

CREATIVE PROCESS

Was the \$50 gold commemorative struck for the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition a copy of a Greek coin or an original work of art?

Twentieth-century gold coins are not normally considered to be "ancient." But the \$50 gold commemoratives struck for the grand 1915 Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco are an exception, at least according to the 1913-18 U.S. Treasury Secretary William Gibbs McAdoo.

McAdoo rejected sketches of the coin's design prepared by sculptor Robert Ingersoll Aitken, who was born and raised in San Francisco.

The design of the \$50 gold piece [Figure 1] was appropriate enough in the Greek coin from which it is evidently copied. The head of Pallas, and the owl, sacred to her, conveyed some meaning on that coin, but none, so far as I can see, in the present instance, except as the head of Pallas may be identified with that of our own Goddess of liberty. The spider-web is not accepted now a days as the symbol of industry, if that was the artistic meaning, but the contrary; and the miniature dolphins floating in the air in front of Minerva's face seem very inappropriate.

There had been heightened tension between U.S. Mint engravers

and outside artists dating back a decade. As part of a series of communications, on November 6, 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote to renowned sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens:

How is that old gold coinage design getting along? I want to make a suggestion. It seems to me worth while to try for a really good coinage; though I suppose there will be a revolt about it! I was looking at some gold coins of Alexander the Great today, and I was struck by their high relief.

On November 11, Saint-Gaudens replied as follows:

You have hit the nail on the head with regard to the coinage. Of course the great coins (and you might almost say the only coins) are the Greek ones you speak of, just as the great medals are those of the fifteenth century by Pisanello and Sperandio. Nothing would please me more than to

make the attempt in the direction of the heads of Alexander, but the authorities on monetary requirements would, I fear "throw fits," to speak emphatically, if the thing was done now.

The mint's chief engraver, Charles Edward Barber, did indeed throw fits about Saint-Gaudens' \$20 design until it was properly flattened to the mint's standards, including its stackability requirement. Barber doubtless did not forget this experience and was preparing his own \$50 commemorative for the Panama-Pacific Exposition. He had likely expressed his opinions about Aitken's sketches to McAdoo; however, in spite of the rejection letter, Aitken was not one to take "get lost" for an answer. He was persistent—he enlisted the help of the Commission of Fine Arts, had a personal meet-

◀ **FIGURE 1:** 1915 \$50 gold Panama-Pacific Exposition commemorative.

Actual Size: 44.9mm

ing with McAdoo, and agreed to remove the spider-web design element and reduce the emphasis on the circling dolphins.

Aitken was quite a character. In his 1933 sculpture for the West Pediment of the Supreme Court Building (Figure 2), he used himself as a model for one of the togate allegorical figures (second from right).

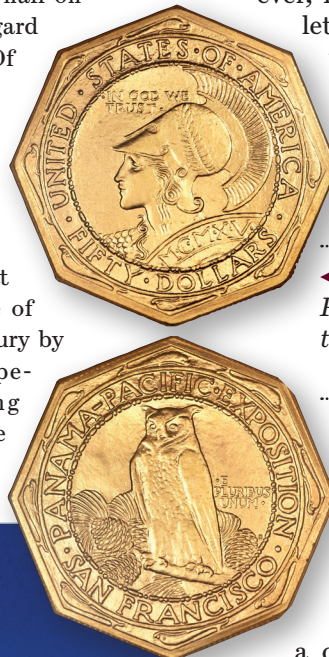


FIGURE 2: West Pediment, U.S. Supreme Court building.



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▲ **FIGURE 3:** *Athena and an owl appear on this Athenian c. 430 B.C. tetradrachm.* Actual Size: 23.9mm

He is shown talking with the figure to his right, modeled after Chief Justice Charles Evan Hughes. Aitken certainly appreciated Greek coins. The obverse motif of his 1929 National Academy of Design President's Medal closely resembles an Alexander the Great gold *stater*. On that piece, Athena is facing right, wearing a Corinthian helmet. The medal has only a single helmet crest and an added, fanciful dotted border, disappearing in part beyond the flan, as was often the case with Greek coinage, which was rarely perfectly centered.

► **FIGURES 4 & 5:** *The c. 214-212 B.C. Syracusan 12 litrae (top) bears a close resemblance to Aitken's \$50, and the city's trademark dolphins feature prominently on the c. 415-409 B.C. tetradrachm.* Actual Size: 23.3mm (litrae) & 25.1mm



McAdoo was incorrect or ill-advised, as Aitken's \$50 commemoratives (the round version is not illustrated here) are not copies of Athenian coins. Ancient Athenian issues (Figure 3) don't look like Aitken's coins. A similarity of spirit exists—both portray Athena and an owl—but it took a skilled artist to create a harmonious design for the modern world.

Finding parallels is interesting, and during his several years spent in Paris as a sculptor, Aitken almost certainly saw many varieties of ancient coins in museums. Figure 4 is a Syracusan 12 litrae with an obverse closer to the \$50 coins than those of Athens. Athena faces left and is wearing a Corinthian

helmet, which was the garb of Athens's enemy, not its coinage. The Figure 5 tetradrachm shows one of Syracuse's hallmark motifs: dolphins swimming around a central figure. Curiously, the California State Seal (Figure 6) also is adorned with a female wearing a Corinthian helmet, thereon called Minerva, the Roman name for the Greek goddess. One can only surmise about an-

other's creative process. But forms like these are embedded in one's subconscious and can come to the fore without conscious recognition during the act of creation. The sources may not be remembered until later, or when someone points them out, occasionally rudely and inaccurately as in the case of McAdoo.

Aitken's reverse owl and associated devices are quite different from the Athenian version. *Athene noctua* ("little owl") is a small creature with a 22-inch wingspan that weighs in at 6 ounces or so. Aitken's bird is a California native, the great horned owl (*bubo virginianus*) that has a 3- to 5-foot wingspan and weighs around 50 ounces. It is not a bird anyone would want perched on their arm, as Ath-

ena's owl was inclined to do in Greek art. Another Californian element was the octagonal shape of Aitken's coin, reminiscent of the state's \$50 Assay tokens. Athens's sacred olive sprigs and mysterious crescent were transformed into West Coast pine cones and needles. Finally, California gold was relatively plentiful; this was not so in Athens, which mined only silver. The one time Athens struck gold coins was during a Peloponnesian War monetary crisis, when Athenians

supposedly resorted to stripping the gold cladding off the statue of Athena in the Parthenon for coinage.

The lesson remains: when the Washington bureaucrat slams the book shut with a firm "No," quietly believing that you are an idiot, you know that he is the fool. Go around him; he can't do anything, as he is glued to his desk.

SOURCES

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◀ **FIGURE 6:** *California State Capitol Senate Secretary's desk 13-star seal.*

Not Actual Size



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THE OWL OF ATHENA (left) is much smaller than the great horned owl pictured on Aitken's \$50.



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