

## Thomas Jefferson's Pisanello Medal

Ralph Menconi's Society of medalist medal, number 74 issued in December, 1966 has many characteristics of a renaissance cast medal. Now there is clear evidence not only to draw the parallels between this medal and Pisanello's Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, K. 12, but to establish K.12's clear and unequivocal influence and inspiration for SOM 74.

Toward the end of his life, Ralph Menconi spent the summers traveling from his home studio in Pleasantville to Cape Cod, Massachusetts. After he died, his wife Marjorie moved to an old colonial home in Cap Cod where one could easily imagine seeing the founders of our nation dine and retire to the parlor for tea and lively conversation.

Now this parlor is dedicated as a gallery of Ralph Menconi's prolific bas-reliefs and a display of medals from his personal collection. The wallpaper is beige with little clovers. A red and orange design in the rug covers the wood floors and there are two wooden chairs and a loveseat settee around the fireplace.

The original fifteen inch plaster cast of the Thomas Jefferson obverse of SOM74 secured to a piece of wood is propped up against a wall. Along with it are plasters of Menconi's inaugural medal of Richard Nixon and some of the plasters to the three series of medals he did for the Presidential Art Company—Signers of the Declaration of Independence, States and Presidents. All of these plasters show well with the

northern exposure light beaming through the windows.

Ralph Menconi was one of the more prolific American medallic artists with well over 600 issues to his credit. Some of these medals decorate every shelf and table surface in the front parlor. It was among these medals on a bookshelf in the corner of the room that one particular medal stood out. It was not a medal of Ralph Menconi, but a medal of Pisanello. It was Sigismondo Pandolfo Maletesta, K.12. It was the only medal of Pisanello in the display.

Marjorie Menconi explained that this medal was found in the artists desk draw at his studio in Pleasantville. She thinks it was a gift from his father, an architect by profession. She knew it was important to her husband, but he never discussed it with her and she was unsure why it had any special meaning.

It is not difficult to see the parallel between the Jefferson medal and the medals of the renaissance. Thomas Jefferson has long been viewed as an American renaissance man. Marjorie Menconi recalls that her husband regarded Thomas Jefferson as a renaissance man. She remembers a family visit to Monticello in the years prior to 1966 and she remembers Ralph Menconi's reverence for Thomas Jefferson at the time.

In the leaflet accompanying SOM 74, Menconi said that "the irregular shape and the handmade quality of the medal reflect the very early medals and coins of the republic." He said that "the

patina—a deep, rich brown coppery color reflects these early pieces.”

The lettering around the edges of the medal uses capital letters in a simple hand printed style similar to the lettering used by Pisanello on his medals. Menconi chose the opening sentence of the second paragraph of the declaration of independence for the obverse and the heading of the declaration of independence for the reverse.

Menconi designed SOM 74 “to honor our founding fathers, and especially to commemorate the Declaration of Independence.” He chose to use the portrait of Thomas Jefferson on the obverse which is one of the few portrait medals in the Society of medalist series. The reverse is a female figure representing “the emergence of a new nation—a young Miss Liberty.”

It is in the reverse design that we can most clearly see the similarities between SOM 74 and K. 12. Where Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta was a warrior who reconquered a City State, Thomas Jefferson was a lover of liberty whose words helped create a nation.

The reverse of K.12 has the image of a fully armed knight holding a sword. To the left of the figure is a heraldic rose tree, Malatesta’s helmet and an elephant’s head crest. To the right of the knight is the soldier’s shield. The figure faces that shield implying that the current event is celebrated and that the crest was the knight’s entitlement to achieve his conquest. The images to the

left of the knight are his history or his support.

On Menconi’s Jefferson medal, the reverse has a representation of the young Miss Liberty. To the left of Liberty is the Mayflower. To the right of the figure are the turmoil’s that preceded the Declaration of Independence such as the Stamp Act, the Boston massacre and the Boston tea party. The image of Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell are above these images.

The Malatesta reverse uses a growing rose tree with the elephant head symbolizing this Italian family. The Jefferson reverse shows the growth of the nation from the voyage of the Mayflower to the symbols of the new American family. The figure of liberty faces the images of Revolutionary turmoil implying that these events were Thomas Jefferson’s reasons and entitlement to achieve independence just like Malatesta’s family crest were his reasons and entitlement to reconquer a city state his family had lost.

The position of the body of the reverse figure on each medal is similar. The figure of liberty on the Jefferson reverse stands with her weight resting on her right leg and the left leg outstretched with toes pointed to the side. This is the same stance the knight takes. The head faces left.

But while the knight’s right arm reaches for his sword and his left arm pulls down on its holder, the female liberty’s right arm waves back toward the Mayflower while her left arm waves

downward toward the images of British injustices. The weapon the female liberty holds is not a sword, but the clash of ideas. Jefferson is not the warrior who retrieved his kingdom with a sword, but the writer and statesman who helped create a nation with his ideas.

The discovery of K. 12 among the medals in the estate of Ralph Menconi along with the similarities of the design elements between K. 12 and SOM 74 create the clear connection between these two great works of medallic art. (Donald Scarinci)

## MEDALS QUIZ

This quiz will appear in each newsletter. This month has four random questions, but future quizzes will have a theme. Email: bobfritsch@earthlink.net with your comments and ideas for quiz topics

1. There are two major references for Swiss Shooting Medals. What are they?
2. What collection of Renaissance small bronze medals is considered the best in the US?
3. How many medals are in the "Comitia Americana" series?
4. What Swiss engraver created the U.S. Grant medal for the Swiss Republican Club in 1868 (he also did a Lincoln medal)? (Answers on page 8) (Bob Fritsch)

## Comitia Americana

Arguably, the Comitia American medals are the most important medals

in the American series. Awarded by Congress between 1776 and 1781 and produced in France between 1781 and 1789, these eleven designs combine outstanding aesthetics with the ultimate in historicity. That they were executed under the direct supervision of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson lends a stature to Comitia Americana pieces that is unmatched—indeed not even remotely approached.

The Comitia Americana series might be as famous in numismatic circles as the state quarters were it not for a few non-trivial issues. For one, only six of the eleven are readily collectible; the remaining five are tough to near impossible. For another, it is difficult to distinguish between contemporary strikings and later restrikings in the Paris mint. It is almost equally difficult to distinguish between French originals and U.S. mint medals made from copy dies.

Ms. Anne Bentley and ye editor working under the aegis of the Massachusetts Historical Society, have undertaken a worldwide census. With luck, we will succeed in quantifying the relative (and perhaps absolute) rarity of the eleven issues. However, it is unlikely that our survey will drive a material number of pieces out of hiding, such that what was rare before will remain rare going forward.

Even though it is not possible to "fix" the rarity issue, it is possible to eliminate the mysteries surrounding restrikes and copies. George Washington's complete set of Comitia Americana medals, assembled by



Mencomi Obverse



Mencomi Reverse



12 *obv.* Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta,  
Lord of Rimini and Fano



12 *rev.* Sigismondo armed and holding sword