

## Part 16

# Horology *in* Art

By Bob Frishman (MA)

I know of six Eastman Johnson paintings that include a clock within the scene, and I expect to find more. Johnson (1824-1906) was one of the foremost American painters of “genre” scenes—views of everyday people and everyday activities that were highly popular during the mid-nineteenth century.

Some art scholars say these artworks, collected mainly by affluent New Yorkers, were caricatures and satires whose owners could feel superior to “common” folk. Others, however, see them as celebrations of an innocent age of growing optimism, prosperity, and democracy in the decades after the election of President Andrew Jackson. While our Civil War burst that bubble, artists such as Johnson continued

to feature scenes of the American character that distinguished us from other peoples of the world.

These are not primitive or folk art paintings. Johnson and his fellow genre painters were professional realist artists with formal training. Known in his day as the “American Rembrandt,” he also depicted scenes of slavery in the South, made portraits of prominent Americans, including Abraham Lincoln and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and was a co-founder of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He studied six years overseas in Dusseldorf, Holland, and Paris. While at The Hague, he produced what may be one of his best paintings, *The Card Players* (with a clock on the wall), completed in 1853. It was displayed at the National Academy of Design and confirmed the lessons of earlier Dutch old master interior scenes by artists such as Gerrit Dou, whom I featured in “Horology in Art Part 7.” Johnson considered his 1871 painting, *The Hatch Family*, his best group portrait; it includes a French figural mantel clock within the family tableau of Alfrederick Hatch, Wall Street broker and later president of the New York Stock Exchange.

For this article I have chosen his final dated painting of everyday life. *The Nantucket School of Philosophy* was painted in 1887 during the last of his 17 summers on the



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Massachusetts island. This evocative detailed oil on canvas, on view at The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, MD, shows elderly gents seated around the stove of a cobbler’s shop. Johnson later identified the captains and revealed that two of them were already deceased when he executed this masterpiece.

In addition to the rustic furnishings and papers tacked to the walls, a large Connecticut column-and-cornice shelf clock stands proudly on the red bureau. Very likely a weight-driven eight-day Seth Thomas or Birge & Fuller, it is an entirely appropriate participant—its case coated with wood and tobacco smoke, its ticking and hourly striking heard clearly during pauses in these men’s reminiscences about days gone by.

### 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, he has authored many articles for the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*, and he can be reached via [www.bell-time.com](http://www.bell-time.com). He recently received an NAWCC Fellow award.