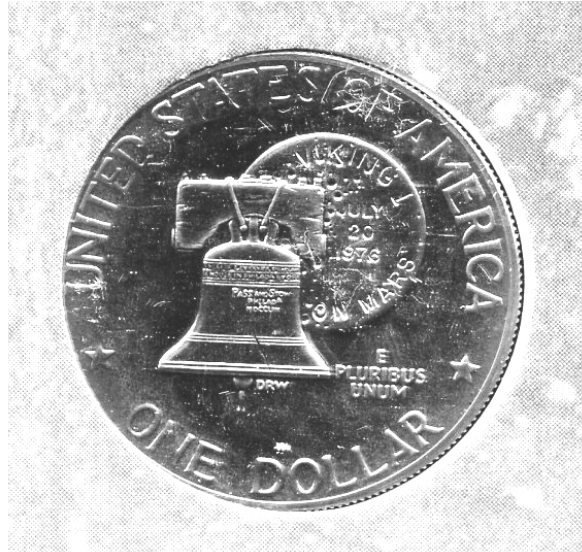


## The Counterstamped Coins of Mel Wacks\*

By Mel Wacks NLG

Dedicated to the artistry and workmanship of Adam Cool

When I learned of the plans for NASA to land on Mars, something clicked. While Mars did not appear on any United States coin, another celestial object did – the Moon – on the reverse of the Bicentennial Eisenhower Dollars dated 1776-1976. And so I designed a counterstamp which was struck on 40% Silver Proof coins over the rugged surface of the moon, reading “VIKING I ON MARS JULY 20, 1976.”



Catalog MW1 “VIKING I ON MARS JULY 20, 1976”

I also wanted to create PNC (Philatelic-Numismatic Cover), and where more appropriate could I have it cancelled than in Mars (Pennsylvania)? I contacted the postmaster there, and he indicated he would be happy to cancel covers on the day of the Mars landing. So envelopes were prepared with two 8¢ postage stamps – “Rise of the Spirit of Independence” and appropriately “United States in Space,” depicting the lunar landing vehicle on the moon with the earth and the sun above. They were sent to the Mars postmaster who carefully applied the cancellation reading “MARS, PA 16046 JUL 20 AM 1976,” and shipped back to me in a box (so they were not individually addressed). On the day of the Viking landing, I drove about 25 miles from my home in a Los Angeles suburb to the headquarters of JPL (Jet Propulsion Lab) in Pasadena where I gained entrance with my Numismatic Literary Guild card and was able to obtain a press kit that included the first photo taken on Mars by the Rover. When I received the box of cancelled envelopes, I took them to a printer who added the historic first photo to each envelope. The back of each envelope was printed with a serial number, and “LIMITED EDITION of 1000.”

**\* An updated and public version of the article that appeared in the Volume 51, No. 2 issue of the *TAMS Journal*, pp. 35-41 (March/April 2011).**



I then placed each counterstamped dollar into a hole in a thick card, placed the cards into the envelopes and sealed them. My records indicate that 500 were made.



MW1PNC "VIKING I ON MARS JULY 20, 1976"

Considering the success of my first counterstamped coin, just a few months later I created another one. This was issued on Thanksgiving and appropriately honored the turkey. The coin chosen was the 1961 Proof Benjamin Franklin Silver Half Dollar. Why? Because Franklin had proposed that the national bird should be the turkey (the bald eagle won out). A turkey was counterstamped over the Liberty Bell (just to the left of the "winning" eagle).



MW2 Turkey (Thanksgiving 1976)

A full color reproduction of John James Audubon's engraving (1830) of a wild turkey is featured on the envelope, along with the following quote: "The turkey is a bird of courage and would not hesitate to attack a grenadier of the British guards who would presume to invade his farmland with a red coat on," with the facsimile signature *Benj. Franklin*. The postage used was the 3¢ Wild Turkey Wildlife Conservation stamp and the 13¢ Bicentennial 1776-1976 stamp featuring a bust of Franklin. And, appropriately, the cancellation reads "TURKEY, TX 79261 NOV 25 PM 1976." The back of each envelope was printed with a serial number, and "LIMITED EDITION of 500." My records indicate a mintage of 200. (Picture mw2pnc)



MW2PNC Turkey (Thanksgiving 1976)

I was thrilled, along with millions of others around the world, when the Camp David Accords were signed by Egyptian President Anwar El Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin on September 17, 1978, following twelve days of secret negotiations at Camp David. The two agreements were signed at the White House, and were witnessed by United States President Jimmy Carter. The Accords led directly to the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty, which among other things, established full diplomatic relations between Israel and Egypt, and contained about 50 normalization agreements covering a variety of issues, including economic and cultural matters, designed to enhance peace between the two countries..



While I was watching this historic event on television I was inspired to commemorate it. And I immediately thought of counterstamping "Peace" Silver Dollars (that were issued beginning in 1921 to celebrate the end of World War I). I believe that it was Ed McClung who had created the first two counterstamped coins, and so I asked him to do the Camp David counterstamp. I gave him dozens of uncirculated 1922 and 1923 Peace Dollars to use for prototypes. But he had problems. The design that I requested was more complex than the first two counterstamps, inscribed "CAMP DAVID PEACE SUMMIT SEPT. 5-17, 1978" and featuring the peace symbol, the names of the participants and appropriate symbols: BEGIN + Star of David, SADAT + Crescent, and CARTER + 5-Pointed Star. He was unable to make a bold counterstamp, even after reaming off an area and stamping it.



MW3TRIAL "CAMP DAVID PEACE SUMMIT SEPT. 5-17, 1978"

And so I asked someone else to give it a try – Adam Cool, who had created a number of counterstamped coins for the American Israel Numismatic Association. Adam was successful, so we photographed it and sent out press releases a relatively short time after the event had occurred.





MW3 "CAMP DAVID PEACE SUMMIT SEPT. 5-17, 1978"

The press release and a picture was featured in the coin column of the Sunday New York Times— and then all hell broke loose! In a few days the mailman started bringing piles of envelopes with orders. This continued day after day, and within a relatively short time the entire authorized mintage of 1,000 pieces was sold. These coins are actively collected, appear periodically on ebay, and the "Camp David" counterstamp is featured in the newly published "A Guide Book of Peace Dollars" by Roger Burdette.

UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) proclaimed 1979 as the International Year of the Child. The proclamation was signed on January 1, 1979 by United Nations Secretary General Kurt Waldheim, and was intended to draw attention to problems that affected children throughout the world, including malnutrition and lack of access to education. I decided this would be my next project, and based the design on Leonardo da Vinci's 1505 drawing of a fetus in utero. The limited issue of 1,000 "Baby Dollars" were counterstamped on various uncirculated 1972-7 Eisenhower Clad Dollars. The die was cancelled after the issue sold out.



The inscription is "INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE CHILD 1979" plus the designer's initials "MRW" (Mel Roy Wacks).



MW4 "INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE CHILD 1979"

In 1979, I created the first of several counterstamped coins commemorating the visits of Pope John Paul II to various parts of the world. During his pontificate, Pope John Paul II made trips to 129 countries, and was the first pope to visit Mexico--in January 1979—followed by four other trips there. After a sell out of 1,979 counterstamped Mexican Silver Pesos, commemorating the Pope's first trip to Mexico, the die was cancelled.



The design of a Papal Seal features an *ombrellino* (umbrella), that is carried processionally over the head of the Pope on state occasions, and crossed keys "to the kingdom," plus the inscription "POPE JOHN PAUL II VISITS MEXICO JAN. 26-31, 1979" and the initials "MRW" of the designer Mel Wacks. The Mexican Pesos used were issued from 1957-67, and have a 10% silver content. The sandwiched

planchets have silver on the outside, with base metals (70% copper and 10% zinc) in the center. When this sandwich material was counterstamped over 5% of the coins (about 120) split. These error coins have proven to be popular with collectors.



MW5ERROR "POPE JOHN PAUL II VISITS MEXICO JAN. 26-31, 1979"

Later in 1979, the Pope made his first of seven trips to the United States, visiting Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Des Moines and Washington. 1,979 Proof Clad Silver 1967 Kennedy Half Dollars were counterstamped with "POPE JOHN PAUL II VISITS USA OCT. 1-7, 1979" plus the initials "MRW." The coat-of-arms of Pope John Paul II is pictured: a mitre (tall, ornamental cap), crossed keys, shield containing a cross, etc.



MW6 "POPE JOHN PAUL II VISITS MEXICO JAN. 26-31, 1979"

Afterwards, the die was cancelled. A distinctive variety of this commemorative was produced in a smaller quantity exclusively for a European dealer, with the inscription: "ADV. IONNES PAVLVS P.M. USA OCT. 1-7, 1979."



MW7 "ADV. IONNES PAVLVS P.M. USA OCT. 1-7, 1979"



The year 1980 marked the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the world's most popular coins, the Maria Theresa Taler, that has been minted by Austria and other countries (Belgium, France, Great Britain, India, Italy, etc.) on-and-off from 1780 to the present—always with the same “1780” date. Through the centuries, many different counterstamps have been applied to Maria Theresa Talers in various parts of the world (Africa, Arabian Peninsula, Indonesia, Turkey, etc.); for further information visit <http://www.theresia.name/en/scountermarks.html>.





Mel Wacks' counterstamp pictures the Eastern Hemisphere (Europe, Africa, Middle East and India), which includes many places where the Maria Theresa Taler has circulated, surrounded by "BICENTALER 1780-1980" plus the initials "MRW." My records indicate that 200 were made.



MW8 "BICENTALER 1780-1980"

The 1980 Summer Olympics were held in Moscow. The United States and 64 other countries boycotted the games because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, though athletes from some boycotting countries participated in the games, under the Olympic Flag. Eighty nations participated including East Germany and the rest of the Soviet bloc. A limited edition of 800 counterstamped coins were made exclusively for a German dealer. He supplied 20 Mark Ernst Abbe East Germany brilliant uncirculated coins and I supplied the counterstamps. Ernst Abbe (1840-1905) was a brilliant German mathematician and physicist who made several of the most important contributions to the design of lenses for optical microscopy. The counterstamp design consists of two nude Olympian runners, similar to those depicted on an ancient Greek vase, c. 525, plus the Olympic motto: "CITIUS ALTIUS FORTIUS" (Faster, Higher, Stronger) and "1980 MOSCOW GAMES" plus a tiny Olympic flame with XIX below, and Mel Wacks' initials "MRW."



MW9 "CITIUS ALTIUS FORTIUS/1980 MOSCOW GAMES"



Two counterstamped coins were issued to commemorate the 1980 Winter Olympics, held in Lake Placid, New York. This was the second time the upstate New York village hosted the Games, the first being in 1932. Records indicate that 2000 1971 Proof Silver Ike Dollars were counterstamped with a design depicting a downhill skier, 5 snowflakes, the Olympic flame with XIII below, the initials "MRW," and the inscription "FASTER • HIGHER • STRONGER LAKE PLACID • FEB. 13-24, 1980." The winners of the large hill skiing event were Jouko of Finland (Gold), Hubert Neuper of Austria (Silver) and Jari Puikkonen of Finland (Bronze).



MW10 "FASTER • HIGHER • STRONGER LAKE PLACID • FEB. 13-24, 1980"

The die was then cancelled. While the "Ski Dollar" was planned before the Games, the decision to create a second issue was not made until the United States' dramatic victory over the Soviet Union in ice hockey excited the entire country – including me. The USA vs. USSR game, called the "Miracle on Ice" in the United States, is the best-remembered game of the tournament and the best-remembered international hockey game ever in the United States. The last minute 4-3 win was the USA's penultimate game of the tournament's round-robin medal round. The USA's final game, against Finland, was the game which clinched the gold medal for the United States, with a 4-2 win.



The counterstamped design featured a silhouetted hockey player swinging his stick, along with the Olympic flame with XIII below, the initials "MRW," and the inscription "1980 GOLD MEDAL WINNERS • USA HOCKEY TEAM." The coins were gold-plated uncirculated 1776-1976 Bicentennial Eisenhower Clad Dollars. After the edition limit of 1,000 was reached, the die was cancelled.



MW11 "1980 GOLD MEDAL WINNERS • USA HOCKEY TEAM"

January 20, 1981 was an historic day – that was the inspiration of two counterstamped coins – one planned and the other done at the spur of the moment. That is the beauty of counterstamps – they can go from conception to production in a matter of weeks.

Ronald Reagan had won election as the 40<sup>th</sup> President, carrying 44 states with 489 electoral votes to 49 electoral votes for President Jimmy Carter (representing six states and Washington D.C.).



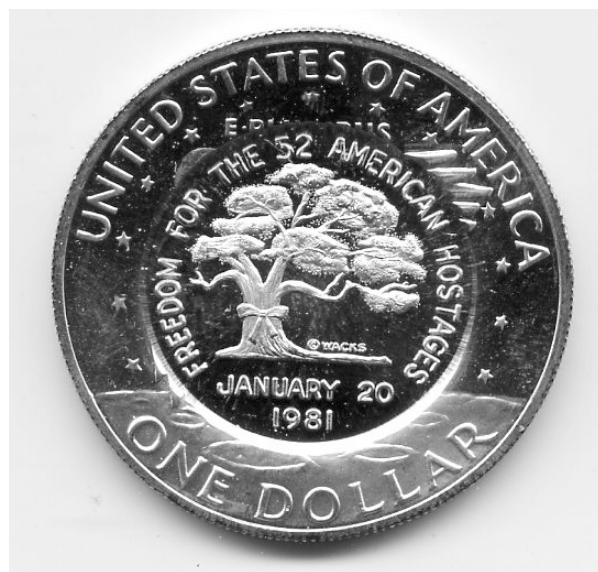
The planned issue was produced on brilliant uncirculated 1776-1976 Bicentennial Eisenhower Dollars, that were stamped with "RONALD W. REAGAN INAUGURATED 40<sup>TH</sup> PRESIDENT JANUARY 20, 1981" and the initials "SNW – MRW" (Shari Nan Wacks and Mel Roy Wacks), plus a meticulously rendered portrayal of the White House by Adam Cool. Records indicate that 500 were made on 40% silver coins and at least 150 on clad dollars.





MW12 "RONALD W. REAGAN INAUGURATED 40<sup>TH</sup> PRESIDENT JANUARY 20, 1981"

The spontaneous issue celebrated the surprise release of the 52 U.S. hostages by Iran. Sixty-six Americans had been taken captive when Iranian militants seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, including three who were at the Iranian Foreign Ministry. Six Americans escaped, 13 were released on November 19 and 20, 1979, and one was released on July 11, 1980. At least 125 pieces (of the 444 authorized) Proof 1971 Eisenhower Silver Dollars were counterstamped "FREEDOM FOR THE 52 AMERICAN HOSTAGES JANUARY 20, 1981" along with a ribbon around an oak tree and "© WACKS." During the Iran hostage crisis, the yellow ribbon was used as a symbol of support for the hostages held at the U.S. embassy in Tehran. This symbolism began in December 1979, when Penelope Laingen, wife of the most senior foreign service officer being held hostage, tied a yellow ribbon around a tree on the lawn of her Maryland home, likely inspired by the hit song "Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Ole Oak Tree."



MW13 "FREEDOM FOR THE 52 AMERICAN HOSTAGES JANUARY 20, 1981"

The biggest social event of 1981 was the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana. Twenty year-old Diana became The Princess of Wales when she married Charles on July 29, 1981 at St Paul's Cathedral, which offered more seating than Westminster Abbey, generally used for royal nuptials. This "fairytale wedding," was watched by a global television audience of about 750 million.



And so I counterstamped brilliant uncirculated Canadian Silver Dollars, which featured a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II, with St. Paul's Cathedral, the inscription "PRINCE CHARLES & LADY DIANA 7-29 1981," and "© WACKS." A maximum of 1,000 were authorized but fewer were actually made.



MW14 "PRINCE CHARLES & LADY DIANA 7-29 1981"

Sandra Day O'Connor was nominated to the Supreme Court by President Reagan on August 19, 1981, thus fulfilling his 1980 campaign promise to appoint the first woman to the highest court in the United States.



This was the inspiration for another counterstamped coin, with a maximum issue of 500. The design features a standing portrayal of a blindfolded representation of Justice holding scales in one hand and a sword in the other; the inscription is “SANDRA DAY O’CONNOR EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW 1981” plus the designer’s initials “MRW.” The coins used were Proof 1971 Eisenhower Silver Dollars. During her 25-year tenure, O’Connor was regarded as the Court’s leading centrist, and was the swing vote in many cases; this made her the most powerful justice for many years. In 2001, the *Ladies’ Home Journal* ranked her as the second-most-powerful woman in America.



MW15 “SANDRA DAY O’CONNOR EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW 1981”

In 1982, the fourth Pope John Paul II counterstamp was issued in a maximum edition of 750 pieces, using uncirculated 1967 British Pennies. The design consists of a globus cruciger (orb), a sphere surmounted by a cross. The orb is a Christian religious symbol, representing the Monarch’s role as Defender of the

Faith and as Head of the Church of England. It symbolizes the stated purpose of the Pope's trip to lead to "a new relationship ... as a next stage towards Christian unity."



The counterstamp inscription is "POPE JOHN PAUL II VISITS ENGLAND 1982" plus tiny "MW" for the designer Mel Wacks.



MW16 "POPE JOHN PAUL II VISITS ENGLAND 1982"

Adam Cool was able to show off his engraving skills again, with the design of George Washington's home at Mt. Vernon on counterstamped Bicentennial Eisenhower Silver Dollars celebrating the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our first President's birth. In 1754, George Washington, as executor of his brother's estate, arranged to lease "Mount Vernon" that December. Later, he bought his sister-in-law's life estate and became owner of the property. In 1757, Washington began the first of two major additions and improvements to the home. The second expansion was begun shortly before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. On those occasions he entirely rebuilt the main house atop the original foundations, doubling its size each time.





The counterstamp is appropriately inscribed "GEORGE WASHINGTON FEB. 22, 1732-1982" plus a large "250" and 13 stars, and the designer initials "MW." Fewer than the maximum of 1,000 were issued.



MW17 "GEORGE WASHINGTON FEB. 22, 1732-1982"

A trio of counterstamped coins was produced to commemorate the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, with maximum mintages of 2,000 each: Ancient runners and a modern weight-lifter, respectively, on proof 1971 Eisenhower Silver Dollars, and the Olympic torch on brilliant uncirculated 1776-1976 Bicentennial Kennedy half dollars, inscribed "LOS ANGELES GAMES • SUMMER 1984" and XXIII, or something similar. The Runners counterstamp was designed by Mel Wacks (MRW), while the Weightlifter and Olympic Flame were designed by Alex Shagin (ASH).

The running star of the XXIII Olympiad was Carl Lewis, who equaled the performance of Jesse Owens in the 1936 Games, winning four gold medals in the 100 m, 200 m, 4x100 m relay; and the long jump.



MW18 "LOS ANGELES GAMES • SUMMER 1984" (Olympic Runners)

The weightlifting competition at the 1984 Summer Olympics consisted of ten weight classes, all for men only. The Soviet boycott meant that the most dominant force in weightlifting at the time, the USSR did not take part—and so the main medal winners were China (6) and Romania (8).



MW19 "1984 LOS ANGELES • SUMMER GAMES" (Olympic Weightlifter)

The 1984 Olympic Torch Relay began in New York City and ended in Los Angeles, traversing 33 states and the District of Columbia. The torch was continuously carried by runners (a total of 3,616) on foot. Rafer Johnson, winner of the decathlon at the 1960 Summer Olympics, was the final runner. He touched

off a flame which passed through a specially designed Olympic logo, igniting all five rings. The flame then passed up to a cauldron and remained lit for the duration of the Games.



MW20 "LOS ANGELES SUMMER GAMES XXIII • '84" (Olympic Flame)

The last counterstamp in this series commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the 33<sup>rd</sup> President, Harry S. Truman.



It featured another masterpiece of the engraver's art by Adam Cool – the Truman home in Independence, Missouri – plus the inscription "HARRY S. TRUMAN CENTENNIAL MAY 8, 1884 • 1984" and the designer's initials "MW." Fewer than 1,000 were stamped on proof 1971 Eisenhower Silver Dollars.

Wallace House (also called the Truman Home), 219 North Delaware Street, Independence, Missouri, was the home of Harry S. Truman, after his marriage to Bess Wallace on June 28, 1919 until his death on December 26, 1972. Bess Truman's maternal grandfather, George Porterfield Gates, had built the house over a period of years from 1867 to 1895.



MW21 "HARRY S. TRUMAN CENTENNIAL MAY 8, 1884 • 1984"

It was fun creating the ideas for these counterstamped coins and seeing them come to life thanks to the talents of engraver Adam Cool--and is very satisfying to see interest in them 25 years later as witnessed by their appearance from time-to-time on ebay, the U.S. Coin Forum of Collectors Universe, etc.