

Augustin Dupré, and his work for America : remarks made before the Massachusetts Historical Society, March 13, 1890 / by William S. Appleton.

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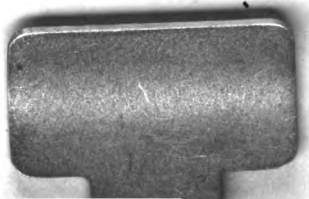


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AUGUSTIN DUPRÉ;

AND HIS WORK FOR AMERICA.

REMARKS

MADE BEFORE

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BY

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AUGUSTIN DUPRÉ

AND

HIS WORK FOR AMERICA.

WHILE in Paris in the early months of 1888, I had the good fortune to be of some use in securing for the Boston Public Library a group of objects which may be called the Dupré collection. They had come from the family of the great medallist Augustin Dupré, and relate wholly to his work done for America or Americans, especially Franklin. I have been allowed to have some of the most interesting and most portable for exhibition here to-day, and will give some description of the collection, with a short account of the artist.

Augustin Dupré was born at St. Etienne near Lyons, October 6, 1748, the son of a shoemaker. St. Etienne was the seat of the royal factory of arms; and as Dupré entered in youth the employ of a gunmaker, this turned his artistic tastes and faculties in the direction of engraving on metal. At the age of twenty he walked to Paris, where he found the same employment, and soon distinguished himself by his beautiful work on sword-hilts, gradually becoming also an engraver of dies for medals. He lived at Auteuil, not far from Franklin at Passy; and his French biographer says that his acquaintance with Franklin began in their morning walks to Paris, which one can readily accept as probable. The diplomatic philosopher undoubtedly drew from the artist's lips an account of his labors and aspirations, and was easily convinced of his ability as already shown in his works. Duvivier was at that time the principal engraver of the royal mint, and as such was employed to design the medal voted by Congress to Washington for the evacuation of Boston,—a medal of admirable workmanship, but without the least suggestion of imagination or genius. Dupré undoubtedly felt he could do better, and Franklin gave him the opportunity.

I shall speak more particularly of Dupré's American medals later; but his merit had made him Medallist of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, and an assistant engraver for the mint, when a decree of the National Assembly of April 9, 1791, ordered a competition for designs for a new coinage. Dupré came out victorious over all other contestants, among whom were Duvivier, the artist of the medals of Washington, De Fleury, William Washington, and Howard, Gatteaux, the artist of the medals of Gates, Wayne, and Stewart, Andrieu and Droz, also medallists of repute. July 11, 1791, Dupré was named principal engraver of the mint; and so continued till displaced by Bonaparte in 1803. Dupré's beautiful designs of 1791 for the pieces of twenty francs and five francs were again adopted by the short-lived Republic of 1848-1852, and are familiar to all on the coinage of France of the last twenty years, — a remarkable instance of national appreciation and popularity. Dupré did not receive the cross of the Legion of Honor till 1830. He died at Armentières, January 31, 1833.

His work for America and Americans comprises seven medals, — the *Libertas Americana*, 1783; the Greene medal, 1787; the Morgan and Jones medals, 1789; the Diplomatic medal, 1792, and two medals of Franklin of 1784 and 1786. The collection now in the Public Library contains something relating to nearly all of these. The *Libertas Americana* has been the object of unbounded admiration ever since it first appeared. Some extracts from Franklin's letters concerning it may be read in Vol. XI. of the Proceedings of this Society, page 301. The conception of the young American Republic as the infant Hercules, whom France in the armor of Pallas covers with her shield, the legend being "*NON SINE DIIS ANIMOSUS INFANS,*" of course took immensely in France; and the genius of Dupré wrought out this idea in shape so beautiful that the medal must always rank among the choicest productions in its own department of modern art. In the Dupré collection are proofs of both sides in gold on a white ground.

Of the medal to Gen. Nathanael Greene there is nothing in the collection, and but little relating to that of Paul Jones. Of the medal to Gen. Daniel Morgan there are the hubs for both dies, and Dupré's study in wax of the battle of the Cowpens for the reverse. This design excited the special enthu-

siasm of Dupré's French biographer, M. Charles Blanc of the Institute, who wrote thus of it: "Le combat de Cowpens, livré en Amérique par Daniel Morgan, a été le sujet d'une médaille qui semble frémir sous le mouvement des cavaliers qui bondissent et des fantassins qui fuient dans un fond, creusé par les plis imperceptibles du métal, et où la fumée du canon va s'évanouir." Nothing more need be said.

The Diplomatic medal, with its legend, "TO PEACE AND COMMERCE," was till a few years ago a numismatic mystery, which was however wholly cleared up in the "American Journal of Numismatics" for 1875. Thomas Jefferson ordered the medal in 1790 in a letter to William Short, then Chargé d'Affaires of the United States to France, in which he also suggested the design, which was afterwards carried out by Dupré. The dies were finished in 1792, and two medals were struck in gold, — one for the Marquis de la Luzerne, and one for the Comte de Moustier; six impressions were also struck in bronze, some of which are confidently believed to have been destroyed in the great fire set by the Communists of Paris in 1871. One specimen in bronze is in this country. In the Dupré collection are the original dies of both sides, — one slightly cracked, the other so badly broken as to be useless. There is also Dupré's model of the reverse in clay, one of the two most precious gems of the collection, carrying out Jefferson's idea of "Columbia (a fine female figure) delivering the emblems of Peace and Commerce to a Mercury." We must admire the inspiration of Jefferson as perpetuated by the graver of Dupré, when we see the beautiful Columbia in the guise of an Indian Queen, placing in the hands of Mercury for universal distribution a horn, filled with grain as a token of the crops to feed the world, crowned by the olive-branch as an offer of the principles of peaceful arbitration.

Concerning the medals of Franklin facts are few. I do not find that Franklin makes any mention of them in his letters, nor is it known who ordered them. Certainly Franklin himself did not. Dupré designed two large medals with the same head of Franklin, — both well known to collectors, and evidently ordered by some enthusiastic admirer. In the Dupré collection are the obverse die and two proofs of a small medal of Franklin, not known, I think, in finished state. There is also a proof from an oval die with the arms of a family of Franklin,

which it is possible was ordered by the old philosopher turned diplomat, though one must regret that he should appear to have asserted a claim to bear them; but such weakness may almost be called a national failing. The two large medals have the same head, the reverse of the medal of 1786 being simply a wreath, while that of 1784 has the beautiful figure of a Genius, each bearing the well-known inscription, "ERIPUIT CÆLO FULMEN SCEPTRUMQUE TYRANNIS." The Dupré collection also contains what to Bostonians must be its most precious object, — Dupré's sketches in pencil, dated 1783, with the first ideas of the medal with the Genius. The obverse is to all intents an original portrait of Franklin, with the legend "BENJ. FRANKLIN MINIS. PLEN. DES ÉTATS UNIS DE L'AMÉRIQUE MDCCLXXXIII.," which was changed on the medal to "BENJ. FRANKLIN NATUS BOSTON. XVII JAN. MDCCVI." The reverse differs slightly from the medal as struck; but the inscription is far inferior, being "JE VOLE À L'IMMORTALITÉ," for which the Latin was substituted, as just mentioned.

Most of the objects I have described are strictly unique in the full meaning of that often misused word, since there was no occasion ever to make a duplicate or repetition of them, except in the case of the broken dies. It is possible that this was done, though the statements in the published correspondence relating to them are somewhat confusing. There are other objects of less interest in the collection, as the engraving of the fight between the "Bon Homme Richard" and the "Serapis," evidently sent to Dupré to guide him in drawing the ships for the reverse of the medal of Paul Jones; and a head of Jones in bronze too large for the medal as struck, as if Dupré had originally designed a larger medal. There are also proofs of both sides of the medal to Washington for the evacuation of Boston, by Duvivier, which we may agreeably suppose to have been presented by the senior artist to Dupré. The authorities of the city of Paris were desirous to secure the collection; but M. Hoffmann, the dealer from whom it was bought, preferred that it should come to this country, where there can be no more proper place for it as a whole than Boston. And I think that we may rejoice that it is securely placed in the Public Library, which is indebted for it to the patriotic interest and liberal views of our own librarian.

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