

# Horology *in* Art

By Bob Frishman (MA)

The ruling couple of the Spanish Netherlands, Archdukes Albrecht and Isabella, made an official visit to Antwerp in 1618. The city fathers commissioned their best artists, in particular Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens, to create a gift for the couple—a series of paintings with allegorical representations of the five senses. In three of the paintings, clocks and watches appear, most prominently in *The Sense of Hearing*.

Most of the musical instruments of the period are represented, along with wooden stands and the notated score by Peter Philips, of a madrigal lauding the royal couple. We see a noisy feathered toucan and cockatoo and an alert juvenile stag, which was a common symbol for the power of hearing. Emphasizing the sensual nature of music, the cherub sings accompanied by a nude Venus.

The pictures on the wall depict a concert of the gods and Orpheus using music to quiet wild beasts. The lush Netherlandish landscape, including the hunting castle of Tervuren, is visible through the window arcades. The scene overall is a celebration of affluence and luxury.

Unlike many other “Horology in Art” subjects, the clocks in this painting are not allegorical references to mortality and the transience of life. Their ticking and striking reflect the auditory theme, and several versions of musical clocks are present in the background at right. It is likely that these clocks were in the collection of the archdukes.

We are fortunate that clocks were available to be depicted. The Counter-reformation of that period was responsible for many clockmakers—often jewelers and goldsmiths—in Catholic countries to refocus on ritual religious objects while their counterparts in Protestant lands continued to produce elaborate timekeepers.



**Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Sense of Hearing*, 1618.**

Oil on panel, 65 cm x 107 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid. COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

Admittedly, the clocks in this image are tantalizingly small and indistinct, but the styles are recognizable and can be seen in museums and collections today. The Frick Collection in New York City, for example, has a small but impressive horology exhibit, on view until early 2014, with some fine examples. To examine the Brueghel 26" x 42" oil on canvas in person, you need to travel to the Prado in Madrid where all five paintings in this series are on display.

## About the Author

Bob Frishman has restored and sold vintage clocks since 1980 and is a past-president of New England Chapter 8. He is a frequent contributor of articles and newsworthy items to the *Watch & Clock Bulletin*. His “Clocks in Art” program was presented at the 2011 NAWCC National Convention. He is head of publicity for the upcoming NAWCC Symposium “Time for Everyone,” November 7-9, in Pasadena, CA. Bob can be reached at [www.bell-time.com](http://www.bell-time.com).