

Part 30

by **Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)**

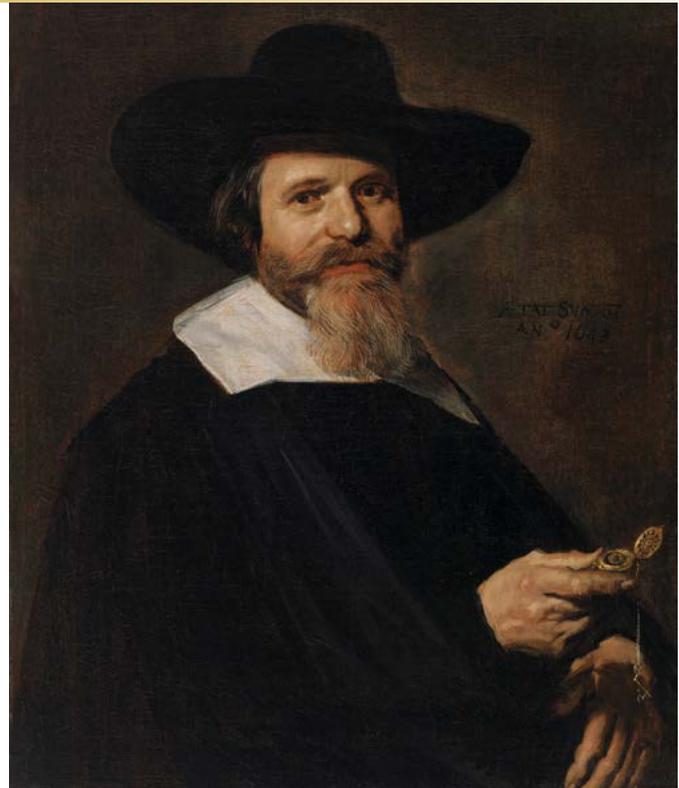
Another fine Dutch oil painting from that country's "Golden Age" is this 1643 *Portrait of a Man Holding a Watch* by Frans Hals. It can be viewed among a sea of later impressionist works at Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation.

The artwork was traced back to its eighteenth-century owner, Amsterdam's Isabella van Leewaarden, then to Paris auctions between 1777 and 1789, and stayed paired with a portrait of the sitter's wife until 1928 when they were separated at yet another auction. The woman's portrait now is across the Atlantic Ocean in Stockholm's Nationalmuseum.

Researcher Frans Grijzenhout makes compelling arguments that the 57-year-old bushy-beard man is Isabella's Mennonite great-grandfather, watchmaker Mathijs Mansz Boeckels. Hals produced many portraits of people in that sect. Boeckels and his brother were known horologists in the seventeenth-century Dutch Mennonite community, and the Rijksmuseum in the Netherlands owns examples of their work. The sitter and his wife are in simple and sober attire, without white cuffs or elaborate collars and headgear, which appears to confirm their religious affiliation. Isabella's ancestors were prominent Mennonite watchmakers in Haarlem. When her possessions were sold in 1773 after her death, the goods included an old Boeckels watch as well as watchmaker tools and parts.

Grijzenhout also discusses the watch in the sitter's hand. It is described as oval, simple as required by Mennonite philosophy, with a pierced cover and silvered chapter ring and case band. A similar Boeckels circa 1610 watch is illustrated.

I also received detailed comments from an expert on early watches, my friend and NAWCC member Philip Poniz. He noted that, unlike "vanitas" and allegorical paintings in which clocks and watches appear as reminders of mortality, the watch in this painting was there just for display, as in a nearly identical prior portrait of a man holding a painted miniature. Poniz questions the sitter's identity and asserts that the watch was round, not oval. It was a "neck watch" with one hand, 12 raised hour indicators so the time could be felt in the dark, and a hinged front cover. Most likely it had a foliot, stackfreed (not fusee), and alarm or



Portrait of a Man Holding a Watch, Frans Hals (Dutch, ca. 1581-1666), 1643, oil on canvas (32-1/2 x 26-1/4 in.). BF262, The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA. Image © 2016 The Barnes Foundation.

striking, and was of older German, not Dutch, origin.

The painting and its watch deserve even more study and research. Meanwhile, we can appreciate its depiction of early portable horology and, perhaps, its maker.

Reference

Grijzenhout, Frans. "Frans Hals: The Portraits of a Mennonite Watch Maker and His Wife." *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*, Vol. 61, No. 2: 123-138. Accessed October 24, 2016. <http://dare.uva.nl/document/2/131874>.

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, he has authored many articles for the *NAWCC Bulletin* and *Watch & Clock Bulletin*, and he can be reached via www.bell-time.com.

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