

SCULPTOR SAINT-GAUDENS AND THE COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION

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Irish born Augustus Saint-Gaudens was one of the many art luminaries and advisors who helped Frank D. Millet, Director of Art at the Columbian Exposition, create a stunning visual display in Jackson Park, Chicago, in 1893. Perhaps the best reminder of Saint-Gaudens for devotees of the fair is the official award medal that some have assumed he had totally designed; an example is shown here, obverse (left) and reverse (right).

Visiting New Hampshire this summer we set our GPS navigation destination to Cornish Mills just a couple of miles from the Saint-Gaudens home off Route 12A. We expected to see a sample of the Columbian award medal but found much more.

We learned from the excellent ranger guide that the ramshackle summer rental Saint-Gaudens found in 1885 had been a spacious old tavern built about 1800 and abandoned when the main carriage road failed to pass the front door. The family loved the verdant hills and grounds near the Connecticut River and, as the summers rolled by, converted the barn to a studio and the tavern to a home. Saint-Gaudens ultimately purchased the property in 1892 and lived at Aspet, his name for the estate, the same name as his father's French birthplace. It became his permanent home after complete renovation in 1900. Today the estate is maintained by the National Park Service as the Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site.



Lithe and larger-than-life model of "Diana" at the Saint-Gaudens Little Studio



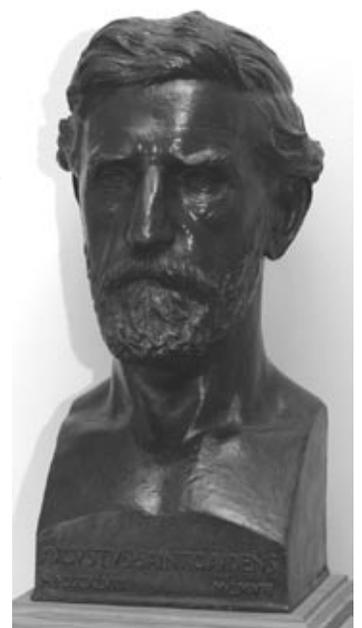
The 1893 official Columbian Exposition award medal in bronze with black velvet holder



Saint-Gaudens' converted tavern outside Cornish, NH, in 2005

A tour of the home begins on the breezy veranda looking west to Mt. Ascutney and continues inside to each of the artistically decorated rooms on the first floor; the windows look out upon the formal flower gardens with gilt statuary. A piece in the house that Saint-Gaudens highly prized is a wall-mounted Roman bas relief of a woman in flowing robes that look real but are of intricately carved marble; Saint-Gaudens mastered this difficult technique and also used it in his design for the beautiful \$10 and \$20 U.S. gold pieces of 1907-33.

The guide then invited us to stroll the grounds, studio, and sculpture galleries. Visiting the Little Studio, we found our first Columbian treasure: the full-sized plaster model of "Diana." This graceful statue—cast in bronze, fitted with a long arrow, and gilded—originally adorned the top of old Madison Square Garden in New York City. For the fair of 1893, it was moved to the top of the Agricultural Building becoming a beacon and icon for millions of attendees. A new version was designed, cast, and mounted for Madison Square Garden in 1892. Unfortunately, the original bronze was lost



Bronze bust of Saint-Gaudens by his assistant Henry Hering, 1908. Located in the Visitor's Center

in the disastrous fires of 1894, which plagued the empty fairgrounds in Chicago.

The Gallery is a set of three buildings surrounding a reflecting pool courtyard, which houses various displays of Saint-Gaudens' artwork. A bas relief of Robert Louis Stevenson and a large bronze bust of Abraham Lincoln are particularly appealing. Displayed in a side showcase is the second Columbian treasure which was new to us: Saint-Gaudens' rejected reverse design of the Columbian Exposition award medal; an example of the medal as struck is also shown. His obverse design was retained. We took pictures and read the display captions carefully. Wanting to learn more, we met with the site's curator, Henry Duffey, whose office is in a large steel building situated in the woods away from the main grounds. From him we learned that Saint-Gaudens' reverse design was rejected by the U.S. Mint acceptance committee because it depicted a nude male and that Saint-Gaudens' chief competitor for coin designs, Charles E. Barber, was chosen to redesign the reverse of the award medal. Saint-Gaudens, an agreeable man, never forgave Barber, and they exchanged barbs for years; the animosity came to an end when Saint-Gaudens died of cancer in 1907. Duffey also said that the Saint-Gaudens papers are located at Dartmouth College in nearby Hanover, New Hampshire.

A few days later in Maine, we visited our friend and Columbian coin researcher Jim Emple, who related much more about the controversial history of the Columbian award medal.

The medal has been extensively studied in numismatic circles, and Emple provided a very thorough twenty-page article by Thayer Tolles titled *"A Bit of Artistic Idealism": Augustus Saint-Gaudens' World's Columbian Exposition Commemorative Presentation Medal, 1997*. In summary, this article explains that the Treasury Department first asked ten artists including Saint-Gaudens and Daniel Chester French, creator of the huge Statue of the Republic in the Grand Basin, to submit designs in 1891; the ten responded unanimously that the compensation offered was too low for consideration. Next, a committee of two consisting of Saint-Gaudens and Barber, long-time Chief Engraver of the U.S. Mint, served as a jury to choose a design from a public competition; they garnered more than 300 proposals, but none was selected. Saint-Gaudens and Barber had conflicting views concerning the content and artistic form for the award medal and over who was competent to produce an acceptable design. Barber digressed and designed new versions of the dime, quarter, and half-dollar in 1892, and separately, John Boyd Thacher, chairman of the WCE Executive Committee on Awards, offered Saint-Gaudens a substantial increase in commission compensation to submit a design. Saint-Gaudens agreed and sent his design in secrecy and on time to the Mint after the fair closed in October of 1893, but details of the design were leaked and it was redrafted crudely by others. Controversy was born in the press. To stop the contentious debate, the Mint rejected the reverse side design and asked Saint-Gaudens for an alternative; Saint-Gaudens blithely agreed and submitted a design featuring only text in order to "avoid all erotic insinuation." The Mint rejected this new offering just four days later and accepted Barber's design that had been commissioned in secret. Saint-Gaudens railed that this was an illegal government action breaking a contract but admitted defeat by late 1894. The final medal and its velvet-lined hinged aluminum box were both struck for the Mint by the Scoville Manufacturing Company, Waterbury, Connecticut. Upon close inspection, at the bottom on each side is engraved the name of its sculptor. One critic of the day lamented that the design from two sculptors was "not up to American numismatic art" standards.



Augustus Saint-Gaudens is a revered sculptor, innovator, craftsman, and artist. A U.S. postage stamp honoring him was issued in 1940 (left). Many books have been written about Saint-Gaudens and his art; those which mention his contributions to the Columbian Exposition are listed in the two-volume bibliography on the 1893 fair published by The Book Stops Here, Albuquerque, New Mexico.



Cast of the rejected reverse of the Columbian award medal showing the nude "Spirit of America." Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site



Augustus Saint-Gaudens

Facsimile of Saint-Gaudens' signature and self portrait caricature