



SENSE & *Artistic* SENSIBILITY

U.S. Mint chief engraver Charles Barber and renowned sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens had opposing visions for the nation's coinage.

TOWARD THE END OF the 1800s, a feud was simmering between U.S. Mint Chief Engraver Charles E. Barber and America's premier and arguably most talented sculptor of the day, Augustus Saint-Gaudens ("Gus" to his friends). At the time, Saint-Gaudens wasn't very complimentary of Barber's coinage designs, publicly questioning the latter's talent and imagination, and occasionally becoming quite belligerent with his comments. Bad chemistry seemed to exist between the two men, though it appears Saint-Gaudens was the primary antagonist. He belittled Barber's coin designs, saying they lacked artistic skill, describing him as "inept."

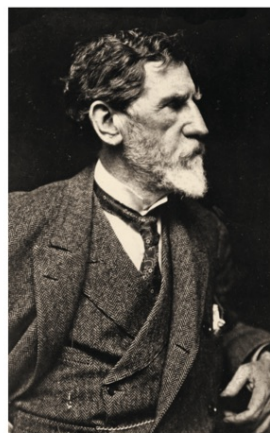


▲ **AUGUSTUS SAINT-GAUDENS** (right) frequently expressed his unfavorable opinion of Charles E. Barber (left) and his artistic skills.

Not surprisingly, Barber didn't appreciate these derogatory statements.

End of an Era

When Theodore Roosevelt became president in 1901, Saint-Gaudens had his ear, impressing upon him that America's coinage could, and should, be more artistic, similar to ancient Greek issues. Roosevelt agreed. The days of Barber's circulating coinage designs became numbered. By law, a coin's design could not be changed until it had been utilized for 25 years. Once Barber's compositions had run their course, they were replaced with James Earle Fraser's Buffalo nickel, Adolph



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▲ **THE INFLUENCE OF FRENCH COINAGE** can be seen on Charles Barber's half dollar (left) and Liberty Head nickel (center), which bear a striking resemblance to France's 1872-A 10 centimes (right).

Actual Size: 30.6mm (left), 21.2mm (center), & 30mm (right)

Weinman's "Mercury" (Winged Head Liberty) dime and Walking Liberty half dollar, and Hermon MacNeil's Standing Liberty quarter. (Fraser and Weinman had been students of Saint-Gaudens.) Circulating coins designed exclusively by U.S. Mint employees became a thing of the past.

Many have described early 20th-century coinage as the high-water mark of American coin design, and the time period includes some of the most widely collected and appreciated specimens today. But how often do you see a Buffalo nickel or a Standing Liberty quarter with a barely visible date or no date, versus a dateless Barber coin? Did Barber value practicality over artistic merit? Was Saint-Gaudens correct about Barber's lack of talent? His claim that Barber was "inept" was certainly untrue, and collectors of Barber-designed coinage would be the first to agree. But was he an imaginative and skilled artist?



▲ **BARBER'S BUST OF WILLIAM MCKINLEY** on the 1897 presidential inauguration medal (left) bore a more accurate representation of the president than the one featured on the 1917 gold McKinley Memorial \$1 commemorative (right), which the engraver created when he was in his 70s.

Not Actual Size

Barber's Legacy

Charles Barber's body of work is extensive: he designed approximately 67 U.S. Mint-issued coins and medals, plus a multitude of pattern pieces. In addition, he engraved Hawaii's 1883 coinage, as well as some pieces for Cuba and Venezuela. To say that the U.S. Mint got its pound of flesh out of the prolific engraver might be an understatement. Barber was a busy man!

Most of his designs were intended for presidential medals, assay medals and various pieces that depicted very recognizable busts of his subjects, except for one: the 1916-17 gold McKinley Memorial \$1 commemorative coin. However, one design does not an engraver's career make. Barber's circulating coinage designs of the late 1800s were pleasing, but repetitive. Keep in mind that the silver coin designs he replaced (Seated Liberty half dimes, dimes, quarters and half dollars) had, for the most part, looked the same for up to 54 years; Barber followed suit by replacing monotony with monotony.

Barber's first attempt at designing circulating coinage involved an embarrassing faux pas. He did not place the word CENTS below the Roman numeral "V" on the reverse of his nickel design, which allowed unscrupulous persons to gold plate the issues and pass them off as \$5 gold pieces. His coin designs seem to have been overly influenced by French coinage. But Barber's designs could be produced efficiently, and this seemed paramount to the engraver throughout his career. His designs saw extensive circulation and held up well.

Coin production was labor intensive. Dies were difficult to engrave, and those that lasted a long time were the most economical for the mint.

PHOTOS: STACK'S BOWERS GALLERIES (1897 MEDAL) & HERITAGE AUCTIONS

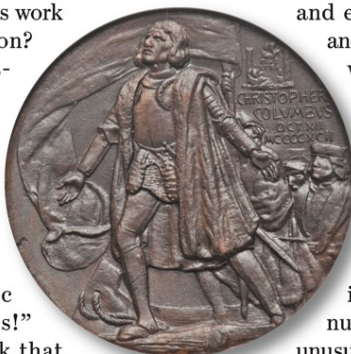
The feud between Saint-Gaudens and Barber heated up around the time of the 1892 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Barber's designs fit the bill. Did his work deserve Saint-Gaudens' derision? No doubt Barber's circulating issues looked very similar and showed a certain lack of imagination. But were his coin designs (as Saint-Gaudens alluded) not artistic? If art is in the eye of the beholder, the answer to the question of whether Barber's work had true artistic merit just might be "sometimes!" He had a serious creative streak that he expressed in his own way.

Aesthetic Differences

The feud between Saint-Gaudens and Barber heated up around the time of the 1892 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Minted for this exhibition were the very first U.S. commemorative coins: the 1892-93 World's Columbian Exposition half dollars (Barber designed the obverse) and the 1893 Isabella quarter (Barber designed the entire coin). A reluctant Saint-Gaudens agreed to design an official award medal for the exhibition, but he did not want the U.S. Mint (i.e., Barber) to have anything to do with the piece. (The medal was struck for the U.S. Mint in two sizes, 38mm and 76.3mm.) Of course, every U.S. Mint product had to cross the desk of its chief engraver, Charles Barber.

The obverse of Saint-Gaudens' 1893 World's Columbian Exposition award medal is impressively modeled



▲ **SAINT-GAUDENS**, depicted here in a painting by Kenyon Cox, rendered a nude boy in his initial design for the reverse of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition award medal (right). The model was rejected and replaced with Barber's less controversial composition (above), which ultimately was paired with Saint-Gaudens' impressive image of Columbus (top).

and engraved, displaying an exuberant and thankful Columbus striding ashore with arms extended and eyes to the sky. The reverse (at least the first version) featured a lot of lettering, along with a full frontal view of a nude boy holding a torch and leaning against a shield. This design was revealed prematurely and received some bad publicity before it was rejected by the mint. (Though nudity on numismatic items was not unusual in Europe, the United States was not ready to place such graphic artwork on a mint-issued product.)

The mint asked Saint-Gaudens to submit a revised reverse, which he did begrudgingly...twice! The second and third proposals were not very inspired and also were turned down. Barber was given the task of designing the medal's



Actual Size: 76.3mm

PHOTOS: HERITAGE AUCTIONS (MEDAL) & WIKIPEDIA.ORG

Barber cringed whenever a Saint-Gaudens design or model came to the mint because he knew its relief would be too high.



▲ **THE COMMEMORATIVE HALF DOLLAR** (left) and **\$2½ gold piece** issued for the 1915-S Panama-Pacific Exposition demonstrate Barber's creativity and artistic talent. Not Actual Size

reverse. This decision infuriated Saint-Gaudens, who later "savaged" Barber's accepted design.

At the time, all coin and medal designs submitted to the U.S. Mint for consideration, whether they were created by Saint-Gaudens or any other artist, were subject to Barber's review. If a design was accepted, Barber (or one of his subordinates) might modify it as necessary to ensure it could be efficiently struck by the mint. Saint-Gaudens, however, felt that any artist's work submitted to the mint was suitable in its final form and shouldn't be modified in any way (especially, and least of all, by Barber). But this really wasn't practical for the mass production of circulating coinage. (It was not as big a deal for limited-edition medals, which, because of their size, relief and metal, required many blows to achieve a full strike.)

Barber cringed whenever a Saint-Gaudens design or model came to the mint because he knew its relief would be too high. Saint-Gaudens' original design for the 1907 high-relief \$20 gold piece had to be struck twice to bring up the design completely, which simply wasn't realistic for a mass-produced coin. The pragmatic Barber adjusted the design and lowered the relief to enable the coin to be produced with a single strike.

Saint-Gaudens died on August 3, 1907, before his design for the \$20 saw mass production. If he had been alive at the time, he probably would have heaped even more scorn upon Barber. As it was, he probably turned over in his grave... more than once!

Hitting His Stride

With the advent of U.S. commemorative coinage, Barber's artistic talents came to the fore. Perhaps he was saving his creative juices for the end of his career, thus settling once and for all his critics' judgments.

Barber's design for the obverse of the 1915-S Panama-Pacific Exposition commemorative half dollar is one of the more attractive motifs among the early commemorative coin series, expressing a nice sense of movement with thoughtful symbolism. (U.S. Mint Engraver George T. Morgan created the reverse.) The design elements draw the observer's eye around the entire composition. On the obverse, Columbia/Liberty faces left toward the sun setting behind San Francisco's Golden Gate (the gateway to the Pacific Ocean) as she distributes the bounty of the West from the cornucopia offered by a child.

Barber's obverse design for the 1915-S Panama-Pacific Exposition \$2½ gold piece (Morgan again created the reverse) gives the word "imagination" a whole new meaning and has many collectors scratching their heads. His depiction shows Columbia/Liberty holding a caduceus (typically a medical symbol) and sitting astride an odd-looking mythical creature called a "Hippocampus." Most collectors would

never guess that Barber had designed this coin. What was he trying to illustrate? The Hippocampus, taken from Greek mythology, has the body and tail of a fish and the head and front legs of a horse. (The creature on the coin looks like something

Hagrid would talk about in a Harry Potter movie!) This imaginary creature's terrestrial horse's head and legs were intended to symbol-

ize cargo and passenger travel by land across the Isthmus of Panama prior to completion of the Panama Canal, while the aquatic body and tail of the fish represented travel by water after the canal was completed. And of course, Columbia/Liberty illustrated freedom of the seas and commerce and also the United



◀ **BARBER'S 1891 silver half-dollar pattern** (Judd-1766) diverges from his more commonly known bust-type designs. Actual Size: 30.6mm

PHOTOS: HERITAGE AUCTIONS & SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION/NATIONAL NUMISMATIC COLLECTION (BARBER PATTERN)

Barber's designs likely were influenced by Saint-Gaudens and Roosevelt's desire to impart an "ancient Greek" artistic flavor to new issues.

States. But what did the caduceus represent?

When the French first attempted to build the canal (1881-89 and 1894), one of the obstacles they encountered were deadly yellow fever epidemics, which struck down thousands of workmen (22,000 died from disease and accidents). In 1901 Dr. Walter Reed showed that yellow fever was spread by a certain type of tropical mosquito. The Americans took extreme medical and sanitary measures to minimize workers' exposure to the insects, and the canal was completed in 1914. If the workmen hadn't been protected from disease-carrying mosquitoes through proper sanitation and equipment, the building of the canal might not have been completed that year, which explains why Columbia/Liberty holds a caduceus. Who would have thought that Charles Barber could design such a coin?

Barber's designs on these two commemoratives probably were in response to years of criticism; also, they likely were influenced by Saint-Gaudens and Roosevelt's desire to impart an "ancient Greek" artistic flavor to new issues. Based on these two coins alone, Barber's imagination and talent are difficult to question.

Cornelius Vermeule, in his book *Numismatic Art in America*, defends the work of Charles Barber (and Morgan), stating:

Yet history will surely judge these men masters of design and technique. Their art was different from that of Saint-Gaudens, James Earle Fraser or Adolph Weinman, but they evolved their own formulas of expression that reflected in American national art on the loftiest levels of craftsmanship.

Final Issue

Barber's last coin was the 1916-17 commemorative \$1 gold piece honoring President William McKinley. Barber had previously designed a bust of the president in 1903 for a gold \$1 commemorating the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. (Another commemorative carried a bust of Thomas Jefferson; it and the McKinley piece shared a common reverse.) Barber also had sculpted McKinley's likeness for presidential inaugural medals in 1897 and 1901. However, the bust on the obverse of the 1916-17 McKinley coin bears very little resemblance to the president's bust on previous Barber inaugural medals and, in fact, bears very little resemblance to McKinley.

Perhaps this inaccurate rendering was due to



PHOTO: PROFESSIONAL COIN GRADING SERVICE

▲ **THE OBERSE OF BARBER'S PATTERN** for a \$20 gold piece (Judd-1773) shows the influence of French coinage on the artist's work.

Actual Size: 34mm

Barber's advanced age. He died at the age of 77 in 1917, the last year of the coin's issuance. This design was atypical and should not condemn the artist's otherwise successful body of work. ■

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