

Medals in Madrid, Spain

Spain is the home of bullfights, paella, guitars and the visionary king and queen who commissioned Christopher Columbus to sail across the Atlantic Ocean. Spain is also the birthplace of a rich artistic heritage and boasts such great artists as Velázquez, Murillo, El Greco, Goya and Dali. The Prado is rich with examples of their art.

Spain is home to a rich and varied numismatic tradition and, notwithstanding the lack of recognition that they receive some wonderful contemporary medallic artists. Names like Fernando Jesus, Ferreiro Badia, Paris Matia, Ana Maria Gallinal and others carry on the artistic heritage that produced some of the most widely circulated specie in the 15th and 16th century Americas.

As with advancement in other areas, the centuries of catholic conservatism and the decades of Franco's dictatorship in this century have hampered the development of the art of the medal in Spain. Like the United States, there is no grand tradition of medallic art in Spain. So, as one might expect, Madrid is not the place to expect to find a lot of medals for sale.

Through the narrow renaissance streets of the oldest section of Madrid, not far from the Plaza Mayor, there are six or seven coin shops and only one of them had medals for sale. Collector tourists do not often request medals. Like many of the shopkeepers in Spain, not many of the dealers speak English. I was told that medals can sometimes be found in the flea market in Madrid called El Rato, but I didn't make it there.

If you can't buy medals, you can certainly have some opportunities to see them on exhibit. When touring the Royal Palace, the curators have converted the room that was used to view films before Franco's dictatorship into a display room for medals. This room contains six old cabinets featuring a wonderful display of some of the medals from the Royal collection. They are all historical medals and include St. Gaudens' Columbian Exposition medal. The Royal palace is on every tourist's list as a place to visit. The display of medals is a bonus.

More off the tourist route, the Casa de Moneda is a numismatic "must see" stop. Not far from the bullfighting ring in Madrid, the Casa de Moneda dedicates its entire third floor to a numismatic and medallic art display that is unrivaled anywhere in the United States or in France.

Located in what looks from the outside like a modern office building, there is a shop on the first floor off the entry, a numismatic theater on the second floor and a gallery of many rooms occupying the entire third floor exhibiting the history of money with an emphasis on Spain and its colonies.

The exhibit begins with a room dedicated to the early development of money. There is a room of Greek coins and several rooms of Roman coins and the Islamic coins of

Spain. You could spend hours in these rooms studying the local Spanish mints that issued roman provincials circulating in Spain and learn a lot about the development of modern day Spain from these beginnings.

Displays of paper money and old numismatic and art books integrated nicely into the coinage galleries. One room dedicated to paper money had cases of six trays that slide with the press of a button and illuminate when viewed. You press any of the six labeled buttons to see the display of your choice.

Three rooms of the permanent exhibit feature medals. One room is filled with renaissance medals, including three by Pisanello and beautiful examples by Mateo de Pasti, Sperandi, Iacopo da Trezzo, Leone and Pompeo Leoni. One room contains historical medals by Spanish artists, and one room is dedicated to international artists and contemporary Spanish artists.

The international medals include French art nouveau with pieces by Boudichon, Courdray, Roty, Chaplain and Duvivier. There are some Dassier pieces and a plaster of Pistrucci's Waterloo medal. There are no medals of the United States represented.

The Contemporary medals feature the work of Spanish artists with a giant galvano of Badia's, "Miro" hung prominently. Fernandez Jesus, Antonio Lopez, Antoni Tapies and other mint artists are well represented but. for some reason, there is no work by contemporary artists who exhibit at FIDEM. Of course, the same could be said about the exhibits at the ANA in Colorado Springs, the Smithsonian exhibit in Washington and the ANS exhibit in New York.

The Casa de Moneda collection was formed after King Carlos III purchased its core from a Spanish artist and engraver in 1783. It

was shown to the public for the first time by Queen Isabel II in 1867 and it moved to its present home in 1964.

The Casa de Moneda shop displayed more medals than the shop at the US Mint in Philadelphia. Like the US mint, there are proof and mint sets, watches, key chains and pens but very few medals.

The catalog of sale items does not offer medals for sale beyond the few small struck commemoratives of the Royal wedding, the mint anniversary or the millennium. The only art medals that are offered for sale are not in the catalog. They are on display at the Casa de Moneda shop.

In the shop, there are three display cases of medals organized by theme—religious, cities and bullfighting. No medals have been produced by the Casa de Moneda since the 1980's, so what is offered is the end of the run. In fact, all of the medals offered by the mint are in a single waist high cabinet that serves as a display counter for the watches and key chains.

The Casa de Moneda Shop offers books as they do in the museum shop of the Monnaie de Paris. But other than one book, "Apocalypse" (1999) of Fernando Jesus, the books feature graphic arts, fine arts and ancient coins.

The Casa de Moneda and the Royal Palace are must see places for the touring numismatist. While the medal in Spain is in the same doldrums as the medal in the United States and other countries, there are many wonderful artists to look for and some terrific buying opportunities before the situation changes. The richness and depth of contemporary Spanish artists and the obvious commercial success of the Casa de Moneda are indications that it is just a matter of time before these sparks ignite

the flames of collector interest in Spanish medals. (Donald Scarinci)