





# Bridging Art & Numismatics

Bas-reliefs on Chicago's Michigan Avenue Bridge were created by two of the country's leading coin designers.

**A**MONG THE MANY cultural attractions that make Chicago special, works of art are particularly prominent. Fine-art aficionados admire master-works of Impressionism and other movements at the Art Institute of Chicago. Architecture buffs marvel at the Willis Tower (originally the Sears Tower), no longer the world's tallest building, but still extremely impressive. And, in Millennium Park, the giant, mirrored Cloud Gate mesmerizes tourists and locals alike.

Coin collectors have an iconic Chicago attraction of their own: the Michigan Avenue Bridge (officially the DuSable Bridge). The connection between numismatics and urban transportation may not be immediately obvious, but this particular drawbridge is not just

part of a journey. Its superlative public sculpture, crafted by artists responsible for some of the country's most admired coins, makes it a worthwhile destination.

On each of the four bridgehouses, 12-foot-tall, limestone bas-reliefs recount stories of Chicago and its development. (The reliefs were completed in 1928, eight years after the bridge was finished.) Funding came in the form of a gift from William Wrigley Jr. (of chewing gum fame) and a generous bequest from lumber magnate Benjamin Ferguson.

The artists responsible for the bridge's decoration—James Earle Fraser and Henry Hering—were not only monumental sculptors, but they also played vital roles in the early 20th-century Renaissance of American coinage. Although the reliefs' style is reminiscent of the sculptural groups decorating the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, their subject matter is distinctly Chicagoan.

Fraser's bas-relief *The Discoverers* (located on the



► **SCULPTOR HENRY HERING** created the bas-relief *Regeneration* (right and left) that appears on the Michigan Avenue Bridge. It depicts workers rebuilding the city after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

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*Fraser mistakenly clothed Marquette, a Jesuit priest, in the robe of a Franciscan monk.*



▲ **THE MICHIGAN AVENUE BRIDGE** features *The Discoverers* (left) and *The Pioneers* (center) by James Earle Fraser. Henry Hering's *Defense* (right) depicts the Fort Dearborn massacre of 1812.

northeast corner of the bridge) honors two pairs of Frenchmen who explored the Mississippi-Great Lakes region in the 17th century: Jacques Marquette and Louis Joliet, and Robert de LaSalle and Henri de Tonti. (Fraser mistakenly clothed Marquette, a Jesuit priest, in the robe of a Franciscan monk.) A retinue of Native Americans sur-

rounds the explorers. (The kneeling warrior in the center could be a twin of the Native American on Fraser's Indian Head nickel.) A vigilant and well-armed allegorical figure oversees the action.

*The Pioneers* (northwest corner), also by Fraser, shows a group of settlers led by John Kinzie, who put down roots in the Chicago area in 1804. It's a

## Chicago's Michigan Avenue Bridge

Built between 1918 and 1920, the Michigan Avenue Bridge is one of many in downtown Chicago. Every day, more than 30,000 vehicles, and about the same number of pedestrians, cross the two levels

of the bridge's 399-foot, street-level span.

Below, the Chicago River comprises part of a water route between nearby Lake Michigan and the mighty Mississippi. To accommodate both road and river traffic, the drawbridge is raised twice a week.

Above, Michigan Avenue connects the Chicago "Loop" with one of the world's greatest shopping districts—North Michigan Avenue, aptly nicknamed "the Magnificent Mile." From the traditional elegance of Brooks Brothers to the cutting-edge technology of Apple, North Michigan Avenue offers a cornucopia of retail opportunities.

The bridge's location makes it an important Chicago landmark. Its north side intersects the site of the city's first permanent residence, the late-18th-century home and trading post of Jean Baptiste Point du Sable. (The bridge was officially renamed the DuSable Bridge in 2010.) The south side overlaps the site of Fort Dearborn, established by the U.S. military in 1803.



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## The Sculptors

**Henry Hering** (1874-1949) is best known to numismatists for his supporting role in creating the country's gold coinage of 1907. Born in New York City, he was educated at Cooper Union and the École de Beaux Arts in Paris before joining Augustus Saint-Gaudens' studio as an assistant. After Saint-Gaudens' death in 1907, it was left to Hering to shepherd his teacher's eagle (\$10) and double eagle (\$20) coin designs through the excruciating relief reductions required by



◀ **FRASER CREATED** two bas-reliefs for the Michigan Avenue Bridge. His lifelike renderings of Native Americans call to mind his obverse design for the Indian Head nickel (above).

the United States Mint.

In addition to his work on the Michigan Avenue Bridge, Hering created reliefs for the Field Museum in Chicago, sculptures for the Indiana War Memorial and Yale's Memorial Hall, and other works of public art. The National Sculpture Society's prestigious Henry Hering Award recognizes excellence in architectural sculpture.

**James Earle Fraser** (1876-1953) was one of the most prominent sculptors of his time. Born in Minnesota and raised in South Dakota, he trained at the Art Institute of Chicago and the École de Beaux Arts in Paris. Like Hering, Fraser was an alumnus of Saint-Gaudens' studio, assisting on the monument to General William T. Sherman in New York City.

As an artist, and as a member of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, Fraser guided American numismatic art in the first decades of the 20th century. His most famous numismatic work is the distinctively American Buffalo nickel, coined from 1913 to 1938. In collaboration with his wife, Laura Gardin Fraser, he designed the widely praised Oregon Trail commemorative half dollar. His medallion work includes the Victory Medal distributed to millions of veterans of World War I.

Fraser's many sculptural works are equally impressive. The slumping Indian on an exhausted horse depicted in *The End of the Trail* is an icon of Western Americana. His statue of Alexander Hamilton stands in front of the U.S. Treasury Building in Washington, D.C., and his equestrian sculpture of Theodore Roosevelt greets visitors to the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Fraser's work also adorns many government buildings in Washington, D.C.'s, Federal Triangle.

scene rich with domesticity: men and women, a child and a group of animals. Another allegorical figure watches over the pioneers, but here, in contrast to *The Discoverers*, it's the real people who are armed.

Henry Hering's *Defense* (southwest corner) depicts the Fort Dearborn massacre of 1812, when dozens of soldiers and settlers fleeing the British were massacred by Potawatomi Indians. The bas-relief portrays Captain William Wells' attempts to stave off the attack as settlers cower behind him. An allegorical figure holds a palm branch, representing martyrdom.

Also by Hering, *Regeneration* (southeast corner) celebrates the city's rebirth after the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. The inferno destroyed most of the city, but the energy dedicated to reconstruction made Chicago the metropolis we know today. The relief shows the power of muscles and machinery, with flames in the background. An

allegorical figure blows a trumpet, heralding the arrival of the regenerated city.

Although conceived for a different purpose and executed on a different scale, the bridge's sculptures have a lot in common with coins. Like coins, the bridge's reliefs are three-dimensional objects, crafted in the artistic style of their time. They tell important stories from history, using a mix of allegorical and representational imagery. And their prime location—easily visible to anyone who crosses the bridge, in places where pedestrians literally can walk right up to them—makes them universally accessible.

During this summer's World's Fair of Money<sup>SM</sup>, or whenever you're in the Chicago area, take a trip downtown for a real treat. Amid the bustle of business and the stimulation of shopping, you'll get a new perspective on public art by visiting the Michigan Avenue Bridge. ■