

Part 25

Horology in Art

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

In 1992 when I started my full-time clock repair business, I bought a framed page from the July 25, 1868, issue of *Harper's Weekly*. It was *Bell-Time*, a Winslow Homer engraving. Also titled *New England Factory Life*, it depicted mill workers in Lawrence, MA, where I was living at the time. I needed a name for my new enterprise, and Bell-Time Clocks was it.

There was a textile factory bell tower in the print, but no clock. Since then, I had been seeking a Homer with a clock, and until recently had located only one. It was an earlier *Harper's Weekly* drawing, from January 5, 1861, titled *Seeing the Old Year Out*. Its scene included a mantel clock at the center of a crowd of celebrants. *Eight Bells*, one of Homer's best-loved oil paintings, portrayed two sailors in rain gear using navigational instruments, but again no clock. This masterpiece hangs at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, MA, where my home is now.

Finally, my search was rewarded. *Winding the Clock*, a 19.5" x 10.75" watercolor, was painted by Homer in the fall of 1881, but since then it has rarely been exhibited or publicized. In October 2015 I visited the art storage room of Texas A&M's Forsyth Galleries and spent an hour with this breathtaking artwork. Stephen Caffey, art history professor at the university, made a careful study of the painting, and on a Sunday morning he joined me along with Amanda Dyer, assistant director of the University Art Galleries Department.

The watercolor is mentioned in Helen A. Cooper's 1986 book, *Winslow Homer Watercolors*, in which she reports that later in 1881, Homer traveled to Cullercoats, England. During his 18 months living there, according to a footnote, he "took a fancy to collecting old-fashioned upright, eight-day grandfather clocks which nearly all fishermen's homes then possessed as treasured heirlooms. He bought two of them and then had them securely packed for shipment to America." A 1936 photograph, taken many years after his death in 1910, showed the living room of Homer's studio on Prouts Neck, ME, with an English tall clock, perhaps from Cullercoats. Visitors during summer months today may tour the restored studio, owned by the Portland Mu-



Winding the Clock, ca. 1881.

COURTESY OF BILL AND IRMA RUNYON ART COLLECTION, TEXAS A&M FOUNDATION, FORSYTH GALLERIES, TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY.

seum of Art, but that clock no longer is there, or anywhere known.

Because he acquired those two clocks after creating *Winding the Clock*, its stately clock is not one of those. Homer's father collected antiques, so maybe it was his. It is not known what the young woman's name was, why she was about to do a job usually handled by the man of the house, or why she appeared to be blowing on the winding crank. She appears to be well dressed, evidence of Homer's great skill in painting a white garment so effectively. It is not known why the cello is present, a controversial instrument for women to play in that era because of the required sitting position. It is known that the low stool was in Homer's studio. It is also known that the painting was purchased from Homer long after the Civil War by a Union officer who had commissioned a portrait of himself.

Although visual details of the clock are not clear, it appears to be an eighteenth-century metal-dial mahogany dome top with serpentine hands, ball-and-spire brass finials, and side columns. The beaded molding and the narrow bonnet are unusual, and the fretwork and other design elements are Roxbury case features, usually not associated with earlier brass and silvered dials. Along with the unlikely green dial, it is not known what other artistic license Homer applied to the portrait, or where the clock is now.

Caffey will speak at the Ward Francillon Time Symposium I am organizing on horology in art for October 26-28, 2017, at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. More than a dozen prominent art historians and curators are making presentations, and I hope to see many of my readers at this groundbreaking conference.

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.