

Part 27

Horology *in* Art

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

This small watercolor, memorializing the 1829 date and moment of death of George R. H. Slack, joins two celebrity time-of-death records in my digital image collection. Deathbed scenes of George Washington and Napoleon are accompanied by bedroom clocks stopped at their final breaths, a practice not uncommon in that era. Our first president's "Clock of Death" survives at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial in Alexandria, VA; the French emperor's mantel clock is on view in Paris at an exhibit about his exile on the island of Saint Helena.

Colonial Williamsburg owns this artwork, faintly signed by J. A. Tilles, an artist otherwise unknown, as is Slack. Williamsburg's online database shows no image, but I discovered a reproduction in a small 1957 publication about the folk art collection of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, its museum namesake. Measuring just 8.25" x 6.25", it also appeared in a 1969 exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. For that exhibit titled *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900*, the catalog indicated that the painting was "found in Washington, Connecticut."

In this series I regularly assert that the clock or watch within the image is never there by accident. Usually in the background or relatively small, the timekeeper was an indicator of wealth and sophistication, or a visual symbol of mortality. In *Watch and Fob*, however, the open-face key-wind pocket watch, probably English, is front and center, at the heart of the narrative.

Equally bold is the multicolor watch ribbon, with attached key and seal. Textile expert Lynne Z. Bassett described it to me as a beautiful silk ribbon with a picot edge, a type sometimes seen in "portraits of men in



Watch and Fob by J. A. Tilles, Mercer County, NJ, 1829. The accession number is 1931.303.10. COURTESY OF THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION.

this period with a ribbon hanging out of their pocket, with a cluster of seals and such at the end." She noted one in William Sidney Mount's 1830 painting *Rustic Dance After a Sleigh Ride*, which can be found at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston at www.mfa.org. I have admired that painting for years because of the longcase clock looming in the corner above the revelers. I never noticed the watch ribbon dangling from a male dancer's waistcoat, which now makes this artwork doubly significant as Horology in Art.

Author's note: I have several colorful New England nineteenth-century folk art images, including banjo and steeple clocks, and pocket watches, which will be subjects of future articles. These images also will be discussed by folk art expert Deborah Child at the October 2017 Ward Francillon Time Symposium I am organizing at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in Massachusetts. The theme of that symposium is "Horology in Art."

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 is an NAWCC Fellow, chair of the Ward Francillon Time Symposium Committee, and a freeman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers. He can be reached via www.bell-time.com.