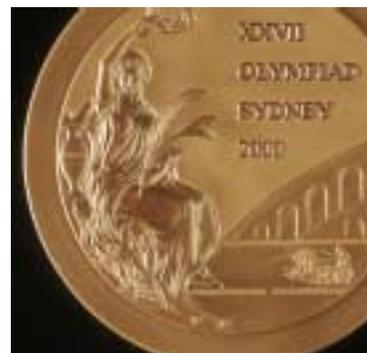


The fine art of victory

The design of the Sydney 2000

Olympic victory medal



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The victory medal may well be a product of the modern Olympics, but the design of each medal owes a lot to the spirit of the ancient Games.

From olive wreaths to golden leaves – the history of the victory medal

In ancient Greece, winning athletes were crowned with a wreath of olive leaves.

Although the runners-up received nothing, the act of participating was

enough to bring honour to each athlete and to Nike, the goddess of victory.

Centuries after the Greek Empire, a French baron named Pierre de Coubertin visited the archaeological digs of ancient Greece and was inspired to recreate the glorification of sport and beauty in a new Olympics. He became known as the father of the modern Olympic Games, and was International Olympic Committee (IOC) President from 1896 to 1925.

The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.

Pierre de Coubertin,
The Olympic Creed

Pierre De Coubertin believed the modern Games would be achieved with the 'involvement of the philosophic arts' and so he invited well known artists to create designs that embraced symbols of the ancient Games and combined them with the ideals of the new Olympics.

The medal awards ceremony was first introduced at the dawn of the modern Olympics, in Athens in 1896. The original first-place victory medal was made from silver, as it was then considered superior in quality to gold.



1896 Olympic participation medal, obverse;
seated Nike holding laurel wreath over phoenix
emerging from flames, Acropolis in background
Designed by N. Lytras *

Second-place athletes received a similar medal made from bronze.

The front side, called the obverse, of both the silver and bronze victory medals featured Nike, the Greek goddess of victory who would soon become the modern Olympic motif. The back of the first medal, called the reverse, featured the ancient Greek Acropolis.

Participation medals (as distinct from victory medals – see below) were also struck, and given to all Olympic competitors.

The gold victory medal first appeared at the St Louis Olympics in 1904, but it was at the 1908 Games in London that the medal awards as we know them were begun: first-place (gold), second-place (silver) and third-place (bronze).



1896 Olympic participation medal, reverse;
Greek legend in wreath
Designed by N. Lytras *

Another interesting development in the victory medal is that it was not until the 1960 Rome Olympics that the medal ceremony actually involved placing the medal around the neck of the winning athlete. For this change in the ceremony, a special chain of gold laurel leaves was designed to accompany the medal. After 1960, the ceremony was maintained and the chain was often replaced by a ribbon.

Cassioli's legacy – the new design standard

For the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) chose a design by Italian sculptor Giuseppe Cassioli for the victory medal.

The obverse of the medal depicted the goddess Nike holding a laurel branch and an olive wreath. Next to her was a Grecian vase or 'amphora' and, in the lower right-hand corner, a fragment of the Colosseum. Although the design became the new Olympic standard, the use of the Colosseum rather than the Acropolis was a choice that would lead to controversy decades later at the Sydney Olympics. (See: *Colosseum or Acropolis?*)

An invitation to compete – SOCOG design brief

Using the Cassioli design as the standard for the obverse of the medal, the IOC and the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) prepared a detailed design and production brief.

In July 1998, SOCOG sent the brief to a selection of 18 Australian fine artists and jewellery designers, inviting them to participate in a design competition for the 2000 Sydney Olympic medal.

The requirements of the brief included:

Quantity: 1000 gold, 1000 silver and 1100 bronze

Shape: circular with a ribbon or chain attachment

Diameter: 60mm (min) and 63mm (preferred max)

Thickness: 3mm (min) and 5mm (max)

Base and finish: for gold and silver to be 99.9% silver and;

Gold medals with at least 6 grams of pure gold plating.

Silver medals with fine silver plating.

Bronze with some silver but mostly bronze (copper and tin).

The obverse had to feature the goddess of victory motif; an interpretation of the original Cassioli design; the year and name of the host city; and the Roman numerals of the Olympiad (XXVII for 27th Olympiad).

The reverse was open to the imagination of the invited designers. Blank space was to be left for the athlete's name and the competing event to be engraved during the Games.

The IOC also specified that the silver used in the production of the medals should be at least 925-1000 grade quality and that it would be SOCOG's responsibility to supply materials and production of the finished medals.

(See: *The metals of medals*)

Maquette to mint – the selection process

The design and production brief specified that each artist provide:

- Five drawings of their medal design: in actual sizes and enlargements of the front (obverse), back (reverse) and side (coupe).

- An actual size, three-dimensional maquette of the medal design executed in either plaster, wax, resin, or clay.
- A design for the medal ribbon or chain, and the method of attaching it to the medal.
- A one page CV outlining their major works and experience.
- An optional sketch of the container the medal and ribbon would be stored in.

By November 1998 all the submissions had been received. The selection committee, which was made up of Australian design professionals, began the task of choosing the designer.

In December 1998, the decision had been made and Wojtek Pietranik, who was employed at the Royal Australian Mint, was announced as the winning designer.



Wojtek Pietranik, designer of the victory medals for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games

After this, the longer and more difficult process began of deciding on a final design. As part of the selection process, the selection committee sent two slightly different designs to the Royal Australian Mint for test-strikes to be made in gold, silver and bronze. Using the test-strikes, the selection committee could more clearly assess the finished product.

The metals of medals – the manufacturing

The huge cost of producing the Olympic victory medals was overcome by the donation of raw materials by mining companies and communities around Australia.

Gold

- 10.5kg of gold was required for the gold medals.
- The total amount of gold used in production was worth more than A\$190,000 at the time.
- All the gold used in the medals came from two mines in the Orange and Blayney areas of central west NSW.

Silver

- More than 1000kg of silver was required for all the medals.
- Most of the silver was donated by the Cannington mine in Queensland.
- The community of Broken Hill also donated a 22.5kg ingot of silver.



Sydney 2000 Olympic Games victory medal, silver, reverse **

Bronze

- In a spark of ingenuity, the bronze medals were made from melted-down 1c and 2c coins that were made obsolete in Australia in 1996. There is a high possibility that the bronze coinage for the medals passed through the hands of most Australians before being turned into medals for Olympians.
- The final bronze medals were made up of 1% silver with the rest made up of the bronze coinage (97% copper, 2.5% zinc, 0.5% tin).

The Royal Australian Mint donated the production of the bronze and silver medals as a contribution to the Sydney Olympics. The Royal Australian Mint also prepared the gold 'blanks' for the Perth Mint to strike as the new Olympic gold medals.

The winning designer – Wojtek Pietranik

Wojtek Pietranik was born in Gdansk, Poland, in 1950 and graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Gdansk with honours at the age of 20.

In 1985, Pietranik moved to Australia and began teaching sculpture. In 1989 he began working as a designer and engraver for the Royal Australian Mint.

Pietranik was awarded the ACT Churchill Fellowship in 1992 which enabled him to travel to Italy and study at the School of Medallion Art in Rome.

Returning to Australia he took up his position again at the Royal Australian Mint and proceeded to work on a number of medals and commemorative coin designs including: the Royal Flying Doctor Service (1998); \$1 silver kangaroo coin (1999); and the \$1 Last Anzacs coin (1999).

Design development – going for gold

When Wojtek Pietranik was invited to design the 2000 Olympic medal, he decided to create something that epitomised Sydney. By combining the traditional motif requirements (the goddess Nike and her wreath) with the Australian motifs of the Sydney Opera House and the wattle, the national floral emblem, Pietranik created a design that captured the Olympic spirit for Sydney.

The design for both the obverse and reverse sides went through a number of stages. Pietranik began by sketching his ideas out roughly on paper. From there he took the best elements, went into his garage workshop and began to model the designs in plasticine. After two weeks of modelling he had the final submission ready which he then cast in plaster and sent to the selection committee with his drawings.



A plaster cast of the reverse of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games victory medal with sculpting tools ***

The original submission showed the obverse with Nike holding a wreath and palm fronds (faithful to the Cassioli design), but wattle replaced the Mediterranean undergrowth and, most strikingly, the sails of the Sydney Opera House reared up in the background.

The reverse depicted the Olympic 'Millennium man' logo centred over a water-effect background that represented Sydney Harbour. The lower right corner was adorned with a flowering wattle branch.



A plaster cast of an early version of the reverse of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games victory medal, with the Olympic 'Millennium man' logo, and flowering wattle in the lower right corner ***

Another key success in Pietranik's design was the outer rim. This was 2mm lower than the sculptured face and allowed space for the event name to be engraved without detracting from the design.

In the case of Olympic medals, I think that this classical medal...will always look good. You can do it better or worse on the sculpturing side, but still the classical medal is understood. But in this case what I tried to do was to really distinguish that medal from the previous ones in the sense that you look at the medal and, without reading because it's not a poster or anything, you straight away should know where the Olympics were held.

– Wojtek Pietranik



The plaster cast of a later design of the reverse of the Sydney 2000 Olympic victory medal ***



The Sydney 2000 Olympic gold medal, reverse

This design won Pietranik selection as the Olympic medal designer, but the design development process was to continue well into 1999.

The finishing touches... or two – alterations to the winning design

The Selection Committee recommended a number of changes to the original submission which included:

- Altering the face of Nike to make her disposition happier.
- Changing the typeface and reducing the type size.
- Replacing the more commercial Millennium Man logo with the more identifiable Olympic rings.
- Replacing the wattle on the reverse with the Olympic Torch.
- Polishing the 'XXVII Olympiad Sydney 2000' and Olympic rings while leaving the other parts of the design with a matt finish.

There was also debate over whether the rings should be centred on the reverse or raised. As a result, two different versions of the reverse were sent to the Mint for test-strikes.

Once the test-strikes came back from the Mint, the Selection Committee, Pietranik and representatives from the IOC met to decide on the final design.

A major change came out of these meetings with the IOC: the Opera House would have to be removed from the obverse and replaced with the Colosseum and a chariot rider and horses.

Once again, Pietranik returned to modelling another medal but this time his key design motif, the internationally recognisable Sydney Opera House, was relegated to the reverse and even then only as part of the wave form in the background of the Olympic Rings.

From the initial plan, the victory medal had gone through three major revisions but, in the end, all were in agreement about the final design and the announcement was made by SOCOG and the IOC. What they did not expect was criticism from the Australian-Greek community.

Colosseum or Acropolis? – the controversial motif

Despite the resounding success of the 2000 Sydney Olympic medal design, it did not escape without some last minute controversy.



A plaster cast of an early version of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games victory medal, obverse, with the Sydney Opera House featured ***



A plaster cast of the changed medal, obverse, with the Sydney Opera House replaced by the Colosseum and a chariot rider with horses ***

When the final medal design was announced, there was confusion over the use of the Colosseum on the obverse design. In 1896, the winning medal depicted the Greek Acropolis but, after the 1928 Olympics, the standard design was changed to represent the Roman Colosseum.

It was not until the 2000 Sydney Olympics that this error was picked up by the Australian-Greek press who called it 'the ultimate ignorance'. The editor of the Greek language newspaper *O Kosmos*, George Hadjivassilis, said the Colosseum was a 'stadium of blood' that had 'nothing to do with the Olympic ideals of peace and brotherhood'.

This image had already been changed from the Sydney Opera House into the Colosseum at the request of the IOC.



Sydney 2000 Olympic Games gold medal, obverse **

The original design and production brief only specified the use of the motif of the goddess of victory and not the other symbols such as the Colosseum. In the end, however, SOCOG decided it was simply too late and too expensive to make further changes to the medal design. Wojtek Pietranik said he would have preferred it if the design had stayed as the Opera House as this 'was meant to represent Nike visiting Sydney for the Olympics', but he also said it was disappointing that the launch of the final medals was tainted by the controversy.

After the Sydney experience, it is expected that changes will be made in the IOC design brief to reflect the cultural-historical significance and proper representation of the Olympic symbols so that the Colosseum will no longer be represented on Olympic victory medals.

The XXVII Olympiad – the final product

On 7 June 2000, the official striking of the Sydney Olympic victory medal was launched at the Royal Australian Mint. The final medal was 68mm in diameter, 3mm thick at the rim and 5mm thick at highest point of relief.



Sydney 2000 Olympic Games
bronze medal, obverse **

Each medal also featured a Fluid Energy watermark design and cyan coloured ribbon marked with the

'Sydney 2000' logo. The final gold and silver medals weighed in at 210 grams, with bronze coming in at 170 grams.

From design brief to final striking, the entire medal design process took more than two years.

There were more than 300 medal ceremonies held over a 16 day period of the Games, with approximately 700 gold, 700 silver and 730 bronze medals being awarded. More medals had been struck in case there were more team members, tied events or for emergency back-ups.

For the first time, SOCOG offered a free medal engraving service to the place winning athletes at the Olympic Village. Each medal winner was also presented with a specially designed medal case. The case was rounded to fit the medal, had a silver base and a translucent blue lid; designed to give an underwater appearance, a final reference to the Harbour waters of the host city.



Case for medals awarded in the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, designed by Bang Design **



Sydney 2000 Olympic Games gold medal, reverse

By the closing of the 2000 Olympics, Australian athletes had won 16 gold medals in total, the highest tally in Australia's Olympic history. Gold winning events included: archery, athletics, beach volleyball, cycling, equestrian, hockey, sailing, shooting, swimming, taekwondo and water polo.



Gold, silver and bronze Sydney 2000 Olympic Games medals in display box **

* This object is part of the Powerhouse Museum collection and was photographed by Powerhouse curator, Paul Donnelly.

** These objects are part of the Powerhouse Museum's Sydney 2000 Games collection and were photographed by Powerhouse photographer, Sotha Bourn.

*** These plaster casts were created, and are owned by Wojtek Pietranik, and were photographed by Powerhouse assistant curator, Catherine Reade.