

Part 26

Horology *in* Art

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

The ominous words “Forever—never! Never—forever!” close every stanza of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s immortal 1845 poem, “The Old Clock on the Stairs,” which is on the next page. In 1868 one of America’s best-known post-Civil War artists, Edward Lamson Henry, produced a painting with the same title. Henry sent a photograph of the painting to Longfellow, who complimented the painter in a letter, saying it was just the image the poet had in mind when composing those lines.

E. L. Henry (1841-1919) specialized in idealized and narrative paintings evoking America’s earlier days, portraying nostalgic scenes of provincial citizens, dirt roads, wooden buildings, and horses and wagons. His patrons included Havemeyer, Astor, and Vanderbilt. He also produced many views of domestic interiors, and in my image collection I have several other examples with clocks. Like the stately timekeeper in this painting similarly titled *Old Clock on the Stairs*, the clocks reinforce the nostalgia, showing floor and shelf clock examples superseded in Henry’s day by smaller cheaper models flooding out of Connecticut factories. Of course, he employed the clocks not merely as ornaments but as overt reminders of the passage of time.

This painting received even greater public attention when it was exhibited at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, where the poem had a revival as well. That same year, Henry Clay Work published his famous song, “Grandfather’s Clock,” causing these floorstanding clocks to be called grandfather clocks ever after.

A New York State Museum publication by Elizabeth



Edward Lamson Henry, *Old Clock on the Stairs*, 1868. Oil on canvas, 20-7/8" x 16-1/2". Collection of the Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, VT. Museum purchase, acquired from Maxim Karolik. 1957-690.41. COURTESY OF BRUCE SCHWARZ.

McCausland, *The Life and Work of Edward Lamson Henry, N.A.*, (Albany, NY: The University of the State of New York, 1945) provides much background on the artist. That institution owns a large collection of Henry’s sketchbooks, letters, photos, and other materials. A more recent publication, *Historical Fictions: Edward Lamson Henry’s Paintings of Past and Present*, was written by Amy Kurtz Lansing (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 2005). A curator at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, CT, she is expected to speak about Henry at the 2017 Ward Francillon Symposium on horology in art in Boston.

The painting is on view at the Shelburne Museum in Vermont. Its meticulous details, glowing colors, and rich surfaces still can trigger emotional longings for

the past, especially among collectors of those venerable artifacts and furnishings. It evokes time’s advance, but also the cycles of time and the human values that endure. The artist was left behind by changes in public taste, and his work was nearly forgotten, but it is now valued more highly by museums and collectors.

The clock looming on the landing was not Longfellow’s. He honeymooned in 1843 at Elm Knoll, a home in Pittsfield, MA, where the poem was inspired. And although Henry was an avid antiques collector with many clocks, this clock was not his, either. The clock belonged to William Kulp, a Spruce Street, Philadelphia, collector of Colonial furniture. A 1917 Henry letter revealed that he painted the scene “from life” and that the woman, with her cat, was Kulp’s old aunt.

We do not know this iconic clock's maker or whether it was American, but it clearly is an impressive eighteenth century example of what would be found in an affluent pre-Revolutionary American home. Its present whereabouts are unknown.

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.

The Old Clock on the Stairs

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Somewhat back from the village street
Stands the old-fashioned country-seat.
Across its antique portico
Tall poplar-trees their shadows throw;
And from its station in the hall
An ancient timepiece says to all,—
"Forever—never!
Never—forever!"

Half-way up the stairs it stands,
And points and beckons with its hands
From its case of massive oak,
Like a monk, who, under his cloak,
Crosses himself, and sighs, alas!
With sorrowful voice to all who pass,—

"Forever—never!
Never—forever!"

By day its voice is low and light;
But in the silent dead of night,
Distinct as a passing footstep's fall,
It echoes along the vacant hall,
Along the ceiling, along the floor,
And seems to say, at each chamber-door,—
"Forever—never!
Never—forever!"

Through days of sorrow and of mirth,
Through days of death and days of birth,
Through every swift vicissitude
Of changeful time, unchanged it has stood,
And as if, like God, it all things saw,
It calmly repeats those words of awe,—
"Forever—never!
Never—forever!"

In that mansion used to be
Free-hearted Hospitality;
His great fires up the chimney roared;
The stranger feasted at his board;

But, like the skeleton at the feast,
That warning timepiece never ceased,—
"Forever—never!
Never—forever!"

There groups of merry children played,
There youths and maidens dreaming strayed;
O precious hours! O golden prime,
And affluence of love and time!
Even as a Miser counts his gold,
Those hours the ancient timepiece told,—
"Forever—never!
Never—forever!"

From that chamber, clothed in white,
The bride came forth on her wedding night;
There, in that silent room below,
The dead lay in his shroud of snow;
And in the hush that followed the prayer,
Was heard the old clock on the stair,—
"Forever—never!
Never—forever!"

All are scattered now and fled,
Some are married, some are dead;
And when I ask, with throbs of pain.
"Ah! when shall they all meet again?"
As in the days long since gone by,
The ancient timepiece makes reply,—
"Forever—never!
Never—forever!"

Never here, forever there,
Where all parting, pain, and care,
And death, and time shall disappear,—
Forever there, but never here!
The horologe of Eternity
Sayeth this incessantly,—
"Forever—never!
Never—forever!"

Source: Scudder, Horace, ed. *The Complete Poetical Works*. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1893.