

# Who Designed the Saint-Gaudens \$20?

by [Michael Marotta](#)

It is widely considered to be America's most beautiful coin. The Liberty from the obverse of the double eagle gold piece from 1907 now graces the gold coins of the US Mint. But was the design cribbed?

A recent issue of *COINage* carries an article by Robert Van Ryzin that talks at length about Augustus Saint-Gaudens and his work. No mention is made of an article that appeared in the June 1993 issue of *The Celator* by Harlan J. Berk. There, Berk laid out the visual evidence.

"The True Origin of America's Greatest Numismatic Art" provides pictures of the Saint-Gaudens Liberty, his Victory from the statue of General Sherman, and his sketch in clay of a striding Liberty in headdress with torch and shield. There is also a picture of a partial restoration of the Nike by Paionios. It was excavated at the site of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia in 1875. Says Berk, "Most convincing of the fact that Saint-Gaudens was inspired by the work of Paeonius is the way the drapery clings and falls around Nike's legs." The outstretched arms and stride are there, also, of course.

Berk allows that there is no epigraphic evidence. He says, "Saint-Gaudens never made any reference to using the Nike of Paeonius in his work..." That is true. The standard work is *The Reminiscences of Augustus Saint-Gaudens Edited and Amplified by Homer Saint-Gaudens*. There are other works, such as *Saint-Gaudens and the Gilded Eraby* Louisa Hall Tharp and *UNCOMMON CLAY* by Burke Wilkinson. None provides a smoking gun. There is no written indication that he knew of the Nike by Paionios.

We have to ask how likely it is that a sculptor working in the last fourth of the 19th century would NOT have known about the excavations at Olympia. We know that A S-G traveled to Italy and worked in France. He must have seen dozens perhaps hundreds of Greek statues.

Looking at the matter from another angle, Ernst Arthur Gardner's *A Handbook of Greek Sculpture* was published in 1920. It contains a plate of Paionios's Nike which is not so restored. There, the uncertainty about the lower arms is obvious. Which is lifted, what holds this or that is open to interpretation. Furthermore, this particular statue is mentioned by Pausanias, who wrote a travelogue of Greece during the reigns of Antonius Pius and Marcus Aurelius. That work was known to classicists of the late

19th century and Augustus Saint-Gaudens was a classicist. If his work doesn't shout that, then surely the fact that he named his son Homer speaks volumes.

There is no doubt that Augustus Saint-Gaudens was a great sculptor with a heroic sense of life. It is most likely that if he had any knowledge of the Nike at Olympia by Paionios it was no different than any other artistic object he learned of.

What is most interesting to me is the way A S-G's original design in clay was simplified by the demands of the subject and medium. He encumbered Nike with a native American headdress, a torch and a shield, and extended wings. The finished product is far more faithful to the original. Anyone who has read *The Fountainhead* understands why.

We named our towns Ithaca, Athens, Spartanburg, Ionia, Rome, and Utica because we sought the best of human achievement for our beginning. Our love of science and our passion for sports would be completely familiar to the Greeks. Our republic and its courts would fit Cicero or Cato and when we criticized Richard Daley and Douglas MacArthur, we called them "Caesars."

Repeating the myths of the past is not the Greek way. The Romans were unflinching in their written and engraved portraits of their Caesars. The coinage of America is specifically and completely classical for a reason. You deserve the truth.

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