

A Renaissance Festival of Medals and More at Princeton University

(by Donald Scarinci)

On the eve of the publication of the second edition of Cornelius Vermule's classic work, *Numismatic Art in America*, Princeton University opened an exhibit displaying medals by Pisanello that Vermule donated in the memory of his wife. Alan Stahl, curator of coins and medals at Princeton University, could not have chosen to display these medals any better.

Vermule's Pisanello medals are one of the many highlights of the exhibit at Princeton University's Firestone Library called, *Numismatics in the Renaissance* which opened on November 9, 2007. Anyone interested in Renaissance medals, manuscripts, ancient coins or early coin collectors must not miss this exhibit.

The Pisanello medals include, John VI Palaeologus (K.1); Filippo Maria Visconti (K.3); Francesco Sforza (K.5); Leonello D'Este (K.10); Cecilia Gonzaga (K.17); and Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta (K.12). Not all of them are original casts, but they are certainly close enough aftercasts to warrant close inspection with one of the magnifying glasses available for use at the exhibit.

In addition to the seven Pisanello medals, there is a display of Giovanni Cavino imitations side by side with the original Ancient coins they imitate. The opportunity to see the Caligula, Domitian, Faustina Younger and Lucius Verus side by side with their Cavino counterpart is very special.

Cavino was not the only imitator on exhibit. Valerio Belli (1486 to 1546), a

favorite of Cardinal Farnese and Paul 3 in Renaissance Rome, made imitations of Roman coins and several of his medals were on exhibit as well.

Highlighting a display of other Renaissance artists who imitated ancient coins is an original text by Benvenuto Cellini writing about how ancient coin dies were made. One could only imagine that this very book was likely to have been the Renaissance textbook for these great imitators.

Another amazing section of the exhibit for those of us who are interested in medallic art is the various depictions of Cosimo 1 de Medici. There were three portrait medals by three different Renaissance artists—Domenico de'Veba (1480 to 1547); Domenico Poggini (1520 to 1590) and Pier Paolo Galeotti (1520 to 1584). The artistic difference in the portrayal of the same subject is a study unto itself.

With all of these riches, medals were a small part of the exhibit. The original Renaissance books and Ancient coins on display is overwhelming. Highlights include a complete denomination set of Roman coins from the third Century BC, the late Republic and the early empire. There are Byzantine coins, Greek coins and of course, Renaissance coins brilliantly displayed next to Renaissance texts.

For the bibliophile, the original Renaissance books are little works of art by themselves. Stahl's selection of ancient coins to display next to line drawings of the very same type brought it all together and put you in the armchair of a Renaissance numismatist studying ancient coins at the very beginning of the study of this subject.

Book after book, carefully spread open under glass like the book by Hubert Goltzius, clearly made the point that illustrations of Ancient Coins had an ornamental function in Renaissance books. These illustrations enhanced the text and added great beauty to the book which was, by itself, art.

Princeton University hosted a symposium on the opening day of the exhibit, *The Rebirth of Antiquity: Numismatics, Archaeology, and Classical Studies in the Culture of the Renaissance*. It was both well attended and well received. People like Paul Bosco and Cory Gilliland spent the day listening to a total of six lectures by a cross section of areas that together created a three dimensional look into Renaissance period numismatics and art.

In a question at the morning session by Paul Bosco, he prefaced with a comment about how good it felt to be “back in school.” The lecturers were indeed great teachers from America’s top Universities.

Following a greeting by Karin Trainer, the Princeton University Librarian, and the morning speakers included: John Cunnally, Department of Art and Design, Iowa State University; Peter N. Miller, Chair of Academic Programs at Bard Graduate Center; and Brian Ogilvie, from the History Department of the University of Massachusetts.

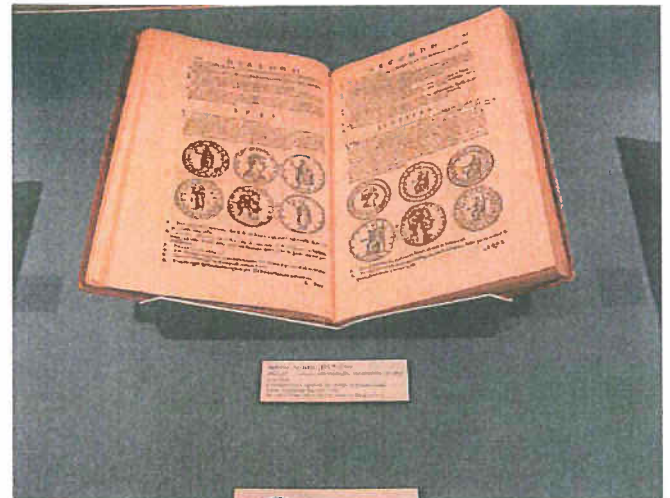
These speakers gave a range of talks from the anthropology of gift giving in primitive societies to the difficulties of translating medieval Islamic Coins during the Renaissance, to a discussion of Renaissance collections and collecting through the eyes of a Renaissance numismatist—Ezekiel Spanheim.

After being treated to lunch in a room with panoramic views of Princeton, the lectures continued with another three speakers: William Stenhouse from the History Department at Yeshiva University spoke about, “Onofrio Panvinio Versus the Numismatists: The Right to Interpret Antiquity,” Christopher Wood of the History Department at Yale University spoke about, “The Temporal Instability of the Artifact;” and Tamara Griggs of the History Department of the University of Chicago spoke about “Controlling the Past in 18th Century Rome.”

This exhibit and the symposium on the day of its opening could only have been

assembled by someone with the depth of knowledge in numismatic and medallic art that someone like Alan Stahl possesses. His scholarship and use of the resources available to him at Princeton University was nothing short of masterful.

According to Princeton University’s web site, the show will run until Sunday, July 20. The library gallery is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, from 9 a.m. to 7:45 p.m. Wednesday, and from noon to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Exhibition tours will be offered to the public at 3 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 18, March 16 and June 1.



Augustine, Dialogues 1



Augustine, Dialogues 2