

# A STELLAR TYPE SET

*Money and medals with heavenly themes are universally popular.*

**T**HE ANCIENTS of many cultures referred to all celestial lights as stars. Some philosophers believed these celestial bodies were holes in the firmament through which light shined from Heaven. Many civilizations held that stars were or represented immortal beings. (Even today, planets bear the names of Roman gods.)

Although real stars are nearly spherical, in heraldry (and in numismatics), they often are portrayed as five-pointed objects. They may be solid, or the outlines might form a pentagram. The United States flag has always featured five-pointed stars, but early U.S. Mint engravers preferred six-pointed ones, while some designers opted for seven or eight points.

Stars and other astronomical

images (such as planets and comets) have been portrayed or referenced on coins, bank notes, tokens and medals in a variety of ways. Some pieces even allude

to how humans have interpreted the stars over the centuries.

## Celestial Globe

Long before Earth was represented as a sphere (though the ancient Greeks calculated its diameter more than 2,000 years ago), the Romans represented the heavens as a globe, sometimes with constellations and meridians on it. A copper coin of Emperor Constantine the Great, who reigned from A.D. 305 to 337, shows a celestial globe atop a commemorative stone marker,



▲ **FIGURE 1:** A Roman copper, struck in A.D. 305-37, shows a celestial globe on a marker.

Actual Size: 18.7mm

▼ **FIGURE 2:** A Hebrew love token made from an Indian 2 annas depicts the moon and a star.

Actual Size: 13mm

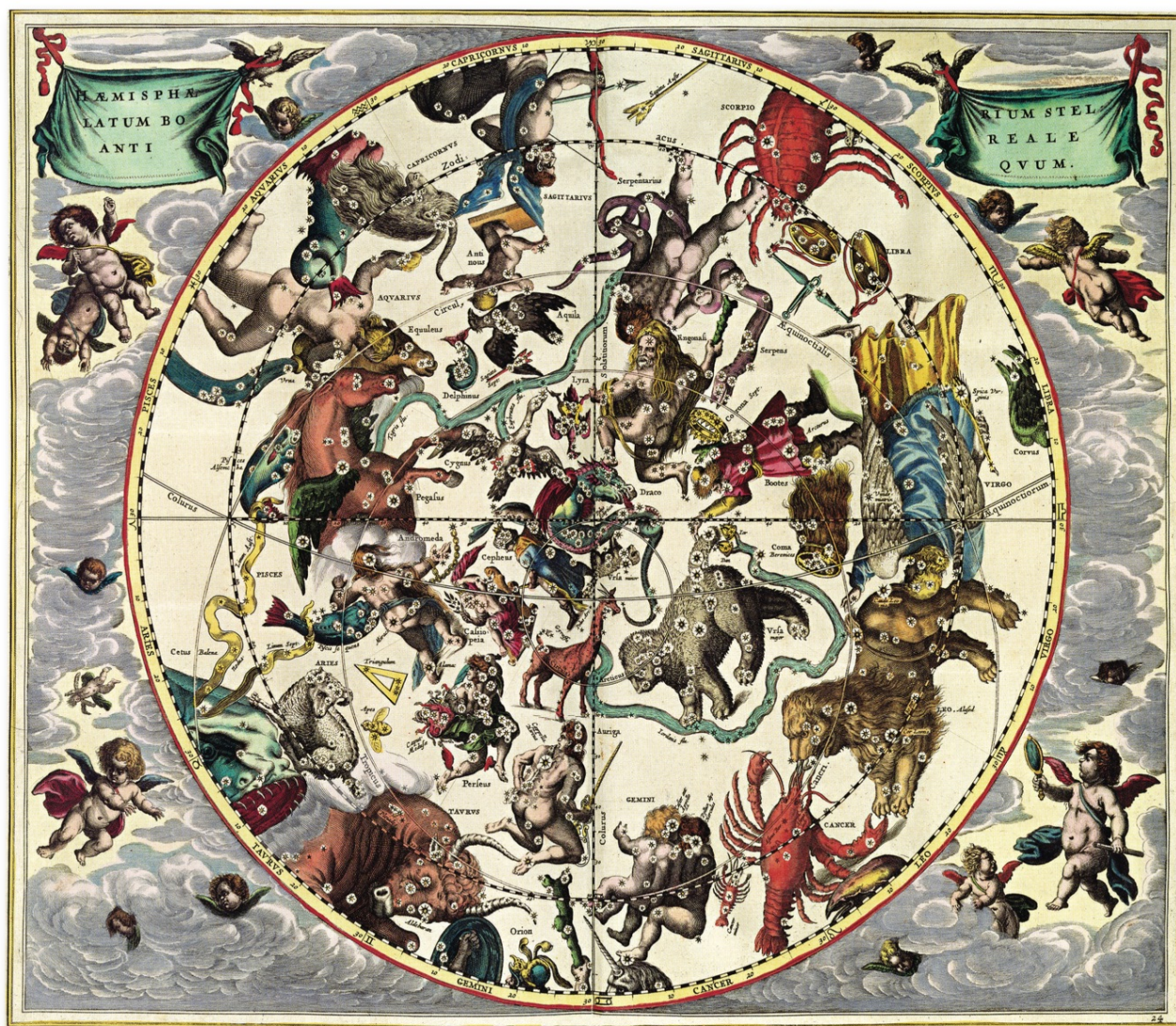


▲ **FIGURE 3:** The obverse of a bronze calendar medal depicts the night sky in the Northern Hemisphere. The 12 signs of the Western zodiac appear along the edge.

Actual Size: 76mm

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PHOTOS: SIMCHA KURITZKY

or *cippus* (Figure 1), with three eight-pointed stars above. The cippus is inscribed VOTIS XX, the emperor's oath of office for 20 years, suggesting the coin was struck shortly after the 10th anniversary of his rule in 315. Surrounding it is a Latin inscription that translates "Blessed Tranquility." Below, "STR" indicates the second workshop of the Trier mint. The obverse shows Constantine's helmeted bust, surrounded by his name and title.

### Heavenly Hosts

The Hebrew Bible refers to the stars as God's army. The love token shown here (Figure 2) was fashioned from an Indian 2 annas



▲ **FIGURE 4:** This celestial map originally was published in 1660.

◀ **FIGURE 5:** A medal showing constellations and zodiacal signs supports the popular hobby of geocaching. Actual Size: 57mm

of George V minted in 1912-17 and mounted in a bezel. The reverse was ground off and engraved with a crescent moon and the Hebrew name for God (*Yah*). To the right is a five-pointed star with the letter *shin*, probably an abbreviation for the divine name *Shaday*. Below, a Hebrew legend translates "Eternal Hosts of Heaven." While most engraved coins were intended as personal mementos or tokens of



*These constellations were more than fanciful—sailors used them to get a fix on their location in the open sea.*

esteem, Hebrew specimens tend to be amulets with Biblical inscriptions or divine names.

### The Night Sky

Astronomers saw many different constellations in the night sky, not just the 12 familiar signs of the zodiac. These constellations were more than fanciful—sailors used them to get a fix on their location in the open sea. (Star maps were published for centuries until radio, sonar and GPS replaced them as navigational tools.)

A beautiful 1993 bronze calendar medal of unknown origin (Figure 3) shows the Northern Hemisphere. (The North Star is just below center.) A scale of degrees, along with the 12 signs of the Western zodiac, appear around the edge. The map is very similar to a colorful rendering originally printed in 1660 (Figure 4).

A black-toned brass medal (Figure 5) shows constellations around the celestial equator, with the legend “Track at Geocaching.com/Navigating by the Stars” and the date 2007. The reverse shows the 12 signs and symbols of the Western zodiac, with a sun and serial number at the center. Geocaching is a popular hobby wherein people publish GPS coordinates and leave a container of souvenirs at that location. Those who find the container take a souvenir and usually leave one in return. Private mints support the hobby by producing a variety of medals with different designs and themes.

### Zodiac Constellations

The Western zodiac is a popular theme on medals. Some pieces not only portray zodiac symbols, but also include the word



“stars.” The Israel government issued bronze and silver medals (Figure 6) in 1970 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the state lottery. The reverse shows the 12 signs of the zodiac around the lottery logo (the letter *pey* with a star in the center), plus a quote from the Talmud in Hebrew and English, OUR STAR MAKES US WISE, OUR STAR MAKES US WEALTHY. The obverse features a larger logo opposite a snake coiled over a beaker and open book, indicating that the proceeds are used to fund scientific research.

The zodiac is featured prominently on two classic Mardi

▲ **FIGURE 6:** A medal celebrates the Israel Lottery and the zodiac.

Actual Size: 44.7mm

Gras doubloons, tossed out to crowds at New Orleans’ famous carnival. An aluminum example (Figure 7) distributed by Jugs Social Club carries a coat of arms on one side and, on the other, the legend WISH UPON A STAR and the date 1982, with several stars around Sagittarius, Cancer, Pisces and the Man in the Moon. A lavender, anodized-aluminum doubloon (Figure 8) includes all 12 zodiac signs and the legend WRITTEN•IN•THE•STARS. Five-pointed stars appear below the legend, and a sun

► **FIGURE 7:** An aluminum Mardi Gras token has both celestial and zodiacal elements.

Actual Size: 39mm



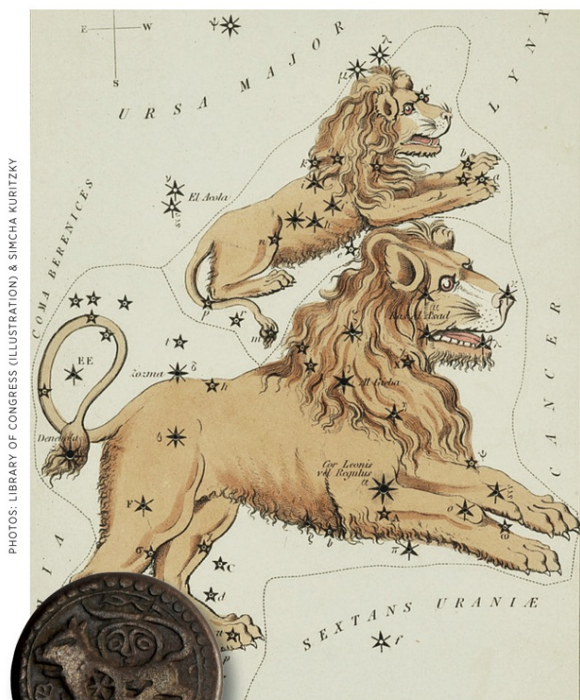
► **FIGURE 8:** Signs of the zodiac encircle the reverse of an anodized-aluminum doubloon.

Actual Size: 39mm





*A brass Chinese amulet is shaped like a cash coin—round (representing Heaven) with a square hole in the center (representing Earth).*



▲ **FIGURE 9:** More than 200 years old, this copper falus of Persia pictures Leo the Lion with a star on his chest.

Actual Size: 17.6mm

and moon occupy the center.

A Persian copper falus from the city of Khoy is dated A.H. 1189 (A.D. 1775) and shows the sign of Leo on the obverse (Figure 9). The sun, which rules over Leo, is represented by a face above the beast, and a star on the lion's chest clearly indicates the image represents a constellation, not an actual animal.

The obverse of a copper-nickel medal (Figure 10) offers a traditional view of Pisces (two fish swimming in opposite directions), while the reverse bears the actual star formation (using eight-pointed stars). A "Lucky Buddha" bronze medal

(Figure 11) presents all 12 signs of the zodiac and a depiction of the constellations. Most Lucky Buddha zodiac medals focus on only one constellation and have a 1936 copyright. This specimen, however, has no such inscription, though it bears a striking resemblance to the Salem Village piece struck for the 1933-34 Chicago World's Fair.

A brass Chinese amulet (Figure 12) shaped like a cash coin—round (representing Heaven) with a square hole in the center (representing Earth)—is patterned after the coins of Chia Ching (r. 1796-1820). The reverse depicts a crescent moon on the left, the sun on the right, a turtle encircled by a snake at the bottom, and crossed swords over the constellation Ursa Major at the top. The turtle



▲ **FIGURE 10:** This copper-nickel medal shows both the sign and the constellation Pisces.

Actual Size: 39.3mm

rules over the northern quadrant of Heaven, and Ursa Major includes the unmoving North Star, viewed by Taoists as the throne of the supreme deity Shang Ti, around which revolved the stars of lesser gods.

### Shooting Stars

The term "shooting star" can refer to meteors or comets. Meteors are debris that falls to Earth, glowing like stars as they enter its atmosphere. Comets are large balls of ice and other minerals that orbit the sun. They are not visible until they get close to the sun and the ice starts to evaporate, generating a long tail. Comets can be seen at night for several days or even weeks and frequently were viewed as signs from God or other divine beings. Astronomer Ed-



▲ **FIGURE 11:** An unusual "Lucky Buddha" medal shows all 12 signs of the zodiac rendered as constellations.

Actual Size: 35mm



*The back of an undated, 90-pfennig note pictures an old man peering into the night sky through a large telescope.*

mond Halley observed that comets had been sighted throughout history and correctly predicted that the comet of 1682 would return in 1758. Now known as Halley's comet, its most recent visitation was in 1986. The historic event was commemorated on a silver Singapore Mint medal (Figure 13) picturing numerous six-pointed stars, with one exhibiting a long tail.

A symbolic shooting star is shown on a uniface, plastic-coated brass amulet (Figure 14) displaying 12 stars above the Hebrew word *morashim*, with a large star below and a dotted trail. (The latter could represent a comet's tail or debris from a meteor.) "Morashim" (meaning "possession" or "legacy") could be a commentary on the impermanence of earthly possessions, or it might refer to the ancient belief that stars are angels who act as our agents in Heaven.

### The Solar System

Three different views of our solar system are shown on modern commemorative coins and a bank note. A West German



▲ **FIGURE 12:** A brass Chinese amulet resembles an early 19th-century cash coin.

Actual Size: 45.9mm

5 Deutsche mark from 1973 (Figure 15) celebrates the 500th anniversary of the birth of Nicolaus Copernicus, responsible for the modern-day definition of our solar system. Before him, scholars upheld Ptolemy's ancient view, wherein the planets and stars revolved around the Earth. The coin illustrates the planets, from Mercury to Saturn, and their orbits around the sun (including the moon around Earth). No other planets or moons were known in Copernicus' time. (About a century later, Johannes Kepler determined that planetary orbits were elliptical rather than circular.)

A 1994 Marshall Islands silver \$50 coin (Figure 16) shows nine planets orbiting the sun (including Pluto, which has since been downgraded to a dwarf planet, a category that includes large asteroids). Stars dot the background, with bigger, brighter ones twinkling in the foreground.

▼ **FIGURE 13:** A .999 fine silver Singapore Mint piece celebrates Halley's comet.

Actual Size: 38.6mm



A 50-tolar note released by the Slovenian Bank in Lublin (Figure 17) is dated January 15, 1992. The front features a portrait of physicist Jurij Vega, while the back has a line drawing of a building and a geometric design superimposed on a stylized representation of our solar system. An asteroid discovered on July 30, 1997, is named after Vega.

### Astronomy

The back of an undated, 90-pfennig note issued around 1920 by the German town of Rathenow (Figure 18) pictures an old man peering into the night sky through a large telescope. The inscription translates, "Totally quiet and secluded, a man gazes nightly at Venus." An example of notgeld (emergency money), the small note also offers a multi-color view of the historic town.



PHOTOS: SIMCHA KURTZKY

▲ **FIGURE 14:** A brass amulet carries the Hebrew word "morashim" and what appears to be a shooting star.

Actual Size: 30mm



*The reverse depicts a man and woman striding confidently toward a figure representing the future of space exploration.*



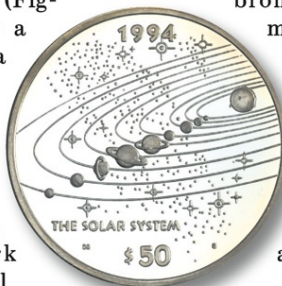
▲ **FIGURE 15:** A 1973 West German 5 Deutsche mark observes the 500th anniversary of the birth of Nicolaus Copernicus.

Actual Size: 29mm

### Space Exploration

Although space programs are a long way off from interstellar flight, we still use the word “astronaut,” which means “sailor to stars.” Several issues commemorate man’s efforts to explore the solar system. Gold, silver and bronze U.S. Mint medals commemorate the Young Astronauts program; the bronze specimen (Figure 19) depicts a space shuttle on a field of stars and stripes and an eagle atop the program’s stylized logo.

Israel issued medals to mark two individual space launches. Pieces in silver and bronze (Figure 20) commemorate the August 5, 1961, launch of *Shavit* (“Comet”) for meteorological research. The obverse shows a rocket lifting off from a candelabra (symbol of the State of Israel) and climbing skyward toward irregularly shaped stars. The inscription in English and Hebrew reads *THERE SHALL COME A/STAR OUT OF JACOB/NUMBERS 24:17*. The reverse carries a rendering of a



▲ **FIGURE 16:** The solar system is shown on a 1994 silver Marshall Islands \$50 coin.

Actual Size: 38.8mm

solar panel, an olive branch and an atom, with the inscription *SCIENCE/IN THE/SERVICE/OF PEACE*. Approximately 2,276 bronze and 3,125 silver medals were produced.

The second medal (Figure 21) was released in 1988. The obverse shows a cloudless Eastern Hemisphere, with an orbiting satellite and the same Biblical quotation as that on the previous piece. The other side reveals the Earth’s horizon, with *OFFEQ-1* in English and Hebrew, and the bilingual legend *FIRST ISRAELI SATELLITE 1988*. The piece, with a limited mintage of 1,070, contains 1 troy ounce of palladium. Roughly another 5,000 medals were struck in gold and brass.

The Society of Medalists’ 67th issue (Figure 22) honors the Space Age. Issued in May 1963 and designed by Karen Worth, this large, bronze medal



▲ **FIGURE 17:** A 1992 Slovenian 50-tolar note offers a stylized rendering of the solar system on the back.

Actual Size: 131.5 x 66mm

features a man superimposed on a large, five-pointed star with a Latin legend that translates “Aspiring to the Stars.” The reverse depicts a man and woman striding confidently toward a figure representing the future of space exploration.



▲ **FIGURE 18:** This 90-pfennig German notgeld pictures an aged astronomer.

Actual Size: 89.4 x 62mm





► **FIGURE 19:** This 1988 bronze medal commemorating the Young Astronauts program pictures a space shuttle and numerous stars.

Actual Size: 38mm



▼ **FIGURE 20:** A bronze medal marks the 1961 launch of Israel's meteorological rocket *Shavit*. Actual Size: 59.7mm



▲ **FIGURE 21:** Struck in palladium, this medal commemorates the first Israeli satellite. Actual Size: 36.9mm

▼ **FIGURE 22:** A 1963 Society of Medalists' issue pays tribute to the Space Age. Actual Size: 72.8mm

