



“My Two Cents’ Worth”

by Ed Reiter



UNCLE SAM’S ART DISEASE

From all indications, the Citizens Coinage Advisory Committee (CCAC) is an earnest, well-meaning panel that does its best to steer U.S. coinage art in a positive direction. In recent years, it has even gone beyond just “advising” the U.S. Mint and aggressively advocated artwork it deemed superior and design techniques it looked upon with favor.

Why, then, have so many new coins issued in the decade since the CCAC’s founding been so relentlessly drab and uninspired? Is the Mint ignoring all this good advice? Or does it simply lack the resources to produce truly exceptional—or even above-average—works of coinage art?

I’ve come to believe the latter is the case.

There have been encouraging signs of growing cooperation between Mint officials and members of the committee—in sharp contrast to the Mint’s seeming disdain for the federal Commission of Fine Arts in years gone by. Recently, for instance, the Mint prepared potential new designs for the reverse of the silver American Eagle bullion coin after the committee recommended a change.

The committee expressed overwhelming preference for a design showing a strong naturalistic eagle and, if adopted, this would represent a significant improvement over the sedate heraldic eagle that has perched on the bullion coin for nearly three decades. It would, in any case, be a much worthier complement to Adolph Weinman’s magnificent Walking Liberty artwork on the obverse.

Perhaps it’s also time to reconsider the “Family of Eagles” artwork on the common reverses of the four gold American Eagle coins. The “family values” theme of this design is a good one, but artistically the design is no match for Augustus Saint-Gaudens’ majestic obverse. Nothing probably *could* be a perfect match—except for the one Saint-Gaudens used himself on the 1907 double eagle.

Come to think of it, why *not* use the master’s original design, and why not use Weinman’s design on the Silver Eagle’s reverse? Is there some legal impediment that couldn’t be overcome? The original coins have long since disappeared from circulation, so con-



fusion is not an issue. The Mint used both sides of the Buffalo nickel on the 2001 American Buffalo commemorative silver dollar and again on the American Buffalo gold bullion coin. Why can’t it do the same on the silver and gold American Eagles?

The Citizens Committee has stressed the importance of using contemporary art on coins of the new millennium. I would have no problem with this—if the Mint could find, and engage, contemporary artists with anything approaching the creative genius of Saint-Gaudens, Weinman, James Earle Fraser,

Anthony de Francisci and other consummate craftsmen whose stunning designs graced U.S. coinage during the first half of the 20th century.

Quite possibly, the current staff artists are overwhelmed by the sheer volume of new designs required in recent years by massive coin programs authorized by Congress. The “America the Beautiful” program, in particular, would tax the creativity of even the greatest artist with its preposterous conceit that the grandeur of massive national parks can be captured on “canvases” the size of a Washington quarter.

This, we are told, is why the Mint established its Artistic Infusion Program (AIP): to recruit outside artists to share the heavy burden of designing all these new coins.

Gifted artists such as Laura Gardin Fraser and Chester Beach were “infused” into the design process for traditional U.S. commemorative coins on occasion—though typically by the sponsoring committees, not the Mint. By contrast, today’s AIP seems to be made up of middling professional artists and promising neophytes.

CCAC member Heidi Wastweert, herself a talented medallic artist, takes a sanguine view of the committee’s mission and motivation in an article elsewhere in this issue of *COINage*.

“What we’re looking for,” she says, “is world-class, modern creativity. Maybe that is not going to come from one artist but from a team of creatives who put their heads together.”

Sadly, two heads—or even two dozen—aren’t always better than one that contains a truly exceptional mind. ☺

UNITED STATES MINT