

## A Century of Medals, and Still Counting: Anniversaries of the Jews in America

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One aspect of the anniversary celebrations of American Jewry (in 1904–05, 1954–55, and 2004–05) was the production of commemorative medallions. An examination of their content, of what is known about the artists who designed them, and of the circumstances in which they were commissioned provides a window into the process whereby American Jewry reflected upon both the antiquity of their settlement and the significance of their dual identity as Americans and Jews.

The idea of celebrating round-numbered anniversaries originated in antiquity — the Romans, for example, put “X” or “XX” on coins, denoting the number of years their magistrates or emperors had been in office; the theoretical one-thousandth anniversary of the Roman state was commemorated in the fourth century C.E. However, apart from the millennium of the year 1000, the idea of doing this sort of arithmetical-historical calculus seems to have been largely absent during the European Middle Ages until the papacy during the fourteenth century began to imitate the Hebrew biblical jubilee cycle of fifty-year intervals.<sup>1</sup> Universities, often with religious affiliations, picked up the round-numbered commemorative habit in the sixteenth century, and from the seventeenth century onward yet another religious group, the Protestants, began regularly to memorialize the centennial anniversaries of their Reformation. Pertinent to our subject, moreover, all of these postmedieval cohorts increasingly commemorated their events by the issuance of medals.

Medals imitate but are subject to fewer restrictions than coins of the realm and therefore may be made of any size or substance and at the initiative of any person or institution; they are not, as coins remain even today, the exclusive prerogative of sovereigns and states. Medals are metallic monuments, like statues, but are far less expensive to manufacture. They are readily replicable and hence are available to be distributed by their sponsors as honors, as signs of common identity among self-defined groups, as personal gifts, as informative media and propaganda, and much later, especially by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as commercially available memorabilia. A medal held in the hand has substance, projects a sense of permanence, and — by virtue of a still-persistent analogy with coinage, its original model — a *caché*, a sense of official importance. Remarkably though, in America, and indeed in Europe, medals commemorating *national* anniversaries were a very late development. Not until the centennials of the American and French revolutions in 1876 and 1879,

respectively, were anniversaries of these signal events occasions for substantial public celebration or for the issue of commemorative medals. Celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America in 1892 was the occasion for a World's Fair and for the manufacture of hundreds of different medals, but there had been no precedent at the three-hundredth anniversary; the event was a novel project. Thus, the decision to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jewish settlement in America in 1905 may be seen as paralleling an impulse that had religious antecedents of many hundreds of years but nationalist precedents that were very recent indeed; one may say they were a modern development.

According to an official account,<sup>2</sup> the entire project for having a 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration was first broached in late February 1905 both at a grass-roots level in New York City at the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel, and at a national level at the thirteenth meeting of the American Jewish Historical Society in Cincinnati. Specific planning for public celebrations, which were to focus on the official Dutch acceptance of the settlement of the Jews in New York in April 1655, then began in April 1905 and proceeded expeditiously within a committee of New Yorkers under the aegis of Louis Marshall. The highlight of the commemoration was a grand event on Thanksgiving Day of the same year, held in New York's Carnegie Hall in the presence of luminaries both of the Jewish-American world and of local, state, and national secular authorities. Ex-President Grover Cleveland and banker and philanthropist Jacob Schiff, among many others, addressed those gathered at the event. A national general committee was also formed to coordinate the numerous celebratory events and speeches that occurred that same year elsewhere in the United States. It may be noted that the idea of a commemorative medal was not part of the original plan. Rather, a public monument was to have been erected at Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Ninth Street in New York at the southeast corner of Central Park, but this intention was set aside in November 1905 so that the funds already collected for the monument might be diverted to the relief of Jews then suffering from pogroms in Russia.<sup>3</sup> Only then did the idea of a medal as a sort of alternative memorial emerge. Schiff defrayed the entire cost of this project, which involved a \$1,200 fee to the medalist, \$3.25 each for the 284 medals struck in bronze, \$10 each for the 36 silver examples, \$300 each for the two gold specimens, presumably an additional few hundreds of dollars for the processing of dies to strike the medals, and incidental manufacturing and packaging costs. The gold medals were presented to President Theodore Roosevelt and to ex-President Grover Cleveland. The silver specimens were given to other dignitaries and selected Jewish and secular historical societies and museums. The bronzes were distributed similarly to lesser officials who had organized the public celebration and to lesser collections and organizations.<sup>4</sup>

The monument originally conceived was to have been the work of Augustus Saint-Gaudens, then America's preeminent sculptor, and Isidore Konti (1862–1938), a Jewish immigrant.<sup>5</sup> After the abandonment of the plan for a monument, however, it was Konti who alone designed the medal that came to be produced for the celebration. Konti, the second of eleven children, had been born to Hungarian Jewish parents temporarily living in Vienna. He was raised in Szombathely in Hungary but, after his artistic talent was recognized, he returned at age sixteen to study at the Imperial Academy in Vienna. After two years in Rome and sculptural commissions from 1888 to 1892 in Vienna, Hamburg, Budapest, and Berlin, he immigrated to the United States in 1892, just in time to gain employment within the circle of Saint-Gaudens as a sculptor on the enormous Chicago World's Fair project of 1892–1893. Thereafter, he became prominent in American artistic circles, the recipient of many private and public commissions, a popular and engaged individual, the peer of the prominent artists of his and earlier generations, but also the beloved mentor of many talented artists soon to rise to eminence in the United States. Konti's sculpture was largely modeled in the round, ranging from memorial tablets and small statuary to bas-reliefs, architectural elements, private funerary, and major public monuments. He made but three assays into the medallion field, the medal for the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1905 being his first. This was followed by the *Isidor Memorial Medal*, a prize commissioned by the National Academy of Design in 1907; and *There's No Place Like Home* in 1910, one of twelve medals issued by the Circle of Friends of the Medallion, a private art collectors' group. It may be noted that, apart from portrait busts of his beloved mother, Rosalie Konti, and of Emmanuel Lehman, one of the founders of the investment banking firm Lehman Brothers, the medal of 1905 seems alone among more than one hundred of Konti's published works to have in any way been linked to his own Jewish origins.

Konti modeled the two-sided 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary medal in the beaux arts style pioneered in France in the late nineteenth century that was nearing its peak of popularity in Europe and the United States. It was reproduced with a three-inch diameter and displayed the soft, low relief and graceful deployment of allegorical female figures so characteristic of the medallion genre in this period.<sup>6</sup> On the obverse side of the medal are standing figures of Liberty bearing a sword and of Justice as a seated figure holding a scroll of the law, both elegantly draped and basking in rays of sunlight, triumphant over a nude and cowering male figure in the foreground, representing Intolerance defeated. A circular inscription states: "Commemorating the 250 Anniversary of Jewish Settlement in the United States." The sculptor's full name, Isidore Konti Sc(ulptor), also appears on this side. The reverse of the medal features a standing figure of History in flowing garments, holding a tablet inscribed with the dates 1655 and 1905 and protected by a hovering American eagle; a young tree is also shown taking root

in American soil. The inscription here is *ההירות מולדת השמים צדק ומשפט מכון כסא*ה, which may be freely translated as: “God Gives Birth to Freedom, Righteousness and Justice are the Foundation of His Throne”; the latter phrase is a variation of Psalms 97:2 (where *כסאו* is the final word). Once again, the artist’s name is recorded here as “IK 1905.” This medal captures in both sentiment and style the optimistic perspective of well-assimilating American Jews of the period — the perspective of both the artist and the patrons of the commemorative project, nearly all of whom were Jews of either German or long-established Sephardic origin. The defeat of Intolerance is presented as a *fait accompli*; the then-current social reality of the millions of newly arriving poor and persecuted eastern European immigrants is not in evidence.

Fewer than fifty years later, the idea of the “First Settlement” had been moved back a year to coincide not, as previously, with the acceptance by the Dutch West India Company of Jews as permanent residents in New Amsterdam in 1655, but with the actual date of arrival of the Jews in the colony in the previous year. With the path of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration already trodden, the idea for a 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration was bruited as early as 1950, and the American-Jewish Tercentenary Committee to plan its details was established by 1952 under the leadership of Ralph Samuel, former president of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies and chairman of the American Jewish Committee.<sup>7</sup> A subordinate group, the Tercentenary Fine Arts Committee, was appointed with Nancy Proskauer Dryfoos (1918–1991) as chair; it organized an extensive touring exhibition devoted exclusively to contemporary art by more than one hundred American Jewish artists. Ranging from drawings and paintings to sculptures large and small, the traveling exhibition contained much material that was “definitely Jewish” in its thematic content but also landscapes and more abstract works; it toured the country during 1954–1955. Dryfoos, herself a noted and prolific sculptor in both stone and metal, a fellow of the National Sculpture Society, and later the president of the National Association of Women Artists, was also commissioned to create a commemorative medal by the American-Jewish Tercentenary Committee. As was the case with Konti, Dryfoos had had no prior track record of medallion production before this commission and, indeed, she is known to have had only two subsequent medal commissions, both in 1959. One was a portrait of her own father, Judge Joseph M. Proskauer, for an eponymous award of the United Jewish Appeal–Federation of Jewish Philanthropies. The other was a portrait of Naomi Lehman for an award by a memorial foundation to individuals active in Jewish child care services.<sup>8</sup> The tercentenary memorial Dryfoos designed was manufactured by the Medallion Art Company of New York as a two-sided medal three inches in diameter, but for reasons that are obscure, it was produced only in bronze, one thousand pieces being made available for distribution to Jewish and non-Jewish dignitaries and institutions.<sup>9</sup> The iconography was constrained by a decision to

feature the official logo of the celebration, designed by William Metzger, as the device on the reverse side of the medal: a modernistic menorah meant to evoke the American flag, with its candles representing the stripes and five-pointed stars as its flames. An inscription surrounding the image says: "American Jewish Tercentenary 1654–1954." The medal's obverse design is of a family unit, consisting of a man, woman, and child standing together in front of a map of the United States in a style that may be described as owing much to the muscular "socialist realism" that since the 1930s had characterized public monumental sculpture throughout the United States and Europe. The inscription, "Man's Opportunities and Responsibilities Under Freedom," also presents a generic quality that seems but little related to the particularity of Jewish experience in America. The only concession to Judaism on this side are the dates in Hebrew, התי"ד-התשי"ד, (5414–5714) and the medalist's monogram, "ND."

Profiting from earlier experiences, by 2002, well in advance of the 2004 event, the Commission for Commemorating 350 Years of American Jewish History was formed of national and Jewish historical and archival institutions, and "Celebrate 350, Jewish Life in America 1654–2004," chaired by Robert S. Rifkind, became the umbrella body for the planning and promotion of educational and commemorative programming nationwide.<sup>10</sup> However, the medal ultimately created to commemorate this anniversary had a somewhat different, less formal initiation than those of fifty and one hundred years earlier. In 2003, during a telephone conversation, this essay's author and Mel Wacks, a person experienced in the production and sale of medals of Jewish interest, explored the desirability of a medal to celebrate the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary. As numismatists, both were familiar with the two preceding medals and aware that issuing a third in the sequence would be both logical and desirable.<sup>11</sup> The reissue of a medal that some years earlier had depicted the moment in 1654 when the ship from Recife had landed in New Amsterdam's harbor seemed one option, but it was evident that there was more to commemorate than a single "Plymouth Rock" moment some 350 years before. The Jews in America had not simply arrived, they had interacted with, and indeed, influenced the development and identity of the United States for hundreds of years.

From this conversation, two ideas emerged: first, that any such medal ought somehow to evoke the ongoing relationship between the United States and its Jewish population; and second, that insofar as possible, the principal designs to be chosen for the medal should avoid certain traditional icons (the menorah, the Statue of Liberty, the Liberty Bell, the Star of David) whose frequent use on medals issued by Jewish organizations over the years had somewhat depleted their original symbolic force. It was also clear that a commemorative medal could be manufactured either as a private venture to be offered commercially for sale or, as the prior two medals had been, produced exclusively as an official issue of the umbrella Celebrate 350 Committee.

In the end, after extensive consultation with Celebrate 350, it was decided to blend the two approaches. The medal would be privately designed and produced but with the imprimatur of the Celebrate 350 body, which would ultimately acquire and distribute the majority of the medals. Thus, official permission was granted to imprint the official logo of the celebration, a miniature menorah, on the medals that were to be made.

A small committee consisting of this essay's author; Daniel M. Friedenberg, doyen of American Jewish medal experts; Robert S. Rifkind, chair of Celebrate 350; and Mel Wacks was formed and set out to identify an outstanding artist and suitable designs for the proposed medal. At this point, the generous financial support of David Berley<sup>12</sup> enabled this committee to announce a monetary prize of \$2,500 to encourage the submission of artistic drawings and models from which the final designs would be selected. The explicit rules for this contest required, first, that the abovementioned symbolic clichés not be used as principal iconographic elements and, second, that the medal's overall program address the engagement of Jews with America over time and not simply depict their first moment of arrival on these shores. Apart from these constraints, the committee did not mandate any particular iconographic program, preferring to allow artists the broadest latitude for expression. By early 2004, a design emerged that met these criteria admirably and artistically and that, with slight modification, the committee finally accepted and had produced. The artist who conceived the winning designs was Dana Krinsky, a young Israeli woman (b. 1969) who was trained at St. Martin's College of Art and Design in London and at Avni Institute of Art in Tel Aviv. Her preferred medium has been small sculpture and medals; her work has garnered several prizes and been well received in private and public collections. She has represented Israel at international congresses and lives, works, and teaches art in Israel.<sup>13</sup>

The 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary medal of 2004, once again three inches in diameter, presents texts and images that illustrate the relationship between America and its Jews. The obverse design depicts a group of immigrants, their variegated Old World costumes hinted at, clustered together as if at the prow of a boat, expectantly facing a new horizon across waves and lit by stars, the waves and stars also suggesting an American flag. The text of Leviticus, "Proclaim Liberty Throughout All the Land," chosen as the motto for the Liberty Bell,<sup>14</sup> is inscribed, along with its Hebrew original וְקִרְאתֶם דֶּרֶךְ בְּאֵרֶץ. The reverse of the medal displays a bold but nonspecific cityscape, an image that also echoes the crenellations of Jerusalem; Jewish settlement in America, as in the Old World, has long been predominantly urban. The words "350 Years of Jewish Life in America, 1654–2004," together with a small incused image of the menorah logo of the national celebration announce the larger theme. In the background, excerpts appear from the stirring words of George Washington, addressed in a letter to the Jews of Newport in 1790, which assure them, and subsequent

immigrant generations, that America offers a tolerant and safe haven to the “stock of Abraham” and to all who “demean themselves as good citizens.”<sup>15</sup> A total of one thousand bronze, ninety-four silver, and sixty-two gold-plated silver medals were struck by the Highland Mint of Melbourne, Florida,<sup>16</sup> of which the majority were distributed to officials, dignitaries, and institutions, as with previous commemorations, primarily by the Celebrate 350 Committee and the American Jewish Historical Society. In fact, a gold medal was not only the public gift of the Celebrate 350 Committee to President George W. Bush on the occasion of his attendance at the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary National Dinner on September 14, 2005, in Washington, DC, but this image also served as the principal icon displayed on the podium as backdrop and on the covers of the souvenir program for this festive event.

The styles and formulae of medallic commemoration seen as appropriate in 1905, 1954, and 2004 appear to have been quite varied, even as the situations and identities of their patrons, artists, and manufacturers were indeed rather different. The organizing committee of 1905 entrusted the design of its medal to an immigrant whose artistic training in Europe favored a level of abstraction in representation that was also fashionable among American elites as well. Actual people, Jewish or even American, were therefore not to be depicted directly. Rather, the participation of Jews in America for a quarter of a millennium was presented as having been enabled by the general beneficence fostered by the freedom and justice that were conceived as the essential and defining features of the United States. One may readily imagine that those American Jews who approved this imagery, many themselves immigrants, were sensitive, as was the artist, to their good fortune in dwelling in America at a time when the very funds that had so recently been collected to memorialize American Jewry needed to be urgently diverted for the relief of European pogrom victims. Since biblical quotations, even ones in Hebrew characters, were well within the normal range of Christian medals of the age, Jewish particularism was granted no place in the iconography of the medal produced in 1905 to celebrate 250 years of Jewish settlement in America.

The medal of 1954, too, seems to have eschewed reference to recognizable Jews in America, offering as a solitary Jewish image an abstract menorah more suggestive of an adaptable modernity than of historical tradition. The artist, born in America, though seemingly well established here both socially and artistically, clearly chose human figures, a map, and an inscription that all emphasized the secular aspects of the hyphenated “Jewish-American” identity. Once again, this time in the aftermath of World War II and the then still hardly discussed Holocaust, the committee that commissioned this medal approved the graphic expression of the loyalty, gratitude, and responsibilities that American Jews owed their adopted land.

The medal devised for the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary offers a different perspective, in part because it was designed by a non-American but probably mainly because of the greater self-assurance of present-day Jews, both those who commissioned the medal and those of the committee who approved it as a central symbol of the main celebratory event. The notion that Jews had originated as immigrants from abroad, that they had actively sought out a new horizon, and that they had arrived wearing costumes suggesting the diversity of their origins are themes that found no place on the earlier medals and whose presence reflects a greater security in their sense of identity than was possible for Jews in America fifty or one hundred years ago. The urban skyline, evoking both the crenelations of Jerusalem's walls and great American cities, is still another feature suggesting the confidence that present-day Jews enjoy in their identities as U.S. citizens who have an additional ancient heritage.

Medals serve many purposes as honors, rewards, and commemorative souvenirs — among others — but above all, they are themselves active participants in a centuries-old tactile tradition of personal gift. Having passed from hand to hand, from donor to recipient, they are intimate at initial presentation and thus incorporate some sense of that moment in later memory. Unlike larger and more imposing monuments, fortunate recipients personally possess them and derive private pride and ongoing pleasure from them. Nevertheless, the very notion of capturing a historic moment, of compressing and encompassing its significance within a disc of metal, is an idea that, having resonated for centuries, itself provides and reinforces a sense of continuity. These three medals, though issued over the course of a century, concur that it is the American promise of freedom and opportunity that has drawn Jewish immigrants to these shores. Viewed retrospectively as historical artifacts, they might be held simply to reflect time-specific traditions of history and of iconography. Seen as part of a medallic *series* yet to be completed, however, they may also serve as markers of the evolving identity of American Jewry.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Philip Attwood, Curator of Medals, British Museum; Dr. Alan Stahl, Curator of Numismatics, Princeton University Library: personal communications. J.O. Sweeny and R. Turfboer, "Tempus in Nummis," *Numismatics International*, Volume 2, 1992, pp. 157, ff.

<sup>2</sup>The 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the settlement of the Jews in the United States, addresses delivered at Carnegie Hall, New York, on Thanksgiving Day 1905, together with other selected addresses and proceedings, 1906, pp. v-x and frontispiece illustration.

<sup>3</sup>Dr. Uriel Paul Federbush, “The First National Jewish-American Medal,” in *The Numismatist*, May 1976, p. 968, as documented in archives of the American Jewish Historical Society, minutes of the Anniversary Executive Committee, October 16, 1905, and December 11, 1905.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 968–969, Archives AJHS, February 1, 1906.

<sup>5</sup>Mary Jean Smith Madigan, *The Sculpture of Isidore Konti 1862–1938*, Exhibition Catalog: The Hudson River Museum, January 26–March 30, 1975, 1974, unpaginated, with 119 illustrations. This is the principal source for information on Konti, his personal history, and career. See also National Sculpture Society, *Contemporary American Sculpture*, 1929, pp.185–187

<sup>6</sup>For an appreciation of Konti and the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary medal, see Barbara A. Baxter, *The Beaux-Arts Medal in America*, New York: The American Numismatic Society, 1987, pp. 72–73. The manufacturer of this medal is not given in any reference available to this author or to those who have previously recorded its history. Dick Johnson, an expert in the history of American medallic production facilities, suggests Joseph K. Davison’s Sons (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), The Robbins Company (Attleboro, Massachusetts), or Bastian Brothers (Rochester, New York) as the likeliest to have manufactured the Konti medal.

<sup>7</sup>Cited in Dr. Uriel Paul Federbush, “Three Hundred Years: The Second National Jewish-American Medal,” in *The Numismatist*, December 1977, pp. 2476–2477, as documented in the Archives of the American Jewish Historical Society, Papers of the American Jewish Tercentenary Committee, 1953.

<sup>8</sup>Information concerning the career and art works of Nancy P. Dryfoos, including personal correspondence, art brochures, photographs, and newspaper clippings, is available in the holdings of the Archives of American Art in the Smithsonian Institution. Much of this material is duplicated in the files of the American Jewish Archives.

<sup>9</sup>Federbush, “Three Hundred Years,” 1977, p. 2480.

<sup>10</sup>The Final Report of the Celebrate 350 Committee may be found online at <http://www.americanjewisharchives.org/aja/links/Cel350.FinalReport.pdf>. See, particularly, pp. 3–5 for the organization of the committee and pp. 14–16 for a partial listing of recipients of the commemorative medal.

<sup>11</sup>This essay’s author has first-hand familiarity with the sequence of ideas, planning, and actions concerning the creation of the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary medal. That familiarity has been supplemented by personal communications from Mel Wacks. See also Mel Wacks, “350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Jewish Life in America Medal,” May 1, 2003, accessed online at <http://www.amuseum.org/jahf/news/newmedal.html>.

<sup>12</sup>President, Walter & Samuels, Inc., New York.

<sup>13</sup>Additional information about Dana Krinsky, as well as illustrations of many of her other works of art, may be found online at her website: <http://www.math.tau.ac.il/~shimsh/medals.html>.

<sup>14</sup>Though the fame of the Liberty Bell dates from the time of the American Revolution, the bell (with its later famous inscription) was commissioned in 1751 by the Pennsylvania Provincial Assembly, cast in London, and delivered to be hung in the State House, only later to become Independence Hall, in 1752. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed., Volume 7, 1986, p 332.

<sup>15</sup>The full text of Washington’s letter and that of the Newport Congregation’s congratulatory letter to the president that preceded it on August 17, 1790, and that indeed originated much of the since famous characterization of the United States as giving “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance,” may be found in *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States 1654–1875*, Morris U. Schappes, ed., New York: The Citadel Press, 1950, pp. 79–81.

<sup>16</sup>Mel Wacks, personal communication.