

An Auctioneer's Collection Is Sold: R.O. Schmitt's Skeleton, Mystery, and Novelty Clocks

by Jeanne Schinto

When an auctioneer has a collection of his own to sell, what does he do? Dentists don't drill their own teeth, surgeons don't remove their own gallstones, and everybody knows the saying about the man who is his own attorney. R.O. "Bob" Schmitt, who conducts semiannual clock auctions in Manchester, New Hampshire, went to Christie's with his 67-lot collection of European skeleton, mystery, and novelty clocks. They were sold on June 17 as the prelude to a sale of pocket watches and wristwatches from various owners.

Ben Wright, international director of Christie's clock department, said of Schmitt's decision to sell them at Christie's: "Bob and I are friends. These are his personal clocks, and it made sense that he came to his friend to sell them. We reach a wider audience than Bob does in New Hampshire."

Schmitt said much the same thing: "Christie's circle of customers is different than mine. Even though I have customers all over the United States, like Christie's does, its audience is at a different level. It tends to get the captains of industry. Neither the aspirations nor the expectations of my customers are quite as high as those of the Christie's customers, and I don't get a lot of overseas activity."

Wright sometimes puts clocks into furniture sales. He thought Schmitt's clocks would do better as "a nice package to put into a watch sale," because Schmitt's were "more watch-y" than clocks with wooden cases. As a group they are ornate, sometimes extremely so, but their greater value and true desirability lie in their unusual mechanical or technical features.

Some timepieces combined the best of science and decorative art, as did the top lot of the collection, a large Victorian gilt-brass scroll-frame skeleton clock made by Bennett of London. It went to Mark Frank, a Chicago collector, at \$66,000 (including buyer's premium).

Occasionally, too, some lots did not rise much above their reserves. Conforming to the situation in virtually all categories of the antiques market today, rarity rules. Lesser pieces—in this case, portico clocks and lyre clocks—do not draw as much interest.

Although the collection was small, it represented decades of study, savvy trading, and travel all over the world by Schmitt, who began collecting as a young man in 1969. "A lot of people don't realize that I am a collector," acknowledged Schmitt, who turned 60 in July. "They think I'm just an auctioneer. And they generally don't see clocks like these in my own auctions, except maybe the odd one here and there."

Regular Schmitt clock auction-goers may indeed be surprised to read the anecdotes in the captions, where the auctioneer reveals himself to be every bit as acquisitive as they are, sometimes spending years in pursuit of a single, coveted object.

Like the Bennett skeleton clock bought by Mark Frank, many of the timepieces that Schmitt collected were extremely rare. One could search the Internet from Sydney to Salzburg and find few if any of them available in the current marketplace. Those who attended the sale—and Schmitt himself—likened it to a mini version of Sotheby's sale of the Joseph M. Meraux collection of rare and unusual clocks, held June 28, 1993, in New York City. (A revolving globe mystery clock in Schmitt's collection had a Meraux provenance.) Another point of comparison, in terms of style but not scale, was the collection of Francis X. Vitale, which was sold by Christie's in two parts, the first in New York City on October 30, 1996, and the second in London on November 26, 1996.

The clocks collected by Joe Meraux were sold as part of his estate; Vitale sold his because he was ordered to do so by the court that had found him guilty of embezzlement (see *New York Times*, October 1, 1997, "In a Passion for Antique Clocks, Executive Embezzled \$12 Million," pp. A1 & A28). Other collectors typically divest when they are thinking of downsizing for retirement. Since the energetic Schmitt doesn't seem a likely candidate for that, we asked him why he had decided to sell now. "I'm reorganizing, and I wanted to build a new and bigger home to facilitate my auction business," he said. "And in today's real estate market, I needed another source of cash."

That he got. The total was \$843,840 against total estimates of \$477,300/701,300 (buyers' premiums aren't figured into the estimates), and only four lots remained unsold.

We also asked Schmitt why he had collected Continental clocks instead of American ones. "I tended to collect what I could find," he replied.

When his clock pursuits began, his employer was the Ford Motor Company in Dearborn, Michigan. He made his first purchase, a German wall clock, at Schmidt's Antiques in Ypsilanti. "They got four containers a week of European antiques, including clocks," Schmitt recalled. "Everybody in Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana who collected European stuff went to Schmidt's because that's where the action was at that time and place."

Schmitt was born in Pasadena, California, and raised in Death Valley. After Ford transferred him back home to the Los Angeles area, he joined Chapter 56 of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors. "That's a research chapter," he said. "They held meetings in homes. You tended to see French novelties and English skeletons there, and I developed a taste for them."

Ten years after Schmitt bought his first clock, he started selling clocks part time. A year later, in 1980, he quit Ford and went full time into the clock business. He and others in Southern California were being fed by a couple of big importers, Lyman Drake and Charles & Charles. "They brought forty-foot containers of furniture and clocks from England, the flea markets of Paris, and other parts of Europe. They brought them in a volume that would be amazing to us today. The dollar was strong, and the market for these things wasn't in Europe. They created a market here."

Jim Cipra of Long Beach, California, is a longtime collector friend of Schmitt and a fellow member of Chapter 56. He is also American section president of the British-based Antiquarian Horological Society. At Christie's sale in New York City, Cipra added these comments to Schmitt's California recollections: "The group he fell in with was really knowledgeable. They were specialists who started collecting just after World War Two. There were about a dozen in the group at the time. We ran around like crazy people buying clocks. Then we found out about auctions."

That didn't really make the hunt for rarities any easier, though. Speaking of the revolving globe mystery timepiece in this sale, Cipra said, "Bob missed it in the Meraux sale and pursued it afterwards for some time and was finally able to acquire it. That's how you get rarities. If you miss something, you try and keep track of it and let people know you want it. One day, they may decide they have enjoyed it enough and let you have it. Or you're chatting with them on the phone and hit them one more time, and they weaken and let you have it. That's the story of collecting."

More than a few of the clocks in Schmitt's collection were once owned by Cipra, including an 88" tall Austrian month-going, two-time-zone long-case regulator with calendar and zodiac made by Gustav Powolny and dated 1875. ("I met Jim Cipra in 1972, and he had that standing in his house," Schmitt told us. "I thought it was a marvelous thing.") Cipra finally sold it to Schmitt in 2002, but he bought it back at this sale for \$12,000.

Cipra bought several clocks and bid on 21 in all, almost a third of the lots in the collection. Why so active? "In general, the English and American clock markets are strong, and the skeleton and novelty markets are particularly lively," he said. "With the weakness of the dollar, buying internationally with dollars is difficult, and so, to me, this sale represented a buying opportunity."

Another active bidder was an absentee, one who has not been identified by any of the clock people with whom we are acquainted. Bidder number 1033 was successful on 14 lots. Lawrence Thompson, who sells clocks and barometers as Sundial Farm in Greenlawn, New York, and who bought three lots himself, thinks the absentee bidder was a collector, not a dealer. "The average dealer would not pay thirty-six thousand for the Westminster Abbey," he said, referring to the skeleton clock whose case takes the form of the British cathedral. "That's a lot a lot of money...It's an odd mix of things that he bought."

People speculated whether Derek Roberts of England had bought any lots on the phone. Roberts is author of the definitive book, *Mystery, Novelty & Fantasy Clocks* (1999, updated 2003), as well as two books on skeleton clocks, among others. (He was also the owner of Derek Roberts Antiques in Tonbridge, Kent, but in May 2003 sold the business to Paul Archard.) Reached by e-mail about the Schmitt sale, he confirmed his participation on a few lots but said he had not been successful on any.

Roberts also kindly provided these general comments about the sale at our request. "I have known Bob Schmitt for maybe thirty years and have always had a great respect for him. I have also had a strong interest in his area of collecting, mystery, novelty, fantasy, and skeleton clocks, which I find fascinating because of their ingenuity and the superb work which goes into many of them. Several of these clocks were made only in small numbers. Some in this sale, such as the skeletonised table regulator and the quarter-chiming skeleton clock by Bennett, may well be unique, made either to special order or for exhibition. Their quality of construction is of the very highest order and way ahead of the standard long-case and bracket clocks being made at that time. The prices that these items fetched [\$38,400 and \$66,000, respectively] indicate that the true worth of these pieces is now being appreciated."

One more question needed to be asked of Bob Schmitt before we ended our reporting of his deaccession. Would he start a new collection? He said he would but would probably be more "conservative." On the weekend after the sale, he bought a skeleton clock on eBay from a seller in Southampton, England.

For more information, contact Christie's at (212) 636-2000; Web site (www.christies.com).