

Numismatic Recognition of the New World

With the impending 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of the New World, the numismatic community hopes that new issues will significantly augment the handful of commemorative coins and medals released since the explorer's historic voyage.

by Russell Rulau
ANA 40588

THE DISCOVERY OF the American continents had little measurable impact upon political or social trends in the Old World for a long time. Thus it is that coinage legends were slow to recognize the intrusion of the New World in daily thought in Europe.

Economic conditions in Spain, and more slowly in other parts of Europe, were buoyed by the immense treasures of the Aztec and Inca empires that began flowing back to the Old World soon after the 1492 landfall. Yet, medals—issued in great variety by the artisans of Europe to honor persons and events of little historic significance—were not issued for more than a century after 1492 to commemorate any of the discoveries or the discoverers of the New World!¹

As C. Wyllys Betts pointed out in his 1894 opus (*American Colonial History Illustrated by Contemporary Medals*), even the conquistadores, such as Cortés and Pizarro, to whom Spain's enrichment was originally due, found no mention on any medallic emission. Commemorative coins were still unknown in the 16th century, of course, but the era was rich in another numismatic category of commemorative—the jeton or counter. Yet, the prolific jeton-makers seemed to ignore the New World in its first century.

When coin legends began to recognize America, the start was slow and

¹ There are always exceptions to every statement one can make about numismatic-historical facts. New information emerges all the time. In our most recent research into this "earliest" situation, we have uncovered several exceptions: before 1518 a possible Italian medal for Columbus by Guido Mazzoni; in 1520 a German medal with Pillars and PLUS OULTRE by Hans Schwartz; and in 1529 a German medal for Cortés by Christof Weiditz.

Excerpted from *Discovering America: The Coin Collecting Connection* by Russell Rulau. Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 1989.

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.....

tortuous. The earliest reference was indirect—Emperor Charles V (Carlos I of Spain) changed the motto on his coins for Flanders in 1519 from NON PLUS ULTRA (“no more beyond”) to PLUS ULTRA (“more beyond”). The “beyond” referred to the Pillars of Hercules (the Straits of Gibraltar), the supposed end of the known world. The Pillars of Hercules and PLUS ULTRA appeared on coins of Carlos I and Joanna (his insane mother) struck at the new Mexico Mint in 1536 and the new Santo Domingo Mint in 1542.

On some of his small silver coins of 1535 struck at Barcelona to honor his successful naval expedition to Tunis, Carlos I first used the Pillars and PLUS ULTRA on homeland coins. On coins of 1555 struck before his abdication late that year, INDIARVM (“of the Indies”) was added to homeland coin legends.

Philip II, who succeeded his father in Spain and the Netherlands, began immediately in 1556 to recognize the New World in legends on medals by calling himself King of Spain and of NOVI ORBIS OCCIDVI (“the New Western World”). This was a full 64 years after Columbus’ landfall.

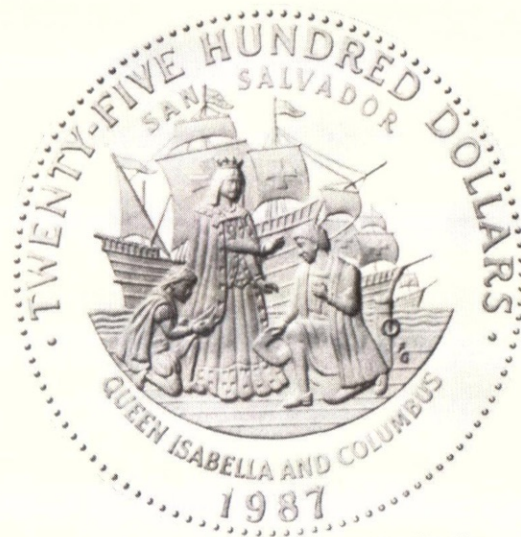
Probably the first medal to commemorate the New World came in 1581 (the legend changes described above had merely added some Latin abbreviations and the Pillars on coins and medals issued for other reasons)—and the commemoration was oblique. Philip II issued a silver medal showing a horse (Spain’s symbol) leaping from a globe and the motto NON SVFFICIT ORBIS (“one world is not enough”). This refers to Spain’s acquisition of the vast Portuguese overseas empire after the union of the two monarchies under Philip’s crown in 1580.

In 1596-98 the Dutch honored voyages to America on three medals, but the themes were general, not specific. America is not identified on the pieces. More Dutch medals issued in 1599 for the capture of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands do not even mention the place or the New World!

The first New World explorer honored on a medal with effigy and name



In 1531 Charles V (right) granted explorer Francisco Pizarro the titles of governor and captain-general of all the countries he might conquer for Spain.



Actual Size: 72mm

Columbus discovered Watling Island in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492. A \$2,500 coin of the Bahamas released in 1987 features Queen Isabella and Columbus; a 1971 \$50 shows his flagship, the *Santa Maria*.



Actual Size: 54mm?

Hernán Cortés is depicted on this 1529 bronze medal by Christof Weiditz, possibly the earliest numismatic recognition of a New World explorer.

was Admiral Piet Heyn, who was not an explorer at all, but rather a very successful pirate! In 1628 he seized the entire Spanish treasure fleet that had been assembling in Matanzas Bay, Cuba, for the homeward voyage to Spain.

The honor of being the first New World settler to be commemorated on a medal belongs to Cecil Calvert, Second Lord Baltimore. In 1632 several medals celebrated his proprietorship over Maryland.

And while the Dutch and English had by now begun to mark the deeds of their explorers, the nations that enjoyed most of the New World's riches—Spain and Portugal—had not yet even referred to its discoverers by name on any numismatic emission!

France saluted its Company of the Indies with medals in 1664. Betts identifies a Spanish medal of 1682 that mentions "Our Lady of Guadalupe of Mexico," which he says may have been struck originally for Mexican Indians. But Betts' editors, Lyman Low and William Marvin, thought this piece emanated as a church medal from a later period. It is, however, an early Spanish claimant to direct mention of a place in the New World on a medal—almost two centuries after Columbus discovered America. The first undisputed Spanish medals mentioning America are the proclamation pieces of Philip V in 1701, issued from Mexico, Lima and Vera Cruz.

It was left to later ages to recognize, numismatically, the contributions of Columbus, Vespucci, Cabot, Cabral and the other early seafarers who opened up a new western world where the Old World thought Asia should be.

Looking Beyond in the 18th and 19th Centuries

JEAN DASSIER OF Switzerland (1676-1763) probably inspired medalists

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who came after him to look outward for medallic subjects. He began a medal series on religious reformers in 1720 and one on French celebrities (*Galerie Métallique des Grands Hommes du Siècle de Louis XIV*), also in 1720. Other medal series on theologians in Geneva, Roman history, and kings and queens of England (the latter begun in 1731) followed.

About 1800 the engravers and medalists of the world began to commemorate persons, events and movements not directly connected with nationalism, commerce, local religion or social standing—moved, perhaps, by the prospect of monetary reward as much as anything else.

One prolific German medalist of the 17th century, Christian Wermuth of Gotha, issued in the space of just 20 years some 1,300 different medals, including many in a “series” concept for sale to anyone who would pay the price. Wermuth’s series include counters on the Restoration of Peace in 1691; portrait medals of Popes (250 medals); portrait medals of Roman emperors (214 medals); and satirical medals on many subjects of interest to Europeans of his day.

Here, then, for the first time, history was re-examined, and medals began to be issued to honor the world’s most famous men, including at first a very few adventurers whose lives touched the New World. Commemorative coins, unknown since ancient Greece and Rome, were revived in the late 1800s and in the 20th century have become commonplace.

What of Columbus?

SPAIN ALMOST TOTALLY ignored Christopher Columbus numismatically. Through the last day of 1988—496 years after his discovery—Columbus had still not graced one official, legal-tender coin of Spain.

Italy was a little better. Through 1988, Columbus had neither been depicted nor mentioned on any official Italian coin. There is an indirect recognition, however. On the silver 500-lira coin struck 1958-85, three caravels are shown opposite a personification of Italia, and these are Co-



Columbus ponders the night sky on the evening before his landing in the Bahamas.



Philip II is proclaimed king of Spain and "the New Western World" (NOVI ORBIS OCCIDENTIS) on this 1559 medal commemorating the Peace of Cateau-Cambresis.



Actual Size: 62.3mm

A 50-crown coin issued by the Turks and Caicos Islands in 1986 marks the 500th anniversary of the proposal of Columbus' "great voyage of discovery."

AS FAR AS we have been able to discover, the first private medal produced in Spain to portray Columbus is the 1885 medal of the Union Ibero Americana.

lumbus' three ships of his first voyage.

The first private medal produced in Italy to show Columbus' effigy is that by Tommaso Mercandetti of Rome in 1821. It was followed shortly by one of Niccolo Cerbara of Rome in 1830, and one produced for Columbus' birthplace, Genoa, by Giuseppe Girometti in 1846.

As far as we have been able to discover, the first private medal produced in Spain to portray Columbus is the 1885 medal of the Union Ibero Americana. A Spanish colony, Cuba, produced plaques in 1862 depicting the erection of a Columbus statue at Cardenas during the reign of Isabella II.

It fell to the French, in 1819, to be the first in the world to portray Columbus on a medal. This was designed by Louis M. Petit and published by Amedee Durand in Series Numismatica, a group of medals produced from 1818 to 1846.

Guatemala in 1854 struck the excessively rare and almost unknown silver 8 reales, which became the world's first coin to depict the discoverer. The first widely circulated coin to depict Columbus was the United States silver 50-cent piece of 1892, struck for the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. That same year, 1892, both El Salvador and Colombia issued silver 50-centavo coins portraying Columbus, and El Salvador also issued a silver peso of the same type.

There is a possibility that Columbus was portrayed once—much earlier. Italian painter Guido Mazzoni, who died in 1518, supposedly modeled dies for a Renaissance medal showing Columbus' head. Before 1872, some copy medals appeared in Italy, and one was acquired by the Vienna State Museum in 1884. This copy piece has not been examined, and the literature has yielded little enlightenment.

And What of Ericsson?

THE VOYAGES OF discovery by Bjarni Herjulfsson (986), Leif Ericsson (1001), Thorvald Ericsson (1004), Thorstein Ericsson (1008) and Thorfinn Karlsefni (1009) were recorded only by the word-of-mouth sagas of the Norsemen at the time. They were set down in print only hundreds of years later in the 1200s and 1300s.

No sketches of the Norse discoverers were made, and even Leif Ericsson's bloodline defies study. About 1410 the colony on Greenland seems to have died off; ever since 1347 the climate had become unbearably cold, and no one was left.

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New World

continued from page 1772

Trade voyages between Greenland, Iceland and Norway were constant in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. Who is to say that some direct descendant of Leif Ericsson who resembles him physically may not live today?

All depictions of the Norse discovery of America are imaginary, and there are pitifully few of these in numismatics. Neither Norway, Iceland nor Greenland has ever honored Leif Ericsson or his Norse contemporaries on an official coin, nor has any other nation—even Canada and the United States, where he made landfall.

The earliest medal we have located that mentions Ericsson is an 1889 award medal of the Norwegian Geo-



A profile of Columbus, known as Cristobal Colon in Latin America, graces the obverse of a 1984 El Salvador 1 colon.

graphic Society designed by Ivar Thronsdén of the Kongsberg Mint. It names Eric the Red and Leif Ericsson. There is an allusion to Ericsson in the use of the date 1000 on the silver Norse-American medals authorized by the U.S. Congress in 1925.

It was 1966 before anyone placed a portrait of Ericsson on a medal. The Franklin Mint of Pennsylvania de-

voted one silver medal of its National Commemorative Society series to discovery, depicting Leif Ericsson and Christopher Columbus and the maps of their Atlantic crossings on opposite sides of the piece.

What Does the Future Hold?

THE PROFIT MOTIVE for coin-issuing nations in the upcoming 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery will be tapped, we predict. We confidently expect Spain and Italy at long last to honor Columbus on coins, just as Portugal has already honored Cabral, and Norway will honor Leif Ericsson.

Other nations, some of which have neither Atlantic coastline nor discovery connections, will also issue coins to capitalize on public interest. Medals, tokens, ingots, plaques and other

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Actual Size: 45.3mm

A striking portrait of Columbus appears on a \$10 piece issued in 1975 by Jamaica.

numismatica of private origin should repeat the experience of plenty encountered at the 400th anniversary in Chicago.

The nations of the New World, especially the United States, will produce official coins and medals saluting Columbus. A group of nations have already struck coins honoring Columbus since 1892: the Bahamas, Cayman Islands, Colombia, Cook Islands, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Italy, Jamaica, Turks and Caicos Islands, and the United States. This list should lengthen greatly before the end of the 20th century a few years hence.

Postscript

THE GOVERNMENT OF Spain will issue a series of commemorative coins honoring the quincentenary of the

discovery of America, according to a story by Jaime Alcocer appearing in the January 1989 issue of *El Eco Filatelico y Numismatico*, a Spanish-language magazine.

Alcocer writes that the project is in the hands of the Organizing Committee of the 5th Centenary, with its headquarters in Seville. This committee is able to decide whatever will be, but the coins must be one of the support pillars of the financing of the celebration events in the City of Guadalquivir in 1992.

This committee is planning an exquisite program for the event. One of its ideas is to reproduce the monetary system that was in use in the whole world in the 15th to 18th centuries. The Bank of Spain, the Ministry of Finance and the Organizing Committee must together approve

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An artist's sketch for a proposed 1992 Spanish gold coin commemorating the quincentenary of the discovery of America depicts a sea monster about to devour a ship full of men. The design probably was adapted from illustrations on 15th-century maps. Spain has not issued a gold coin since 1897.

the proposals.

A series of pieces on the discoverers of America may be included. Alcocer

feels that publicity about the discovery series should provide a brilliant revival of numismatics in Spain.

Reproduced with the article was an artist's sketch of a 25,000-peseta coin (face value equal to U.S.\$212.50), which could be a gold coin denomination. Spain has not issued a gold coin since 1897 (there were some official restrikes of the 1897 piece in 1961-62).

Vice president of Pobjoy Mint Limited (U.S.), Russell Rulau is best known for his standard references on American tokens and medals, among them *HARD TIMES TOKENS*, *EARLY AMERICAN TOKENS*, *MEDALLIC PORTRAITS OF WASHINGTON* and *U.S. TRADE TOKENS, 1866-1889*. He also has written books in the fields of foreign coins and paper money and has authored several thousand articles and news stories about all phases of numismatics since his first article was published in 1958.



The three ships from Columbus' first voyage are shown on Italy's 500-lira coin, struck from 1958 to 1985.

ANA MUSEUM

Rulau's new book, *DISCOVERING AMERICA: THE COIN COLLECTING CONNECTION*, is available for \$19.95, plus \$2.50 shipping and handling, from the publisher, Krause Publications, Book Department, 700 E. State St., Iola, WI 54990.

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