

Fixing Clocks Labor of Love to Craftsman

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The antique clocks in Donald Leman's shop tick away the hours he spends restoring them to their original grandeur.

Leman is a self-taught craftsman who has a passion for his work. After spending 12 to 14 hours a day, six days a week, restoring clocks and picture frames, he spends his day off looking for more clocks and parts of clocks to buy.

In addition to the clocks offered for sale in the store, the Frame Gallery, he has 12 to 15 clocks in his home collection. "The house chimes, bangs, and gongs. And nobody hears them," he said.

"You get so used to the sounds, you notice when they don't go off," Leman added. Weeks after he sells a clock that strikes the hour, he still misses its sound.

All the clocks on display in the shop are running, and all on the same time. So all strikes sound simultaneously, creating a mechanical symphony.

"I have a bad habit of falling in love with clocks I restore," Leman said. "I once refused to sell a clock to a customer" who had offered to buy it after Leman restored it. He got it running perfectly again, but when the customer told him she didn't intend to run it, he kept it.

Leman's is not a clock repair shop. Rather, he restores only fine clocks, the finest of which, an 1870 Victorian wall clock, sold for \$1,600 after restoration. Before restoration, the clocks sell for about half as much.

Prices of other clocks, made by fine European, American, and Japanese clockmakers, range from \$200 to \$1,100, depending on age, size, and condition. These prices reflect only about one-tenth of the time perfectionist Leman puts into his work.

"I am my worst enemy when it comes to finishing work," he said. "If it doesn't please me, it won't get hung on the wall."

Customers often bring in a clock in pieces, with

some pieces missing. If Leman can't find an appropriate replacement part anywhere, he makes one.

One such clock he's working on now is a New Haven primitive box clock made of seasoned cherrywood. While the original glass from the door is intact, most of the wooden door frame is missing.

"First I have to find seasoned cherry. Then I have to construct the actual frame, then finish it the same as the original. Matching it will be a neat trick," Leman said.

Some clocks come into the shop looking nothing like they did when they were made. The varnish on a 100-year-old Waterbury shelf clock, for instance, has turned black and bubbly. But under Leman's skilled hands, the beauty of the original rosewood has started to appear.

Leman does all of the work himself. "I wish there were elves to help do the mundane jobs," he said.

At times when he is puzzled about how to fix something, he consults with other clock restorers, whom he finds are always glad to share their knowledge. "It's a real fraternal kind of thing," he said.

Leman has long appreciated fine craftsmanship and has a degree in fine arts. He started restoring clocks about four years ago and combines this work with his framing business, which he has had at his North Town location for 10 years.

The two businesses go well together, since Leman often finds old clocks and picture frames mated to each other. He collects Victorian frames, now hard to find, and restores them.

Leman also frames anything customers bring in, including license plates, baby diaper pins, coins and stamps, and a delicate turn-of-the-century feathered fan carried at a customer's grandmother's wedding.

Regular customers trust his judgment at selecting colors and materials for frames and mats. Taking great pride in his frames, Leman makes them look good from all angles, sealing corners and painting over nails so they don't show. "I take as much pride in the back as I do in the front of a frame," he said.

Leman plans to continue his clock and frame restoring indefinitely. Watching him tenderly work on a clock, others might say that he is lost in time.