

Skinner Inc., Marlborough, Massachusetts

Four or One? Clocks and Watches at Skinner

by Bob Frishman
Photos courtesy Skinner

A Tornek-Rayville TR-900 dive watch was the top lot, by far, at the sale on April 29 at Skinner in Marlborough, Massachusetts. For its price of \$113,775 (includes buyer's premium), someone could have taken home all four of the next-highest lots with money left over. The watch, however, was simple to wear or ship; the other four lots were clocks—three tall clocks and a fragile skeleton clock under an oval glass dome—and required a van and careful handling.

"Get the estimate low enough, everyone competes."

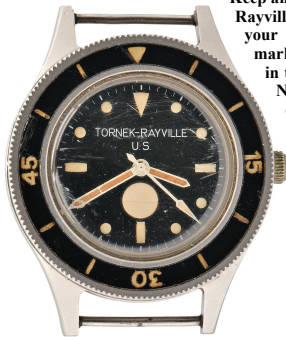
Portability certainly was not the only reason for the price difference. A reflection of the hot vintage wristwatch market, the 1965 U.S. Navy dive watch's stunning price also defied usual expectations about how subsequent appearances of "rare" pieces bring decreasing values. Back in April 2015 another Tornek-Rayville example topped a Skinner sale at \$58,425, and now this one brought nearly double. It sold to a phone bidder, assisted by Jonathan Dowling of Skinner's clocks, watches, and scientific instruments department.

One other wristwatch broke into the small group of five-digit prices at the auction. A circa 1960 Universal Geneve Tri-compax triple-complicated watch went to an absentee bidder for \$17,220. A circa 1985 Omega Speedmaster made \$7995, and a circa 1960 Breitling Navitimer \$5228, rounding out the high-end wristwatch offerings. Useless for these but useful for pocket watches, two lots of gold chains and cases totaled \$14,760, we hope not just for the melt value.

Call me old-fashioned, but clocks still appeal most to me, and this auction offered many temptations in nearly all categories. A unique "Grand Complication" skeleton clock brought the second-highest price at \$39,975 from a left bid. It was signed by Louis E. Meyer of St. Charles, Missouri, and dated 1876. The two-page catalog description conjectured that the clock had been made for the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia but that damage from a tornado before the exhibition could not be repaired in time.

Leading the 59-lot American clocks section of the catalog was a tall clock with a rocking-ship dial by James Doull of Charlestown, Massachusetts. We first viewed this stately clock on March 24 when it shared the podium with Rory McEvoy, whose title is curator of horology at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, England, and who visited Skinner's headquarters to present a lecture. We knew that the \$8000/12,000 estimate was low, proved by its \$29,520 selling price, the auction's third highest. An attribution of Thomas Seymour as the maker of the mahogany case probably helped.

Asked about the clock's low estimate, Robert Cheney, director of Skinner's clocks, watches, and scientific instruments department, explained that, as in many cases, the Skinner staffer who took in the item did not fully recognize the value, and the estimate stuck. Most buyers acknowledge that Skinner estimates generally are low, perhaps as corporate policy. That day, when Skinner's president/CEO Karen Keane was calling bids, she



Keep an eye out for a Tornek-Rayville dive watch at your yard sales and flea markets. They were made in the 1960s for the U.S. Navy, and collectors obviously will pay a lot for them. This one went for \$113,775.



A stately 18th-century Amsterdam musical tall clock, signed by Roger Dunster, features a nest of bells struck by 17 hammers along with two additional larger bells to perform the "Dutch striking" system of indicating the hours. Here we see its ornate brass dial. The Dutch clock sold for \$15,990.



Carriage clocks range from basic to complex in look and function. This example, which sold for \$5228, features nearly every attraction—Swiss maker, miniature size (4" including handle), silver case with colorful enamel panels, and minute-repeating audible time reports.



Bigelow and Kennard, a carriage-trade Boston jeweler, originally sold this small but ornate and complicated English bracket clock around 1900. Its three-train movement features fuseses and a selection of chimes on bells and gongs. It sold for \$8610.



Japanese table clocks are rare, and this rosewood makura dokei, circa 1850, brought \$10,455. All such Japanese timekeepers feature methods of indicating temporal hours that lengthen and shorten seasonally.

Leading the long-duration Austrian clocks was this Mayer stained fruitwood Vienna regulator. Its time-only movement needs the weight raised just once a year. It sold for \$5535.



Selling well over its \$200/300 estimate at \$10,455, this silver desk clock has its Cartier name to thank. Its 11-jewel movement by the European Watch & Clock Company and its original leather carrying case made the package complete.

commented on a lot that quadrupled its low estimate, "Get the estimate low enough, everyone competes."

The fourth-highest lot was a mahogany Simon Willard tall clock. Selling at \$19,680, on an unusually strong \$18,000/28,000 estimate, it went in the room to dealer John A. Delaney. On the previous evening, Robert Cheney focused on this clock for his gallery talk during a preview session. "A Forensic Look at a Simon Willard Eight-day Clock" described Cheney's recommended procedure for evaluating such clocks before buying. There are many tell-tale signs of alterations, repairs, and forgeries, although recognizing them may take years of practice and study. Based on his decades-long study of Willard clocks, he insisted that it is impossible to determine if a movement was made by a Willard clockmaker. Other factors involving the case, dial, hands, etc. must be considered, although of course clear provenance back to the early 19th century would be optimal.

Rounding out the top lots was a burl walnut circa 1765 Dutch tall clock with a musical and alarm eight-day movement. It sold online for \$15,990, underbid by John Delaney. At 115" high, it had the height issue afflicting many tall clocks not suitable for modern ceilings. Other standouts in the opening section of 103 European and Asian clocks included long-duration Austrian regulators, ornate French gilt-brass mantel clocks, English bracket and lantern clocks, Japanese wall and table clocks, French carriage clocks, and a Cartier silver desk clock, which blew through its ridiculous \$200/300 estimate to sell to a phone bidder for \$10,455.

Five strong American clock lots failed to sell during the auction, which hurt the sale's overall total, although two of them sold in the weeks after the sale. A "Simon Willard" lighthouse clock, an early 20th-century high-quality reproduction, rose to only \$9500 and stopped short on a \$10,000/12,000 estimate. Probably by Boston-based James Conlon, it may have been made to deceive gullible collectors at that time. (These reproductions are described in the new book on lighthouse clocks reviewed by me recently in *M.A.D.*) A Levi and Abel Hutchins tall clock failed to reach its minimum (est. \$10,000/15,000) on the day of the sale but sold later for \$10,455. A John Wood of Philadelphia tall clock stopped at \$9500 on an aggressive \$20,000/40,000 estimate but appears as sold on May 16 for \$8000, according to the Skinner website. An Ithaca box skeleton calendar clock stalled at \$8500 (est. \$10,000/15,000). There was just one marine chronometer this time, an uncommon eight-day model by H. H. Heinrich of New York; nobody waved at the \$9000 opening bid on a \$12,000/15,000 estimate.

A rare A.D. Crane year-duration torsion clock, circa 1846, sold for \$5535 (est. \$4000/6000). These New York clocks are fully explained in a 1987 publication from the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, *Aaron Dodd Crane: An American Original*. We had an opportunity to remove and view the back of the round dial, on which are the handwritten words "This clock came via ox team across the plains in about 1850 to California. It belonged to the Coulter family of Punta Rosa, California, given to Dr. A. Morse Bowles in October 1921 as a wedding present when he married Dorothy Roswell of Healdsburg, California." Back on the East Coast and without another rewinding, the clock could still be running during a spring 2017 Skinner auction of timekeepers.

For 359 offered lots, the sale totaled a little over \$715,000. For more information, contact Skinner at (www.skinnerinc.com) or (508) 970-3000.

A popular image on clocks made by J. C. Brown is a view of his home reverse-painted on glass. Frishman photo.



James Doull of Charlestown, Massachusetts, made the movement of this circa 1795 tall clock with a Thomas Seymour case that sold for \$29,520. Seymour expert Robert Mussey Jr. is cited in the case attribution to that famous Boston cabinetmaker.



Robert Cheney's gallery talk featured this Simon Willard tall clock. Describing what prospective buyers should look for, he claimed that this example has the kind of "consistent and believable" appearance we should seek. It sold for \$19,680.



Patent timepieces, or so-called "banjo" clocks, range from 20th-century worthless copies to rare original period examples. In the latter category is this mahogany weight-driven clock by Reuben Tower of Hingham, Massachusetts, with an even rarer alarm option. It climbed to \$5535.



This circa 1832 George Marsh hollow-column Connecticut shelf clock was pictured in classic clock reference publications noted in the auction catalog. The weights descend within the large side columns. The clock rose to \$5843.



Nearly destroyed by a tornado and then rebuilt by its Missouri maker, Louis E. Meyer, this one-off complicated skeleton clock may have been planned for display at the 1876 Centennial Exhibition, but the storm intervened. It went to a new owner for \$39,975.



Acorn clocks are extremely fragile, so few survive in original condition. This circa 1845 example includes a colorful reverse-paint glass tablet showing the residence of maker J. C. Brown. It sold for \$5535.



An Ansonia "Medin" walnut weight-driven wall clock far surpassed its \$500/700 estimate at \$5228. It is rare, large, ornate, and in very good condition including original paper label, and the high winning bid was no surprise.



Walter Durfee (1857-1939), a Providence, Rhode Island, clock dealer, is best known for his grand tubular-chime hall clocks of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Other desirable clocks also bear his signature, including this mahogany lyre-style weight-driven banjo timepiece, which brought \$7995.



Not every crystal regulator mantel clock is valuable, but French ones with champlévé decoration and more elaborate cast brass cases can bring ten times more than standard models. This one brought \$3690.



Many good pocket watches were on offer. This Audemars Swiss 18k gold minute-repeating chronograph was one of the best. Its complicated movement revealed here is far more interesting than its dial. It sold to the phones just above the \$3000/5000 estimate for \$5535.



When they are sold in groups, the values of vintage mechanical gold Art Deco wristwatches can add up. These eight included ones by Longines, Gruen, Waltham, and Tissot. The lot brought \$2706.



Skinner clock department director Robert Cheney is shown evaluating tall clocks, which includes laying them on their backs (after bonnet and movement are removed!) to inspect the feet. Frishman photo.



Before the Connecticut clock factories mastered the manufacturing of coiled springs, other methods were attempted to replace hanging weights. Inside the case of a Birge & Fuller steeple clock were these "wagon springs." Disaster strikes when those little chains break during winding, meaning that many of these cases have replaced glass tablets. This clock sold for \$3998. Frishman photo.



Two experts, Tom McIntyre and Brian Jeans, were inspecting watches during the preview. Some of the carriage clocks are visible in the foreground. Frishman photo.



Selling well above the \$5000/7000 estimate at \$17,220, this circa 1960 Universal Geneve Tri-compax stainless steel wristwatch went to a left bid. Its four subsidiary dials could make basic time-telling difficult.



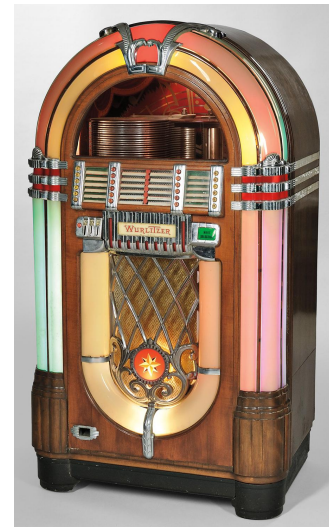
Certain clues help determine the authenticity of "Willard" lighthouse clocks. If original and correct, values are huge, so reproductions abound. In this early 20th-century example, which failed to sell at the auction, the hands are oversize, the signature is a bit heavy, and the engraved bezel is incorrect. Frishman photo.



Overall, the mechanical music lots did poorly in the sale, demonstrating low interest these days in music boxes and early record players. Although estimated at \$15,000/25,000, this coin-operated Mills Violano Virtuoso from Chicago was allowed to sell at \$9840 to an Internet bidder. Transporting and servicing this 64" x 43" x 30 3/4" elaborate player would be challenging, but we hope it would be worthwhile in order to hear the 32 perforated paper player rolls that came with it.



Inside the Violano are a mechanically controlled violin and partial piano, ready to perform hits from the past. Frishman photo.



A Wurlitzer "Bubbler" would look great in every man cave, and this circa 1946 jukebox for 78 rpm discs is impressive. According to Skinner, the lights work, but the speaker just buzzes, so expert service will be needed by the online buyer who paid \$3567.