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## Sci-Tech, Clocks, and "Crazy Stuff" at New Department's Inaugural Sale by Jeanne Schinto

September 21st, 2009

Skinner Inc., Marlborough, Massachusetts

Photos courtesy Skinner Inc.

by Jeanne Schinto

The first sale by Skinner's new department of science,

technology, and clocks, directed by Robert C. Cheney, took in a solid \$1.17 million on July 25 at the auction house's suburban headquarters in Marlborough, Massachusetts. The star lot was a timepiece, appropriately enough, given the megaton of horological expertise that Cheney brings to the company, which he joined four years ago. Astronomical regulators by E.

Howard of Boston have been selling at, well, astronomical prices over the last few years.

continuously operating jewelry firm in the state, it remained at the store in one spot for upward of 140 years until it was sold to someone Cheney termed "an interim buyer" in August 2008. To judge by the traces of salmon and green paint around the edges of its backboard, the clock wasn't moved even when painters refreshed the jewelry store's walls. "That is not an uncommon phenomenon when it comes to clocks, like this one, that are scary to move," Cheney said.

The clock definitely had some age to it-the "9" on its four-jar mercury pendulum is the earliest serial number on any Howard astronomical regulator known. The clock's condition was superb. The case has retained what appears to be its original finish, and neither case nor movement has any significant repairs or replacements. If it has any physical flaw at all, it is that its dial was repainted at some time over the decades.

know that some Howard collectors are so-called 'catalog buyers,'" Cheney said. "They like the numbered models that are illustrated in the various Howard catalogs." This one, being unique, is not pictured. "My entire career, as you know, has been focused on clocks from an era much earlier than that of Howards," Cheney continued, referring to the era of Simon

There was, however, one

potential stopper for some

Howard clock collectors. "I

Willard and other early American clockmakers. "What excited me most about that period were special-order items. My tastes go in that direction when it comes to sold for \$74,063 (est. these Victorian clocks as well." But who would share that taste enough to meet the price level suggested by the \$175,000/200,000 estimate? A good sign at the preview the day before the sale was the presence of Charles Grichar of Houston, Texas, who has one of

anywhere. He paid \$118,500 the drum-headed Howard No. 23 Skinner's catalog. that Skinner offered on August 23 at last summer's sci-tech sale. He also owns a Howard No. 45, for which he paid the record price for any Howard model, \$220,000 (there was no buyer's premium), at a sale run by Colonel Glen LaRue of Sweet Springs, Missouri, on March 29, 2008. Grichar's presence, however, certainly did not guarantee that he would go the limit on this one. surveyor's compass by noted Although he paid \$165,900 for the Howard No. 67 oak regulator (1735-1807) of Norwich, wall clock offered at Skinner's

regulator offered at Skinner's Americana sale on June 3, 2007, letting it go for \$143,500 to a private collector on the phone whom the auction house did not scared a few bidders," said name. At noon the next day, July 25, Cheney opened the Grand Rapids jewelers' clock from the podium at \$130,000. A phone bidder raised it against the desk to Harland clocks, there are reach \$160,000. When no one else seemed ready to step into the breach, Grichar did, asking for and receiving a half-increment

increase. No one topped it, and

\$195,525 with buyer's premium.

the clock was the Texan's for

Americana sale on February 17,

on the Howard No. 36 wall

Grichar was asked what it is about these clocks that particularly appeals to him. His engineering background makes one think that it would be their extreme accuracy. That was one attraction, he said. "But my dad was a railroad guy, so time was always very important, and many of these big clocks were used in railway settings. So I guess that's where it began." Clocks are not Grichar's only

14k gold 1947 Kentucky Derby winner's trophy and 14k gold commemorative mint julep cup (est. \$60,000/80,000) that initially later sold to him for \$59,250.

of which were sold.

called it, sold for \$18,960.

\$8000/12,000 estimate.

passion. "I collect all manner of

things," he said, "early American

"After thirty years, I've sort of 'been there and done that' with the clocks," he explained, "and I do think that expanding my repertoire has been kind of fun for me intellectually. This [sci-tech] is an extremely varied field. When I was laying out the catalog, I had twenty-eight different piles of material, and in order to make some sense out of that, it has been fun exploring how these fields interact with one another. Certainly timekeeping interacts very closely with many of them and has

The sale's astronomy offerings also included a 1618-dated diptych pocket sundial in ivory made by Lienhart Miler of Nuremberg (\$3555), a miniature sextant by Dollond of London (\$7110), and a circa 1790 ebony octant attributed to Thomas Biggs of New York (\$2726). The lot that shared the catalog's cover with the Howard regulator related to heaven and earth: a magnificent pair of 18" Newton library globes, celestial and terrestrial, that came by descent from William L. Clements

Because 2009 marks the 40th anniversary of the first moon landing, Cheney's lecture was able to play off moonwalker Neil Armstrong's famous phrase, "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind." While scientific progress often does appear to proceed in leaps, it's more often than not preceded by innumerable baby steps, some of them sublime, others absurd, Cheney observed. Surely in the absurd category was the sale's floating bicycle. "Nothing rare about them," Cheney noted, and a Google search pulled up multiple examples, new and old. The circa 1920 one offered at Skinner was made by the Eureka Novelty Company, New York City. It

From the estate of William S. Greenspon of Richmond, Massachusetts, a psychiatrist turned art dealer and artist, the amphibious bike sold for \$5036 against an unassuming \$600/800 estimate. One other notable lot from the Greenspon estate was a 20th-century metal kinetic sculpture of a child seated in a highchair. A probable California creation, the catalog stated, it was composed of found metal machinery, industrial metal, radio parts, and a few clock parts too. Purportedly, when plugged in the thing simulates a child having a tantrum, with its arms banging the highchair's tray, its feet stomping, its light-bulb eyes flashing, and even "sporadic, static wails issuing from a

when he briefly plugged it in, it started to smell like an electrical fire. It will be up to its buyer, who paid \$6518, to explore its kinetic possibilities further. The room was heavily populated for the first four hours of the sale. We noted, among others, Kenneth Launie of Cambridge, Massachusetts, vice president of the Antique Telescope Society and a member of the Amateur Telescope Makers of Boston; clock auctioneer R.O. "Bob" Schmitt of New Hampshire; and pocket watch collectors Tom McIntyre and David Newsom, both of Massachusetts. Most, if not all, were at Skinner's Marlborough venue for the first time. What they discovered is

Massachusetts, but it lacks one feature: food. Vending machines offer sodas, but otherwise there is no concession on the premises. We were told that bidders at other sales have had pizzas delivered, and at this sale at least one twosome went out to get their own. Skinner provided free sandwiches at one point, but the miracle of the loaves and fishes did not occur. So a word to the wise: if snacks appear at a sale you attend, get up and get yours early.

The next sci-tech sale will be in 2010. Meanwhile, Cheney said, "I think that my first adventure worked out quite well. I have some other ideas as to what should comprise future sales. I'm working on some consignments that may broaden the field even further. 'Some areas are very soft, such as musical boxes; we've known that for

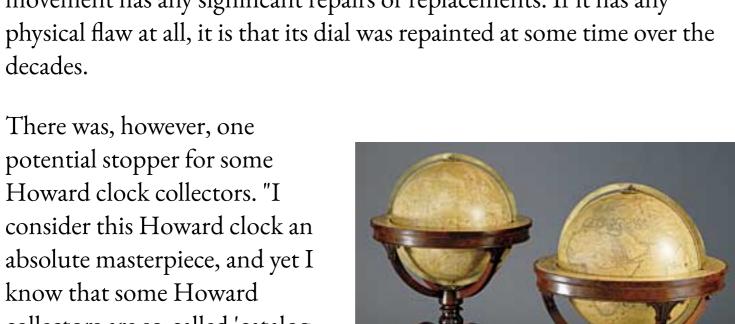
I'm going to try my luck with some things that I would generally categorize as 'intellectual entertainment' found in a gentleman's or gentlewoman's library." For more information, contact Skinner in Marlborough at (508) 970-3000, in Boston at (617) 350-5400, or see the Web site

special-order astronomical regulator by E. Howard with a 16½" reversepainted glass dial marked "E. Howard & Co. Makers. Boston." sold to Charles Grichar of Houston for \$195,525 (est. \$175,000/ 200,000). It is 103" tall and, among other features, has an eight-day damascened brass movement that

A circa 1865

walnut-cased

incorporates a Graham's deadbeat escapement and a four-jar mercury pendulum. Among the most notable features of the circa 1865 special-order example at Skinner was its 103" tall Gothic walnut case topped by a steeply pitched pediment, and it had a great provenance. Part of the original furnishings of Herkner Jewelers, Grand Rapids, Michigan, the oldest



The pair of 18" Newton & Son

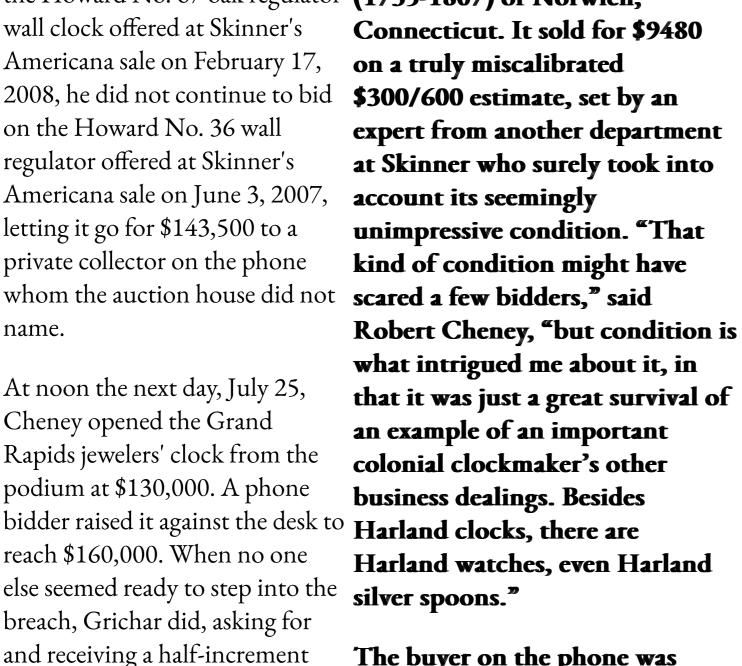
Clements (1861-1934), founder

library globes, terrestrial and

celestial, came to the sale by

descent from William L.

of the Clements Library at the University of Michigan and a regent of the university. They \$30,000/40,000). The cartouche on the terrestrial globe reads: "Newton's/ New & Improved/ Terrestrial Globe, / Accurately delineated/ from the observations of the most esteemed/ Navigators and Travellers,/ to the Present Time./ Manufactured by Newton & Son, 66 Chancery Lane,/ London/ the most important collections of Published 1st January 1867." Howard astronomical regulators Clements, a collector of rare books, bought the globes in the (including buyer's premium) for early 20th century, according to



Paul DeCoste of West Newbury,

Massachusetts, was the

underbidder on this brass

clockmaker Thomas Harland

The buyer on the phone was acting as an agent for a private collection. Speaking on condition of anonymity, the agent said: "There is only one other known surveyor's compass by Harland, and it's located at the Smithsonian. This is literally like finding a twelve-cylinder Ferrari in a barn. And, yes, it's going to need a sensitive restoration, but the essential elements of the compass are intact, and the missing pieces can be accurately replicated." In addition, the agent said, the

compass's engraving is of an impressive nature, clearly showing Harland's abilities. furniture, lamps of various sorts, and I have a few cars." He also owns the remained unsold at Skinner's Americana sale on June 7, 2009, but were Two other major lots were timekeepers: a pristine Simon Willard patent timepiece (known colloquially as a "banjo" clock) that brought \$47,400 and a Rolex Oyster stainless steel wristwatch from the 1950's that went at \$77,025. Nonetheless, Cheney seemed to revel as much, if not more, in the other specialties represented in the 850-lot sale, an impressive 85.3%

for at least three centuries." Noting in a slide lecture on the night before the auction that "the heavens were the ultimate timekeeper," Cheney called his audience's attention to the sale's circa 1790 universal equinoctial ring dial by W. & S. Jones of London. This "most elegant and accurate of all sundials," as Cheney

(1861-1934), founder of the University of Michigan's Clements Library. The Newton company of London produced globes of all sizes, and what

were probably its largest and smallest pairs were in this sale. The library

conservation prior to the sale," went at \$74,063 (est. \$30,000/40,000) to

pair, which Cheney said had gone through "some very professional

a New York City buyer on the phone, competing against two other

phone bidders. The pair of 3" Newton table globes from a different

consignor was in need of similar work and made just \$4148 on an

consists of a welded steel frame, a couple of airtight drums, a rudder, and a couple of foot pedals-in other words, crude and improbable to the max.

1930's-era radio," according to the catalog description. Cheney said that

that it's much more comfortable than the old place in Bolton,

quite some time. The field of major automata is now really quite soft too, following the exit of a couple of very significant collectors overseas. So

(www.skinnerinc.com). Originally published in the October 2009 issue of Maine Antique Digest.

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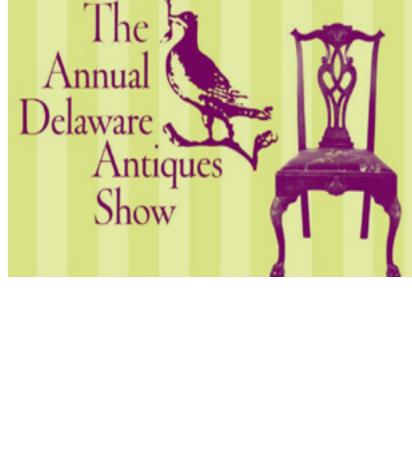
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