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THE YALE UNIVERSITY COLLECTION OF COINS AND MEDALS

Yale's collection of coins and medals is among the University's oldest, dating to the early years of the nineteenth century, and is thus older than the Art Gallery which now houses it. Already by 1863 its origins were obscure, but the holdings numbered some 3,000 coins. These were published with three ends in view:

*“to help collectors in the arrangement and study of their own coins ... this can be only partially gained, owing to the limited space at our command, and to the experimental nature of the undertaking;” “as the most practicable way of expressing our thanks to the donors, and assuring them that their gifts are appreciated and preserved;” “we have desired to bring the collection more seriously to the notice of numismatists and others, in order that they may know wherein it is wanting, and that those so disposed may have an opportunity of adding to its usefulness. The study of coins as aids and illustrations of History and the Arts is daily better appreciated, and there can be no place better fitted for the preservation of a collection for that purpose than a college Library.”*

Apparently from its beginnings the coins were housed in the University Library, and when Sterling Memorial Library was built in 1930 a dedicated coin room, with walk-in vault, was included. For many years the collection was managed by members of the Classics Department faculty, but by 1965 there remained no faculty members with suitable expertise, and the collection was put in charge of a part-time, non-staff curator with predictable consequences. In 1996 he departed as well. By the end of the millennium maintenance of the collection had become burdensome to the library, and space was at a premium; the library sought means of managing the collection elsewhere on campus, and in 2001 jurisdiction over the collection was transferred from the Library to the University Art Gallery. In 2002 the present curator was named, with a joint appointment in the University's Department of Classics. In 2003 the collection, which at first had been part of the Gallery's Department of Ancient Art, was separately constituted as the Department of Coins and Medals.

## Growth of the Collection

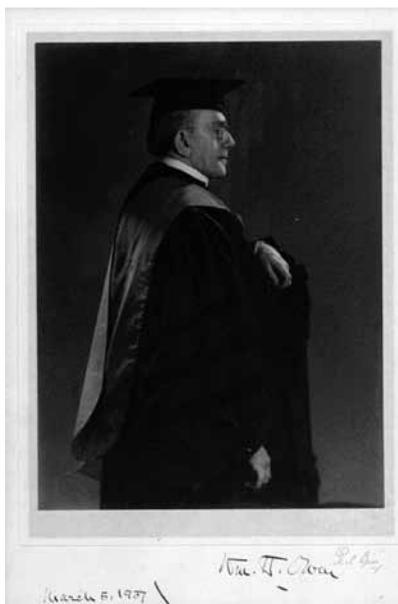
The noble intent with which the collection was formed was clearly modified by an acquisitiveness that would make a modern museum curator proud, and by 1880 the collection of ancient coins alone had grown to over 3,200 pieces, making it perhaps the largest such collection in the United States. Growth continued in various ways through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The bequest of C. Wyllys Betts, (B.A. 1867, M.A. 1871, died 1887) brought to the University a major collection of medals relating to the American Revolution, and his book (compiled posthumously) is still cited today.<sup>9</sup> A major acquisition was the collection of Greek and Roman coins of Prof. Eduard Thraemer, whose connection to Yale, if any, is now unknown.<sup>10</sup> Somewhat surprisingly, this is exactly the period of E. T. Newell's occupancy of the position of "Honorary Curator"; though he made extensive gifts of seals to the Near Eastern collection,<sup>11</sup> his total numismatic benefactions to Yale consisted of about 80 pieces, largely Ptolemaic and Parthian; this compares with lifetime and posthumous gifts of about 120,000 objects to the American Numismatic Society.

In this period the ancient portion of the collection benefited from the interest of Alfred R. Bellinger, who went on to become one of America's leading numismatists (Fig. 1) and William T. Owen (Fig. 2), whose interests lay in the modern period. The collection benefited enormously from the partage of coins discovered at Dura-Europus, where the University excavated for nine seasons; the coins provided fodder for Bellinger's *Syrian Tetradrachms of Caracalla and Macrinus*.<sup>12</sup>

- 9 C. Wyllys Betts, edited by William T. R. Marvin and Lyman H. Low, *American Colonial History illustrated by Contemporary Medals* (New York, 1894).
- 10 Thraemer was a Professor at the University of Salzburg whose major contribution was a 422-page book entitled *Pergamos. Untersuchungen über die Frühgeschichte Kleinasiens und Griechenlands* which is, understandably, absent from modern citations. The collection was acquired with funds from a group headed by Prof. C. C. Torrey, of Yale's Department of Semitic Languages.
- 11 The first 695 items in Newell's collection of seals are published by H. H. von der Osten, *Ancient Oriental Seals in the Collection of Mr. Edward T. Newell* (Oriental Institute Publications no. 22, Chicago, 1934).
- 12 Apart from Newell, who was a Yale man (B.A. 1908, LL.D. 1909) and sometime honorary curator of the collection, Alfred Bellinger is the outstanding figure in the university's numismatic history. Besides this monograph, Bellinger published extensively on Corinth and five monographs published by the American Numismatic Society on hoards from Dura, leading up to the Final Report in 1949. He produced other works on excavations at Corinth and Troy.



**Fig.1 Alfred R. Bellinger**



**Fig.2 William T. Owen**

In June of 1945 the University's Council on the Library and Museums met in the coin room, and the minutes of that meeting are informative. Apparently Bellinger was asked to rate the various collections in the United States, and he replied that *"first in all categories was the collection of the American Numismatic Society while the famous Garrett Collection has the finest specimens. The Yale collection has proved of considerable value in the classical teaching field and through the constant publication of its resources."* F. C. C. Boyd, a well-known collector and member of the committee, then noted the contribution of William T. Owen, the collections longtime curator, in the American field, where he rated it third in the United States (presumably behind the ANS and the Smithsonian) as far as gold was concerned. He drew attention to the Garvan collection's of Pioneer Gold and the Brasher Doubloon, which Owen had acquired from personal funds in 1943. Sadly both the Garvan collection and the doubloon, as well as the remaining American gold, disappeared in a major theft, still unsolved, in 1964; only the Brasher doubloon subsequently came to light, and after its recovery the University sold it. Yale's holdings of American gold are now negligible.



**Fig. 3** Bela Lyon Pratt's medal for the bicentennial of Yale College, 2001.87.1905.

The collection grew but slowly during this and the subsequent period, subsisting on tiny annual funding and a shrinking base of donors; noteworthy however were acquisitions in the field of the Roman Republic, mainly during the tenure of T. V. Buttrey as Assistant Professor of Classics and Assistant Librarian for Numismatics (1957–1962). Large additions in recent years have included over 4,000 Greek and Roman provincial coins from the collection of Prof. Peter R. and Leonore Franke, purchased in 2004. This was formed as a study collection embracing Greek and Roman provincial coins. In 2007 the Department entered into a bargain purchase agreement with Ben Lee Damsky, who specializes in Roman and provincial coinages; to date some 460 coins have been purchased, with the remainder scheduled to come by gift. And about the same time an anonymous benefactor donated some 400 mainly Greek gold, silver and electrum coins in memory of Israel Myers.

Today the total of all numismatic holdings is approximately 100,000 pieces; while the collection does not enjoy its nineteenth-century primacy (this figure is now eclipsed by the national collection and by the American Numismatic Society) it is beyond doubt the largest collection of any American university. The change in jurisdiction mentioned above meant eventual removal from the Library, and in 2007 and again in 2009 coins were taken from the Library to temporary quarters to facilitate their cataloguing and photography. Almost 40,000 coins have now been catalogued, mainly by student help, and are accessible on-line through the Art Gallery website.

The collection will be brought back together in permanent quarters in the spring 2012, when the Bela Lyon Pratt Coin Room, endowed by a descendant of Pratt's, will open in the remodeled Art Gallery. (Pratt, who studied art at Yale, is best known for his sculpture of Nathan Hale, which is iconic on Yale's Old Campus and is also seen outside CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia; the British executed Hale has a spy in 1775. Pratt also had an extensive career as a medalist and sculptor whose commissions included the 1901 medal for the bicentennial of Yale College (Fig. 3) and the last U.S. half- and quarter-eagles, struck 1908–1932.) The coin room will occupy one of the most conspicuous sites in the Art Gallery, on the corner of Chapel and High Streets and adjacent to the bridge connecting the Old Art Gallery to Street Hall (fig. 4). An exhibit area outside the room will be permanently dedicated to coins and medals, which will also be displayed in other areas where relevant. The Coin Room itself will accommodate the department's offices, a classroom with projection, study space and a work area for student help. Work on the online digital catalogue will proceed until completion.

At present numismatics is taught in a biennial technical seminar, and coins are incorporated in many areas of instruction: history, history of art, economics, mediaeval studies, and religious studies. Mr. Damsky's endowment of the curatorial chair will ensure a permanent commitment to the discipline and the collection, and the future of numismatics at Yale is guaranteed.



Fig. 4 Exterior of the new coin room prior to renovation.

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