

Skinner, Marlborough, Massachusetts

No Preview, No Podium, No Problem: Watches and Clocks Online

by Bob Frishman
Photos courtesy Skinner

In about an hour, it was all over. Even with brief anti-sniping extensions for last-minute bids, nearly 400 lots at Skinner cascaded to their timed closings on the evening of Tuesday, April 14. Bidders for wristwatches, pocket watches, clocks, music boxes, scientific instruments, and cameras had more than a week to pile in—the online-only sale opened on the 6th—but there was silent activity on many lots right through the final countdowns until the bold red “Ended” and “CLOSED” alerts appeared on viewers’ screens.

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The auction had only a small number of unsold items, and most lots sold within or above estimates. The lack of salesroom and chanting auctioneer was no obstacle to a successful outcome. Despite the economy’s plunge and public virus fears, and perhaps reflecting a group protest against these scourges, multiple bidders pushed prices to pre-February levels and even higher. Bolstered by 869 registered bidders, the sale total including buyers’ premiums was \$1,085,488. Out of 395 offered lots, 203 sold above estimate.

This department’s regular spring sale originally was scheduled for live action on Friday, April 10. Then came the announcement that it would be online-only, running April 6-14, with previews by appointment only—maximum six people at a time. I made my appointment with department head Jonathan Dowling for the final day, expecting to have followed the week’s bidding and seen what already had aggressive bidding.

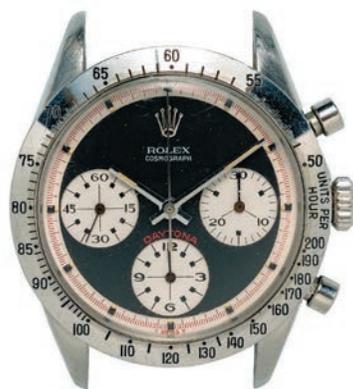
Then “brick and mortar” businesses were ordered shut by Massachusetts’s governor, so there were no live previews. We were thrust into the true world of online buying—as via eBay and Amazon—where you hope and trust that what you see on your screen is what you get on your doorstep. Unlike shoes that don’t fit or coffeepots that don’t heat, antiques auction returns are more complicated, risky, and contentious.

In my conversations with Dowling, I asked if any consignors had pulled their items, fearful that bidders would stay away. He replied that none seemed worried about bidders being unwilling to spend hundreds or thousands of dollars without personal inspections. He did report, after the sale, that the number was higher than usual for requested condition reports and additional images.

I always try to stick to my “no-preview, no-bid” rule, after some scorching mistakes, but I confess that this time I bid a few times, based only on photos and descriptions. Outbid, however, I cannot claim any successes or disappointments, just the usual lingering questions of whether I should have kept bidding for some items that I would love to own if they were right.

Skinner’s online platform appeared to function flawlessly, with many nice features. Soon after bidding opened on April 6, I began scrolling through the lots, noting bids almost immediately that filled in and climbed higher throughout the week. Placing a bid, once registered and logged in, was easy and remained so even during the closing hour when I lobbed more bids with just minutes remaining. Quickly after such bids, e-mails confirmed them and then announced when I was outbid again. The relatively few reserved lots were so noted, urging more bids to get past the reserve number.

One small but understandable source of frustration is the anti-sniping policy mentioned above, which adds five-minute “auto-extend” increments to the closing time if new late bids arrive. Just as at a live auction where high bidders plead for the hammer, the



Jonathan Dowling wrote in an e-mail, “The Rolex Paul Newman Reference 6239 is certainly a highlight of my career so far, and I doubt I will ever come across another example in this condition.” This circa 1968 single-owner Daytona chronograph is in a rare state of preservation. This iconic model was worn by Newman and other racers who appreciated its precision and utility in calculating lap speeds. The original purchase receipt showed \$235, which now appreciated to \$200,000 (est. \$80,000/120,000). Other Rolex watches in the sale did well but not this well.



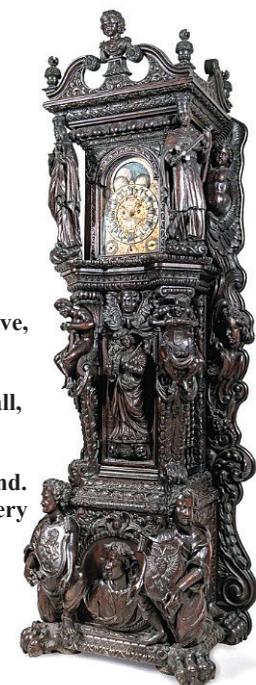
Modern multi-button quartz watches are not the first to display more than one time. England’s M.J. Tobias marketed this 18k gold pocket watch for two geographic time zones, or maybe for railroad and local times before standardization. Note two seconds hands, too; one sweeps from the center, and the other rotates in a small subsidiary dial. The watch sold for \$1250 (est. \$1000/1500).

sudden jump from seconds to minutes adds to the fear and suspense. When you want it, you want it now, and too bad for those who hesitate. At least it all was over much more quickly than during hours-long live sales when auctioneers may dally in hope of more jumps from the room, computers, and phones.

Also sad was the absence, more common recently, of a full-size, full-color printed catalog. The expense may no longer be warranted, and online listings can be more comprehensive, but my holding and studying bound pages is more satisfying and long-lasting. The 24-page brochure for this sale was attractive but has no shelf life.

Buyers experienced delayed gratification too, since no shipping or pickups could happen during the state’s lockdown of non-essential businesses. Once lockdown restrictions were partially eased, new owners could arrange third-party shipping or socially distant handoffs in a tent at the firm’s sprawling modern building a few minutes off I-495’s Exit 23C. And forget credit-card points and rewards; Skinner does not accept cards for auction invoices.

The final price of \$100,000 (est. \$20,000/40,000) for the “Clement clock” was a nice surprise. It was great news too for the beneficiary of the sale, the Vermont Historical Society, which provided the extensive, historically significant provenance. An extravagantly carved dark oak Victorian behemoth standing 12’ tall, it formerly loomed in the Vermont State House after coming from the Grosvenor Hotel in Chester, England. Its four-train movement chimes every quarter-hour and can play seven tunes on two sets of nesting bells.



Failing to sell were four gold pocket watches (one shown) salvaged from the 1838 sinking of the steamship *Pulaski*. Early in the history of steam-powered navigation, this luxury ship went down off the coast of North Carolina after a catastrophic boiler explosion, killing most of the crew and 150 well-heeled passengers. The ship was discovered 120’ deep in 2017. Despite good pre-auction publicity, and the promised use of the funds for further recovery operations, buyers paddled to safety. This 18k gold example by S.T. Tobias & Co., Liverpool, apparently was drowned by its \$12,000/15,000 estimate, which was the same for all four watches.



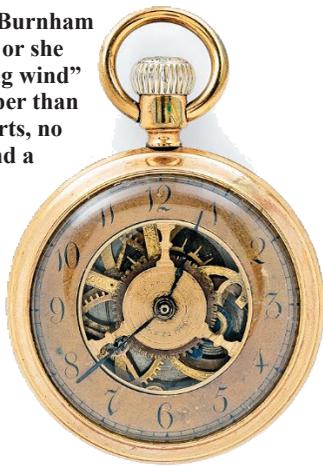
Civil War provenance can radically boost a non-running pocket watch’s value. This typical Swiss coin silver watch would have little collector interest without its cuvette’s engraved inscription, “Presented to Lieut. E.L. Rowe by the Union Club of Gloucester Oct. 7th 1862.” Estimated at \$200/250 and including a copy of Rowe’s service records, it made \$938. The next lot (not shown), a P.S. Bartlett coin silver watch made in Waltham, Massachusetts, had Confederate soldier provenance, and it sold for \$875 (est. \$200/250).

We may expect competitive collectors to be secretive or worse, so it was very encouraging to hear the opposite from Dowling. In a post-sale e-mail, he wrote, “I was contacted by some very nice collectors who were willing to share their knowledge, especially on the technical side, along with collectors offering their opinions/knowledge on case makers and movement makers. I am lucky to be part of such a willing group of collectors.”

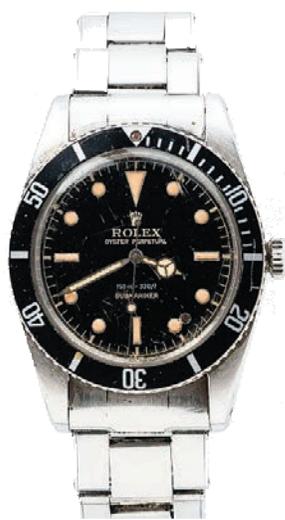
Dowling’s next scheduled sale for those generous collectors is in October. Online versus live will be decided closer to the date, but any qualms about online now seem to be unwarranted. Like a dwindling number of auction bidders, I like the live auction drama—“free theater,” I’ve called it—but those days probably are numbered.

For more information, visit the website (www.skinnerinc.com). Dowling, a skilled furniture restorer who heads one of the few specialized clock departments at today’s auction houses, may be contacted directly at <clocks@skinnerinc.com> or (508) 970-3131.

If the buyer of this Benedict & Burnham pocket watch plans to use it, he or she quickly will understand its “long wind” nickname. Designed to be cheaper than competitors, it has far fewer parts, no jewels, a rotating movement, and a special duplex escapement, but also a 9' mainspring that every day needs 150 half-turns of the stem. This product of Waterbury, Connecticut, sold for \$313 (est. \$300/400).



Combine the names Tiffany and Patek Philippe on a wristwatch, and you've got more “gold” than just its 18k case. It took \$16,250 (est. \$5000/7000) to buy this 18-jewel caliber 27SC manual-wind watch with its gold mesh bracelet.



This “James Bond” circa 1958 Rolex Reference 5508 Submariner was single-owner and seemingly unserviced since new. The buyer may not be a secret agent, but he or she spent \$53,125 (est. \$20,000/30,000).



Charles Frodsham is a great name to see on any English timepiece, and this marine chronometer also has engraved on its bezel “Exposition Universelle De 1855 / Grande Medaille D'Honneur.” Unknown is whether this high-precision instrument ever helped determine a ship's longitude, but it brought \$3125 (est. \$2000/4000). A few other ocean-going chronometers in the sale were less costly.

Simon Willard's name on a clock still works magic. One of the best-known Boston-area clockmakers, he invented the “banjo” clock—although he never called it that. This “patent timepiece”—his terminology—has wonderful reverse-painted glass tablets and stenciled decorations and a lengthy, detailed provenance. Its \$8000/12,000 estimate seemed about right for these days but not to bidders, who pushed it to \$33,750 during the final extended minutes. More typical banjo clocks in the sale brought less than one-tenth that price, including a \$2000 early 20th-century Waltham (not shown) that I underbid, attracted by its lower door's painting of the Boston State House. Skinner's American furniture and decorative arts auction, also pushed to online only, closed the day before and had several nice clocks; a circa 1800 mahogany Simon Willard tall clock (not shown) brought \$25,000.



Nathaniel Mulliken, a well-known Colonial clockmaker working in Lexington, Massachusetts, produced this brass-dial eight-day butternut tall clock around 1765. The refinished case, 85" tall, appears to retain its original hood, base, etc. The buyer paid \$13,750 (est. \$6000/8000).



Prices of period tall clocks may be recovering, especially if they are American and in nice condition. Signed “Aaron Lane / Eliza, th Town,” this 102" high clock by Aaron Lane (1753-1819) of Elizabethtown, New Jersey, sold for \$10,625 against a reasonable estimate of \$8000/12,000. The clock is especially appealing with its silvered brass dial, contrasting mahogany and walnut construction and inlays, and ogee bracket feet.



Welch, Spring & Co. does not indicate a spring-driven Welch clock. It names the Bristol, Connecticut, 1868-84 partnership of Elisha N. Welch and Solomon C. Spring. Reading the time on this eight-day perpetual-calendar wall clock is difficult, but that did not stop the buyer from spending \$2875 (est. \$700/900).



Astronomical regulators by E. Howard & Co., Boston, often are the stars of clock auctions, being rare and impressive looking and having ultra-high accuracy. From several important consignments by the Norfolk Southern Railway, this walnut No. 25 seemed a bargain at \$43,750, even far above its \$10,000/20,000 estimate. Safe shipping, especially of its four-jar mercury pendulum, will be tricky. Its No. 22 mahogany cousin (not shown) in the sale soared to greater heights, bringing \$106,250 on a \$40,000/60,000 estimate.



The \$10,000/12,000 estimate was spot-on for this English musical bracket clock that sold for \$11,250. Eighteenth-century London clockmaker Benjamin Ward signed this highly decorative mahogany dome-top three-train timekeeper that can play a jig, cotillion, gavot, and minuet. It is 27" tall, and its movement features a beautifully engraved brass backplate typical of that period.



An object did not need to tell time to do well in the sale. This late 18th-century silvered-dial surveyor's compass made \$11,875 (est. \$700/900). The price no doubt reflects the “B. Bannaker” name engraved on the instrument, and the buyer got three books about Benjamin Banneker in the bargain. If you just needed to know which way is north, several other lovely vintage instruments sold for much less.



Familiar French brass-and-glass carriage clocks originally came with leather carrying cases, and almost always those cases are falling apart or long gone. If the buyer of this lot is lucky enough to have clocks that fit, this group that included assorted keys was a good buy at just \$344 (est. \$150/250). A carriage clock sitting inside its protective case can still be read by removing a sliding front panel.

Jonathan Dowling was happily surprised by the \$16,250 price (est. \$1000/1500) earned by this mahogany eight-day tall clock by Earnshaw of London. It was the sole English clock from a nice collection of otherwise American examples.



SKINNER STAFF WORKING FROM HOME



In addition to frequent e-mail reminders to view the sale lots and bid, Skinner also sent this mosaic of photographs showing some of its key people working remotely. A similar pastiche of at-home bidders on sale-closing night would be fun to see too. Frishman screen shot.



No shipping or pickups of auction purchases could happen during the state's lockdown of non-essential businesses. Once lockdown restrictions were partially eased, buyers could arrange third-party shipping or do socially distant handoffs in this tent at Skinner's sprawling modern building. Frishman photo.

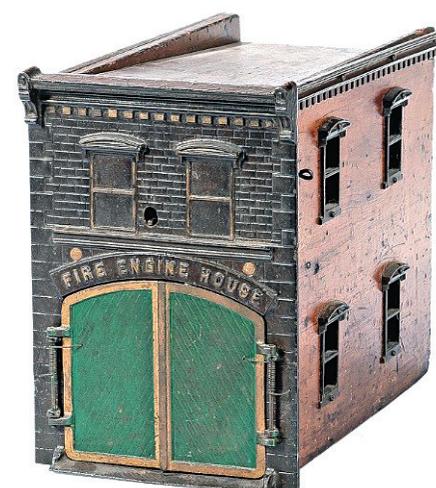
Image	Lot #	Title	Estimate	Time Left	Bids	[Watch]
	1001	George Washington Portrait 18kt Gold Open-face Watch	\$800 - \$1,200	8m 5s	Current bid: \$1,100 Asking bid: \$1,200	LEAVE BID
	1002	Ed Koehn 18kt Gold Open-face Pendant Watch with Compass Fob	\$800 - \$1,000	Ended	Winning bid: \$550	CLOSED!
	1003	Sikaon Stainless Steel Watch for the Ford Motor Company	\$100 - \$150	Ended	Unsold	CLOSED!
	1004	Perry & Sandox No. 2262 Open-face Watch	\$100 - \$150	3m 5s	Current bid: \$200 Asking bid: \$225	LEAVE BID

The first four lots were scheduled to close shortly after 7 p.m. As seen on this screen shot, two ended on time; two others were extended when last-minute bids came in, providing time for other alert bidders to retaliate. Frishman screen shot.

Clearly there was something extra special about this rosewood *grande sonnerie* Vienna regulator that at \$11,250 earned far more than its \$1500/2500 estimate. Even that estimate could be considered optimistic considering recent sale results for these beautiful and well-crafted three-weight clocks that deserve better. Its 10" enamel dial is signed "Kralik S. / Pesten." The circa 1875 clock will require more than its 68" of height to look right on the new owner's wall.



Perhaps a celebrity autograph collector snagged this lot for \$2000 (est. \$200/250). One of the three photographs is signed "To my friend Prof Chas F Chandler / Thomas A Edison." The sale had no Edison phonographs, but buyers did get two—a Model MS and a Model V—by Victor, as well as a few underpriced Swiss cylinder music boxes.



Clockwork but no clock, this Ives Fire Engine House from the late 19th century opens its green-painted iron doors when its bell rings three times. Estimated at \$700/900, it sold for \$1500. The building sides are pine with iron window frames. The buyer will want an appropriate toy fire engine to park inside.

