

Plenty of time on his hands

What makes Cameel Halim tick? You can see for yourself when his clock collection—most pre-dating 1800—goes on display in Evanston

By Deborah Horan N
Tribune staff reporter

Cameel Halim pauses at precisely 11 a.m. Clocks bong and chime around him as objects spin and figurines dance in ornate syncopation. The cacophony raises the decibel level in the ground-floor salons of Halim's Kenilworth mansion, drowning out his voice. For the moment, there is no point in speaking.

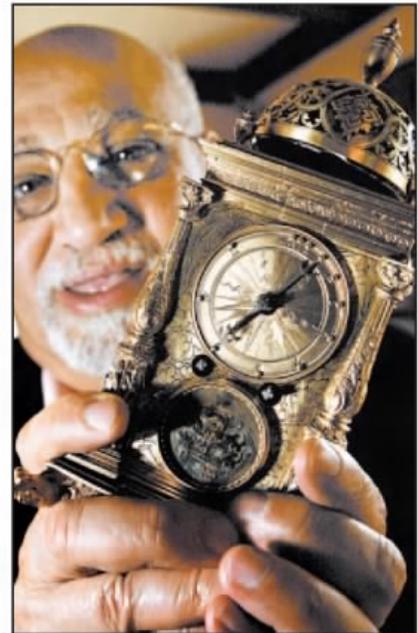
When the bells fall silent, Halim resumes, talking excitedly about the 600 or so antique timepieces he has collected for more than a decade that he plans to display in an old Victo-

rian house in Evanston that he is converting to a museum. The pieces include an 18th Century tall case clock once owned by a Japanese ruler, an early 17th Century elephant clock from Augsburg, now part of Germany, and a French Breguet pocket watch built for a blind man.

"Clocks have a magnificent history in civilization," Halim, 63, said amid the relatively quiet ticktock of the more than two dozen clocks and watches displayed in his home's main salon.

"Today we look in our cell

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Tribune photo by Charles Osgood
Cameel Halim holds an Augsburg table clock, circa 1520. It is the oldest in his collection of about 600 timepieces.

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CLOCKS: Chicago had an eye on collection

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phones and know the time, but if you look at what the world went through to find the time, it's an amazing story."

Halim's collection tells part of that story through the gem-studded clocks and chiseled watches that were once on exhibit in Rockford at Seth Atwood's Time Museum, which closed in 1999.

Halim, an engineer who made his fortune in real estate, paid roughly \$5 million to buy about 200 of the timepieces, including most of the European clocks from his favorite era in the science of timekeeping, or horology: 1500 to 1800, an epoch that began with the first attempts to mechanize timekeeping and ended with the Industrial Revolution.

Halim also bought Atwood's collection of American pocket watches and his 2,700-volume horology library. Those artifacts, plus 70 Tiffany and other stained-glass windows that Halim collected separately over the years, also will be on exhibit in the Evanston museum.

The vast purchase means Evanston—which gave Halim the OK last month to move forward with his museum project—will get a slice of a stunning collection that the City of Chicago tried for years to obtain. Shortly after the Time Museum closed, Mayor Richard Daley, an avowed timepiece enthusiast, offered Atwood \$25 million for his entire 1,551-piece collection, then appraised at \$33 million. But the city raised only \$5.6 million, including a comparatively paltry \$761,000 from private donors. In the end, the city bought just 492 pieces in the collection and gave up its quest for the remainder.

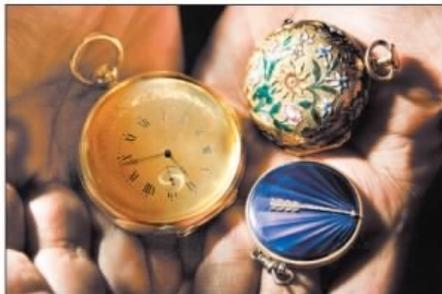
Those timepieces and dozens more were sold to the highest bidders at Sotheby's on three different occasions from 1999 to 2004. Buyers from London, New York, Switzerland and elsewhere flocked to the New York auction house to bid on clocks once owned by kings and princes, emperors and American entrepreneurs. In all, 953 timepieces sold for nearly \$38 million, a Sotheby's spokeswoman said.

Halim's sliver of the collection includes some rare pieces: the 17th Century elephant clock, which displays a man tied to a tree who is circled by a lion and leopard every 60 minutes to signal the "death of the hour"; a precision long case clock that kept time at the Princeton College observatory from 1817 to 1887; and the 18th Century case clock owned by the 10th Japanese shogun, who ruled from



Tribune photos by Charles Osgood

Cameel Halim plans to convert an 1892 Victorian house into a museum for his clocks and Tiffany stained-glass windows, shown here at his home in Kenilworth. He says he'll sink about \$4 million into renovating the house at 1560 Oak Avenue near downtown Evanston.



Halim holds three of the 200 pocket watches in his collection. The watch on the left runs for a year without rewinding. The one bottom right has hours etched around the circumference for use by a blind person.



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1760 to 1786.

"The clock must be wound every four to five hours," Halim said of the Japanese timepiece. "[The shogun] had a full-time clock-winder." Halim plans to display the Atwood pieces—plus most of the 400 clocks and watches he had already collected—in the Victorian house that will become a museum at

1560 Oak Ave. near Evanston's downtown. He says he'll sink an additional \$4 million into an elaborate renovation of the house, including constructing a three-story building in the backyard to house the Tiffany glass windows, mosaics and artifacts such as inkwells.

Among the pieces Halim already owned that will be on display



Halim, in his living room with a skeleton clock from 1860, has a collection of 600 clocks, generally dating prior to 1800, at his home in Kenilworth.

play is an English skeleton clock encased in a glass dome that was broken when the Germans bombed London during World War II. The force of the air raid shattered the clock's glass case, which Halim painstakingly glued back together.

There is also an English table clock that keeps time as a marble rolls along a zigzagging track every 30 seconds.

"Our museum will be world-class," Halim predicted. "People will come from all over the world to see our collection."

Evanston officials are betting the museum will attract thou-

sands of visitors when it opens in summer 2008. Thousands trekked annually to the Time Museum in Rockford, many from abroad.

"This is really a unique type of museum to have," said Ald. Melissa Wynne. "It'll bring people to Evanston."

Halim, too, hopes thousands patronize the museum, which will operate as a corporation rather than a non-profit and will not rely on public money. But making money is not his motivation, Halim said. He wants people to enjoy a discipline that has fascinated him since he was a child in Egypt.

As a boy, he once smashed open a clock to see what made it tick, he said.

Later, he found himself drawn to the art and evolution of clock-making.

"I was always fascinated by history and art," Halim said. He found that timepieces merged those passions with his chosen area of study, engineering. "Clocks combine art, history and mechanics," he said.

He bought his first timepiece—a tall case English music clock—in New Orleans as a "consolation prize," he said, after the wedding of his eldest daughter about 10 years ago. Since then, he has patronized timepiece auctions from New York to Hong Kong to Iowa, where he discovered and bought five large Atwood clocks not included in the Sotheby's auction.

He's not worried that he'll pine for the clocks that fill his salons when they are moved to the Evanston museum. Instead, he plans to keep adding to his vast collection.

He's too used to the sound of bells, chimes and music, even at night, to empty his mansion of timepieces.

Especially the peal on the hour:

"Just remember to do like this," he said, plugging his ears and smiling as the cacophony began again at noon, "or you'll lose your hearing."

dhoran@tribune.com