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Exploring the Cool Rim Country

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Buying Antique Clocks

by Richard MacLean

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and so it is with antique clocks. A clock must strike a chord in your heart (pun intended) and complement the décor of your house. That said, you do not want to pay a ridiculously high price for something based solely on visual appeal. Love at first sight may later turn to exasperation if it needs extensive unexpected repairs. This article provides some clock buying dos and don'ts.

What is a fair price?

There is no universal Blue Book of clock values. In total, there are thousands of types, styles and name brands extending back hundreds of years. Finding a clock equivalent to the one of interest can be a challenge. Most guides such as *The Standard Antique Clock Value Guide* by Alex Wescot were published a decade or more ago. Unless it is a rare collector piece, prices have decreased because of the diminished interest in mechanical clocks by post-Baby Boomer generations.

The online *Antique Clocks Identification and Price Guide* (www.antiqueclockspriceguide.com) is a good source of more up-to-date information. Etsy and eBay can also provide some good examples of current pricing but, of course, the final sale price may be considerably lower. That said, there are some general guidelines you can use to determine if you are wisely buying.

General guidelines

Typically, clocks cost $100 to $350 in antique stores. They can also cost twenty dollars or thousands. What makes the difference?

Age—the older the clock, the higher value. A 50-year-old clock is not "old" by clock standards. Grandfather or tall clocks made pre-1850 are particularly valuable.

Maker and Origin—American brands such Seth Thomas, Gilbert, Ithaca, Sessions or Ansonia are popular. Especially desirable are very old clocks crafted by well-known individual clockmakers. French, German, English and Austrian clocks are typically well made and desirable. French novelty clocks (e.g., figural mantel) can be incredibly ornate and valuable, assuming they fit your style needs. Korean and Japanese clocks are much less desirable. Howard Miller clocks typically contain excellent German movements and keep excellent time if well maintained but they are more functional than collectible antiques.

Condition—Mint, all original condition clocks are the most desirable. Look for original paper labels and maker-inscribed logos on dial faces. Antique clock cases converted to quartz battery may look nice but lose most of their value. They keep accurate time, however! Look for clocks that may need some superficial restoration but are complete. Some parts and repairs are inexpensive and others are extremely costly. The difference is not always obvious so consider talking to an expert before buying.

Style and Features—Stately tall clocks are highly desirable. Weight-driven clocks keep better time than spring-driven clocks. Some wall clocks such as a Seth Thomas Regulator No. 19 are premium clocks. Beware: the term "Regulator" is more of a generic style term than denoting higher value. Eight–day Cuckoo clocks are more desirable than the 24-hour variant. Advertising clocks command top prices.

Hour strike clocks are more valuable vs. time-only clocks. Chimes (e.g., Westminster) are more desirable than strike-only. Calendar, moon face dial, triple chime, porcelain face, beveled or reverse-painted glass add value.

Repair—A key consideration before buying is the need for

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repair or restoration. Clocks are typically sold "as is." Basic cleaning, oiling and putting a clock in beat can cost over $100 depending on a number of factors.

Some buyers may be satisfied with a non-functioning "wall hanger." But if you desire a timekeeper, seek firm assurances that the clock is functioning and has been recently cleaned and oiled. For most clocks reconditioning the cabinet can enhance the beauty and enjoyment of your purchase. Rare and very old clocks, however, should be reconditioned very judiciously.

Even if a clock is currently functioning, it will not remain that way indefinitely. Clocks are mechanical devices, akin to a Model T Ford that may not have had its oil changed. Gear arbors eventually wear the holes on the plates that hold them in position. Re-bushing these pivot holes is expensive. Anniversary (i.e., 400 day) and Cuckoo clocks are especially problematic since few repairers are willing to work on these. If possible, obtain an option to return the clock conditioned upon getting a repair estimate within a set time period.



A decrepit $20 flea market find is now worth over $500. Why?

Example

The clock in the photograph was bought for $20 at a flea market. Dirty, tarnished and not functioning, was it worth even these few dollars? Yes! It was made by a well-known French clockmaker, Isidore Grenot, around the early 1800s. The potential value was built on it being complete with no broken parts and features such as a signed, un-cracked porcelain face, ornate brass and marble fixtures. A $200 restoration brought it back to an excellent timekeeper worth easily over $500.

Richard MacLean has repaired and restored clocks varying in age from 20 to over 200 years old at his business, the Clock Ticker in Prescott, AZ. He is a member of the National Association of Watch & Clock Collectors. For more information, visit www.Clock-Ticker.com.

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