

## Part 19

# Horology *in* Art

By Bob Frishman, FNAWCC (MA)

In The Netherlands, messy homes are called “Jan Steen households.” Although this 1663 painting hangs in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Austria, I was able during a recent Amsterdam visit to inspect several others by one of the most famous Dutch “Golden Age” artists, Jan Steen (1625-1679).

Steen specialized in genre paintings that illustrated comic scenes of everyday life but exaggerated them as moral lessons. His patrons enjoyed the skillfully rendered domestic details and boisterous situations, while congratulating themselves for their own well-ordered lifestyles mandated by that era’s strict Calvinism.

The painting’s title, “In Luxury Beware,” or “Beware of Luxury,” is hardly necessary. In this middle-class household, luxury brought the corruptions of gluttony, greed, drunkenness, lasciviousness and ruin. While mother dozes, children smoke and pilfer, the dog gobbles meat pie, father and his seductress maid or prostitute make merry at center stage, a pig sniffs a rose, and the floor is strewn with food, clothing, and valuables. Clearly out of place is a pious couple: a Quaker (identified by the “quacker” on his shoulder) who reads in oblivion while the nun gestures an ineffectual warning.

Steen’s contemporary audiences would easily have recognized the symbols rampant on the canvas. Key, sword, basket, beggar’s crutch, scourging birch, leper’s rattle, hat on floor, playing cards, and more all hammered away at the cautionary message.

In many of the artworks featured in this series, clocks are included as visual metaphors for time’s transience and human mortality. Here the monkey, a symbol of lust, hoists the clock weight and evokes a familiar proverb that “in foolishness time is forgotten.” In another of Steen’s raucous room scenes, “The Dissolute Household,” the monkey and clock appear again in nearly the same position. In both images, the hanging clocks are bell-top timekeepers made just after Christiaan Huygens’ first pro-



*Beware of Luxury* (“In Weelde Siet Toe”) by Jan Steen (1625/1626–1679) [Public domain] via Wikimedia Commons.

totypes. It is possible, but unlikely, that Steen placed a “Hague” short-pendulum clock in his chaotic room.

Whether short-pendulum, balance wheel or foliot, these clocks mounted high on the wall could have long weight cords and normally be out of harm’s way.

Jan Steen produced serious scenes as well. “The Sick Woman,” also painted at this time, is reminiscent of Gerit Dou’s 1663 painting featured in Part 7 (March/April 2013). These paintings, too, show Dutch weight-driven wall clocks, reminding seventeenth-century viewers that life is short, and now offering us a view of early clocks in original settings.

### 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 recently received an NAWCC Fellow award and is Chair of the Ward Francillon Time Symposium Committee.