

Part 18 Horology *in* Art

By Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

At the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs, CO, guests may view a large number of high-quality “Giclée reproductions of well-known American artists’ images of the West. Opened in 1918, this venerable resort now is owned by billionaire entrepreneur and philanthropist Philip Anschutz, and many of the ornately framed artworks on display are copies of originals at his American Museum of Western Art in Denver.

During an art tour for hotel guests, I viewed iconic Western images by Albert Bierstadt, Thomas Moran, Georgia O’Keeffe, George Bellows, Thomas Hart Benton, Maxfield Parrish, and more. In a first-floor hallway we found George Caleb Bingham’s 1845 *Family Life on the Frontier*. After migrating west with his family in 1818, Bingham (1811-1879) in the mid-nineteenth century painted nearly 50 canvases about life and politics of Missouri mostly for patrons of the American Art-Union in New York who were hungry for views of the nation’s wilderness and its people. Self-taught and initially apprenticed as a cabinetmaker before turning to portrait painting, he perhaps is best known for his *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, and *The County Election*.

In the 1999 book, *Compass & Clock*, by art historian John Wilmerding, the author devotes several pages to Bingham, whom he calls “the foremost genre painter of the day.” Wilmerding discusses how Bingham combines skillful executions and compositions with nostalgic evocations of a more pristine society and landscape.

A 24.5" x 29.5" oil-on-canvas, *Family Life on the Frontier* is lesser known, perhaps because of its more static characters and subtle interior nighttime lighting. Like other works by Bingham, it portrays the values of a simpler, purer life already past in our East Coast cities. The solid, high-ceilinged but basic room is accented with dark shadows. Father reads by the white light of an unseen lamp, mother with rosy cheeks nurses her infant, two sons gaze into the glowing fireplace, an older daughter removes the supper dishes, and a small framed painting indicating sophisticated taste hangs above the mantel.

Centered prominently on that stolid mantel is the clock, an important symbol of family stability, modernity,



Family Life on the Frontier by George Caleb Bingham.

IMAGE COURTESY OF AMERICAN MUSEUM OF WESTERN ART—THE ANSCHUTZ COLLECTION.

and discipline. Almost certainly a Connecticut 30-hour weight-driven shelf clock that would have been available and affordable to that Missouri household, it has a large round white dial easily read even in the dim light, telling 7:10 in the evening. The veneered wood case appears to be highlighted by thin gilt moldings, and its reverse-painted lower glass tablet suggests a quiet rural scene.

Although it shows a somewhat contrived and idyllic setting, the painting must have brought great pleasure to its 1850s viewers. As one of America’s art treasures, it remains a work important for its cultural and historical message, for its artistic merit, and of course, for its attention to horology’s place in our frontier.

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.