



ABRAM BELSKIE



NUMISMATICS: THE ART *of* COINS AND MEDALS



ABRAM BELSKIE (1907-1988)

As an artist and sculptor he was able to combine two disparate disciplines – art and medicine – in which he won acclaim in both worlds. In the field of medicine he is re-nowned as a medical sculptor for his life-size scientifically correct anatomical models. He worked with Dr. Robert L. Dickinson on the *Birth Series*, at New York Medical College and his *Heart Series* for American Heart Association. His work in this field earned him a Faculty position

at New York Medical College which he held for many years. His medical associations led him to other sculpture commissions such as *The Surgeon*, 1962 for Ethicon Building in Somerville, N.J. as well as *Portrait of Dr. Robert Dickinson* for N.Y. Academy of Science and *General Robert Wood Johnson* at Johnson & Johnson Laboratories. As a numismatic sculptor he has been praised and honored for his fifty medal series “Great Men of Medicine” issued by Presidential Art Medals, Inc. The artist best describes his numismatic work as follows:

“I like it because it combines both art and science. I don’t think, really, there’s any barrier between them. If the combination was good enough for Leonardo da Vinci, it’s good enough for me.”

From 1952 until 1984 he designed over 130 medals and medallions which is the focus of this publication and exhibition, Numismatics: The Art of Coins & Medals.

The Belskie Museum is indebted to have D. Wayne Johnson, Curator, Numismatic Art, scholar and author, catalogue the numismatic work of Abram Belskie. This brochure has been written as an *Introductory Primer on Numismatic Art* featuring the art of Abram Belskie. A complete catalogue listing is available upon request.

D. Wayne Johnson is known as editor and creator of *Coin World* which he started in 1960, editor of *The Art Medalist* for Medallic Art Company and contributing writer to two internet sites: www.amsamedals.org www.medalcollectors.org

How Abram Belskie Made Medals

By D. Wayne Johnson

Curator, Numismatic Art, Belskie Museum



Medals are used in many ways, to celebrate an anniversary, to record some famous person or event, to collect for the sheer enjoyment of their beauty! More often, however, medals are created as an award; for example, the Nobel Prize Medal, the Pulitzer Medal or Olympic medals. In addition to being a life-long sculptor, Abram Belskie was also a medalist – a person who creates medals. He was 39 years old before he started making medals and creating the models from which medals were made. Medals are like any other art work. They are created by artists who develop an idea in their mind, to become the theme of the medal.

Medal ideas are first sketched.

Like any medal artist, Abram could draw *sketches* in two ways – on paper as a drawing – or since he is a sculptor he could sketch in *clay* – the material he works with most of all. Sketching in clay gives the artist greater freedom but is more involved.

For quick sketches Abram drew on paper, but in his mind the lines indicated an outline of *relief*. If a sculptor creates a statue he thinks in three dimensions. But it is said a medalist thinks in two-and-one-half dimensions, and that is half-joke. The

relief for medals is a special kind, called *bas-relief* because it has a flat back. Even though a medal has relief on two sides, it is made from two flat-back models. The front is called the *obverse*, the back the *reverse*. The artist must create a separate model for each side.

Medals have two elements on each side – the pictorial elements and the *lettering*. So the artist must think of lettering in addition to what he wants to show as the images on each side. There is not very much room for either element, so the artist must reduce

the wording and image to the very minimum. He does this by making the image almost a symbol.

Consider a coin in your pocket. It is made the same way as a medal, with themes, images, lettering and made from a model. A typical coin is from a half-inch to an inch-and-one-half, from a dime to silver-dollar size. Medals can be any size, but on average, they are one and-one-half to three inches. These are very small areas for the artist's design. The artist's theme must be expressed in a very small size. But the artist has an advantage. He works oversize, and the mint or medal maker reduces his design to the smaller size intended for a coin or medal.

There is tremendous advantage in working oversize because the design is reduced for final production. Facial features and hands, for example, can be more lifelike. Clothing can be shown with folds much more realistically. *Detail* adds realism to just about every part of the image shown on the medal. Ideally the artist wants to design a single theme, make a simple image – called a *device* on a coin or medal – but adds as much detail as he can to make it appear real.

Artist interpretation is most important.

The artist must add his interpretation – of the person, or the scene, or the image. He can simplify his subject, or strengthen it, or emphasize some element. He must make two designs, each related to the other to emphasize each other, for the two sides.

Modeling for a medal.

Abram made pencil sketches as the first step in his medal designs. Next he would work in clay. He would add clay to a *background plate*, a smooth disk of plaster slightly larger than the size of the model. Next he would prepare the design by *modeling*.

He models by adding clay or carving it away creating *modulated relief*, the rise and fall of the design. Clay is added a tiny

bit at a time – called pellets – then shaped with special tools. One, called a *wire tool*, looks like a wire loop on the end of a pencil. Another is made of wood, a boaster, used for shaping and smoothing the clay. He would have the basic relief formed, then he would add the lettering.

Casting in plaster of Paris.

Once he was satisfied the design was perfect, complete in every way, he would make a plaster cast of the clay model. First he would coat the clay with a release agent to allow the cast to be removed after it hardened. He would build a fence around the clay with a metal strip, supporting it in a way where the plaster would not seep out.

Plaster of Paris is a white powder. It is mixed with water, slowly, not to allow air bubbles in the mixture. Then he would pour a small amount over the coated clay, slowly, again not to allow air bubbles on the surface.

'Touching up' is last step.

The plaster hardens in an hour or two. The plaster cast can then be lifted off carefully. But to make sure it is completely hard, it is often put in an oven and baked.

Casting changes polarity. The positive clay becomes a negative cast. At this stage the artist "touches up" the negative plaster. He sharpens up the lettering or deepens some area to emphasize the design.

Then he coats the plaster cast, again with a release agent, and makes a cast from this negative. This will be a positive, and is what he sends off to the mint or medal maker.

The manufacturer will reduce it on a pantograph and cuts the dies. The dies are used to strike the coin or medal in metal, bronze or silver.

Mary Queen of Scots, 1973

Societe Commemorativa de Femmes Celebres series (FM SCS-43)



- A -

Sketch & Theme - pencil drawing



- B -

Background Plate & Working Model



- C -

Obverse - negative relief



- D -

Reverse - positive relief

Frederick Douglass Medal, 1969

from the American Negro Commemorative Society Series, silver 1.5" in diameter, Franklin Mint; Belskie Museum of Art, NJ 1993.114



- E -

Modulated Relief with clay pellets, Border, Lettering for obverse



- F -

Device & Sketch - initial pencil drawing for reverse



- G -

Silver & Striking, Struck - obverse



- H -

Silver - reverse

Brookgreen Gardens 50th Anniversary Medal, 1931-1981

1981, bronze, 3" diameter, Medalllic Art Company (MAco 78-163), Belskie Museum of Art 1993-123



Abram Belskie in his studio, Closter, New Jersey with models for the 1981 Brookgreen Gardens medal



- I -

Silver & Striking, Struck - obverse



- J -

Silver & Striking, Struck - reverse



The Language of Medal Making

A-Z

Medallists speak a language all their own. As with any field it has special terms and names for processes, techniques, tools and results. Many of these terms have been borrowed from related fields – metallurgy, art, die making, and numismatics, for the most part.

Anniversary Medal

A medallic item issued on the occasion of a significant anniversary.

Award Medal.

A medallic item bestowed upon a recipient in a contest, race, game or other sporting event, or given to an individual for some notable activity.

Background Plate.

A blank plaster disk often with a molded border upon which a design can be built by adding relief of clay, plasticine, or wax.

Bas-relief.

Sculptural modeling in low relief with design elements projecting slightly from the background.

Border.

The outermost design elements following the perimeter of a medallic or numismatic item.

Bronze.

An alloy of copper and zinc, most medals are struck in bronze.

Cast, Casting.

The mold or the process of pouring a mold, or the object made by this process.

Clay.

A material in which sculptors work, modeling clay (or plasteline) with which a relief design is formed.

Collection.

Medals and other objects preserved in a museum or an individual's possession.

Detail

Small design elements applied to the device, portraits or larger elements on a model to make it more realistic, lifelike or attractive.

Device.

The principal design element on a coin or medal (not including the lettering); often a portrait or other pictorial design.

Incised.

Cut into; carved, engraved or inscribed into a surface with a sharp instrument.

Loop.

A ring-shaped attachment to a medal so it may be hung from a ribbon, chain or such to be worn.

Medal.

A metallic piece, of historic, commemorative, or artistic design, made – by casting or striking – originally in the shape similar to a coin (but without denomination and certainly not intended to pass for money).

Medallion.

A large medal, round or nearly so; 3 3/16-inch (80mm) or larger.

Model, Modeling.

The permanent form and preparing the three-dimension relief of a new medal design usually of hard substance as plaster of Paris.

Negative.

Sunken relief in opposite polarity to POSITIVE; dies are negative relief to strike a positive image.

Obverse.

The front or most important side of a coin or medal.

Patina

Coloring and protection added to a metal object by treating with chemicals to change surface composition plus lacquer or wax for protection. Medals are given a patina much like statues and sculpture-in-the-round.

Plaster.

The material plaster of Paris from which any three-dimensional object can be molded.

Positive.

Raised relief in proper polarity.

Proof Surface.

A highly polished mirror-like reflectiveness on the surface of a struck piece. All Franklin Mint medals were proof surface.

Relief.

The three-dimensional surface that is the design raising from the base, background or field; the design is said to be in **Modulated Relief**.

Reverse.

The back side of a coin or medal.

Series.

An issue of a number of numismatic or medallic items with a common theme or design and a continuity of issue.

Sketch.

A two-dimensional drawing or three-dimensional relief prepared by the artist to assist in the designing of a numismatic or medallic item.

Silver.

A gray-white precious metal, which because it is highly malleable and coinable is widely used as the composition for coins and medals.

Sterling.

A fineness of silver, 925 parts per 1000 (alloyed with 75 parts copper for hardness).

Striking, Struck.

Making a numismatic or medallic item by impressing an appropriate blank with a pair of dies – with one blow of a press – the result is the transfer of the relief design to the blank.

Theme

The primary subject of a design; it could be its topic but often many topics are included in a medallic design.

Uniface.

A single-sided medallic item with design appearing on one side only; thus it has a blank reverse.

Working Model.

An unfinished model, one an artist is still working on; not ready yet to be placed into production is marked with a ° symbol.

Abram Belskie Timeline



Workmen in the studio of Robert A. Baillie, Closter, New Jersey, in the 1930s: (L to R) standing: Joe Giannoti, Charles Semino, Howard Semino, Robert A. Baillie, Felix Felice; kneeling, Charles Semino, Jr.; seated Abram Belskie.

1907 Born in London, England on March 27 and lives in Scotland with his family.

1922-26 Attended Glasgow School of Art studying painting and sculpture. Apprenticed to Scottish artist William Petrie. He was awarded the John Keppie scholarship to further his art studies in Europe.

1927-29 Receives the Sir John Edward Burnett Prize. He served as an assistant to several Scottish sculptors, Alexander Proudfoot, Benno Schotz, and Archibald Dawson, and was an instructor in Glasgow School of Art.

1929 Arrives in New York City on November 11th to work as an assistant to the sculptor John Gregory. He assists in the creation of the 12 bas-relief marble panels for the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C. depicting various scenes from the plays of William Shakespeare over a period of three years.

1930 Marries his childhood sweetheart, Helen Atkinson, on March 17th in New York City.

1931 Moves to Closter, N.J. to work as the studio assistant to Robert A. Baillie (1880-1961). Robert Baillie owned a stone carving studio in Closter and worked with many famous sculptors in the creation of their large public sculptures such as Malvina Hoffman, James Earle Fraser, Anna Hyatt Huntington, Adolph A. Weinman, and Wheeler Williams.

1932-36 He has use of Robert Baillie's Stone Carving studio to work on his own sculpture. During this period of time he creates his notable sculptures, *Christ Child*, 1934; *The Pirate* for Mariner's Museum, Newport News, VA, *Three Hebrew Youths* for N.Y. Jewish Theological Seminary.

1935-37 His two marble sculptures *Christ Child*, 1934 and *Moonbeam*, 1937 are purchased and placed in Brookgreen Gardens, Pawley Island, South Carolina.

1938 Abram Belskie is introduced to Dr. Robert Latou Dickinson by Malvina Hoffman and a life long partnership ensues to create scientifically correct three-

dimensional medical models for teaching purposes under the auspices of N.Y. Academy of Medicine, New York City. This lead to a faculty position at New York Medical College in which he combined sculpture with medical teaching aids for more than twenty years.

1939 Maternity Center Association, N.Y. commissions Dr. Robert Dickinson and Abram Belskie to create life-size bas-reliefs of the stages of pregnancy from conception to birth for the Hall of Man Pavilion for the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair. Over 2 million visitors see this exhibition.

Becomes a Naturalized citizen of the United States.

1940 Co-authored with Dr. Dickinson the book titled *Birth Atlas: Reproductions of 24 Life Size Sculptures of Fertilization, Growth, Stages of Labor, an Involution* published by Maternity Center Association, N.Y. This publication reproduced these sculptures photographically.

1951 Awarded the Lindsay Morris Memorial Prize by the National Sculpture Society for his sculpture *The Anatomist*.

1952 Creates his first commissioned medal, *National Golf Day, I Beat Ben Hogan* (MAco 52-26), sponsored by Time magazine. This medal was struck by Medallic Art Company, the oldest private mint specializing in design and manufacturer of medals. This firm was founded in 1907 by the French sculptor, Henri Weil. Belskie would continue to design medals and medallions for this firm until 1984.

1953 Designs his first medical medal, *Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center 25th Anniversary Medal* (MAco 53-33)

1955 Designs the bronze plaque for Peter Minuit Plaza in Battery Park, New York City to commemorate 300th Anniversary of the First Jewish Immigrants in America.

1956 Receives the Mrs. Louis Bennet Prize by National Sculpture Society.

1959 He is awarded the J. Sanford Saltus

Award for outstanding Achievement in the Art of the Medal awarded by The American Numismatic Society of which he was a member.

1963 Receives the Golden Anniversary Prize by Allied Artists of America.

1966 Creates his first medal for Franklin Mint - *Thomas Jefferson Medal* (FM NCS-24A)

1968 Designs the *Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Medal* (MAco 68-56). It is the world's first high-relief proof-surface medal.

1969-74 Designs the *50 Men of Medicine* series of medals for Medallic Art Company, N.Y. A historical review of notable scientists and doctors from Hippocrates to George Minot selected by medical historians. These 50 medals are struck in silver and bronze. (MAco 69-14-1 thru 69-14-50)

1974 Selected "Sculptor of the Year" by The American Numismatic Association

1981 Designs *The Brookgreen Gardens 50th Anniversary Medal* (MAco 78-163)

1988 Dies on November 17th

1994 The Belskie Museum of Art & Science opens on September 11th. Museum founded by Closter Lions Club to preserve, house and exhibit the works of Abram Belskie. Upon completion of the museum, the Closter Lions Club donates it the Borough of Closter.

Professional Memberships: National Sculpture Society, fellow; National Academy of Design, fellow; The American Numismatic Society, fellow and Allied Artists of America.

Collections: The Belskie Museum of Art & Science, Closter, NJ; American Museum of Natural History, NY; The Field Museum, Chicago, IL; Mariner's Museum, Newport News, VA; Brookgreen Gardens, Pawley Island, SC; Cleveland Health Museum, Cleveland, OH; Johnson & Johnson, New Brunswick, NJ; N.Y. Jewish Theological Seminary, NY; Park Avenue Synagogue, NY; New York Academy of Medicine, NY and American Heart Association, N.Y. Numismatic Art: American Numismatic Society, NY; Brookgreen Gardens, SC; Cleveland Museum, OH; Harvard Art Museum, MA; Princeton Library, NJ; Smithsonian Art Museum, DC

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Self Portrait, c.1951 /cast 2005, bronze, 20" diameter
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