

**A Brief Study of Finials**

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# A Brief Study of Finials

Clock hardware and its originality to its intended purpose frequently come into argument even amongst the learned brethren of skilled restorers, collectors, and sundry experts. None are more likely abused than the finial in my opinion.

Frequently an expert and esteemed colleague may state a clock has “original finials”. Many a true restorer will smirk, shake their heads in disbelief, and go on down the road, as they will have many a story to suggest belief in originality exists mostly in the head of the buyer, and on occasion that of the seller. It is entirely possible that finials could be original to a given clock. However, a great deal of experience suggests that is frequently not the case. Why? Several reasons, some worthy of consideration may include;

1. Styles change over time, what was very popular last year or last century, or 250 years ago, may be undesirable by later standards
2. Finials tend to self destruct over time, they are most often of thin metal, pressed, and are subject to stress cracking and disintegration over time
3. They are easily lost, stolen, set aside etc, removed for cleaning and not replaced, damaged while cleaning and not replaced, on and on
4. As homes changed and clocks were moved to new and often less prosperous abodes frequently height became a problem. In many cases a couple of inches of height can be removed with the center finials removal
5. Often a restorer or an owner might decide to “improve” a clock with an “in their opinion” “better” finial. Frequently wooden finials became replaced by brass finials over time. Older styles were replaced with newer styles. Damaged finials were replaced with later and greater. Graduated sizes were replaced by matching threesomes etc.

In some cases original drawings may exist of a case as offered and sold by a cabinet maker that will show an intended finial design. Style books of Chippendale, Hepplewhite, and others do come to mind. If a clock should possess a finial representative of the style book then perhaps its originality is more likely.

Most of us are not fortunate enough to have clocks pictured in style books so we do need to depend on other clues.

I am not an expert but I have bought and sold many tall clocks over the last 40 years. I have also inspected, appraised, restored, and repaired a fair number of tall clocks. That and \$5 will buy a cup of my favorite brew at Starbucks....but hopefully I have learned something from the experience and exposure.

A quick sampling of clocks sitting about at the moment, only one of them has period finials (Clock C) and I can absolutely state, while period, they are not original to this clock. I put them on the clock 30+ years ago as they were missing from the clock when purchased.



3 old finials but not period, most likely early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Clock A) photo 1



Also not period but late 19<sup>th</sup> early 20<sup>th</sup> century finials (Clock B) photo 2





Clock A

photo 3



Clock B

photo 4



Clock C

photo 5



Clock C finial (Period)

(6)





Clock C notice the split

casting (7)



Parts for restoring

finials (8)





3 very non period finials new Ball and Ball on the left, mid 20<sup>th</sup> century center and right (9)



3 apparent period finials, notice the steel peg rather than a screw to mount them (10)





Inside of the apparent period finial, much too clean and in too good condition to be period. Also threads are very well cut and deep and sharp (11)



Notice the stress crack in this 20<sup>th</sup> century copy (12)

In conclusion:

It is literally and unequivocally impossible to prove finials are “original” to a clock. It is possible to say some are likely period, or correct for the style and period, and likely original. Many clocks have non period finials; therefore they cannot be “original”.

I have repaired some fair number of finials, which is why I have repair parts. Disassembly of the “thought to be original finials” many times reveal them to be later and non period. Photo (11) above shows that very well. I originally thought these to be period, but their condition was “too good”. Disassembly and the clues found inside suggest they are not period in spite of having an iron peg to mount them and a couple of other more period traits. Fortunately I didn’t pay a “period price” for them either.....

Survival rates of period finials on period tall clocks in this country is certainly less than 50%, more likely only 10-20% of the tall clocks I have owned, repaired, restored, and or appraised have had period finials. Of course restoration itself does tend to draw in basket cases rather than museum pieces. But, having done work for several museums I have not found their inventories to be rife with period finials either.....

Your “mileage” and opinions may differ. These are mine and contain some degree of usefulness to the serious student of clocks IMO.

Best regards to all

Jim DuBois