

Part 20

Horology *in* Art

By Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

Vanitas still life paintings were sumptuous reminders of life's transience and our foolishness in craving its brief pleasures. Especially popular in the seventeenth century, these artworks overflowed with symbols of frivolity and mortality. Several vanitas images in my "Horology in Art" collection include a watch, an hour glass, or a small clock.

Perhaps the most vivid is *The Knight's Dream* painted in 1650 by Antonio De Pereda of Madrid. It hangs at that city's Museo de la Real Academia de San Fernando. *Allegory of Vanity* is another bold De Pereda painting with a gilt table clock, seen at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and online.

Unlike Dutch examples without human figures, Pereda's large 85" x 60" oil on wood panel included a sleeping seated pale young nobleman. In his dream a winged angel displayed a banner lettered in Latin, warning that life spurs us to action but quickly flies away. Reinforcing her admonition are two skulls, a burnt candle, coins, flowers, jewelry, sheet music and stringed instrument, a mask, pistol, armor, and symbols of royal and papal power.

At the painting's center is the ultimate symbol of time's passage—a clock. This one, a small gilt architectural "turmchenuhr" or "little tower clock," was a style made to resemble urban steeples that housed big turret clocks.

Two examples, both nearly identical to the little gold ticking tower on the knight's table, have been sold at recent auctions of important Renaissance clocks. Lot 8 of Patrizzi & Co.'s sale in Milan, Italy, in 2009 was made circa 1600 by Nikolaus Schmidt the Elder of Augsburg, Germany. On January 28, 2015, at a Christie's auction in New York City, a clock from the same city and period, was sold as Lot 69 of the Abbott Guggenheim Collection.



The Knight's Dream painted in 1650 by Antonio De Pereda of Madrid [Public domain] via Wikimedia Commons.

The thick auction catalogs provide detailed descriptions and photographs of these early striking and alarm clocks from the "Golden Age" of German horology.

We know that these clocks were costly and inaccurate, more like precious and complicated novelties than true timekeepers. Today, we can study them only in a few museums, private holdings, and at rare auctions when collections are dispersed. Fortunately, we also see them in wonderful paintings where they sit as eternal reminders that they, and the world, will outlive us all.

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. He recently received an NAWCC Fellow award and is Chair of the Ward Francillon Time Symposium Committee.