

The UNAM's Exceptional Contemporary Medal Collection

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This page: UNAM Centennial, obverse, 999-grade silver, 60 mm in diameter, 100 grams, written along the edge, struck in 2010. Next page, same medal reverse.

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The UNAM is one of the country's few educational institutions that has an on-going program for issuing medals.

Medals unique for their beauty and age, and medals struck as distinctions for outstanding members of the university, renowned for their work and contributions, or to commemorate important moments in the history of our institution: these are all part of the exceptional numismatic collection that is one of our university's cultural assets.¹ The older medals date from the eighteenth century when Gerónimo Antonio Gil, an engraver from Madrid's San Fernando Academy, arrived in New Spain, and culminate in the first third of the twentieth century. The latter are part of the contemporary collection, begun in 1948, and continually growing since the UNAM is one of the country's few educational

institutions that has an on-going program for issuing medals.

NUMISMATICS AND THE UNIVERSITY

The university's old medal collection, stored at the San Carlos Academy, dates back to the end of the eighteenth century, even though the Mint began striking medals in New Spain in 1536 for the Royal University of Mexico. With the arrival of Gerónimo Antonio Gil to these shores in 1778, steps were taken to organize a school for engravers at the Mexico City Mint (1781), the precursor for the San Carlos Royal Academy of the Three Noble Arts (1785) in New Spain. The relationship between the Mint and San Carlos was established thanks to the interest of Gil, the mint's greatest engraver, in education.

¹Editor of *Voices of Mexico*. We wish to thank the University Office for Property Management (DGPU) for providing us with information and giving us the facilities for photographing the medals.



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30 Years, UNAM Sculptural Walk, electrolytic pewter, 100 x 60 mm, struck in 2009.



University City, World Heritage Treasure, 999-grade silver, 60 mm in diameter, 100 grams, struck in 2009.



20th Anniversary of Nezahualcóyotl Hall, 999-grade silver, 64 x 50 mm, 100 grams, struck in 1996.

The collection boasts 320 medals, divided into two kinds: medals given in recognition of merit and commemorative medals.

The academy's numismatic production declined after Gil's death and came to a complete halt between 1812 and 1824, when it closed its doors due to the War of Independence. In the mid-nineteenth century, these activities received renewed impetus when a new team of professors came to the academy, among whom was Juan Santiago Bagally, engraver to the London Mint, who brought with him an interesting collection of pieces of English manufacture. The academy's numismatic collection increased when Mexico's representative in London, Francisco Facio, acquired examples of English medals.

In the early twentieth century, this activity again declined due to a lack of interest among students and the technological lag in the procedures used, which contrasted with the new production techniques in practice elsewhere that yielded more precise results. Engraving courses were suspended in 1903. A short time later, some courses on specific topics were renewed, and academic and commemorative medals were designed.

The National University of Mexico, founded in 1910, inherited this collection when it absorbed the old San Carlos Academy in 1929, dividing it into the National School of Architecture and the Central School for the Visual Arts. The latter, in 1933 dubbed the National School for the Visual Arts, renewed the striking of medals, thus increasing the academy's collection.

The pieces struck from 1948 on are part of the modern collection. They are an interesting sample of numismatic versatility, but receive little attention from the university community.

THE CONTEMPORARY COLLECTION

The collection boasts 320 medals, stored by the University Office for Property Management (DGPU) in safe deposit boxes in several banks. It is divided into two kinds: medals given in recognition of merit and commemorative medals. Their designs run the gamut from the traditional, based on the old academy's medals,



60 Years of Academic Service, obverse (coat of arms of the Royal Pontifical University of Mexico), 24-carat gold, 33 mm in diameter, 20 grams, struck in 1992.



20 Years of Academic Service, obverse (design by Felipe Ehrenberg), copper patina, 38 mm in diameter, struck in 1986.



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Gabino Barreda Medal for University Merit, obverse (given to the student with the highest grade-point average in his/her high school or college graduating class), 999-grade silver, 40 mm in diameter, 38 grams, struck in 1982.

to completely innovative images showing the evolution of numismatics. The forms go way beyond traditional round medals, to elliptical, square, rectangular, hexagonal, heptagonal, octagonal and decagonal. One interesting point is that the collection has not been gathered for exactly artistic reasons, which is why the pieces are never on display. And, although publications do exist that catalogue their aim, appearance and year of issue (like the one this article is based on), as a collection, the holdings are almost completely unknown both among members of the university and the Mexican public in general.

MEDALS OF MERIT

The purpose of these medals is to recognize the efforts of members of the university com-

munity in different spheres. Those conferred for university merit are part of the tradition of any center of learning and have different aims:

- a) To honor the academic efforts of professors and researchers. This is the case of the Justo Sierra Medal, given a single time to those who have distinguished themselves in teaching and research; the Gabino Barreda Medal, given to high school students and undergraduates who finish their course work with the highest grade-point average in each school or faculty; the Antonio Caso Medal, awarded to graduating students with the highest grade-point average in each master's and doctoral program; and the Juana de Asbaje Medal, given to women academics who have shone in their fields.
- b) To acknowledge the work of members of the institution's collegiate bodies: among these



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Bicentennial of the School of Visual Arts and Architecture (Carlos III Medal), 999-grade silver, 67 mm in diameter, 150 grams, struck in 1982.

are the Board of Governors Medal and the Medal for Service in the University Controller's Office, the University Council Medal and the Technical Council Medals, among others.

- c) To pay tribute to extended service as academics and administrative posts in the institution. Among others, medals for 10, 15, 20, 25, 30 and up to 60 years of academic service are awarded, while in the case of administrative employees, a medal is given for 25 years of service.
- d) In recognition of a specific activity or of those who have performed outstandingly in their profession.

COMMEMORATIVE MEDALS

These testify to important moments and significant dates for the UNAM and society in general. Among them are:

- a) Institutional medals, issued to commemorate dates like the foundation of the university in 1910, the anniversary of its becoming autonomous, the 450th anniversary of the



Prince of Asturias Award for Communications and the Humanities 2009, aged bronze, 66 mm in diameter, struck in 2009.

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San Carlos School of Fine Arts, Polytechnic University of Valencia, obverse, 999-grade silver, 67 mm in diameter, 150 grams, struck in 1995.

arrival of the first printing press to Mexico, the moment when Congress approved the UNAM charter and the 450th anniversary of the foundation of the Royal Pontificate University of Mexico (the UNAM's predecessor). The design of the last two medals was picked from the entries in a competition open to the public.

- b) Pieces struck to pay homage to individuals who have left their mark on the university, like those commemorating the 100th and 150th anniversary of the birth of Don Justo Sierra, the main promoter of the creation of the National University; the centennial of the birth of distinguished members of the university community and UNAM presidents like Dr. Ignacio Chávez and Mario de la Cueva, among others.
- c) Medals celebrating significant cultural activities like the exhibition "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries," housed in the Old College of San Ildefonso, one of the UNAM's most important cultural venues, or important events like the total eclipse of the sun in 1991.

Commemorative medals testify to important moments and significant dates for the UNAM and society in general.

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Renowned sculptors and engravers, like Mathias Goeritz, Sebastián, Helen Escobedo, Arnaldo Cohen, Vicente Rojo and Federico Silva, designed many of the pieces.

- d) Pieces issued at the request of different academic institutions or administrative offices to celebrate a significant date or event in their history. Examples are the medal commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Nezahualcōyotl Hall, the first elliptical medal in this collection; and the Law School Two-Metal Medal, made of bronze and silver.
- e) Medals issued at the request of other institutions, and some made jointly by them and the UNAM.
- f) Annual calendars with designs alluding to the institution, which began being issued in 1998.

Several things distinguish the collection as a whole. First, most of the pieces include the UNAM's official coat of arms, at the center of which is a map of Latin America encircled by the UNAM motto, "The spirit will speak for my race," held up by an eagle representing Mexico and a condor representing the Andean

region. All this rests upon an allegory of volcanoes and a nopal cactus. Another characteristic is that many pieces display the UNAM mint itself: this is important because few institutions actually have their own numismatic mark (see box about the parts of the medal). Another plus is the participation of renowned sculptors and engravers in the design of many of the pieces, like, for example, Mathias Goeritz, Sebastián, Helen Escobedo, Arnaldo Cohen, Vicente Rojo, Federico Silva, just to mention a few.

We are able to reproduce only very few medals here; for reasons of space it is impossible to include even a third of the collection. Nevertheless, we hope to have piqued our readers' interest in seeing the other treasures an institution like the UNAM preserves. In the 100 years of its history, the UNAM has offered Mexican society something more than a good place for their children to study and contribute to the development of their country's knowledge. **UNAM**

NOTES

¹ This article has been written using information from *Medallas universitarias contemporáneas*, published by the University Office for Property Management (Mexico City: UNAM, 2003).



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Evaluating Commissions, 999-grade silver, 38 mm in diameter, 40 grams, struck in 1979.

PARTS OF A MEDAL



[1]

The **obverse** is the main face of the medal with the most significant image.



The **reverse** is the back of the medal, which includes secondary symbols and images.

The **edge** is the part that shows the thickness of the piece, and it can be smooth, lined, have something written on it, etc.



[2]



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[3]

The **rim** is the part around the circumference of the medal, next to or very near the edge; it can also be smooth, dotted, lined, etc.

The **inscription**: words or phrases with the name of the medal or alluding to the event being commemorated, usually placed along the rim.

The **field** is the entire area of one side of the medal; some call the field only the part of the side that is not occupied by a portrait or another image.



[4]



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The **mint mark** is a seal of the mint that struck the medal.

- [1] 40 Years of Computing in Mexico, 999-grade silver, 66 mm in diameter, 110 grams, struck in 1997.
- [2] UNAM Centennial, obverse, 999-grade silver, 60 mm in diameter, 100 grams, written along the edge: National Autonomous University of Mexico, struck in 2010.
- [3] 60 Years of Academic Service, reverse, 24-carat gold, 30 mm in diameter, 20 grams, struck in 1992.
- [4] 50 Years, University Olympic Stadium, obverse, 999-grade silver, 60 mm in diameter, 100 grams, struck in 2002.

Photos 1 and 4 in this box, courtesy of the University Office for Property Management (DGPU).