

## Part 17

# Horology *in* Art

By Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

I recently paged through my copy of George Eckhardt's 1955 book, *Pennsylvania Clocks and Clockmakers*. I was excited to see on page 132 what the author describes as "The first oil painting made in the Colonies...." It is a 1705 portrait of Johannes Kelpius painted by Dr. Christopher Witt, and it includes a clock on the wall behind the sitter.

The original of this historic artwork—the oldest of its kind in North America—is owned by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. I am grateful to them for waiving reproduction fees so that the image may be published here.

Kelpius landed in Philadelphia in 1694, invited by William Penn to settle there with his small group of religious separatists. Known as "German Pietists," they awaited Christ's appearance at the upcoming Millennium. They focused on spiritual matters as they studied, gardened, prayed, and composed poetry and hymns. Kelpius did not believe that he would die or that his body would decay, but when he succumbed to pneumonia at age 35, this portrait is all that remained. The group and its settlement disappeared, but more information is available from the Kelpius Society, which promotes its message of peace and brotherhood.

In Germantown, PA, there is a tablet at the historic Morris-Littell house. Its inscription reads "On this site a botanical garden, one of the first in America, was planted by Dr. Christopher Witt, botanist, mystic and physician, born in Wiltshire, England, November 10, 1675; died in Germantown, January 30, 1765."

Eckhardt asserts that Witt, the portraitist of Kelpius, made the timepiece in the painting. The author offers no explanation, but his claim is likely because of the entry on page 444 of *Clockmakers and Watchmakers of America by Name and by Place* by Sonya L. Spittler, Thomas J. Spittler, and Chris Bailey, 2011. Witt is identified as a maker of "tall clocks, tower clocks, mathematical instruments." Another reference to Witt in a 1912 book by Howard Atwood Kelly suggests that the doctor constructed "the first clocks made in Pennsylvania, and probably in America."

The clock is an unusual form. Clearly weight-driven, it would have been made soon after the application of the pendulum to timekeeping. That may explain its broad base that could accommodate a short pendulum's wide swing, such as in brass lantern clocks of the same period with distinctive "wings" on each side. I can find no record of the clock's current whereabouts.



Portrait of Johannes Kelpius by Dr. Christopher Witt (DAMS #5975), call #1882.1. HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA.

First portrait, first oil painting, first clocks, first clock-maker; what more could I want for a worthy "Horology in Art" feature?

### 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 at [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.