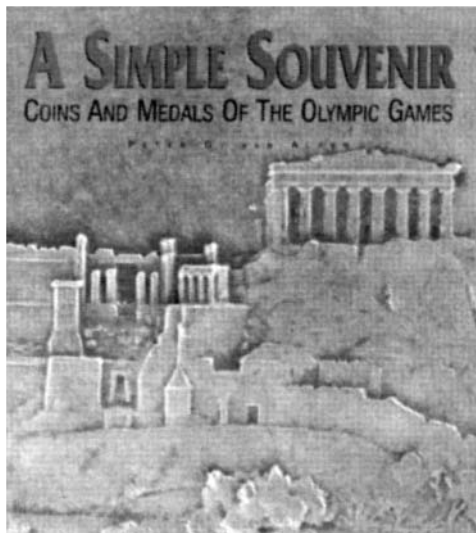


BOOK REVIEW

A Simple Souvenir: Coins and Medals of the Olympic Games by Peter G. van Alphen (New York: American Numismatic Society, 2004), 146 pp.
Reviewed by Robert K. Barney, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada.

To "coin" a phrase, Peter van Alphen's *A Simple Souvenir* ... is anything but "simple"—in fact, his book is an outstanding contribution to the genre of literature that deals with the subject of Olympic medals and coins. Van Alphen, the Margaret Thompson Assistant Curator of Ancient Coins at the American Numismatic Society, located in the heart of the financial district of downtown Manhattan, brings a dimension of knowledge and expertise to his subject well beyond that of other authors who have investigated the subject of coins and medals of the Olympic Games.¹ As the book's attractive dust-cover jacket proclaims, van Alphen achieved a Master of Arts degree at Texas A&M in nautical archaeology and, as well, graduated from The University of Texas (Austin) with a Doctor of Philosophy in classical philology. He has published widely on the subject of Linear B, Nautical Archaeology, and Numismatics.

The idea for van Alphen's striking work arose from the catalogue published by the American Numismatic Society for its exhibition, "Full Circle: The Olympic Heritage in Coins and Medals," shown at the Federal Reserve Bank in New York City from October 2003 to October 2004, an event staged to coincide with the celebration of the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. The exhibition itself presented over 120 ancient and modern coins, medals, and related Olympic badges, posters, and ephemera.



A Simple Souvenir is presented in two sections, the first of which ("Introduction," 35 pages) develops the history of Olympic coinage in antiquity, the re-birth of the Olympics in modern times, and a prose treatment of Olympic medals from Athens 1896 to Sydney 2000. Van Alpen's prose is eloquent, his research detailed (the "Introduction" is documented by 109 footnotes, many of them referencing respected sources). Van Alpen is at his best when dealing with Olympic coinage in antiquity, obviously a measure of his academic training and career specialization. Readers will find van Alpen's analysis concise, shrewd, and enlightening, even to those of us who have studied in the field for years. For instance, though conventional wisdom tells us that kings and tyrants often struck coins to celebrate their triumphs at Olympia (almost exclusively with respect to the chariot events), how many of us are aware that, at the ancient Olympic Games, the Elean managers of the great festival produced history's first bonafide Olympic coins, not as commemorative objects, but rather as the sole legal tender for business transactions occurring in the Olympic precinct during the course of the festival (p. 11)? Upon arrival, Olympic pilgrims in antiquity were required to exchange their "home polis" currency for locally-struck Elean coins (probably at a rate favourable to the hosts) just as modern Olympic pilgrims do today when arriving in the country of the city hosting modern Olympic festivals. Van Alpen's impressive "Introduction," as the rest of the volume, is impressively illustrated. Scores of reproductions, attractively presented, buttress his analysis. A thorough bibliography documents the text.

The second (and major) part of *A Simple Souvenir* focuses on the catalogue material presented in concert with the American Numismatic exhibition at the Federal Reserve Bank. This section commences with a galaxy of ancient coin illustrations and pertinent research commentary on such matters as: "The Coinage of the Eleans for Olympia," "The Coinage of the Western Greek Tyrants," "The Coinage of Phillip II," and "Other Coins With Agonistic Themes." This is followed by a lengthy treatment of Modern Olympic medals, perhaps the most important dimension of which is a thorough analysis of the medallic artists whose designs adorn the various coin editions. What we can detect from this is a history of artistic influences prevailing among coin designers of Olympic medals with respect to specific eras. For example, we learn that the first half-century of Olympic medallic art was influenced heavily by French Art Nouveau (with one or two exceptions—Rivaud's 1924 winner's medal, for instance). And, that the winner's medals for the 1928 Amsterdam Games were designed, not by a medallic artist, per se, but rather by a painter and sculptor of religious themes commissioned by various churches throughout Italy. That individual was the Tuscan artist Giuseppe Cassioli. Following the Amsterdam Games, Cassioli's 1928 medal design was submitted to the jury of an IOC-sponsored competition to select a design suitable to use indefinitely for the winner's medals of the Summer Games. His design won the contest and was used exclusively for over seven decades. In 1972 the IOC allowed the Cassioli medal's "reverse" (seated Victory holding laurel wreath and palm) to be altered by the host city Organizing Committee. But, the Cassioli medal's "obverse" (Victor carried by jubilant athletes) saw no significant change until 2004, at which time the design was discarded. Following World War II, a rapid decline of Hellenistic themes for Olympic medallic art took place, replaced by an acceleration of legends and symbol depiction, like the five rings and individual host-city Olympic emblems. Van Alpen's research on the lives and motivational influences of Olympic medal artists is the best I have encountered in one specific volume. Here is a wealth of information, written from the perspective of a true numismatic scholar.

Finally, van Alpen briefly treats the history of commemorative coins struck in modern circumstance by state-owned-and-operated mints. Since such items are legal tender, the design process must follow established mint procedures. Different from the Olympic medal

design process, almost always, national mint "in house" designers are responsible for the finished product—the IOC itself has little "say" over such designs. According to van Alpen, the first "legal tender" Modern Olympic coin, a 500 markka silver/copper piece, was struck by the Finnish National Mint in 1952. The second, a 1000 yen silver/copper piece, was struck by the Japanese National Mint in 1965. From that time on, Olympic coins have consistently been struck in celebration of the Summer Games.

Despite my admiration for Van Alpen's work, there is a major shortcoming—the book's title is not altogether descriptive of its contents; the subtitle of the book, *Coins and Medals of the Olympic Games*, is, in part, misleading. There is no treatment whatsoever of Olympic medals struck for the Winter Games, a medallic tradition that stretches backward in time to 1924. Perhaps, then, a more descriptive subtitle would have been *Ancient Olympic Coins and Modern Olympic Summer Games Medals and Commemorative Coins* (a bit too cumbersome, perhaps). But, in point of fact, if van Alpen could have researched and composed for Olympic Winter Games commemorative coins and medals what he most assuredly has for ancient Olympic coins and medals and commemorative coins of the Summer Games, then his book could well have been an unparalleled treatment of the subject as a whole. That said, this is an important work, one produced in substantial and attractive substance, and a book that should be read by all interested in a fascinating and important dimension of the history of the Olympic Games, both ancient and modern.

Endnotes

- ¹ See, for instance, Jim Greensfelder, Oleg Vorontsov, Jim Lally, *Olympic Medals — A Reference Guide* (Cincinnati: GVL Enterprises. 1998); and Victor Gadoury, *Olympic Coins and Medals* (Monaco: 1996).