

The artistry of the SKELETO

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Even when arranged with other timepieces, skeleton clocks and watches always draw attention. Instead of a handsome case or a beautiful dial the focus of a skeleton watch or clock is the intricate and artful piercing of the plates to display functioning of the movement. To illustrate this point a watch dealer friend often displayed a New England Watch Company skeleton watch, along with his other pocket watches, in the window of his shop. He said that many potential customers came into his shop to inquire about the unusual watch.

Despite the relatively large number and variety of skeleton clocks that were produced by British clockmakers, English skeleton watches are a rarity and are seldom offered for sale. It took many years and some frustrating misses to add the watch illustrated in **figure 1** to my collection. The photograph shows the white enamel dial with Roman numerals and nicely pierced gold arrow hands. As can be seen, the winding arbor is located in the hole in the dial next to the number four. The display case is engraved and made of low carat gold with a stirrup-shaped bow attached to a tall pendant. A high dome crystal covers the dial and a bull's eye crystal covers the movement. The watch rests on the pontil of the crystal keeping it vertical in the dial-up position.

In **figure 2** the intricately pierced and engraved movement can be seen. The top plate is cut away and engraved in a floral pattern that includes flower rosettes, stems and leaves. The table of the single footed balance cock is pierced in the form of a flower including the stem and leaves, while the diamond cap jewel is located in the centre of the flower surrounded by the petals. The fast/slow indicator is located in the pierced foot of the balance cock.

The signature 'A Tyler, London 371' is engraved on banners extending from either side of the balance cock foot. Even the mainspring can be seen through the cut-away and engraved cap of the main spring barrel. The movement is so cleverly skeletonised that the verge escapement can be easily seen through the high domed crystal covering the

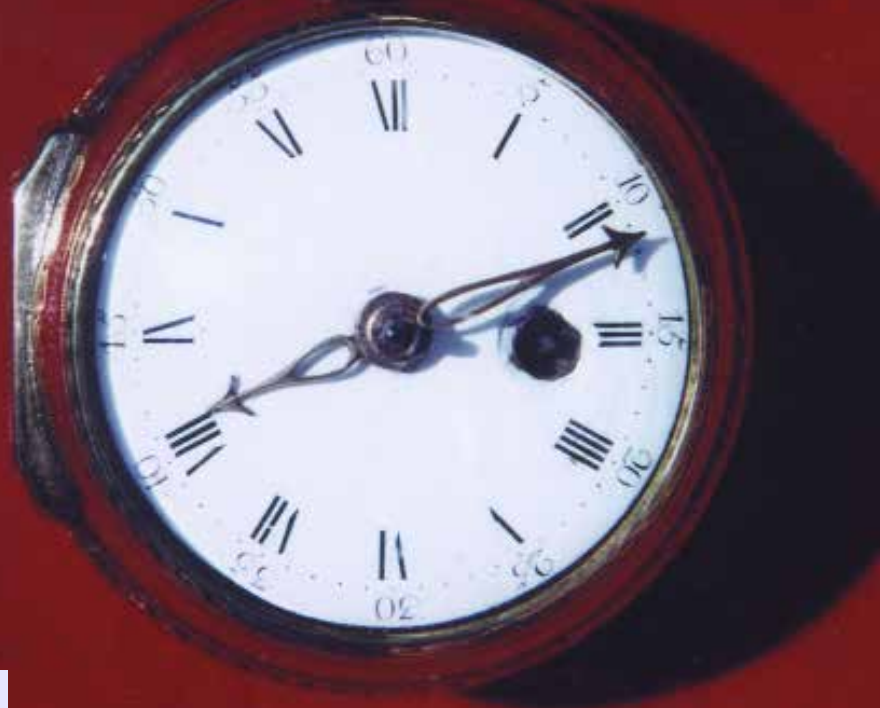


Figure 1.

Figure 3.



N

in price from a few pounds to
) paid for a Breguet tourbillon



Figure 2.

movement. The fusee-compensated verge movement with a continuous screw set up to the mainspring, baluster shaped pillars and a pierced and spreading balance cock foot would indicate the watch was made in the last half of the 18th century.

I could find no reference to A Tyler, London, either in *WATCHMAKERS & CLOCKMAKERS OF THE WORLD* Volume 1 by G H Baillie or in Volume 2 by Brian Loomes. Philip Priestley, a friend and researcher, checked his extensive references to no avail. When I found an almost identical watch illustrated in *THE CAMERER CUSS BOOK OF ANTIQUE WATCHES* the author describes it as 'likely to be of Swiss origin' even though Robert Slater, the maker of this particular watch, is listed in Baillie. The three skeleton watches pictured in *THE ARTISTRY OF THE ENGLISH WATCH* by Cedric Jagger are more completely cut away and therefore lacking some of the decorative piercing and engraving that are found on the Tyler watch in **figure 2**. This form of movement decoration seems to be confined to the late 18th century, therefore they are considered to be rare.

Are these interesting horological curiosities English or Swiss? Certainly at this time the Swiss were taking unfair advantage of the excellent reputation held by the British watchmakers, signing them with English sounding names such as Tarts and Samson. They made watches in the English style with the exception that most have double-footed balance cocks.

Looking through auction catalogues I have seen several Swiss or possibly French skeleton watches and they vary considerably from the English style. Most have a pierced decorative overlay that is mounted with paste or semi-precious jewels over the movement and many also have pierced and engraved filigree plates surrounding the dial. In an April 2000 Antiquorum auction catalogue I found a Swiss watch in which the movement is cut away and decorated in a very similar manner as the illustrated A Tyler example with the exception that the Swiss watch is housed in a 20-carat case. The Tyler watch is still an enigma to me: the fast/slow regulator is located at the base of the table of the balance cock which seems to be typical of the examples signed with the names of

Figure 4.



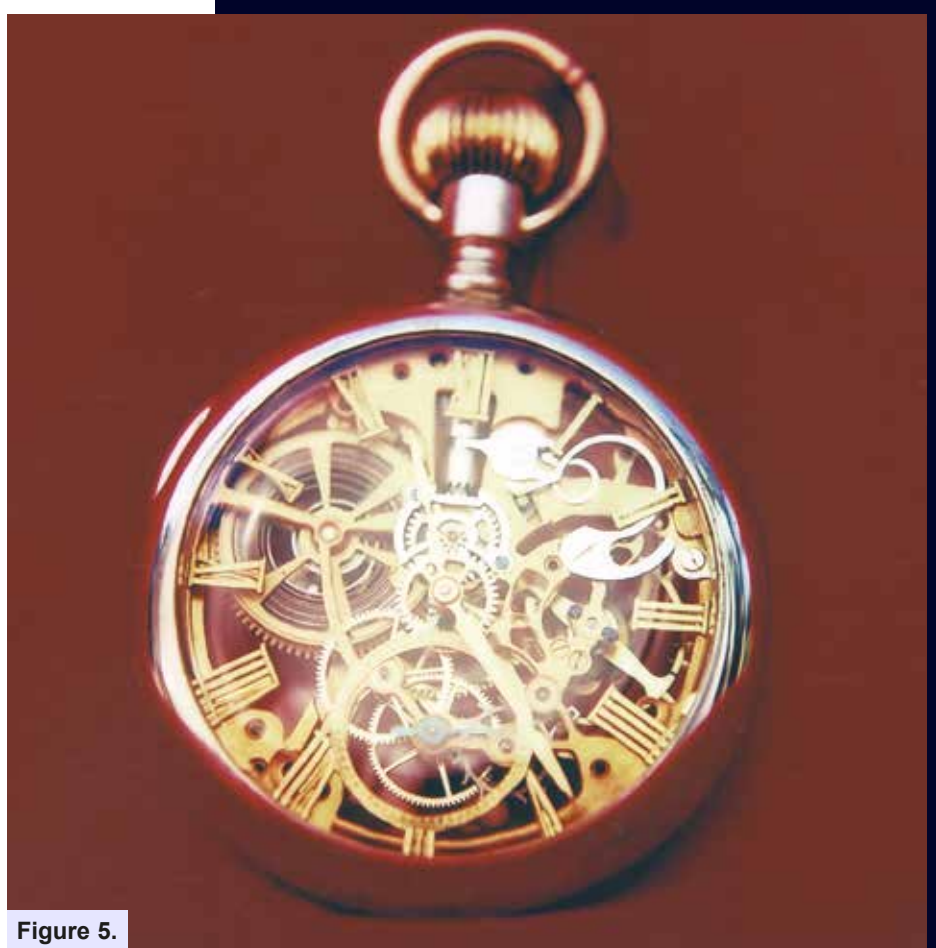


Figure 5.

work of cutting the plates
to be particularly
most completely away
the thin gold dial
Roman numerals. He
reached the exposed steel
the brass ones. The
entirely skeletonised that
the light essentially

what is seen are the wheels and not the
plates that support them. After showing
the watch to friends and collectors he
quickly lost interest in it. The joy to Jesse
was the challenge of making it therefore
he was pleased when I asked him if I
could add it to my collection.

There seems to be a renewed interest in
skeletonised pocket and wristwatches.

Figure 6.

