

# Part 24 Horology *in* Art

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

**R**embrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) needs no introduction nor detailed biography here. However, I have found only one artwork by him with a timekeeper. My Horology in Art collection has nearly 80 images by other Dutch artists, including Gerrit Dou and Jan Steen who have been featured in previous columns, but the most famous artist of them all seemed uninterested in showing clocks or watches.

This single oil-on-paper example is a monochrome drawing (grisaille) done in 1634 to produce an etching printed in subsequent years. On view at the National Gallery in London, it is his only known full-scale preparatory study. Titled in Latin *Ecce Homo*, it referenced the Bible's account of Pontius Pilate conducting the trial of Jesus Christ and urging the crowd to "Behold the man." The multitude, including priests, demanded execution and insisted that they had only one king, Julius Caesar whose immense bust glowered from atop a nearby column.

Rembrandt's skills at depicting architecture are clear, but of course the enormous clock is an anachronism, because clocks rarely appeared in other artists' depictions of the event. Christ's ordeal preceded such tower clocks by at least 13 centuries.

In this work the clock's hand points to the sixth hour reported by St. John, which equates to our noon, but the dial's Roman numbers are in unusual positions: VI is at the top, and I is at the bottom just above Rembrandt's signature. We can only speculate about the number placement, but one dial of the 1499 clock in Venice's St. Mark's square, which Rembrandt never visited, also had VI at the top. The public clocks the artist would have passed in Leiden and Amsterdam had standard dials with XII in the usual spot.

Note also that the clock has the single hand typical of the earliest mechanical timepieces. Clocks of Rembrandt's era had two hands, but they still were regulated by foliots before Christiaan Huygen's application of the pendulum near the end of the artist's life. Because the clock sits over a massive stone arch, the weights powering the movement would have needed offset pulleys and channels to descend as the clock ticked.

During Rembrandt's years of public acclaim, his prints often brought as much money as his original works. The



*Ecce Homo* by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1634.

COURTESY OF NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON.

*Ecco Homo* engraving was published in 1636 and again in 1655 as a drypoint version. Perhaps after he completed this preliminary drawing, he realized or was told that no clock was present at Christ's trial. In the prints the clock is gone.

## 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](http://www.bell-time.com). He recently received an NAWCC Fellow Award and is chair of the Ward Francillon Time Symposium Committee.