

Part 23

Horology *in* Art

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

“Oh, there’s a clock in it.” Steve Fletcher was the Skinner auctioneer that day in 2012 at its Boston gallery, when he suddenly realized why I was bidding on a John Whorf watercolor.

Fletcher knows me as a clock person, so at first he was confused about why my paddle was up. Happily, I was high bidder for *Abandoned Farm No. 2*.

John Whorf (1903-1959) enjoyed a successful 35-year career as a New England artist, although like many he struggled financially during the Depression. He studied at the School of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts as well as in Europe and worked with Charles Webster Hawthorne and later under John Singer Sargent. He focused on watercolors and spent most of his life in Provincetown, MA, at the tip of Cape Cod. I had noted several of his paintings at various fine-art auctions, appreciating his skill in creating colorful impressionist views of urban, rural, and seaside scenes.

Fortunately for me and all fans of his work, the first book solely about him was published in 2013. Authored by his son John Whorf, who passed away in 2010, and granddaughter Amy Whorf McGuiggan, *John Whorf Rediscovered* offers comprehensive details on the artist’s life, as well as many large reproductions of his paintings. The grandson, also a John Whorf, contributed to the volume as well.

Shortly after the book appeared, I communicated with McGuiggan, sending her an image of my 15" x 22" painting. She promptly emailed with enthusiastic comments, describing it as one of his:

connoisseur paintings, meaning that their subject matter may not be of interest to everyone [commercially speaking], but those of us in the know appreciate them. I love the painting’s intimacy and its sense of time, past and present. [It likely was done] in the 1930s when my grandparents were living in what is still known as the Oldest House in Provincetown, a place whose antiquity appealed to my grandparents love of history.



Abandoned Farm No. 2 by John Whorf.

She pointed me to a similar painting, this one including a steeple clock, featured on pages 58-59 of the new book.

For this feature, I looked at thousands of shelf clock images, hoping to find the model Whorf depicted. I did not, although it is similar to ones in the Seth Thomas City series and others by Welch, Spring & Co. It is possible that the artist rendered it without complete accuracy, or that he was viewing a rare model in that room full of abandoned household objects from days gone by. Clearly, as in many paintings I feature, the clock strongly reinforces the sense of time the artist so well conveyed.

Reference

Whorf, John, and Amy Whorf McGuiggan. *John Whorf Rediscovered*. Watertown, MA: AFA Publishing, 2013.

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 and has authored many articles for the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*. 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.