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December 1st, 2012

# Turn, Turn, Turn: Holtzapffel Rose Engine Lathe Brings Record \$228,000

by Jeanne Schinto

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*Skinner, Inc., Marlborough, Massachusetts*

Photos courtesy Skinner, Inc.

Skinner's science, technology, and clocks auction at its Marlborough, Massachusetts, headquarters on Saturday, December 1, 2012, was a blowout, bringing just under \$1.92 million (including buyers' premiums). It is the best result achieved by the department since Robert C. Cheney took over as its director in 2009, during one of the darkest periods of our economic doldrums.

At the center of the excitement was a rose engine lathe made in 1838 by Holtzapffel & Company, London, England. Observers thought its price would reach \$250,000, and it almost did, selling to a phone bidder for \$228,000. It is a new auction record for a Holtzapffel lathe of any kind, said Cheney, who recalled that the last Holtzapffel rose engine lathe at auction brought \$90,000, which must have been the logic behind this one's \$70,000/90,000 estimate.

"However, this one is miles above that one," said Cheney. "It is without a doubt the most elaborate, complicated, complete, important example, and it's in near-perfect condition—and that's not a sales pitch," he added. "It is widely recognized among the authorities in this field as the best and the brightest."

At least one authority from the past thought the same. He was biased, perhaps, but John Jacob Holtzapffel II (1836-1897) is quoted as having written that it was "one of three, the last and best we have made."

Adding to the lathe's desirability in the marketplace was its complete cabinet of accessories. "You open those drawers, and all those tools are just where they're supposed to be," Cheney marveled. "This is a very, very important rose engine—the most important one known."

Surprisingly, although probably not to lathe lovers, its provenance has been as carefully recorded as that of a significant highboy. Its first owner, who reportedly paid £1500 for it, was John Taylor, Esquire (1779-1863), a London civil engineer and a Fellow of the Royal Society. Warren Greene Ogden, Jr., who wrote *The Pedigree of Holtzapffel Lathes* (1987), traced the history of its ownership through five others to himself in 1954, and then to Richard I. Miller of Tucson, Arizona, in 1985. Miller, who does ornamental turning as a hobby, consigned it to this sale.

Cheney described its new owner as a private collector who went to some lengths to keep his identity a secret. "I've been told he has other examples of Holtzapffel lathes in his collection," Cheney said, "but whether he is going to use this one, I do not know."

For those who need a refresher, a lathe is a machine that shapes wood, metal, ivory, or the like by rotating or turning it rapidly along its axis while the operator presses a fixed cutting or abrading tool against it. "A rose engine takes that to a whole different dimension," said Cheney.

Those who were able to preview the rose engine lathe at Skinner would have noticed its many rosettes, hence its name. Those rosettes are what make the headstock of the lathe move back and forth—as opposed to a regular lathe, whose headstock remains stationary—and those rosettes are what govern the action of the work. Not only can the material be turned but also elaborately decorated. An object "may look like the work has been all hand carved, but it is actually rose-engine-made," said Cheney.

The bidder who bought the rose engine lathe also paid \$43,200 (est. \$20,000/30,000) for the sale's catalog cover lot: a little-used, if ever, set of 64 Holtzapffel ivory-handled, silver-shanked turning tools of exhibition quality. Made circa 1850 in London, the set was housed in a double-door mahogany display cabinet of the period that, the catalog said, is consistent with other known cabinets that have housed Holtzapffel turning tools. The catalog also said these tools likely were shown by Holtzapffel in The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in London in 1851.

The source of the ivory-handled tool set was Dr. Theodore R. "Ted" Crom (1920-2008), who was highly esteemed among those who attend or monitor these sales. A civil engineer by profession, Crom spent 60 years on his hobby of collecting, studying, and writing books about the tools used for making and repairing early clocks and watches, and his private museum in Hawthorne, Florida, enjoyed an international reputation. In the past couple of years, Skinner has sold other great objects from Crom's collection, and the well hasn't yet run dry.

Besides the tool set, this sale featured a couple of Crom's mid-19th-century straight Holtzapffel lathes, which brought \$11,700 and \$10,200. (At a Skinner sci-tech sale on May 1, 2010, Crom's early 19th-century rose engine lathe from the workshop of Frenchman Abraham-Louis Bréguet sold for \$44,438.)

What was much more significant this time, however, was a lesser-known aspect of Crom's collection: an important group of early European watches. The 94 lots included many of the sort that are more often seen at the international auction houses, and they attracted an international group of bidders, ranging from Austria to Asia. "People actually took the time to travel great distances to see the material," said Cheney. "Overall, I was very pleased with the results, but I must say, it was exactly what I expected."

A European bidder in the room paid \$24,000 for Crom's circa 1630 Swiss-made Charles Bobinet watch in a gilt-rose crystal case with a verge-escapement fusee movement and an associated chain. He also bought the collection's circa 1660 London-made silver alarm watch for \$12,000 and the circa 1700 London-made "shutter" watch by Thomas Young for \$10,200.

An Internet bidder paid the most for watches from the Crom collection: \$34,440 for a circa 1640 Swiss-made tulip-form gilt-brass and rock crystal watch by Jean Rousseau; \$58,425 for a circa 1715 Rotterdam-made pair-case watch by Samuel Ruel; and \$67,650 for a circa 1813 London-made enamel and pearl-set open-face gold watch by Barrauds.

A phone bidder paid \$22,800 for a unusual circa 1630 crucifix-form watch from the Crom collection. Cataloged as "possibly Continental," it was accompanied by a notebook of Crom's research material on the mysterious timepiece. The same bidder paid \$24,000 for the sole 20th-century watch in the collection, a circa 1980 18k yellow gold triple-date minute-repeating watch accompanied by an ivory watch casket that was ornamentally turned by artist Delphin Broussaillès. What was Broussaillès' machine of choice? It was a Holtzapffel rose engine lathe, built in 1797.

The bulk of Crom's watchmaking and clockmaking tools was sold in 2010 at the same auction that featured his Bréguet rose engine lathe. This auction featured more of his tools, and several went to Richard L. Ketchen of Carlisle, Massachusetts, who was bidding in the salesroom. A watchmaker, clockmaker, and collector, Ketchen is a fellow of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors and has won that organization's gold medal for craftsmanship. "Richard is one of the few people on the planet who actually knows how to use those tools," said Cheney.

Cheney is himself a third-generation clockmaker, and his sci-tech auctions always have a healthy helping of horology. This time, two clocks in particular were noteworthy, and both came from a consignor who walked into Skinner's lobby with them. "And boy, was I skipping down the stairs after taking in those," said Cheney.

One was a circa 1840 miniature patent timepiece, i.e., "banjo clock," by John Polsey (1816-1873) of Boston, who in his youth probably was apprenticed to Aaron Willard, Jr. A regular-size banjo clock is 30" to 34" long; this one was just 2 1/2" long with a 5" diameter painted iron dial. There are many mini-banjos, some even smaller than this, but they have large watch-style movements. This rarity, however, has a small version of a full-size, weight-driven, pendulum-swinging banjo clock movement.

"In thirty-five years, I'd never seen anything like it," said Cheney. "Every single thing about it was scaled down. The movement was scaled down, the weight, the dial, the painting, the case. It is a perfectly scaled down version of a normal-size Polsey timepiece."

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The second clock was undersized too. Just 7 1/2" tall, the miniature alarm clock in an ebonized oak case was made in London by George Lindsay, whose name is engraved on the silvered brass dial. The catalog dated it to circa 1785, but according to G.H. Baillie's Watchmakers & Clockmakers of the World, Lindsay died in 1776. Other sources mention that he was also a scientific instruments maker and inventor, "Watch & Clockmaker to his Royal Highness ye Prince of Wales," and later appointed as Royal Watchmaker to George III.

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"I don't think anybody who saw it didn't say, 'What a sweetheart of a clock!'" said Cheney. "It was the size of it, the age of it, the fact that it's an alarm clock, and the condition! The engraved silvered dial looks great. All the brass hardware's original. The movement's intact, with the original verge escapement. What more do you want?"

What more, indeed? There were a dozen phone bidders on it, only a few of whom actually got into the action. The winner paid \$15,600 against the same \$1500/2500 estimate that was given to the Polsey mini-banjo.

"The estimate was the old carrot-and-a-stick routine," said Cheney. "We knew it would do well. How well, we didn't know, but certainly ten thousand." Other clocks did better than these two, to be sure, but these were the only two that the previewers wanted to buy.

The top clock lot went to Charles Grichar of Houston, Texas, bidding by phone. He paid \$150,000—more than twice the low estimate—for an 86 1/2" tall E. Howard & Company 90-day astronomical regulator. Made in Boston, circa 1870, the clock had stood in Edward W. Freeman's jewelry store in Lowell, Massachusetts, until 1975, then it went to the consignor, said Cheney. "For the last forty years, it was in a summer home on the coast of Maine."

Remarkably, it had no significant repairs, replacements, or condition issues. About Grichar, who has bought many other Howard clocks at these sales, Cheney said, "He's obviously putting together a very important collection."

There was only one clear highlight in the section of the sale devoted to pure science. The back cover lot, it was an outstanding exhibition-grade set of surgical tools made in 1876 by George Tiemann & Company, New York City. The year is crucial because Tiemann was a prominent exhibitor at the U.S. International Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia that year, and this set would have been noticed for such things as its ruby-set mother-of-pearl-handled implements and its felt-lined, silver-bound rosewood carrying case with the original gilt leather maker's tag inside.

"Science is slow [in the marketplace]," said Cheney, and this item, which came from a private collector outside Cincinnati, didn't have as many competitors as it might have had in years past. Nonetheless, it went at \$85,200 (est. \$80,000/100,000) to a person on the phone whom Cheney described as "a major collector of medical antiques, a nationally recognized collector of surgical instruments."

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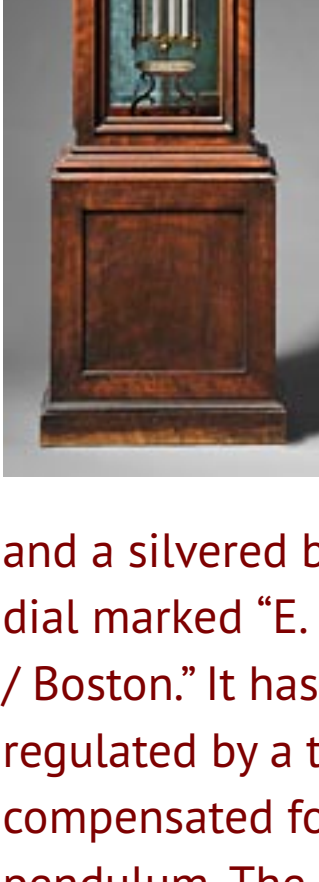
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Made in London in 1838, the Holtzapffel & Company rose engine lathe number 1636 and its mahogany bench with drawers containing numbered split rosettes, steel and ivory rubbers, tool rests, brass chucks, and hand tools came with two additional bench-top dovetailed mahogany boxes holding 24 sets of brass split rosettes. Also included in the \$228,000 price (est. \$70,000/90,000) was a two-part mahogany cabinet packed with yet more accessories.



The top clock lot, an 86 1/2" tall E. Howard & Company 90-day No. 23 astronomical regulator, made in Boston, circa 1870, sold to Charles Grichar of Houston, Texas, for \$150,000 (est. \$70,000/90,000). The clock has a 16 1/4" diameter "drumhead" case and a silvered brass astronomical dial marked "E. Howard & Co. Makers / Boston." It has a 90-day movement regulated by a temperature-compensated four-jar mercury pendulum. The catalog stated that it had no significant repairs, replacements, or condition problems.



A 2 3/8" ornamentally turned steel and granulated-gold box by contemporary artist Daniel Brush, circa 1990, sold to an Internet buyer for \$18,450 (est. \$2000/3000). Brush's work is the subject of a survey exhibition, Daniel Brush: Blue Steel Gold Light, at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City; on view through February 24, it is accompanied by a catalog. For more information, see the museum's Web site ([www.madmuseum.org](http://www.madmuseum.org)).



The catalog's cover pictured part of a set of Holtzapffel exhibition-grade turning tools, made circa 1850 in London for an exhibition. The set sold to phone bidder #940 for \$43,200 (est. \$20,000/30,000) and included 64 fluted ivory-handled turning tools of varying patterns, with engine-turned silver ferrules and cast threaded rosettes for blade attachment, all stamped Holtzapffel on the hardened steel blades. They came with a period double-door mahogany display cabinet consistent with other known cabinets housing Holtzapffel turning tools. The catalog said these tools likely were shown by Holtzapffel in 1851 at The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in London. Crom collection.



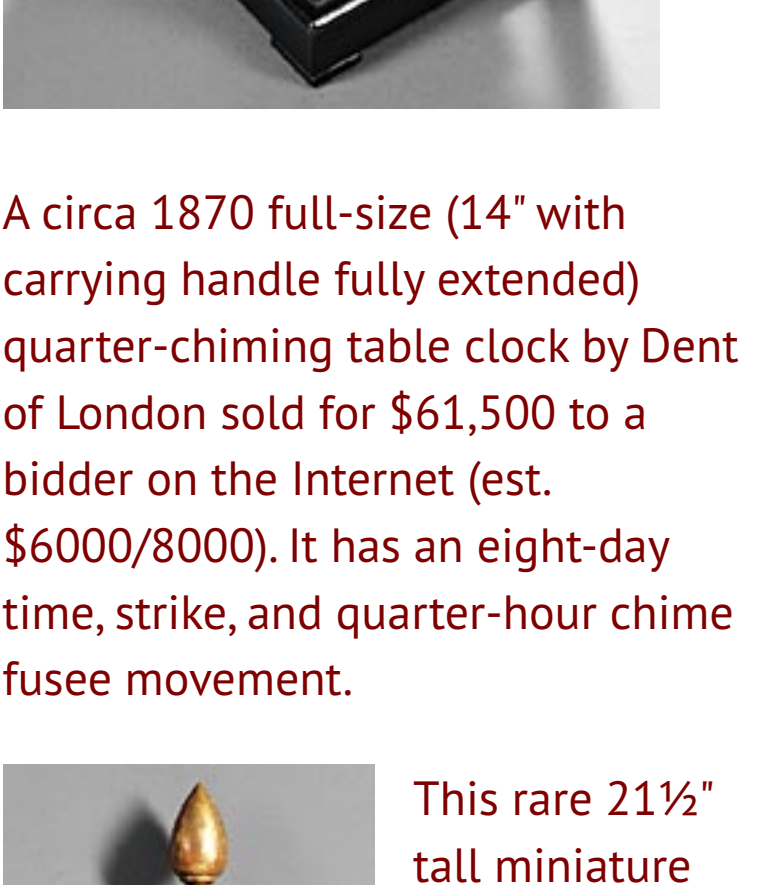
A circa 1630 carved ivory crucifix-form watch, cataloged as "possibly Continental," sold to a phone bidder for \$22,800 (est. \$6000/8000). The 3" x 2 1/4" diptych case depicts scenes from the Crucifixion, the Annunciation, and the Nativity. Crom collection.



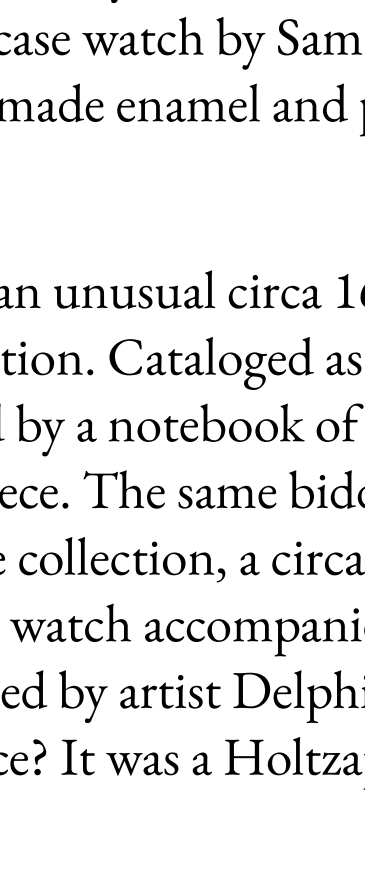
The circa 1715 watch marked "Samuel Ruel / Rotterdam," housed in a pair of enameled cases, went at \$58,425 to an Internet bidder (est. \$15,000/25,000). Crom collection.



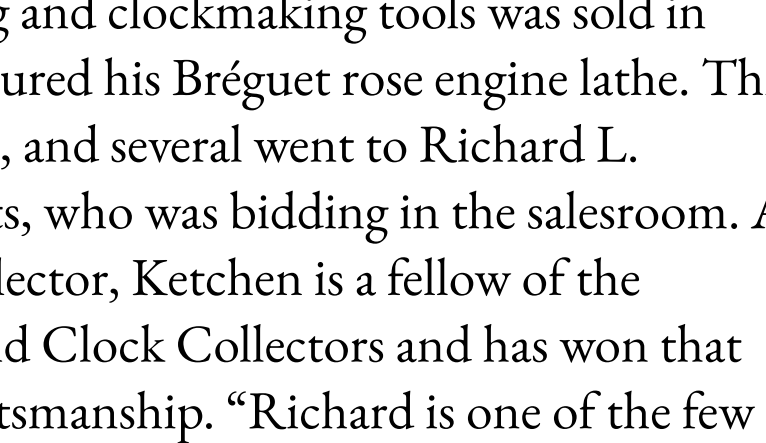
An 18th-century miniature alarm table clock by George Lindsay of London in an ebonized oak case went at \$15,600 to a phone bidder (est. \$1500/2500). The eight-day chain fusee timepiece with verge escapement and 3" pendulum is 7 1/2" tall with its carrying handle fully extended.



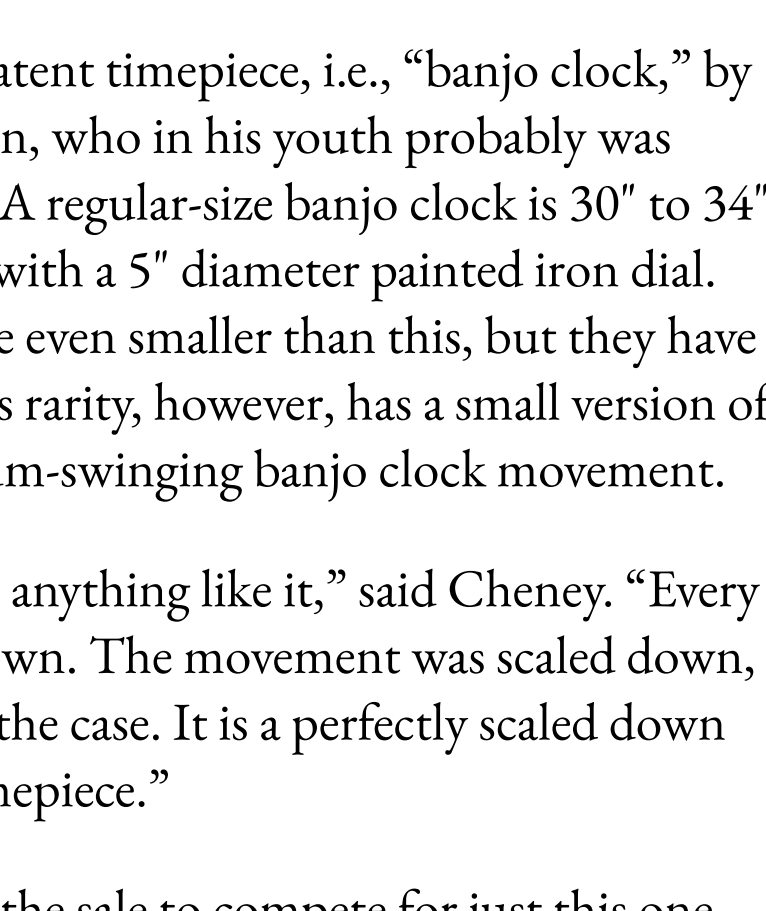
A circa 1870 full-size (14" with carrying handle fully extended) quarter-chiming table clock by Dent of London sold for \$61,500 to a bidder on the Internet (est. \$6000/8000). It has an eight-day time, strike, and quarter-hour chime fusee movement.



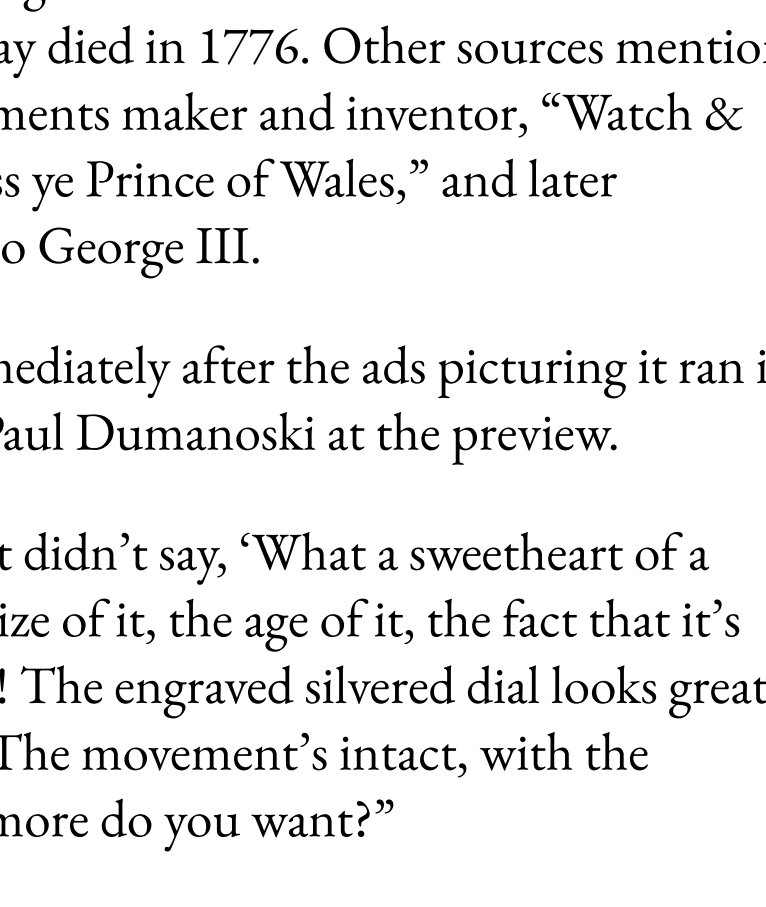
This rare 2 1/2" tall miniature banjo clock with 5" painted iron dial by John Polsey of Boston, circa 1840, attracted a great deal of interest and sold to the Internet for \$7995 (est. \$1500/2500). No other banjo clock in the sale did better.



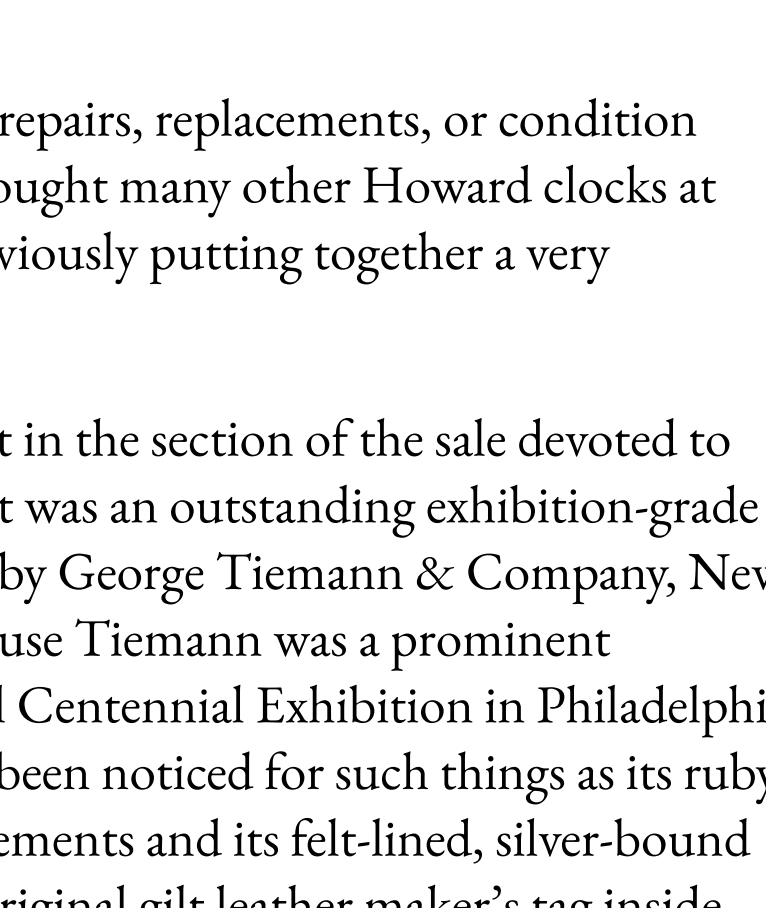
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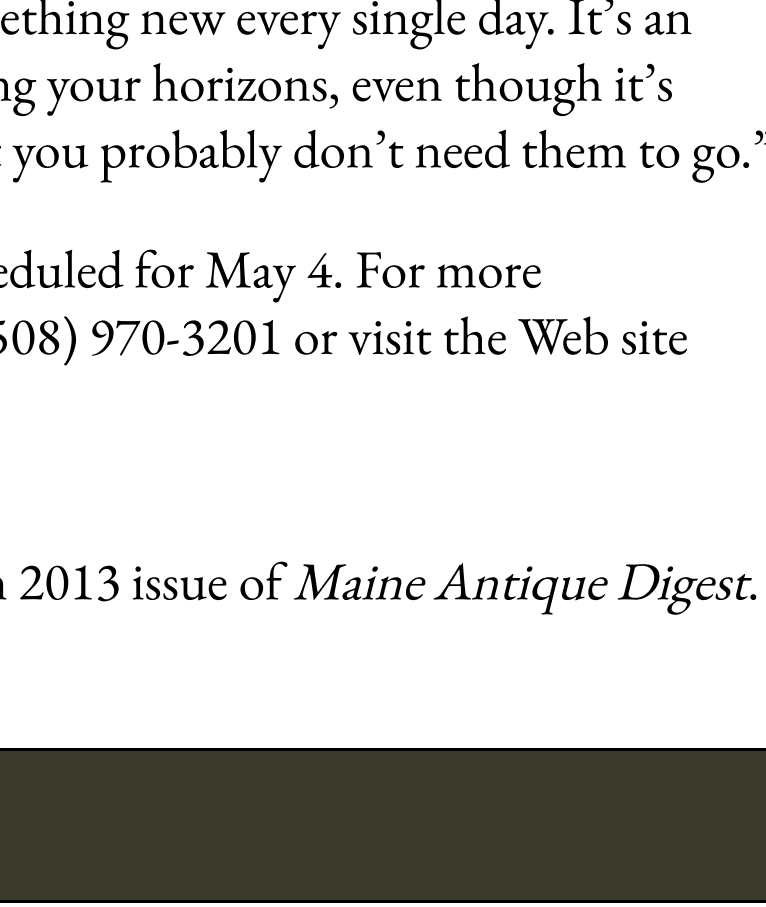
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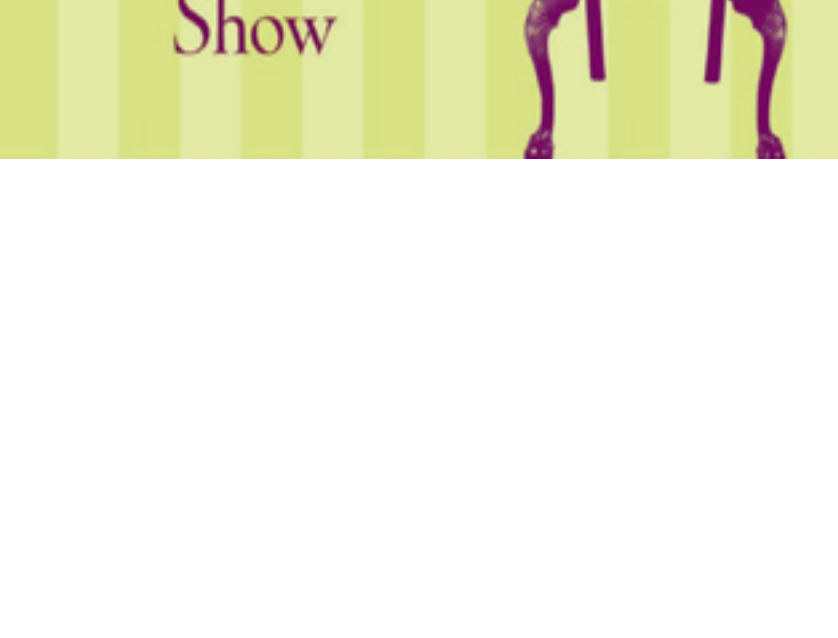
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