

Canine & Equine

The Art of Laura Gardin Fraser



PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Drawing upon her immense talent and love of animals, a noted sculptor carved out her own numismatic and artistic legacy.

IT IS SAID THAT IF SOMEONE has a career they truly love, they'll never work a day in their life. Such was the case with Laura Gardin Fraser, who filled her days doing what she loved, with whom she loved.

Fraser (1889-1966) had a long career in the art world as a sculptor/medalist. Born near Chicago and raised in and near New York City, she gained an appreciation of art from her mother. As a girl, she spent much of her time at her parents' vacation home in northern New Jersey. It was there, among the family's horses, dogs and other pets, that her love of animals flourished. This passion would eventually be combined with her love of art.

Fraser enrolled at the Art Students League in New York City, where, in 1910, she studied under James Earle Fraser (the designer of the Buffalo nickel). The two married in 1913. When asked about their life together, she replied, "We talked and laughed and competed our entire lives." An independent woman, she served as a captain in the American Volunteer Motor Ambulance Corps transporting wounded soldiers during World War I.

With the issuance of the 1921 Alabama Centennial commemorative half dollar, Laura Gardin Fraser became the first woman to design a coin struck by the U.S. Mint (or for that matter, any mint). She also designed other U.S. classic (1892-1954) silver and gold commemoratives: the 1922 Grant Memorial (silver half dollar and gold \$1 issues); the 1925(S) Fort Vancouver Centennial half

dollar; and the obverse of the 1926-39 Oregon Trail Memorial half dollar. She also designed two commemorative coins for the Philippines: the Douglas MacArthur 1947-S 1-peso and a 50-centavo pieces.

Fraser is the only designer of classic commemoratives to have created a unique, modern commemorative, the 1999-W Washington \$5 gold piece. Honoring the bicentennial of George Washington's death, the coin resurrected her rejected 1932 submission for the Washington commemorative quarter.

Over the course of her career, Fraser designed more than 100 medals and won many prestigious awards for her work. She also designed and sculpted heroic-sized pieces on display around the country. Regardless of the size of her creations, Fraser drew upon her talent to carve out a successful career during a time when women sculptors had a tough go of it. Many thought (incorrectly) that she lived in the shadow of her renowned husband, but she was a gifted artist in her own right. However, it wasn't uncommon for someone to comment during an unveiling of one of her works, "Bet Mr. Fraser helped you on this one!" (The

Fraser's often wagered between themselves on how long it would take someone to ask her this question.) At one particular event, a wealthy patron quizzed Fraser about her husband's input. With a certain amount of irritation, she asked the patron, "Just who is this James Earle Fraser I keep hearing about?"

Sculptors work on commission, and neither Fraser ever had much down time. Their large summer studio in Connecticut, along with their



▲ **THE INSCRIPTIONS** on the obverse of Laura Fraser's bronze, uniface medal "Bide-A-Wee" (Scottish for "Stay a while") describe man's popular four-legged friend: loyalty, devotion, forgiveness and humor. Bide-A-Wee, a home for abandoned and stray dogs, still operates in the metropolitan New York area.

Actual Size: 69.2mm

PHOTO: ROBERT B. KELLEY

◀ Laura Gardin Fraser is shown working on a "heroic" statue of Stonewall Jackson in 1948.

Oklahoma City Fairgrounds officials dragged their feet about paying for the work, insisting that her husband's name be engraved upon the piece.

PHOTO: NEW YORK STATE MORGAN HORSE SOCIETY



◀ **LAURA GARDIN FRASER** (left) often lived in the shadow of her husband, sculptor James Earl Fraser, though her talent rivaled his.

smaller winter studio in New York City, almost always displayed their ongoing work. The two never collaborated on a project, except for the Oregon Trail Memorial commemorative half dollar, struck intermittently and at various mints from 1926 to 1939. (Many collectors consider it the most appealing coin in the Mint's classic commemorative series, which, considering the Frasers' combined talent, it probably is.)

Late in James' life, he received a commission from the Oklahoma City Fairgrounds to sculpt a rendering of the state's Land Run. Since James was in failing health, the commission was transferred to Laura. She completed the job in 1955 (two years after his death), creating—with incredible detail and a strong sense of movement—a 4 x 20-foot bronze panel that depicts hundreds of horses, wagons and men racing across the landscape. Although Fraser used her husband's sketches, she alone completed the final design and the actual panel. Oklahoma City Fairgrounds officials dragged their feet

PHOTO: MEADOWLARK GALLERY



▲ **WITH HER HUSBAND IN FAILING HEALTH** in the 1950s, Laura Gardin Fraser assumed his commission from the Oklahoma City Fairgrounds and used his sketches to sculpt this 4 x 20-foot bronze panel that depicts hundreds of horses, wagons and men taking part in the 1889 Oklahoma Land Run.

Fraser felt that “a sporting subject would be a departure from what one has been accustomed to seeing in medallic art.”

PHOTOS: ROBERT B. KELLEY



▲ **LAURA FRASER DESIGNED** this bronze award medal for the Irish Setter Club of America. The breed's notable traits encircle the reverse; the cartouche below the dog-bone-shaped lead is for the recipient's name.

Actual Size: 76mm



about paying for the work, insisting that her husband's name be engraved upon the piece. In response, Fraser kept the panel until her death, when it was purchased by Oklahoma City's National Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center. (The bronze relief currently resides at Oklahoma City's Bicentennial Plaza.)

The exquisite renderings of man and beast recall Fraser's affection and respect of animals, and her earlier works featured dogs and horses. She created a 73mm bronze award medal for the Irish Setter Club of America that was struck in 1922. The piece features a full-bodied Irish setter and an Irish harp on the obverse. On the reverse are the traits for which the breed is known, along with a cartouche on which was engraved the recipient's name. The medal is still presented to deserving Irish Setters, preserving Fraser's legacy and her partnership with the Irish Setter Club of America.

She also designed the first of an annual series of



PHOTO: COMMONS WIKIMEDIA

▲ **IN THIS UNDATED PHOTOGRAPH**, Fraser is shown working on one of her high-relief sculptures. The talented artist died in 1966.

medals created for the Society of Medalists. Struck in bronze in 1930 by Medallic Art Company, *Steady* shows a hunter with his bird dog "on point" on the obverse. The reverse features a ruffed grouse, the



PHOTOS: CARL STANG

▲ **ISSUED BY THE SOCIETY OF MEDALISTS** and struck by Medallic Art Company in 1930, Fraser's 71.1mm bronze "Steady" medal depicts a hunter with his bird dog "on point" on the obverse; a ruffed grouse, the pair's quarry, is shown on the reverse.

Not Actual Size

Morgan horses are noted for their strength, endurance, intelligence, even temperament and smooth gait.



▲ **MORGAN HORSES** are the subject of these uniface Morgan Horse Club of America medals designed by Laura Fraser. Both pieces were struck by Medallie Art Company.

Actual Size: 75mm

hunter's quarry, on a log. Fraser felt that "a sporting subject would be a departure from what one has been accustomed to seeing in medallie art. Therefore, I chose the hunter with his dog because it presented the opportunity of telling a story embodying a human and animal element."

A group of equestrian-themed, uniface Fraser medals were struck in 1923 for a variety of organizations, including the Horse Association of America and the Morgan Horse Club. All are 75mm and were struck by Medallie Art Company. The one-sided Horse Association of America specimen depicts a polo player astride a horse. The story goes that Fraser borrowed some polo mallets from the Association and took them to her Connecticut home and studio. Wanting to get a feel for the efforts that were required of the polo player and the mount, she and her horse would gallop about the vacant property surrounding her Connecticut home, striking a ball with a mallet. Noticing the activity, her neighbors started showing up with their own horses and joined in. It wasn't long before pick-up polo matches were in full swing!

PHOTOS: AMERICAN NUMISMATIC SOCIETY

The Morgan Horse Club medal features a strong, proud-looking horse with its head held high. (One of the earliest horse breeds developed in the United States, Morgan horses are noted for their strength, endurance, intelligence, even temperament and smooth gait.) Morgans were quite popular during the Civil War, when they were used in cavalries and for hauling artillery and other heavy material. The Morgan Horse Club's *Vermont* medal depicts a touching scene of a Morgan mare and foal in a pasture. (Morgans were first bred in Vermont.)

Perhaps the all-time favorite Laura Gardin Fraser animal-themed work is the *Bide-A-Wee* medal, a uniface piece issued around 1913. Anyone who is fond of dogs will appreciate the lifelike rendering of the trio on the obverse. "Bide-a-Wee" (Scottish for "Stay a While") was, and still is, an animal shelter located in the New York metropolitan area. Only a true animal lover could have designed such a heart-warming medal. ■

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▲ **FRASER DEPICTED A POLO PLAYER** and his mount on a 1923 uniface Horse Association of America medal. Actual Size: 73 mm

Alexander, David Thomason. *American Art Medals, 1909-1995*. New York: The American Numismatic Society, 2010.. (ANA Library Catalog No. RM.20.A3a)

Luftschtein, Susan. *One Hundred Years of American Medallie Art: 1845-1945*. New York: John N. Jacobson & Son. (RM10.L3)

Vermeulle, Cornelius. *Numismatic Art in America Aesthetics of the United States Coinage*, 2nd ed., Atlanta: Whitman Publishing, 2007. (GB40.V4 2007)