

Golden Touch

Augustus Saint-Gaudens' coin designs are testimonies

to his numismatic talent and artistic creativity.

A CENTURY AGO, a dynamic President and a talented sculptor embarked on an ambitious project to improve the aesthetics of our country's coinage.

The President was Theodore Roosevelt, whose outsized personality and progressive politics ushered America into the 20th century. The sculptor was Augustus Saint-Gaudens, one of America's foremost artists, acclaimed for the evocative realism of his monumental works. Their collaboration brought unprecedented artistry to U.S. coins and left a golden legacy treasured by generations of numismatists.

Saint-Gaudens was best known for his memorial sculptures, including the Sherman Monument near New York's Central Park, seated and standing statues of Lincoln in Chicago, and the Shaw Memorial on Boston Common. But he also was familiar with numismatic art, having worked on various cameos, portrait reliefs and medals (including one for Roosevelt's second inauguration). Soon after Roosevelt's reelection, the President had opined that "our coinage is of atrocious hideousness," and in 1905 he enlisted Saint-Gaudens "to try for a really good coinage."

The sculptor embraced the project enthusiastically, telling Roosevelt he had "hit the nail on the head with re-

gard to the coinage." Unfortunately, Saint-Gaudens' health frustrated his ambitions, and he barely was able to complete designs for the gold eagle (\$10) and double eagle (\$20) before he died on August 3, 1907.

Saint-Gaudens never saw the final versions of his coins, because the Mint had trouble adapting his designs to allow for quick and effective striking. The original plan for Roosevelt's "pet iniquity" had been to produce coins in high relief that harked back to the issues of ancient Greece. But, after a limited production run of high-relief double eagles (each requiring three strikes instead of the usual one), the designs ultimately were made considerably shallower for full production.

Even in modified form, Saint-Gaudens' designs are extremely impressive. The \$10 obverse features an allegorical portrayal of Liberty wearing an Indian headdress (added at Roosevelt's suggestion); a standing eagle is on the reverse. The \$20 design is a study in motion: on the obverse, a full-length, female figure strides forward, seeming to step out of the confines of

the coin, while an eagle flies across the reverse. Art historian Cornelius Vermeule was effusive in his praise, writing in his 1971 book *Numismatic Art in America* that the coins "both burst as artistic skyrockets in the horizons of our artistic creativity."

The designs were modified slightly in 1908, after legislation required the addition of IN GOD WE TRUST to the reverse. Roosevelt originally opposed the inclusion of the motto, considering it irreverent to mix divinity with commerce. Saint-Gaudens' coins were produced until 1933, when the United States abandoned the gold standard and its wonderful gold coinage along with it.

Even in their heyday, the Saint-Gaudens coins saw only limited circulation. Eagles typically had small mintages, and issues were sporadic after 1916. Double eagles, America's largest coins, generally were gold reserves or used in large financial transactions, and the coins' subsequent melting left the series with many rarities. The 1933 double eagle stands at the summit of

► Augustus Saint-Gaudens never saw the final versions of his coins. On the obverse of this high-relief 1907 double eagle, a female figure appears to be walking out of the coin.

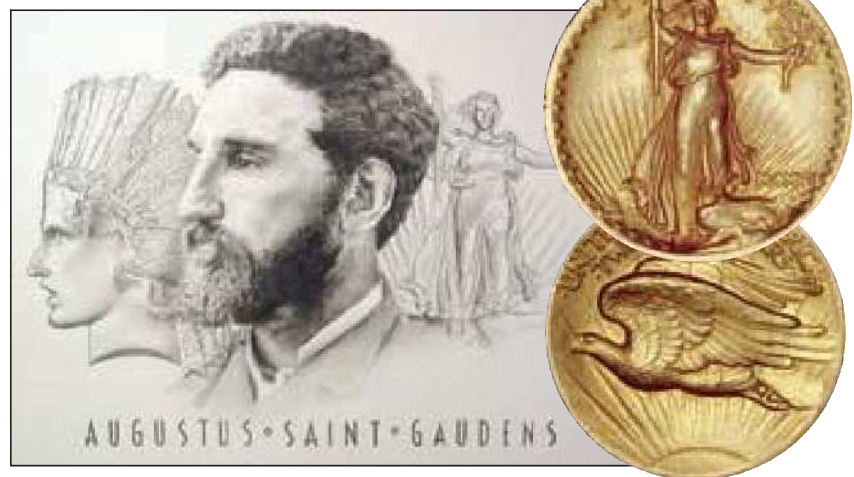


ILLUSTRATION: CHARLES DAUGHTREY
COIN PHOTOS: ANA ARCHIVES

GETTING STARTED ■ *continued*

scarcity: never officially issued, the one specimen in private hands sold for a record \$7.59 million in 2002. Another 10 examples, confiscated from the family of late Philadelphia jeweler and gold dealer Israel Switt, are held by the U.S. Mint.

Still, there are lots of affordable options for collectors who are seeking examples of Saint-Gaudens' coins. Many dates, especially among double eagles, are available for little more than their bullion value. Even for common dates, prices do start to pick up in higher uncirculated grades, so (as always) it's worth seeking high-quality specimens with bright luster, strong and detailed strikes, and excellent eye appeal.

Whatever coins you choose, it's easy to appreciate the appeal of the Saint-Gaudens eagle and double eagle. The sculptor's creations truly matched President Roosevelt's vision, setting an enduring standard of excellence in numismatic art.

sanders@money.org