

Part 14

Horology *in* Art

By Bob Frishman (MA)

Most of the artworks in this series hang in grand museums. We can view them there, and we can have our own digital images, posters, and postcards. But we cannot afford to have the originals on our walls. One exception, an 1860 Yokohama print, was available and affordable.

I have several computer images, scanned over the years from books and auction catalogs, of old colorful Japanese prints with clocks. Usually, they portray traditional interior scenes and characters. The clocks have distinctive designs, with Japanese hour markers and complicated mechanical systems needed to indicate unequal hours varying in length with the seasons. Japan did not adopt Western timekeeping until 1873.

I have hoped to own an original one of these, and I recently met a longtime dealer of Japanese prints, who assured me that he could quickly locate a nice vintage example with a clock. After he searched his inventory and the collections of his colleagues, he was surprised that he could not find one.

Finally, he found this 9.5"x14" Oban print drawn by the popular artist Yoshikazu. It is a scarcer image showing Westerners at a party in Japan and is one-third of a three-sheet publication. An original copy of the entire triptych is in the collection of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.

It also is pictured in a February 1961 *Antiques* article which reports that my print is the artist's copy of a June 6, 1860, newspaper depiction of Japanese delegates visiting the White House. He retained the format and props (including the clock), but redrew the characters and slightly altered the setting. As is common, he had some trouble with Western faces.

In general, these prints (without clocks) are plentiful, and I own two from my art-collecting parents. When new, they were cheap and found in many nineteenth-century Japanese homes. After Perry's arrival, many caricatures of the foreign visitors appeared, feeding intense local curiosity. On all the prints are Japanese letters identifying the artist, censors, and publisher.

Condition greatly affects price. The quality of the initial impression is one factor, since woodblock printing surfaces wear down quickly. Certain ink colors and the entire print can badly fade, especially if not protected from sunlight. Like all paper antiques, they may have been attacked by vermin and moisture, discolored by chemicals in the paper and air, or mishandled by careless owners. Luckily, my Yoshikazu retains colors nearly as bright as new and shows just a bit of worm nibbling on a corner.



The clock, clearly not Japanese, is an impression of a Black Forest wag-on-the wall with Roman numerals and dangling weights and pendulum. Its prominent location is a signal, as in many of my featured artworks, that the subjects are sophisticated and affluent.

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 was head of publicity for the recent Time For Everyone symposium where he presented his "Clocks on Canvas" program during the add-on day in Santa Barbara. He has authored many articles for the *Watch & Clock Bulletin* and can be reached via www.bell-time.com.