

FRANK GASPARRO, U.S. MINT'S FORMER CHIEF ENGRAVER, DIES

Frank Gasparro, renowned sculptor and former Chief Engraver of the United States Mint, died on September 29, 2001, at a hospital in Havertown, Pennsylvania, after complications from a fall. He was 92 years old.

Gasparro, the Mint's 10th Chief Engraver, was sworn in on February 23, 1965, and retired on January 16, 1981. During his tenure, he created more circulation coins than any living artist in history. He is best known for his designs on the reverses of the Lincoln Memorial cent and Kennedy half dollar, and the creation of two \$1 coins - the Eisenhower/Apollo 11 in 1971 and the Susan B. Anthony in 1979.

Gasparro's coinage breakthrough came in 1959 when his Lincoln Memorial design was chosen from nearly two dozen in-house entries. The year was the 150th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth and the 50th anniversary of the birth of the Lincoln cent. It was a fitting anniversary given Gasparro was born in Philadelphia on August 26, 1909, a mere 24 days before the introduction of the Lincoln cent.

The inspiration for the cent's reverse came from ancient Greek coins, which typically show the head of a deity on the obverse and a portal or temple on the reverse. Gasparro is quoted as saying, "I have always been an admirer of Lincoln and have made many sculptures of him. Also, the Lincoln Memorial inspired me so very much that for several years I made thumbnail sketches until there was quite an accumulation. The Lincoln Memorial is Greek Classical in design, architecturally, and the perfect complement for a coin."

Gasparro never tired of seeing his design on the more than 100 billion cents in circulation, nor did he ever leave a "penny" laying on the street. It was common for him to point out to clerks and strangers in check-out lines that he designed the change in their pockets.

His artistic talent appeared at a young age. While in grade school, he also attended classes at the Samuel Fleisher Art Memorial School in Philadelphia. At age 15, Gasparro began taking private lessons from Guiseppe Donato, protégé of the master sculptor Auguste Rodin. Later, at the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, he studied under sculptors and medalists Charles Grafly, Walker Hancock and Albert Laessle. In 1937 he trained at the Federal Art Administration (FAA), a part of the Works Progress Administration established by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Great Depression.

Gasparro became a junior engraver at the Mint in 1942, earning \$2,300 a year. Some 20 years later, he was appointed Chief Engraver by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The soft-spoken Gasparro supervised the production of about 30,000 dies a year for all U.S. coinage and medals produced at the Philadelphia Mint. He also prepared designs for scores of medals, including the nation's official Bicentennial medal and the Mint Presidential medals for every chief executive from Lyndon Johnson to Jimmy Carter. One of his greatest successes was the medal designed for actor John Wayne, authorized by Congress and

issued by the Mint in 1979. Sales of the piece exceeded \$1 million, making it the all-time best seller in the Mint medal series.

Gasparro, the 1968 recipient of the ANA's Numismatic Art Award for Excellence in Medallic Sculpture, was commissioned to design the commemorative medal for the Association's 100th Anniversary Convention, held in Chicago in August 1991. In describing the medal's obverse, he explained, "This is my best attempt to show the America of today. I wanted to symbolize the bringing together of the farmer and rancher, with the mountains from the West meeting the city and industry from the East. I wanted America with her arms open, welcoming everyone to Chicago."

The coins he created continue to roll off the presses, perpetuating a legacy far beyond the present day. It will continue as long as collectors save Gasparro's "labors of love."

Survivors include his wife of 62 years, Julia; and a daughter, Christina Hansen of New York.

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