

Peace Medals: Negotiating Power in Early America.* Robert B. Pickering, ed. Tulsa, OK: Gilcrease Museum, 2011. 128 pp. [Distributed by the University of Oklahoma Press]

Reviewed by Raymond J. DeMallie

This volume was produced in conjunction with an exhibit at the Gilcrease Museum called “Peace Medals: Symbols of Influence and Prestige in North America.” As befits an exhibit catalog, the essays are brief, diverse, and specialized, offering perspectives that range from the numismatic to the ethnographic. Usually cast in silver, occasionally in gold, medals depicting kings and presidents were prized diplomatic gifts that were presented to American Indian leaders as tokens of allegiance. From Indian perspectives they became valued status symbols, objects of pride and jealousy. As Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas L. McKenney put it in 1829, besides serving as tokens of friendship, peace medals were “badges of power” and “trophies of renown” (p. 74). They have long been valued by non-Indians as well, so that the majority of surviving medals that were actually presented to Indians are today in museums or private collections.

Robert B. Pickering opens the volume with a brief introduction to peace medals, their creation, and the differences separating genuine from fake examples. F. Kent Reilly III offers an ethnographic perspective suggesting that peace medals fit naturally into the tradition of shell gorgets, many engraved with scenes of religious significance, that were worn by Indians for some four thousand years, as attested archeologically. Like the pre-European shell gorgets, Indians early on considered silver medals to be invested with a kind of supernatural power based on the image depicted on the medal.

Most of the following chapters deal with peace medals given by particular governments. Barry D. Tayman, Tony Lopez, and Skyler Liechty examine Spanish peace medals in a very thorough essay that describes minute differences between versions of the same medal and includes a census of known examples. John W. Adams addresses medals given by Louis XV of France. Duane H. King examines British medals as depicted in portraits of Cherokees painted in London in 1762. Significantly, these portraits also show silver gorgets worn in conjunction with medals—a more obvious continuum with shell gorgets. George J. Fuld offers detailed discussion of variation in the large, oval medals depicting George Washington, made from 1789 to 1795, which were individually engraved, rather than minted. He also includes an inventory of known examples and discusses the issue of fakes. Bruce W. Arnold writes about medals given by Louis Philippe I of France to visiting Iowa and Ojibwa Indians in 1845. Not specifically peace medals, they were presented to the Indians in honor of their visit and the dances that they performed for the king. Arnold was interested in whether any of these medals survived; he located two, one of which is in the Gilcrease collections.

The final essay by Frank H. Goodyear III is a thoughtful investigation of the peace medals given to the Sac chief Keokuk by the U.S. government. He is known to have had at least four, each one

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presented after the signing of a treaty. Goodyear examines paintings and photographs of Keokuk for evidence of the medals. He finds that in portraits painted in 1824 by James Otto Lewis and 1837 by Charles Bird King, and in a photographic portrait in 1847, a year before his death, Keokuk is prominently wearing a peace medal; all these portraits were made on occasions when the chief was away from home. However, in 1835, when George Catlin visited Keokuk at his home in Iowa and painted two portraits of him, no medal is visible. Goodyear concludes that the medal symbolized Keokuk's commitment to diplomacy—in contrast to the rival chief, Black Hawk, who chose the path of war—and that he wore it “when it suited his larger purposes” (p. 80).

The book is beautifully illustrated in color with photographs of medals, as well as historical paintings and photographs showing the ubiquitous presence of peace medals in the visual record. It will be of value to specialists, but it could also serve to introduce general readers to this important item of American Indian material culture and the multiple meanings peace medals have had over time.

Raymond J. DeMallie is Chancellors' Professor of Anthropology and American Indian Studies at Indiana University where he also directs the American Indian Studies Research Institute. His museum-based studies began while still a student at the University of Chicago, when he undertook work with ethnographic collections from the Plains of North America at the Field Museum under the supervision of James W. VanStone. A former president of the American Society for Ethnohistory, he is the editor or author of numerous works, including The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), (with Vine Deloria, Jr.) Documents of American Indian Diplomacy: Treaties, Agreements, and Conventions, 1775-1979 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999) and the Plains volume of the Handbook of North American Indians (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2001). He is presently completing editorial work, with Joanna C. Scherer, on Alice C. Fletcher's previously unpublished memoir, Life among the Indians, which will be published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2013.