

Jewish-American Hall of Fame medals long-running series

Long program highlights famous, little known figures from history

BY JEFF STARCK COIN WORLD STAFF

Forty-three years ago, during a particularly flourishing period for modern medallic art, a commemorative medal program was born that still endures. The continuing series offers collectors both challenge and familiarity, with a variety of subjects by well-known designers, some of whom designed United States coins.

The Jewish-American Hall of Fame medal project is the longest running series of nongovernment art medals produced in America, according to Mel Wacks, the originator of the program and still its torch-bearer today. More than 25,000 medals have been sold through the program since its inception in 1969, an outgrowth of the then Judah Magnes Museum.

New inductees are honored with a plaque, as well as placement on a medal highlighting their history and unique accomplishments. Part of the American Jewish Historical Society after 2001, the plaques that honor new inductees have been on permanent loan at the Virginia Holocaust Museum in Richmond since 2010.

Inductees are from all corners of society: sports, military, medicine, business and entertainment, among others, and the medals

often highlight lesser-known facets of their fame.

While many names (like Barbra Streisand and George Gershwin) would be instantly recognizable to almost everyone, mixed in are names that are most certainly unknown or overlooked by many people, like the 18th century's Haym Solomon or the 20th century's Dr. Bela Schick.

"Jews have made important contributions to the history and culture of America from the time of [Christopher] Columbus," writes Wacks at the JAHF website, www.amuseum.org. "Learn that it was Spanish Jewry, not Spanish jewelry, that paid for Columbus' voyage of discovery."

In a recent interview, Wacks added, "There are many individuals who have made substantial contributions to America (and the world) in one way or another but whose names are not known to the public, and we have honored some of them."

Program details

Alan Stahl, currently the curator of numismatics at Princeton University, writing in the 1990 catalog of the Federation Internationale de la Medaille, listed the Jewish-American Hall of Fame series among the

most "important series of medals in recent years," placing it in the company of the Society of Medalists and the Brookgreen Gardens medal programs, both famous in art circles. But the JAHF program stands alone as the longest survivor of the medallic art heyday.

In general, each inductee (and medal subject) is a single individual, but some exceptions have been made.

Compositional changes

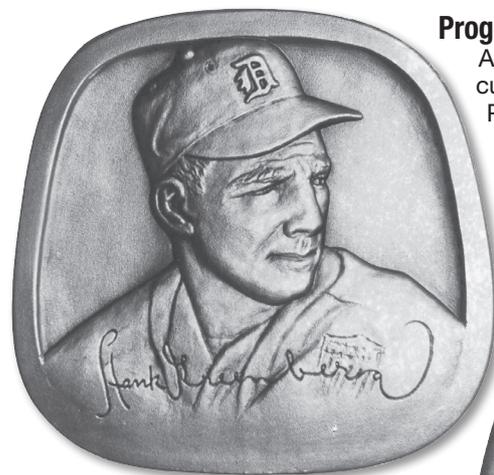
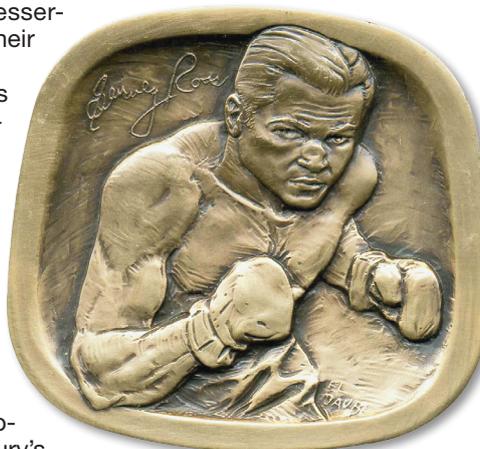
The medals have always been made in bronze versions, with additional versions produced in precious metal.

In the 1970s, about 25 gold-plated bronze sets of the first six medals (issued from 1969 to 1974) were made and sold by Medallic Art Co.

From 1969 through 2010, .999 fine silver medals were issued, but the rising cost of silver forced the JAHF to begin issuing silver-plated bronze medals in place of a pure silver version.

Gold medals have been a mainstay of the program since 1978, though the overall gold content of the medals has undergone change. The gold medals of 1978 and 1979 are made of .583 fine gold. The fineness was decreased to .4167 fine with the 1980 issue, which was

Boxer Barney Ross' service to his country during World War II was instrumental in securing induction to the Jewish-American Hall of Fame. The medal, designed by Eugene Daub, pairs the pugnacious pugilist with his Silver Star for gallantry.



All images courtesy of Jewish-American Hall of Fame, www.amuseum.org/jahf.

Henry "Hank" Greenberg, the first Jewish player inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, was recently honored with silver-plated bronze medals to mark the centennial of his birth. The medal, designed by Hal Reed and originally released in 1991, illustrates the tension between vocation and faith.



eral “very talented medalists” who have created designs for the program, the “high quality minting” and the “very small mintages” for the medals.

But, in three instances the program could not maintain that uniformity of shape; the 1986 Christopher Columbus medal, another Columbus medal in 1992 and the 1973 medal honoring Haym Solomon (who helped finance the American Revolution) are the only round medals thus far in the series, because the artist who designed all three, “the great medalist, Paul Vincze, would not work in our usual rounded-trapezoidal shape,” Wacks said.

The JAHF medal series has received widespread acclaim, he said.

“While we have a strong nucleus of Jewish supporters, we also have many non-Jewish buyers throughout the United States and as far away as mainland China. Some are attracted by the subject matter that has wide appeal ... [and] others appreciate the magnificent high relief portraits and designs,” Wacks said.

Sports figures

Jews have left an indelible impression on all facets of American history, and perhaps no area is more American than sports.

Though sometimes stereotyped as unathletic — the *Famous Jewish Sports Legends* pamphlet in *Airplane!* comes to mind — many Jewish athletes have risen to success in the highest sports leagues in America.

Baseball is the sport where Jews have achieved possibly the most success; more than 150 players of Jewish descent have played at the major league level, several of them enjoying Hall of Fame careers. One of those Jewish stars of the baseball diamond is Henry Benjamin “Hank” Greenberg, who arrived in Major League Baseball 15 years before Jackie Robinson broke the modern color barrier.

In 1956 Greenberg became the first Jewish athlete inducted into the National Baseball Hall of

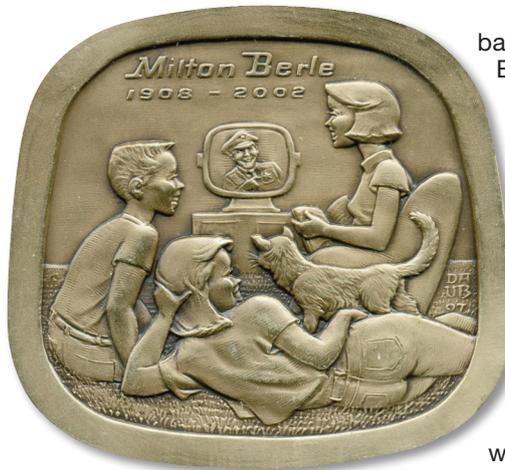


Milton Berle's pioneering work in the early days of television earned him the moniker Mr. Television (he was also known as Uncle Miltie). A Eugene Daub medal honored him in 2008.

Fame. In 1935, Greenberg was named Most Valuable Player, the first Jewish award winner, for leading the Detroit Tigers to a World Series Championship, but it is a game he didn't play that might best encapsulate the balancing act between career and faith.

In 1934, with the Tigers in a pennant race, Greenberg decided to play on Rosh Hashanah (hitting two home runs, including the game winner) but sit out Yom Kippur, the holiest Jewish holiday. The Tigers lost that day, but had already secured a position in the playoffs. Edgar Guest wrote a poem about the dilemma faced by Greenberg, the final lines of which are inscribed on the reverse of the medal, reading WE SHALL MISS HIM IN THE INFIELD AND SHALL MISS HIM AT THE BAT BUT HE'S TRUE TO HIS RELIGION — AND HONOR HIM FOR THAT.

The medal, designed by Hal Reed, features a portrait of Greenberg along with his signature on the obverse. In addition to the



quote from the poem, the reverse depicts Greenberg hitting his 1945 pennant-winning grand slam home run in the ninth inning of the season's final game.

The Greenberg medal was originally released in 1991 in bronze, silver and .4167 fine gold versions; the JAHF issued an additional quantity of silver-plated bronze medals in 2011 to mark the centennial of Greenberg's birth. These are medals marked HANK GREENBERG CENTENNIAL on the edge.

Catcher Moe Berg is another baseball player honored in the series of medals, but it was his military service to America during World War II that secured his enshrinement into the JAHF.

The Berg medal, designed by Eugene Daub, was issued in 2006.

The Berg medal highlighted both Berg's military action in World War II and his baseball career with four major league teams before the war. An athlete who filmed Tokyo military installations during a 1934

baseball tour of Japan, Berg joined the Office of Strategic Services during World War II, engaging in espionage critical to the war effort.

Berg is the only baseball player to be enshrined in the CIA's Hall of Fame and the International Spy Museum.

Another World War II hero, boxer Barney Ross, was honored with the 2009 medal, also designed by Daub.

Ross was a three-time world boxing champion who maintained later that the toughest round he ever faced “was the night I spent in that shell hole with my wounded brother.”

His service as an infantry soldier earned him a Silver Star for gallantry, which features prominently on the reverse of the medal.

The medal shows the finely detailed musculature of a boxer in his prime, and something more, a bashed-in facial feature. “This is a nose that's taken a lot of hits,” Daub said in 2009 in an interview with *Coin World* (Sept. 21, 2009).

Entertainers

Jewish actors, comedians, performers, directors and producers have left an imprint in Hollywood and the entertainment industry.

One of the biggest stars of the early television era is Milton Berle, who became known as “Mr. Television.”

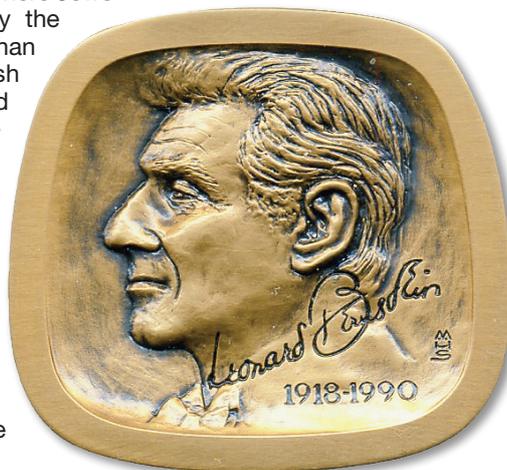
Berle was inducted into the JAHF in 2008.

Daub created the medal, which shows a portrait of Berle wearing a bow-tie. The legend THERE'S ONLY ONE PLACE FOR ME — NEAR YOU, comes from Berle's theme song.

A nostalgic scene of a 1950s family watching Berle's hugely popular *Texaco Star Theater* on an early television appears on the reverse.

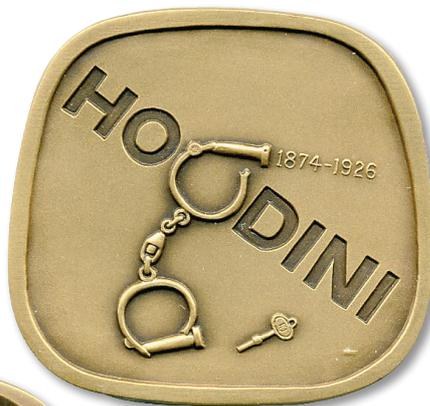
Berle received one of the first Emmy Awards ever given for starring in NBC's *Texaco Star Theater* (1948) and was the first person to be inducted into the Television Hall of Fame (1984), among other distinctions.

Fans of classic and Broadway music surely will recognize the



Musician Leonard Bernstein is honored on the 1993 medal by Marika Somogyi, as the JAHF marked the 75th birth anniversary of the composer.





Magician Harry Houdini was honored in 1996 with a medal for the Jewish-American Hall of Fame. The medal, designed by Hal Reed and Mel Wacks, is one of two double-medals in the series, with the insides of the two medals sharing negative designs of each other. The outer images appear to the left, the inside images to the right.

an 'Oreo' double medal," he said.

Houdini was born Erich Weiss in Hungary. He immigrated to the United States with his family and rose to fame as an illusionist and magician, his death-defying feats earning him fame worldwide long after his curious death in 1926.

The Houdini medal and one for Asser Levy are the only "double medal" issues in the series.

Science, medical field

One of the intriguing aspects of the series is the diversity of subjects honored.

Physicist Albert Einstein (the subject of the second medal, issued in 1970) is a name almost universally familiar, but other honorees, like Dr. Bela Schick (who developed a test for diphtheria, and is honored on a 1990 JAHF medal), is probably unfamiliar to most peoples.

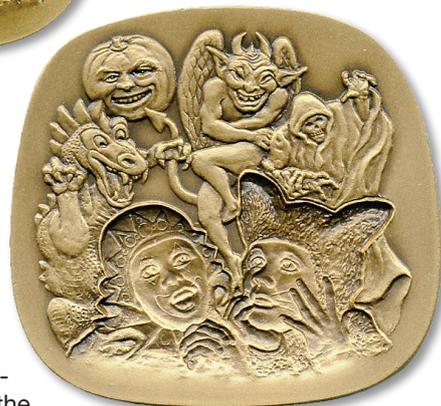
Einstein and Schick are just two

of the handful of luminaries from the world of science and medicine honored in the series.

Another medal (1980) honors Jonas Salk, who created the polio vaccine, while yet another medal (released in 2011) highlights Gertrude Ross, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Medicine.

What did these honorees do? Einstein's work on theoretical physics was ground shaking for the time and still reverberates more than 100 years after theories published during his "annus mirabilis" or "miracle year" have since been proven, leading to numerous technologies enjoyed by billions daily.

Schick, seen at his microscope on the medal commemorating his accomplishments, developed the eponymous Schick test for diphtheria susceptibility. Dr. Schick coordinated a successful, five-year campaign to eradicate the



disease that killed thousands annually in the U.S. The campaign included a pamphlet created by a young artist Gerta Ries (Wiener), who 75 years later would design the medal in the JAHF series honoring the man.

Salk's discovery was the linchpin in fighting a disease that affected tens of thousands annually. The reverse design is a testament to the effects of the life-changing disease; two boys play basketball while another, stricken with polio, stands with crutches and watches.

Elion, the latest honoree, is the 10th female inducted into the Hall. A chemist, she is credited with the development of the first chemotherapy for childhood leukemia, work that later led to improving organ transplants.

Historical figures

The Jewish diaspora in America has included inventors, explorers, poets, artists and more, touching many segments of American life.

In 1992, coinciding with the 400th anniversary of America, the JAHF medal honored Columbus, who might have had Jewish ancestry, while the medal also referred to the expulsion of Jews from Spain. An earlier medal (1986) honored three individuals — Don Isaac



work of Leonard Bernstein, who was honored on a 1993 medal from the series.

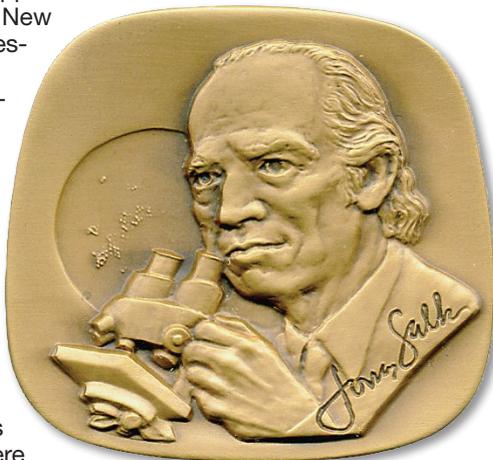
The Bernstein medal, designed by Marika Somogyi, marks the 75th anniversary of the birth of the late musician. The obverse depicts his profile bust facing left with facsimile signature across the neck and dates 1918-1990 below. The reverse depicts a scene of Bernstein at a piano on stage during one of his Young People's Concerts.

Bernstein was a composer of Broadway musicals, classical music, operas and ballet scores in addition to being a conductor. He became the first American-born person to head a major symphony orchestra when he was appointed music director of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in 1958.

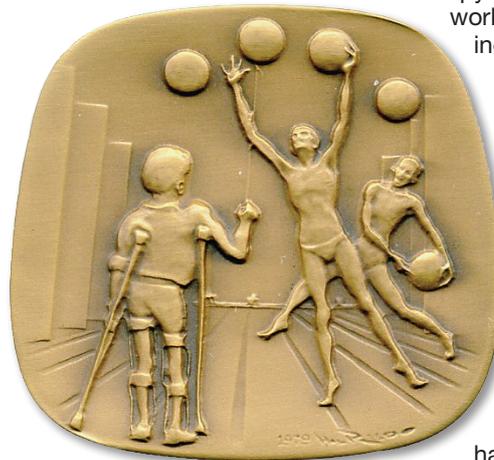
The star of an earlier and much different medium, Harry Houdini, was inducted into the hall and honored with a medal in 1996, designed by Reed and Wacks.

The medal was a first for the series, offering collectors two medals in one, Wacks said.

"The Houdini medal is like an Oreo cookie — there are actually two medals. Halloween scenes [on the insides] are the negative of each other and fit together perfectly to make



Dr. Jonas Salk was honored in 1990 for his revolutionary vaccine for polio, which saved thousands from life in wheelchairs or on crutches and from death or being in an iron lung. Hal Reed designed the medal.



Abravanel, Luis de Santangel and Abraham Zacuto — who helped Columbus obtain the financial assistance critical to his journey.

Columbus' exploration cleared the way for later waves of explorers and, later still, immigrants to brave the passage across a mighty ocean to come to the shores of a new land.

The spirit that welcomed so many immigrants to a growing power is honored with the 1983 medal for Emma Lazarus, well known today for her sonnet about the Statue of Liberty.

A shortened form of the familiar legend, GIVE ME YOUR TIRED, YOUR POOR ... YEARNING TO BREATH FREE, appears on the obverse of Gerta Ries Wiener's 1983 medal.

Wiener's medal features a young portrait of Lazarus on the obverse. A crowd of immigrants on board a ship sailing toward Ellis Island graces the reverse. Ten figures appear, including six children. The immigrants stand near the ship's railing, staring wistfully at the Statue of Liberty in the distance.

Some 12 million immigrants came through nearby Ellis Island from 1892 to 1954, just one of the many points of entry for millions of immigrants, some of whom were Jewish, during the 19th and 20th century.

One of those immigrants who came to the country in the 19th century hailed from Bavaria in Germany: Levi Strauss, who is credited with co-creating one of



The words of Emma Lazarus appear in her reproduced handwriting on a JAHF medal issued in 1983 and designed by Gerta Ries Wiener.

the most defining items of American fashion history, blue jeans.

Levi jeans are still being made nearly 140 years after Strauss and tailor Jacob Davis patented the process to add copper rivets to strengthen jeans.

Strauss and the patented jeans are honored with a 1979 medal.

Medals by coin designers

A notable achievement of the series of medals is the sheer number of respected and famous artists who have been commissioned.

Collectors of U.S. coins desiring to piggyback on their U.S. coin interests might consider the medal series, as several of the artists also created coinage designs.

The only other numismatic work of Jacques Schnier, the artist behind the 1974 Herbert H. Lehman medal, is the 1936 Bay Bridge commemorative half dollar.

Alex Shagin is a well-known artist who created the reverse for the 2001 Capitol Visitor Center commemorative half dollar reverse. He also created JAHF medals for humanitarian Elie Wiesel (1995),



Though most medals in the series conform to the JAHF standard rounded trapezoidal shape, the great sculptor Paul Vincze would not create designs in that shape, so the three medals he created for the series, including one honoring Haym Solomon in 1973, are all round.



singer/actress Barbra Streisand (1997), *Titanic* victims Ida and Isadore Strauss (1998), Asser Levy (1999), Bess Myerson (2001) and Leopold Karpeles (2002).

Somogyi, the designer of the Bernstein medal, also created the 1989 Benny Goodman medal and the 2000 medal for Arthur Miller, as well as the 2001 Capitol Visitor Center commemorative silver dollar obverse and the 1991 Mount Rushmore commemorative silver dollar obverse for the U.S. Mint.

Jim Licaretz, designer for the 2005 Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal medal, has multiple U.S. coin designs to his name, including the 2009 Guam quarter dollar reverse and 2010 Boy Scouts of America Centennial commemorative silver dollar reverse.

Work from one of the artists behind three medals in the JAHF series can be found around the world. Vincze, creator of the only round JAHF medals, also created coins for many countries, including Guatemala, Guernsey, Guinea, Jamaica, Libya, Malawi and Nigeria, among others.

Collecting the medals

Collectors interested in pursuing the medallic series can limit their chase to a set of one metal version, or pick-and-choose honorees in building a thematic collection. A collection of all three versions for every year, while not impossible, would likely take years of effort and a large bankroll.

The JAHF still offers some of the past issues through its shop; as of press time July 11, one or more of the versions are still available for 32 of the approximately 40 recipients.

The complete list of medals issued, as well as which ones

remain available, can be found at www.amuseum.org/jahf/shop/shop.php.

The site also lists a few ancillary items, including a few medallic issues that are not part of the JAHF series. A 1993 medal honoring Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is not part of the series (and she is not an inductee), though it was issued as part of a separate JAHF initiative. Nor is the 350 Years of Jewish Life in America medal released in 2004; it was issued for a larger project for the Celebrate 350 commission, a national commemoration of Jewish history in the United States.

Buying the newest releases as they become available (which is annually, with rare exception) is one way to kick-start a collection.

The 2012 medal will celebrate Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785 to 1851), who was probably the most famous American Jew in the early 19th century, but is relatively unknown today, according to Wacks. The medal will become available in the fall.

Wacks invites those with interest in this or any of the medals to telephone him at 818-225-1348 or email him at directorjahf@yahoo.com.

In addition JAHF medals often appear in mail-bid sales conducted by William Rosenblum, a specialist in Judaica, and a few are usually offered on eBay at any given time.

Other dealers might carry the medals with less frequency, but "it is extremely rare that complete or nearly complete collections are available, so it is a challenge putting together a complete set of Jewish-American Hall of Fame medals — but isn't that what makes collecting fun?" Wacks said.

The medals provide a lesson in history, even for Wacks.

"I've learned a lot. The [series] has given me an education," he said.

Decades after its birth, the Jewish-American Hall of Fame medal program continues to attract an audience of interested collectors, which extends far beyond the Jewish community.

"If these medals had only appealed to a small ethnic group they probably would not have survived," Wacks writes. ■