

COLLECTING THE
CHARBNEAU
DOLLARS

Hand-carved gold, silver and copper miniatures commemorated the 1939-40 Golden Gate International Exposition.

OF THE NEARLY 100 different, historical souvenir medals produced for the 1939-40 Golden Gate International Exposition, the tiny and enigmatic “Charbneau dollars” are among the rarest and most valuable. Over the years, myriad bits and pieces of information regarding their varieties have been published, resulting in conflicting descriptions and opinions as to what was struck and what exists today.

In their seminal 1963 reference, *So-Called Dollars*, Harold E. Hibler and Charles V. Kappen listed several varieties, but not all are clearly defined. Cataloger Robert H. Burnie, in *Small California and Territorial Gold Coins* (1955), lists the largest number of varieties, some of which cannot be confirmed and likely

◀ General Electric Company was responsible for the Exposition’s breathtaking night illumination.

do not exist. However, after many years of extensive research, I have positively identified 13 distinct varieties, which are summarized here.

The Exposition

San Francisco mounted two successful world’s fairs, in 1894 and 1915, and its citizens hoped a third, celebrating the opening of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge in the mid- to late-1930s, would help pull the city out of the economic malaise of the Great Depression. The Exposition site was Treasure Island, built by the federal government over the hazardous Yerba Buena Shoal in the shadow of the Bay Bridge. The island was to be an airport for Pan American’s Pacific Rim service and fleet of Clipper planes,



J1



but ultimately served as a naval base from 1941 to 1997.

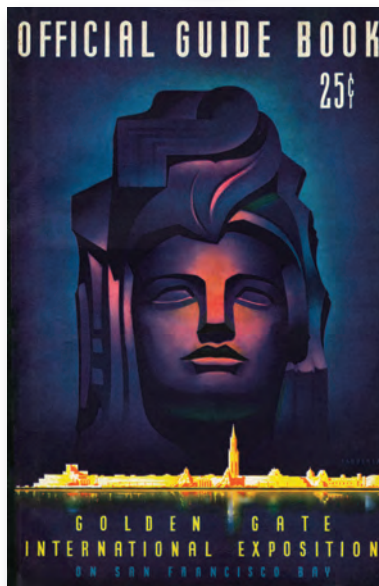
Structured around the theme “Pacifant of the Pacific,” the Golden Gate International Exposition showcased the products of countries bordering the ocean. The fairgrounds were dominated by the “Tower of the Sun” and an 80-foot statue of ocean goddess “Pacifica.”

President Franklin D. Roosevelt participated in the opening ceremonies via radio, noting that “as the boundaries of human intercourse are widened by giant strides of trade and travel, it is of vital import that the bonds of human understanding be maintained, enlarged and strengthened rapidly. Unity of the Pacific nations is America’s concern and responsibility; their onward progress deserves now a recognition that will be a stimulus as well.”

Jules Charbneau

A San Francisco fine-art appraiser, dealer and jewelry designer, Jules Charbneau exhibited his collection of 25,000 miniature, hand-carved items at the Exposition. He also struck and sold medals slightly smaller than a U.S. gold dollar to commemorate the event, their diminutive dimensions complementing his exhibit theme. The gold specimens sold for \$5 each; silver and copper examples were \$1 each.

The medals are dated 1939 and 1940, corresponding to the Exposition’s two, separate runs, the first from February 18 through October 29, 1939, and the second from May 25 through September 29, 1940. The obverse features the head of Pacifica, “Queen of the Fair,” with PACIFICA above; the reverse features the Golden Gate Bridge and the text “GOLDEN GATE INTERNATIONAL EXPOSITION ON SAN FRANCISCO BAY.”



▲ For the 1939 Golden Gate Exposition, Jules Charbneau issued tiny souvenir “dollars.”

PHOTOS: TODD POLLOCK (CHARBNEAU DOLLARS) & B. GREGORY

After a stint in the U.S. Navy and a variety of odd jobs, Charbneau began exhibiting his tiny collectibles at theaters, department stores and fairs.

the Tower of the Sun appears on the reverse, with the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, a ship, and Pan Am's China Clipper completing the theme of modern transportation. In all probability, Charbneau designed the piece, as he had created a dollar-sized gold medal for the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition.

When Charbneau offered his tiny, dollar-sized souvenirs at the Exposition, he likely had no idea how popular they would become years later. Unfortunately, his sales were disappointing, and reportedly the majority of the approximately 3,000 gold, silver and copper pieces were melted.

Charbneau's collection of miniatures already was well known. After a stint in the U.S. Navy and a variety of odd jobs and professions, including being a mascot for the 1898 Baltimore Orioles baseball team, he began exhibiting his tiny collectibles, for an admission fee, at theaters, department stores, fairs and expositions. Russell Maloney's "Talk of the Town," in the July 24,

1937, edition of *The New Yorker*, covered Charbneau's display at Radio City Music Hall, quoting the small, white-suited man as he described a few items:

And here is a camel that can go through the eye of a needle—in fact, a whole menagerie of ivory animals small enough to pass through the eye of a needle. Here is a baby grand piano you can hold in the palm of your hand; it's made to give good music, but you have to hit the keys with a toothpick. ...And here is the smallest check on the largest bank in the world—a check for one mill on the Chase National.

The official guide book for the 1939 Exposition had this to say about Charbneau's exhibit in International Hall on Treasure Island:

Three thousand silver spoons in an acorn, thirty elephants in a seed, and four-inch rifle are among

Charbneau Dollar Attribution

CATALOG NO.	DATE	METAL	OBVERSE LEGEND (below "Pacifica")	ADDITIONAL INFORMATION	OBV/REV ORIENTATION	WEIGHT (grams)	CMJ INITIALS (in hair)	H/K NO.
J1	1939	Gold	1 D / SOLID GOLD		Coin	1.22	Yes	488
J2	1939	Gold	1 D / 10 K / SOLID GOLD		Coin (or Medal)	1.22	Yes	unlisted
J3	1939	Gold	1 ★ / 10 K / SOLID GOLD		Medal	1.21	Yes	unlisted
J4	1939	Gold	1 ★ / 10 K / SOLID GOLD	"22" stamped over "10 K"	Medal (or Coin)	1.92	Yes	unlisted
J5	1939	Gold	1 D / 10 K / SOLID GOLD	"40" stamped in reverse field	Coin	1.22	Yes	unlisted
J6	1939	Silver	STERLING		Medal	1.14	No	487
J7	1939	Silver	STERLING	gold-plated	Medal	1.14	No	487C
J8	1939	Silver	STERLING	"40" stamped in reverse field	Medal	1.15	No	487B
J9	1939	Copper	(none)	textured fields	Coin	0.92	No	unlisted
J10	1939	Copper	(none)	textured fields; gold-plated	Coin	0.95	No	490
J11	1940	Gold	1 ★ / 10 K / SOLID GOLD	thin planchet	Medal	1.00	Yes	489
J12	1940	Gold	1 ★ / 10 K / SOLID GOLD	"22" stamped over "10 K"	Medal	1.90	Yes	unlisted
J13	1940	Silver	STERLING		Coin	1.14	No	487A



PHOTO: B. GREGORY

the 250,000 [sic] miniature hand-carved items done by Jules Charbeneau [sic] which are on display in the hall.

Gold, Silver & Copper Varieties

A number of motivating factors suggest a probable sequence for the production of Jules Charbeneau's medals. I developed a tentative numbering system for them when I cataloged the 2008 Holabird-Kagin sale of the Bill Weber Collection.

The first variety is gold and listed as J1 in *Discover the World of Charbeneau So-Called Dollars*, which I co-authored last year with William Hyder. Dated 1939, it reads SOLID GOLD below the image

▲ A colorful, foldout map in the official guide book detailed the attractions on Treasure Island.

of Pacifica, with a "1" at the upper left and a "D" at the upper right, indicating the value (\$1).

Just 12mm in diameter, the pieces are slightly smaller than a U.S. gold dollar and weigh 1.21 to 1.22g. However, they are not "solid gold" (24kt) as stated, but rather 10kt gold. Perhaps in response to customer inquiries, Charbeneau created a new die (J2), adding "10 K" above the legend, which technically still was not correct.

The question of gold content was just the beginning of Charbeneau's worries, as it was reported



J2



J3





J4



J5



J6



J7



J8



J9



J10



J11



J12



J13



It was reported Charbneau received a visit from U.S. Treasury Department officials concerning his private issuance of money.

he received a visit from U.S. Treasury Department officials concerning his private issuance of money. Some researchers speculate they even confiscated the dies for his gold dollar. (Six years prior, President Roosevelt had outlawed the ownership of gold by private citizens.)

A new variety, J3, evolved, with a “1” and 10 K/SOLID GOLD as before, but with a five-pointed star in place of the “D.” J1 and J2 were struck using coin orientation (the obverse and reverse images are rightside-up when the coin is flipped top to bottom), while most of the other dollars have medal orientation (the images are correctly displayed when the medal is flipped side to side). Apparently, the changes resolved Charbneau’s problems with the Treasury Department as he continued to sell numerous varieties of his gold-dollar-sized souvenirs at the Exposition.

The next variety, J4, had basically the same design as J3, but was counterstamped “22.” Perhaps Charbneau was motivated by customers’ requests for higher gold content. The planchet was the same size, but the weight increased significantly from 1.21g to 1.92g, reflecting the change in composition.

Toward the end of 1939, the J5 variety emerged. The reverse of some J2 examples were countermarked with a “40,” and the pieces were repurposed as souvenirs for the 1940 Exposition.

The first 1940-dated gold issue, identified as J11, bears the 10 K/SOLID GOLD notation as the previous 1939-dated varieties, but the planchet is considerably thinner and weighs 1g as opposed to 1.21g. (It is doubtful the public was aware of the decreased gold content.)

Charbneau produced 22kt-gold medals (J12) in 1940 as well, counterstamping “22” on the obverse, similar to J4. All 1940 medals were struck from 1939 dies on which “40” was engraved over “39” in the date.

Three 1939-dated silver varieties weigh between 1.14g and 1.15g each and feature a revised obverse design. The “1” and “D” (or star) were removed, and the SOLID GOLD notation was re-



PHOTOS: B. GREGORY



▲ Admission to the Exposition was 50 cents for adults, 25 cents for children.

placed with STERLING (J6). Some 1939 pieces were gold-plated, creating variety J7. (Imagine his customers’ confusion when Charbneau attempted to sell them a gold-colored medal labeled STERLING.) The third silver variety (J8) was created when the reverse was counterstamped with a “40,” similar to J5. Only one 1940-dated silver variety is known (J13). It appears none of these pieces were gold-plated.

Charbneau also produced two 1939-dated copper varieties. New dies were created, with no “1” or “D” (or star) in the fields and no designation of the metal content below the image of Pacifica. The fields of these copper pieces have a distinct, orange-peel texture (J9), while the surfaces of all gold and silver varieties are smooth. As with his 1939 silver issues, Charbneau plated some of the copper pieces in gold (J10).

All the obverse dies for Charbneau’s solid gold medals bear the initials “CMJ” in Pacifica’s hair, likely representing the die engraver. (The same initials appear on two elongated cents commemorating the Exposition.) The reverse dies for all the dollars, regardless of composition, are signed “CMJ” along the edge at about 8 o’clock.

I welcome any new or supporting information regarding the tiny gold, silver and copper dollars produced by Jules Charbneau for the 1939-40 Golden Gate International Exposition. Contact me at socalledguy@hotmail.com, phone 916-955-2569.

Acknowledgment

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