

BY BOB BAIR

LM 4138



Joined *in* GENIUS

The artistic contributions
of James Earle Fraser &
Laura Gardin Fraser

UNDOUBTEDLY the most talented husband-and-wife pair ever to become involved in sculpture, medallion art and U.S. coin design was James Earle Fraser (1876-1953) and Laura Gardin Fraser (1889-1966). James is best known for the iconic Buffalo nickel and his famous sculpture *End of the Trail*. Laura is remembered for her medals and three and a half "Classic" U.S. commemorative coins (the Alabama Centennial, Grant Memorial and Fort Vancouver Centennial issues, and the obverse of the Oregon Trail Memorial half dollar, with James designing the reverse). She also created the awe-inspiring Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson double-equestrian sculpture recently offered by the City of Baltimore to the Chancellorsville Battlefield in Virginia.

The Frasers designed more than 100 sculp-

tures, medals and coins each during the 20th century. Their fame was far-reaching and widely acknowledged, with both receiving numerous awards during their lengthy careers. James and Laura's lifelong love and professional admiration for one other shone like a steady, idyllic beacon throughout their 40 years together as husband and wife.

The two met in 1908, when Laura attended the Art Students' League of New York. She worked there as an instructor under James from 1910 to 1912. They soon fell in love and were married in 1913. After moving to Westport, Connecticut, they purchased 40 acres and built a 1½-story, 35 x 65-foot studio several hundred yards from their house, where they spent their days working in close proximity to one another, although on separate projects, until James' death in 1953.

PHOTOS: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS (JAMES EARLE FRASER) & F.P. MERRITT

SIOUX CHIEF Iron Tail (below) and two other Native Americans served as inspiration for the Buffalo nickel design.

Actual Size: 21.21mm



It has pertinent historical significance, and is in line with the best traditions of coin design, where the purpose was to memorialize a nation or a people.

In searching for the ideal representation of the Native American for his coin, Fraser decided to combine features from three models, stating that “the profile is a composite of three plains Indians—A Souix [sic], a Kiowa and a Cheyenne. The three Indians were: Iron Tail, a Souix [sic]; Big Tree, a Kiowa; and Two Moons, a Cheyenne. The Indians had come to visit President Roosevelt and stopped off in New York. During this time, I was able to study and photograph them. The three had combined features of the hardy, virile types of Great Plains Indians.”

The reverse featured a bison often reported to be Black Diamond from the Bronx Zoo. But since he never resided there, and the configuration of Black Diamond’s horns was markedly different from the animal Fraser portrayed on the nickel, it is more likely that the model was Bronx, leader of the buffalo herd at the Bronx Zoo during the time the artist was working on his design.

Fraser also created the Norse-American Centennial medal (1925), generally accepted as belonging to the Classic commemorative coin series (1892-1954), though it is not featured in *A Guide Book of United States Coins* (the “Red Book”). Representative Ole Juulson Kvale of Minnesota sponsored the design as a medal rather than as a coin to increase its chances of being approved by Congress. In a year that had already seen the passage of four commemoratives, this medal was created in “thin” silver (mintage 6,000); “thick” silver (33,750); gold (100, minus 47 melted); and bronze (estimated 60-75). John R. Sinnock, the U.S. Mint’s eighth chief engraver (1925-47) and designer of the Roosevelt dime, wrote in a letter to Fraser about the Norse specimen: “I have always greatly admired this medal. It certainly is the finest example that I know of in the handling or combining inscription with motif.”

THE STORY of James’ much-beloved Buffalo nickel (1913-38) has been told often. He described his motif for this unique specimen thusly:

In designing it, my objective was to achieve a coin which would be truly American, that could not be confused with the currency of any other country. I made sure, therefore, to use none of the attributes which other nations had used in the past. And in my search for symbols, I found no motif within the boundaries of the United States so distinctive as the American buffalo, or bison. The great herds of buffalo that roamed over the Western plains played an important epic in winning the West... With the Indian head on the obverse, we have perfect unity in theme.



FRASER’S NORSE-AMERICAN

Centennial medal celebrated the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the ship *RESTAURATION* in New York City with more than 50 Norwegian immigrants aboard.

Not Actual Size



LAURA GARDIN FRASER became the first woman ever to design a coin for any government when her motif was accepted for the 1921 Alabama Centennial commemorative half dollar. It was the first of its kind to celebrate the centennial of the admission of a state into the Union and the first U.S. issue to portray a living person. The obverse features a conjoined image of William Bibb, Alabama's first governor, and Thomas Kilby, who was governor during the state's centennial. The coin was created in the "2x2" version shown below (mintage 6,006, including six pieces for the United States Assay Commission), to represent Alabama's admission as the 22nd state in the Union and to display the Saint Andrew's Cross featured on the Alabama State flag. A "Plain" piece without "2x2" (mintage 64,038, including 38 assay pieces) also was produced.

Laura successfully crafted the 1922 Grant Memorial commems issued for the centennial of Civil War General Ulysses S. Grant's birth. Her design was used for the 1922 gold \$1 (the "With Star" sold by the Grant Memorial Commission for \$3.50 each [mintage 5,016] and the "No Star," \$3 each [5,016]), as well as a half dollar. The latter also was minted in "With Star" (4,256) and "Without Star" varieties (67,405, including assay specimens). This was the first time the same motif had been used on commemorative coins of different denominations.

Fraser's work once again was chosen in 1925, this time for the commemorative half dollar honoring the centennial of the founding of Fort Vancouver as an outpost and trading center, under the auspices of the Hudson's Bay Company (in what is now Washington State). On the obverse is Dr. John McLoughlin, the administrator of Fort Vancouver for its first 22 years. The reverse shows an early settler before an outline of the fort. Primarily of regional interest at the time, this coin had a total mintage of 50,028, with 35,034 subsequently being melted, leaving 14,994 pieces for collectors.

Laura described her and her husband's professional relationship by saying, "Jimmy never did tell me what to do, he never superimposed his ideas, ever, on another sculptor...that is because Jimmy was truly a great man, even at that early stage. And throughout our nearly forty years of marriage, he never let anything interfere with my working."

JAMES AND LAURA deliberately collaborated only once—on the famous and strikingly beautiful Oregon Trail Memorial commemorative half dollar (1926-39). James designed the obverse that portrayed a covered wagon symbolizing immigration and the "end of the trail" for the American Indian and his way of life. Laura crafted the reverse, which depicted a Plains Indian gesturing eastward, attempting to halt the flood of Euro-American immigrants into Indian territory.

The Oregon Trail commem came into being largely through the efforts of Ezra Meeker, who journeyed westward on the Oregon Trail in 1851.

With support from Dr. Minnie Howard and others, he spearheaded the creation



◀ **WILLIAM BIBB** and **Thomas Kilby** grace the obverse of Laura Gardin Fraser's Alabama Centennial commemorative. The "2x2" version features the insignia behind Kilby's neck (enlarged above).

Actual Size: 30.61mm

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With support from Dr. Minnie Howard and others, Meeker spearheaded the creation of the Oregon Trail Memorial Association and its fundraising efforts.”

of the Oregon Trail Memorial Association (OTMA) and its fundraising efforts to memorialize and popularize the trail, which then was fading from American's collective memory as an important part of U.S. history. "We have been fortunate," said the OTMA, "in securing two of the most eminent sculptors and medalists in the United States. Mr. J.E. Fraser and his wife, Laura Gardin Fraser, a no less distinguished medalist than her husband. Never before has a coin been

PHOTOS: HERITAGE AUCTIONS (COIN) & GETTY IMAGES/CHRIS GORGIO

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Allegations of gender bias against Laura soon became a generally accepted part of numismatic lore.”

the joint product of a man’s idea and handiwork on one side, and a woman’s design and craftsmanship on the [other]—something which appeals to the imagination!”

Six million Oregon Trail halves were authorized by Congress in 1926, with a total net mintage from the Philadelphia, San Francisco and Denver Mints (the latter two facilities on an intermittent basis) of 202,923 from 1926 to 1939.

What some might consider to be a contemporary numismatic “urban legend” concerns the rejection of Laura Gardin Fraser’s design for the Washington quarter by Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon in 1932. Her motif had received winning approval from both the United States George Washington Bicentennial Commission and the Commission of Fine Arts, but was overruled by both Mellon and his successor Ogden Mills.

Allegations of gender bias against Laura (especially on Mellon’s part) soon became a

generally accepted part of numismatic lore. However, numismatists Q. David Bowers and Thomas Bush have questioned why Mellon would have approved Fraser’s four commemorative coin designs during his tenure as Treasury Secretary in the 1920s if he had harbored anti-female prejudice. In any event, her design resurfaced in 1999 when it was approved for the George Washington gold \$5 commemorative observing the bicentennial of his death.

A BRIEF LOOK at the artists’ personal relationship helps further our understanding of them, not only as supremely talented artists, but also as a couple completely devoted to each other and the support and inspiration they provided one another. Laura described their relationship in the 1960s, both in her autobiography and in interviews with Dean Krakel (whose book *End of the Trail* documented efforts to restore and relocate James’ iconic statue after its display at the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition), by saying

He never ceased to be an inspiration, and he called me his illustrious student. In the early days



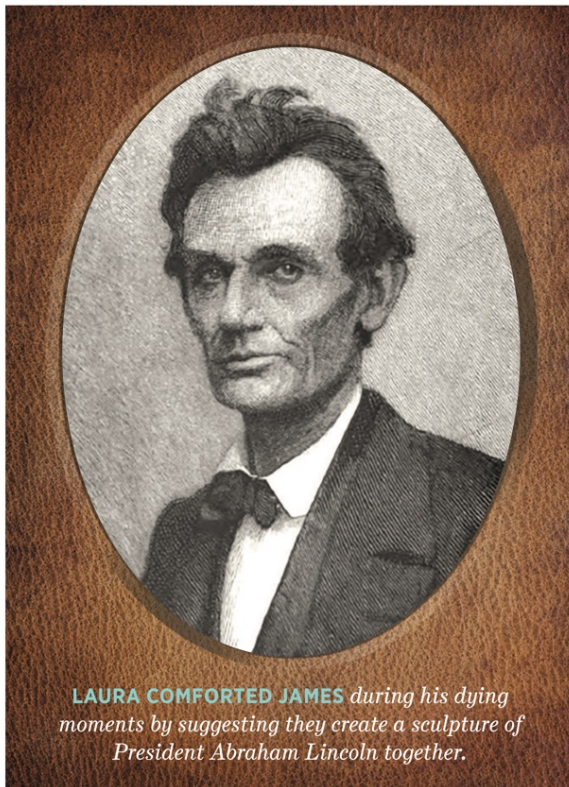
THE OREGON TRAIL

Memorial half dollar was the dynamic duo’s only collaborative effort, with James designing the obverse and Laura crafting the reverse.

Actual Size: 30.61mm



PHOTOS: ANA ARCHIVES/JOHN NEBEL (COIN) & GETTY IMAGES/DSZC



LAURA COMFORTED JAMES during his dying moments by suggesting they create a sculpture of President Abraham Lincoln together.



of our marriage, we had so much fun and our lives were so exciting...Jim was great...He was a great teacher. Jimmy had the rare quality of being able to recognize what someone felt. He never liked to work in one specific manner. He encouraged individualism. Everyone loved him—especially me. I still feel his presence in the studio—especially at night. We used to love to work late and then walk to the house in the moonlight...I am still here living in our 200-year-old home across the road and working in this studio in the inspiration of his memory...I feel his presence so much I don't feel he's gone.

Laura's reminiscence of her "Jimmy's" last living moments in 1953 are both poignant and telling of the depth of their professional and (especially) personal relationships:

We talked and laughed and competed all our lives. When we weren't working, we were talking, and we never grew tired of each other or ran out of subject matter to discuss or argue about... We could spend literally days discussing a play or a concert. Good acting always thrilled us, as did

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We talked and laughed and competed all our lives. We never grew tired of each other.”

the strength and beauty of poetic writing. Of course our own creative work was our life. It was that way to the end.

A few minutes before Jimmy passed away, I sat on the edge of his bed and started talking about us doing a Lincoln [James had previously done a massive statue of Abraham Lincoln, “Lincoln the Mystic,” also known as the Abraham Lincoln Memorial, located in New Jersey.]. He just beamed with

excitement. I didn't want him to overexert himself, so I thought I better leave. I got up and walked to the door, then turned around and looked at Jimmy. He raised his head, nodded, and looked at me, smiled and said, “By golly, Laura, we'll do a colossal Lincoln...together!”

What a wonderful and fitting epitaph it would have been for two of America's most skilled and gifted sculptors—and for their long-standing partnership sharing artistic genius, mutual inspiration and a lifelong love—to have completed that colossal Lincoln...together! ■