

# Part 32

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

**F**irst, a big round of applause for New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art for its new policy of free and open use of much of its online digitized collection. More museums have been taking this enlightened action in line with their public education mission, and it's easier for me to share important images without permissions restrictions and payments.

Second, a special invitation to my readers to attend October's "Horology in Art" Symposium at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. I have recruited a world-class roster of eminent art historians to discuss many centuries of artworks with timekeepers. Information and registration now is available via the website [www.horologyinart.com](http://www.horologyinart.com). I look forward to meeting many of you during a wonderful time to visit New England. Never before, nowhere in the world, has there been a conference on this theme.

This issue's feature is on view at the Met after being acquired from private collectors in 2006. Several times at that museum I have enjoyed examining *Taking the Census* by Francis W. Edmonds (1806-1863). A fine example of American genre painting, this 28" x 38" oil-on-canvas is the first known view of our nation's census process. It documents the humor and confusion resulting from an 1850 regulation that required heads of households to provide details about their dependents.

In this painting, similar to earlier Dutch paintings of domestic interiors and residents, the father counts on his fingers to help provide data about his family, some of whom are hiding behind mother in their rustic home. The bearded census taker records the information with quill and ledger, aided by a young assistant with ink pot and more "census" papers. The small framed print of George Washington reinforces the admonition to report truthfully.

The artist, based in New York, had a day job as a bank cashier and painted in the evenings and on weekends. At first, he used pseudonyms when exhibiting, but eventually his talent was sufficiently acknowledged for him to sign his own name. Another of his



**Figure 1.** *Taking the Census*, by Francis W. Edmonds, 1854, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006.457.

rural interiors, *The Image Pedlar*, circa 1844, shows an unusual square wag-on-wall clock.

A more typical Connecticut ogee shelf clock, one of the most familiar and common of American timekeepers of the period, is nearly dead center in *Taking the Census*. It tells the time as 12:19, it reveals a brass 30-hour weight-driven movement through the large dial hole, and its reverse painted glass tablet portrays a mansion and trees. As usual, the clock symbolizes that this rural family has attained a welcome level of prosperity and orderliness.

## 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 *Watch & Clock Bulletin*, and he can be reached via [www.bell-time.com](http://www.bell-time.com).

He is an NAWCC Fellow, Chair of the Ward Francillon Time Symposium Committee, and a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers.