Viennese, But Not A Waltz, the Crystal Palace Mystery, and a Fancy Watch at the West Coast Clock & Watch Museum - Ed Pasahow

Among the wonders of the WCCWM are a series of tall case and wall clocks known as Vienna Regulators. This class of clocks was produced within the period between 1800 and 1900. As the name implies, they were originally handmade between 1804 and 1814 in Vienna, Austria. We will look at several examples that show the development and variety of this style of clock. Table clocks called Crystal Palace clocks are another fascinating set of pieces in the collection deserving our attention. We will finish up with a look at a graceful woman's watch that is truly an art piece.

Vienna Regulators

Vienna Regulators originated in clockmakers' shops that produced the clock one at a time--all by hand. The name for these clocks acknowledges their fine time keeping ability and explains the high demand, which was more than individual clockmakers could meet. The market for clocks of this accuracy and quality quickly led to mass production in a variety of locations.

A pendulum-regulated movement mounted in a linear wooden case, which may be decorated in either reserved or elaborate styles characterizes the Vienna Regulator. The case features large glass doors that provide views of the swinging pendulum and weights (unless the clock is powered by winding springs). The hours on white porcelain dial are marked by Roman numerals. The time is usually struck on the hour and half hour, and some clocks chime the quarter hours.Industrialized German-made clocks started to use spring drives rather than weights in the latter 19th Century as a cost cutting measure. Consequently, the clockmakers known for handmade, weight-driven clocks could no longer compete. By 1900, the annual German production of all types of clocks exceeded 8.5 million.

This tall case Vienna Regulator has a black lacquered case in a classic, Renaissance revival art deco style. Dating about 1890 to 1905, this clock was factory made in Germany. While the maker is unknown because the clock is unsigned, either the Lenzkirch or the Gustav Becker factory was probably the producer.

Lenzkirch was founded in 1849 in the Black Forest region of southwestern Germany. Their production plant was the oldest clock company in the Black Forest. Eduard Hauser and Ignaz Schöpperle instituted production line methods to machine precision parts. The quality of their output was so good that Lenzkirch became of competitor in the world precision clock market, and the organization grew into a large complex. Along with quality production, Lenzkirch managers also developed effective marketing and transportation strategies. At its peak, the company employed over 600 workers. The recession following WWI ended the Lenzkirch success and in 1929, Junghans A.G. purchased the company.

Gustav Becker founded his eponymous company in 1847 in Freiburg, Silesia, Germany, not far south of Berlin. Becker struggled to obtain financing and machinery, but by 1852, his products won a state medal in recognition of their accuracy and precision. The design of this medal became the company trademark. By 1875, production reached 300,000 clocks; however, by 1880, competition from cheaper spring-driven clocks compelled Becker to discontinue weight-driven clock production. Becker passed away in 1885, but his company continued to thrive through 1926. At that time, the Junghans Clock Factory purchased the enterprise creating a merged organization of 8,682 workers.

Vienna Regulator Tall Case Clock dial

Vienna Regulator tall case clock weights case

Vienna Regulator tall pendulum bob

Returning to the tall case Vienna regulator, the twin weights provide power—one driving the time and the other the strike. The ornamental brass medallion at the top of the hood and the decorative corner pieces demonstrate the care that went into production of the clock. A pierced lock plate protects the finish from careless insertion of the key when unlocking the case. The dial is elaborately engraved brass with floral

designs and scroll flourishes. Massive cathedral hands complement the ornate dial with Roman numerals marking the hours and a railroad-track minute chapter ring with the five-minute intervals engraved with Arabic numerals. The decoration continues onto the pendulum bob and weights, which are suspended from five-spoked pulleys contained in blocks with four-leaf clover cutouts. The 14-day movement further demonstrates the high standard of workmanship in this clock.

Piecrust Vienna Regulator

Piecrust Vienna Regulator dial

The piecrust Vienna regulator wall clock—named for the fancy bezel design--dates from the 1830s. This clock represents the Biedermeier style of Vienna, Austria. A single weight drives the time-only clock for 30 days after being fully wound. The dial is fabricated from a single piece white milk glass, and is marked with Roman numerals and a minute chapter ring. In contrast to the previous factory-made example, the hands here are of a simple design and the brass weight and pendulum bob are plain. The bob is suspended on a wooden rod. A sinuously curved zebra rosewood door, with boxwood inlay striping, frames the black case.

Lenzkirch clock

Lenzkirch clock dial

pendulum

The next clock is an early Lenzkirch regulator from the period 1850 to 1860. This factory-made clock uses spring-drives for both the time and strike, sounded on the coil at the back. The pendulum, embossed with the Lenzkirch “daisy,” regulates the 14-day

movement. The pendulum is suspended from “gridiron” rods made from two types of metal. The outer rods are brass and the center one is iron. The bimetallic structure tends to hold the length of the rod constant with varying temperature, thus regulating the beat. An engine-turned bezel frames the porcelain dial marked by Roman numerals and a railroad-track minute chapter ring. The hands are more elaborate than the clock described above. A walnut case surmounted by a carved fret holds the clock movement. Finials abound on the case with two at the top, two at the bottom, and another below the bottom bracket.

Crystal Palace Clocks

Two items in the WCCWM collection offer insight into the thought processes of clock designers and inventors. The first clock is a prototype for the production version. The evolution of these clocks indicate how final versions develop. Before delving into the clocks, we must first consider the origin of the name. Two Crystal Palaces structures standout in history. The earliest, built in 1851, was the display hall for the Great Exhibition of London. This breakthrough construction, designed by Joseph Paxton, was one of the first uses of steel latticework supporting extensive glass curtains. A second building using similar construction techniques was built for the 1852-1853 New York Exposition. Unfortunately, the latter palace burned in 1858 during the annual American Institute fair.

Why the Crystal Palace clock designer, Henry Davies, chose this name for his patent in 1874, more than twenty years after the original Crystal Palace construction, is unknown. To put this question in perspective, consider the Seville, Spain Expo ’92, which occurred slightly more than twenty years ago today. Does anyone remember the Royal Pavilion along the Lake of Spain or the mascot, Curro that was a white bird with the legs of an elephant and a rainbow crest? Would calling a modern clock the Royal Pavilion or Curro be a wise marketing choice? Perhaps the oval glass dome that surrounded the clock reminded Davis of the glass construction style.

Henry Davis evidently worked with or for several clock makers over the years including George A. Jones & Company between 1870 and 1872 and the Ansonia Clock Company (as one of the incorporators) beginning in 1877. With this background, he became an inventor and clock case designer. Davies received three patents for what became the Crystal Palace clocks. Along with his Ansonia association, he also became involved with the Waterbury Clock Company as shown by his clocks appearing in the catalogs of both manufacturers. Further complicating the clock history, the E.N. Welch Company supplied movements for some of the Crystal Palace clocks.

Crystal Palace Davies prototype clock with dial

Crystal Palace Davies clock

Crystal Palace prototype

Davies clock movement

The first clock in the WCCWM collection is a prototype dating around 1875. A gilt casting, made by Cornelius & Son of New York, was adapted to fit the clock. A simulated mercury pendulum hangs in front of the figures of a boy with a bird's nest and a girl with flowers. (The photos show this and the following clock without their protective glass domes for sake of clarity.) The clock strikes the hour on a bell, clearly visible on the movement side of the clock. The dial is plainly marked with Roman numerals, but the pendulum obscures the figures as it swings back and forth.

Crystal Palace #1 Extra clock

The production piece, identified as Crystal Palace #1 Extra, is clearly a superior design, also dating around 1875. The nickel-plated figures of a girl with a goose and a boy with a rabbit appear on each side, so the pendulum no longer swings in front of them. A mirror behind the brass pendulum reflects its motion. The dial is similar to the prototype, and the Ansonia movement runs for eight days after a full winding. Again, a bell sounds the hour. The clock base and parts of the mirror frame are walnut. The base is twice stamped with the trademark, “Davies, Patd.”

Davies sold his clocks in a variety of formats with movements from various manufacturers. Some had only a single figure and others no figures. Many of them had one or two mirrors, but some clocks were simply mounted on a post. The common themes in all models were the same style of dial, wooden base, and a dome.

A Jeweled Watch

Ladies Swiss watch

Ladies Swiss watch dial

In addition to their time keeping ability, watches also serve as jewelry. This second function is evident in a Swiss feminine watch from about 1900 in the museum collection. At that time, wristwatches were just beginning to become popular, and women frequently wore watches pinned to their clothing or on a pendant. To facilitate attachment, this watch has a fleur-de-lis pin, evidently not original to the manufacture. The watch was worn with the decorative back visible as a broach, so the owner had to turn the watch over to read the time. The entire case is a lovely azure enameled guilloche (incised or engraved pattern) design with a central star. The star is set with stones of decreasing size. The dial is clearly marked with Roman numerals and a railroad-track minute chapter ring. Although the dial is small, slim black hands simplify reading the correct time.

The WCCWM collection offers many other clocks and watches to discover. A quick visit is sufficient for an orientation, but to appreciate each individual timepiece returning is necessary. Museum docents can provide the background for most to the items, and a computer display offers documentation on the collection.

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