance. COURTESY OF BONHAMS.





**Figure 2.** Third place in the auction at \$56,250 was another French clockwork warship automaton, this one with the distinctive underwater ram on the battleship's prow. This clock was retailed by Kendall & Dent, London. COURTESY OF BONHAMS.

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 paid off.

Hirschfield, recently widowed, was unusual as a woman in a collecting field traditionally dominated by men. Her husband, Alan Davis, was supportive but not the collector. His nephew sparked Hirschfield's clock interest several decades ago. Davis's brother's son began finding clocks to sell to his helpful uncle, and as the house filled and the expenses mounted, Hirschfield began taking time from her professional social work career to learn more about the antique clocks invading her life.

Soon she was traveling cross-country in her station wagon buying and selling at shows, auctions, and the many NAWCC meetings. She said she was well-accepted by the men, who often turned to her for help as she grew more knowledgeable. Her collection, mostly formed 30 and 40 years ago, spread throughout her 1850s Brooklyn Heights house, but this year the time had come to let the clocks go.

The proceeds of the sale are entirely dedicated to the college education of her four grandchildren, the oldest of whom is soon to graduate from high school. Her collec-

tions of fine art and Maurice Sendak material still keep her company, however, as does her online bookselling business.

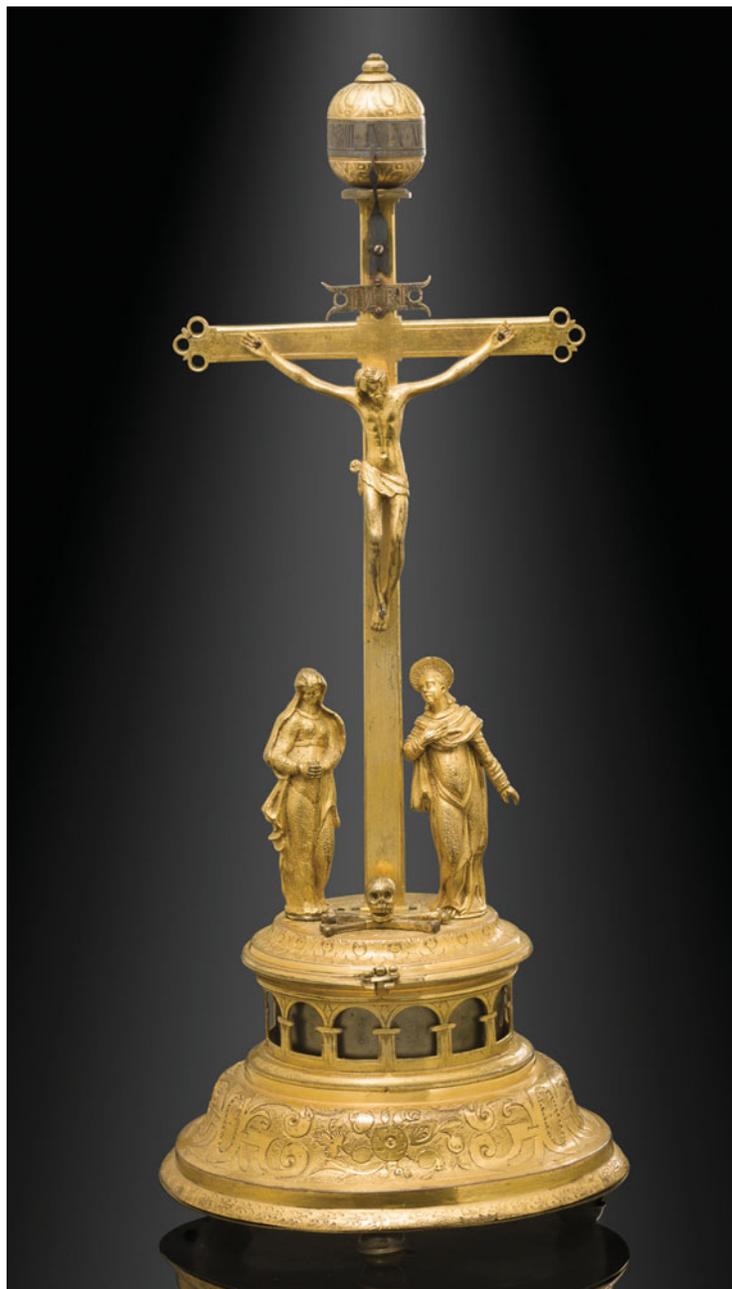
The breadth of Hirschfield's collection is indicated in the glossy sale catalog. French clocks joined marine chronometers, watchmaker escapement models, Connecticut brass and wooden works shelf clocks, antique and quality reproduction banjo clocks, Howard hanging regulators, and three tallcase clocks.

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, NY, 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 they are avidly sought by collectors. The larger sizes were made to special order so are far rarer than



**Figure 3.** Howard No. 6 walnut figure-eight regulators have been known to sell for much more, but this one still was hammered within its \$15,000-\$20,000 estimate at \$17,500. COURTESY OF BONHAMS.



**Figure 4.** The gilt movement's engraved "HS" monogram on this early seventeenth-century crucifix clock points to Hans Schlottheim (ca. 1547-ca. 1625) of Augsburg, Germany, as the likely maker. Two early features, hog-bristle regulator and stackreed to equalize mainspring power, remain in place. It sold for \$22,500. COURTESY OF BONHAMS.

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 (Figure 3). In October 2014 at a semiannual auction of antique clocks by R. O. Schmitt Fine Arts, another Howard No. 6 hammered at \$35,000. Two of her other Howards sold within estimate, but the fourth, a Model 59 with 8" black dial, was passed at \$3,500.

Overall, however, Hirschfield was pleased with the outcome. She praised Jonathan Snellenburg, director

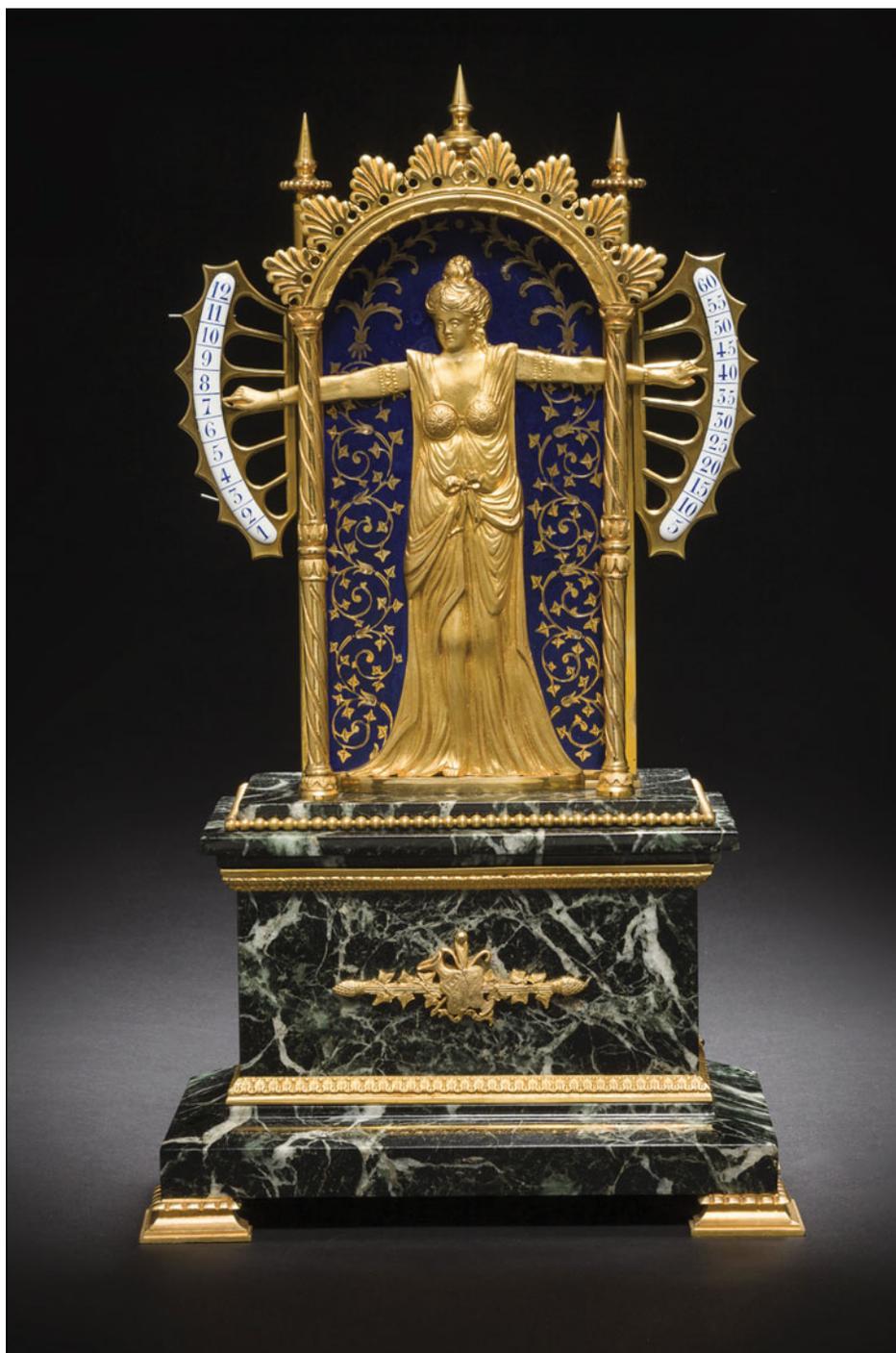
of clocks and watches for Bonhams, NY, whom she has known from "way back" when he was a dealer and sometimes a competitor for clocks she wanted. Snellenburg also pleased another consignor, the owner of the clock section's opening lot. A gilt-metal crucifix clock, made in Augsburg, Germany, early in the seventeenth century, sold for \$22,500 (Figure 4). 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. (The Christie's auction was featured in

**Figure 5.** A bras en l'air French mystery clock beat its \$8,000-\$12,000 estimate at \$13,750. The woman's arms now show the time as 7:42. When the arms reach the top, they drop and start their slow ascent again. COURTESY OF BONHAMS.

the September/October 2015 issue of the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*.)

A younger and energetic collector, as described by Snellenburg, consigned a small number of exotic French late nineteenth-century mystery clocks 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 (Figure 5). 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. 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 their collection.



### About the Author

Bob Frishman has repaired, restored, collected, sold, and researched antique timekeepers since 1980. His business, Bell-Time Clocks, is based in Andover, MA. He lectures regularly about the history, science, and culture of mechanical timekeeping and has authored many articles for the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*. He can be reached via [www.bell-time.com](http://www.bell-time.com). He recently received an NAWCC Fellow Award and is chair of the Ward Francillon Time Symposium Committee.

*Editor's note: This article was originally printed in the June 2015 edition of Maine Antique Digest. Copyright 2015 Maine Antique Digest.*

## More Auction House Results

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This Patek Philippe Calatrava wristwatch sold for \$5,520 in a May 2015 auction held by R. O. Schmitt Fine Arts. It is stainless steel with a mesh bracelet and its price included a 15 percent buyer's premium.

COURTESY OF R. O. SCHMITT FINE ARTS.



This English skeleton clock in a cathedral form with intricately pierced plates sold for \$4,140 in a May 2015 auction held by R. O. Schmitt Fine Arts. It has a two-train fusee movement and its price included a 15 percent buyer's premium. COURTESY OF R. O. SCHMITT FINE ARTS.




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## Potency of Old

Unlikely  
 Is the power  
 For rating a friend  
 Or judging a shower  
 Of watches that run  
 Behind or ahead  
 Or stall and start  
 Or stop without an inkling  
 Like dreams  
 Out of your head

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A retired dean from Harvard University's Division of Continuing Education, where he currently teaches courses on French studies and management, Ray Comeau believes that collecting old watches holds lessons for us all, as the poem above illustrates. His email is [comeau@hudce.harvard.edu](mailto:comeau@hudce.harvard.edu).