

Part 29

Horology *in* Art

by Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

While at the Tate Britain art museum in London recently, I was excited to see *The Awakening Conscience*, an 1853 painting by William Holman Hunt (1827-1910). For many years, I have admired this Victorian painting, which was chosen by Loudon Wainwright III as the cover of his 1986 album *More Love Songs*.

Love is the theme of the painting, but specifically illicit love. This is a first and rare example by a pre-Raphael artist who tackled the thorny topic of kept women. Nearly all other contemporary portrayals of English ladies stressed their purity and high moral values, but Hunt wanted to represent a fallen woman's moment of redemption.

Hunt was not alone in attempting the reform of prostitutes, but his model, Annie Miller, was one with whom he was not successful. However, in this scene she heard the call, jumping from her unaware lover's lap to stare through a window at symbolic bright sunlight. The colorful oil-on-canvas overflowed with the following other symbols and messages: She had no wedding ring on her finger, she was in a Victorian state of undress, the couple had been singing "Oft in the Silly Night", and the sheet music on the floor was Edward Lear's adaptation of Tennyson's "Tears Idle Tears". A cat mangling a bird and a discarded soiled glove pointed to the mistress' precarious situation as a victim liable to be abandoned and forced by necessity into common streetwalking.

Hunt also adhered to the detail and thoroughness of his fellow artists. For the love-nest setting, he rented a newly furnished room at Woodbine Villa in St. John's Wood, a *maison de convenance* in a neighborhood where wealthy London men kept their mistresses. Hunt was inspired to create the painting "by reading the description of Peggotty's search for Little Emily in David Copperfield," according to Christopher Wood's book titled *Victorian Panorama: Paintings of Victorian Life* (London: Faber, 1976). This did not stop most critics, except John Ruskin, for condemning the work for illustrating a dark side of domestic life.

Hunt even designed the 34" x 42" ornate gold frame, which included marigolds signifying sorrow, bells for warning, and a star for spiritual revelation. Even bolder was the biblical quotation Hunt added at the bottom,



The Awakening Conscience by William Holman Hunt. This photograph was taken of the painting at the Tate Britain art gallery in London, England.

"As he that taketh away a garment in cold weather, so is he that singeth songs to an heavy heart". In my photograph of the painting, I include those words, which amplify his treatment of a suppressed feature of nineteenth-century Britain.

Of course, the French ormolu clock under its oval glass dome on the piano lid played a usual horological role. Here again the clock served as a reminder of mortality and the need for reforming one's life while time remained.

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.