

# The Ben Lee Damsky Collection

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In October 2007 the Department of Coins and Medals at the Yale University Art Gallery received two substantial gifts. The first was the opportunity to purchase at a bargain price the collection of Ben Lee Damsky. The second was Damsky's generosity in endowing the curatorship of coins and medals and adding to its funding with the proceeds from the sale. Never has such a commitment to numismatics been expressed at Yale or any other American university.

The Damsky collection, which consists of over 850 coins of the Roman world, was formed over many years, and its contents reflect increasing levels of sophistication. The coins—such as those of Augustus and the Severans, the eastern silver mints of Rome, and representations pertaining to Roman architecture and religion—are also indicative of certain themes that Damsky followed throughout his collecting career. Space permits selection of only a few here.

A few prefatory words may help in the understanding of the objects presented here, since the terminology of numismatics is either unfamiliar or misleadingly familiar. Ancient coins were struck by hand using a tool called a *die*. One die, incised with an image (in intaglio and in reverse) was embedded in an anvil, which held it firmly in place and provided reinforcement around the perimeter; this is known as the *obverse*

*die*, and the image struck from it is the *obverse* of the coin. A second, hand-held die is used to strike the *reverse* of the coin; this is known as the *reverse die*. The reverse die was struck, probably by a different individual, with a heavy hammer against a blank of metal (no doubt heated to render it more malleable, since ancient images of coining implements usually show tongs) placed upon the obverse die. The force of the impact raised up the intended images on the surface of the coin. This hand-held aspect means that the physical relationship of the two images to one another is variable, as the free die rotates in the hand of the workman; this relationship is described in terms of hours on the face of a clock, where 6:00 indicates that one face is upside-down when the other is right-side up. (This is the orientation of all United States coins.) It also meant that the edges of the coin spread irregularly, since the blanks were often imperfect and it was difficult to center the dies properly.

Coin descriptions include separate treatments of the obverse (abbreviated *obv.*) and reverse (*rev.*). *Legends* (from the Latin *lego*, “to read”), or inscriptions, which are usually continuous on coins, are given with word and line breaks. Numismatists refer to the main image on a side of a coin as its *type*, which is described clearly enough so that the

viewer can understand it. Weights are given, since ancient coins were valued for their metal content; today we use the metric system and render these weights in grams. Diameters are given in millimeters.

Most Roman imperial coins bear a date of some sort. Unless the emperor is described as deified in the legend on the coin, his accession and death dates provide outer termini. Other indicators of date are titles. For example, the consulship (abbreviated COS on coins, and iterated II, III, etc.) was held occasionally during years that are known to us; the last current title is used, so an emperor is COS II until he becomes COS III, and so on. Tribunician power (abbreviated TR P or TR POT, and iterated II, III, etc.) is very useful because it was renewed annually, normally on December 10. Other titles, not useful for dating, include P M (*pontifex maximus*, high priest); CEN(s) (censor); and P P (*pater patriae*, “father of the country”).

This sampling from the Damsky collection can only scratch the surface of a carefully selected body of coins that provides material for artistic and historical study, as well as for teaching of numismatic technique and public exhibition. Damsky’s gift, and the curatorial endowment that accompanied it, insure the future of numismatics at Yale.



I.

### *Aureus of Augustus*

Struck by the moneyer P. Petronius  
Turpilianus  
Rome, 19 B.C.

Obv.: CAESAR – AVGVSTVS Head of Augustus r.  
wearing an oak wreath

Rev.: TVRPILIANVS III VIR Seven-stringed *chelys* (lyre)

Gold, 8.03 gm, 9:00, 19.7 mm

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Ben Lee Damsky

Down to the end of the Republic, the Romans had used gold only occasionally and generally in emergency contexts: the first really large issue took place during the crisis of the Second Punic War. But the civil wars following the death of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. increased the demand for money to pay the legions, and gold, being more valuable and more portable, was employed. When the emperor Augustus reformed the coinage in 23 B.C., gold had a place at the top of the currency system and the aureus was tarified at twenty-five denarii or one hundred sestertii.

The emperor’s own large issues in gold were yet to come, and he never struck much of it at the mint of Rome. This is one of Augustus’s first issues, which maintains the emperor’s Republican fiction—his attempt to show that the old Republic was still functioning as before, thus reassuring the public of stability—by allowing the appearance of the name of the magistrate Turpilianus, who was one of a board of three magistrates who oversaw the mint, on the reverse.

The date of this coin is secure on numismatic grounds, and Damsky has associated it with a series of reverse types that he thinks commemorate the death of Vergil in that year.<sup>1</sup>



2.

### *Aureus of Gallienus*

Rome, A.D. 264(?)

Obv.: GALLIENVS AVG Bust of Gallienus laureate and cuirassed l.

Rev.: DEO AVGVSTO Laureate head of Augustus r., seen from behind

Gold, 5.88 gm, 6:00, 21.6 mm

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The date of this piece is an inference from its content: with its inscription, it makes good sense as a commemorative issue, and the 250th anniversary of the death of Augustus in A.D. 14 would have been an appropriate occasion to revive his memory.

The reverse legend, DEO AVGVSTO, is unusual, though not quite unprecedented. It was normal for a deceased ruler to be described as *divus* (loosely, “deified”), indicating that upon death the emperor joined the gods. But the nominal form of *deus* (“god”) is never used in this way. The dative case, DEO, seen here, also indicates a dedication, and when the legend is read from obverse to reverse the dedicator is identified with the living emperor Gallienus.

The features of Augustus resemble those of the first coin in this article; he is thus captured as approximately a forty-year-old man, rather than the seventy-six-year-old he was at death.



3.

### *Denarius of L. Clodius Macer*

North Africa, A.D. 68

Obv.: L CLODI MACRI Bust of Victory r., her hair gathered in a bun, her two wings seen partially; s – c at sides

Rev.: LEG III in lower field; LIB inwardly at top, AVG outwardly at r.

Silver, 4.09 gm, 5:00, 17 mm

Yale University Art Gallery, Ruth Elizabeth White Fund, with the assistance of Ben Lee Damsky, 2007.183.9

Clodius Macer, *legatus* (military general) in North Africa, revolted from Nero early in A.D. 68 and cut off the critical supply of grain to Rome. The death of Nero on June 9 of that year led to civil war, since Nero left no successor to carry on the dynasty begun by Augustus, and Galba, who was commander in Spain, eventually succeeded to the throne. Galba apparently appealed to Macer for support, which was not forthcoming; instead he raised a new legion, the I Macriana Libetratrix, to accompany the third legion (honored here) already under his command.

Unlike other pretenders, Macer never claimed the title of Augustus; indeed the S[ENATUS] C[ONSULTO] on the obverse of this coin seems to proclaim his loyalty to the Senate; and the legend LIB AVG, probably to be expanded “Libertas Augusta,” or “August Liberty,” announced the freedom of the Roman people.

Macer was executed on the orders of Galba in the fall of A.D. 68. His coinage—which constitutes the only primary source relating to his brief ascendancy—is very rare today and this is the first example in the Gallery’s collection.





4.

### *Sestertius of Galba*

Rome, A.D. 68

Obv.: IMP SER GALBA CAES AVG TR P Head of Galba r. wearing an oak wreath

Rev.: CONCORD AVG Concordia seated l. on a high-backed throne; she holds an olive branch in her extended r. hand and a transverse scepter cradled in her r. arm. s – c to l. and r. in field

Orichalcum, 26.98 gm, 6:00, 35 mm

Yale University Art Gallery, Ruth Elizabeth White Fund, with the assistance of Ben Lee Damsky, 2007.183.13

Concordia (Harmony) is one of the many personifications of well-being that accompany the emperor on Roman coins. Here, the presence of Concordia was a conscious choice, for Galba was but one of several claimants to the throne left empty by the suicide of Nero in June A.D. 68 and he would have wanted to associate his leadership with the ideals that this personification represents. Contemporary with Galba's own coinage issues are other anonymous issues from Spain and Gaul as well as later issues of Vitellius and Vespasian.<sup>2</sup>

Galba was almost seventy-one at the time this coin was struck, and the account of his reign left by the historian Tacitus emphasizes his age as a component of his feebleness in dealing with threats both to himself and to the empire. But he was still a vigorous soldier, having marched his army from Spain to get to Rome.

This portrait is clearly one of an elderly man, with thinning hair, baggy eyes, and jowls set over a frame that is nonetheless firm and communicates a certain resolve. The oak wreath on his head is the *corona civica*,

Rome's highest military decoration, awarded for saving the life of a citizen; from the time of the emperor Augustus it was claimed by all the emperors on the ground that they protected the lives of citizens. Concordia herself is identified by the surrounding legend, and she has in her hand the olive branch usually associated with Pax (Peace); she also carries a scepter, an emblem of the emperor, who would (it was hoped) bring peace to the Roman world.

Galba himself was assassinated on January 15, A.D. 69.



5.

### *As of Domitian*

Rome, A.D. 86

Obv.: IMP CAES DOMIT AVG GERM – COS XII CENS PER P P

Rev.: PACIS above, s c in exergue. Altar enclosure on high base. In the center are tall double doors with pulls approached by six steps. The doors are slightly open. Two relief panels on each side of the doors are set above one another: standing figure upper l. before seated figure facing l.; symmetric version of previous upper r.; tall and short standing figures or standing figure and altar lower l.; two standing figures lower r. There is a heavy cornice in three layers at top, which is surmounted by multiple "horns" at each side. A veiled, togate priest with a patera in his r. hand stands at each side.

Copper, 9.83 gm, 6:00, 28.7 mm

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This coin, struck in A.D. 86, shows both the possibilities and the pitfalls of looking at architectural coin types. Its representation of the Ara Pacis is broadly accurate in outline and in proportion, but the details of the reliefs on either side of the monument replicate no known panel from the altar, and in

fact the two upper panels are merely mirror images of one another.

Clearly working within the small confines of a coin die imposed limitations on the engravers' ability to capture detail, and it seems unlikely that they worked from autopsy; more likely a sketch was provided from which they had to incise an inverted image. Shortcuts were taken, as here; yet the laurelled frieze is accurate at the top of the monument, and the image (like less-detailed earlier ones) shows the "horns" on top of the altar, which are now lost.



6.

### *Sestertius of Domitian*

Rome, A.D. 95–96

Obv.: IMP CAES DOMIT AVG GERM COS XVII CENS PER P P Bust laureate draped r., seen from behind

Rev.: s – c on either side. Quadrifrontal arch seen obliquely. Two elephant quadrigas back-to-back, each with driver, on top

Orichalcum, 23.84 gm, 6:00, 33 mm

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Architectural types became increasingly popular as choices for coin types in the first century, and this is only one of several first-century examples of arches. It illustrates the modern view that arches were intended not only to be functional and impressive in their own right but also to provide a base for the statuary above (now usually lost). Domitian was well known for his propensity to decorate the city with all sorts of monuments and arches (Suetonius, *Domit.* 12); this coin represents the rebuilding of the Porta Triumphalis, the gate through which triumphators passed and which is known to

have had two quadrigas of elephants above it (Martial, *Epig.* 8.65.9–.12):

*hic gemini currus numerant elephanta  
frequentem,  
sufficit inmensis aureus ipse iugis.  
Haec est digna tuis, Germanice, porta  
triumphis;  
hos aditus urbem Martis habere decet.*

Here twin chariots number many an elephant,  
and Himself in gold suffices for the colossal cars.

This gate, Germanicus, is worthy of your triumphs;  
Mars' city deserves such an entrance.<sup>3</sup>

After his death virtually all monuments of Domitian were destroyed, but this one—with at least one of its chariots—survived into the second century.<sup>4</sup>



7.

### *Sestertius of Trajan*

Rome, A.D. 103–11

Obv.: IMP CAES NERVAE TRAIANO AVG GER DAC P M TR P COS V P P Laureate head r., drapery on far shoulder

Rev.: SPQR OPTIMO PRINCIPI SC in exergue. Aerial view of Circus Maximus: two arches with quadrigas r. and a third l.; colonnade and high wall with windows in checkerboard pattern on near arm. Far arm shows sections of seats and tetrastyle temple on podium surmounted by radiate head of Sol. Spina at center has three *metae* at each end, Cybele riding lion, great obelisk on base surmounted by ornament, and shrine

Orichalcum, 26.26 gm, 6:00, 33 mm

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This is the most detailed representation of the Circus Maximus surviving today, and it was the inspiration for works of art in other

media—wall paintings, mosaic, relief sculpture—as well as later coins and medallions. The occasion for its striking was probably Trajan's restoration and expansion of the Circus, which he undertook as early as A.D. 100; an inscription on the Circus of A.D. 103 acknowledges the addition of some five thousand seats for the comfort of viewers.

The view shows the great obelisk of Augustus, erected in 10 B.C., in the center of the arena; to the left is a statue of Cybele riding on a lion, while on the right a pair of columns supports dolphins, which were tilted to count the laps of competitors. Immediately to the left and behind the obelisk stands a temple of Sol, and at the left extremity is the Arch of Titus; at the right ends, arched towers provide access to the galleries and seating.<sup>5</sup>

8.

### *Medallion of Antoninus Pius*

Rome, 145(?)

Obv.: ANTONINVS AVG PIVS P P TR P COS IIII

Rev.: No legend. Spes stands draped and veiled, raising her r. hand to hold up a flower and lifting her skirt with her lowered l. hand. She is in a chariot with five spokes on the wheel that is pulled by two young men, nude except for shoulder cloaks. The near one is seen in profile while the further one turns toward the viewer and is seen in three-quarter view. In the background is a hexastyle, Corinthian temple with five steps and five columns visible. A podium at l. is just in front of the young men. The left-most column is truncated at the top by the curve of the coin.

Orichalcum, 51.31 gm, 1:00, 39.5 mm

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Roman medallions were produced from the same materials as contemporary coins, but are distinguished from them by their heavy weights, their quality of engraving, and frequently by the elaboration of their reverse types, which would take advantage of a much larger flan. They were struck in very limited quantities and are regarded as presentation pieces intended for members of the imperial house, nobility, or foreign dignitaries.<sup>6</sup>



Because of the very limited striking, die linkage among related pieces is more common than in the coinage at large. The obverse die of this medallion is linked to the reverse of two other medallions: a reverse with Sol in quadriga,<sup>7</sup> which seems to make allusion to Antoninus's consulship of A.D. 145, and the reverse of an unpublished medallion in the British Museum, London, showing the marriage of Bacchus and Ariadne, which clearly refers to the wedding of Antoninus's son Marcus and Faustina II in A.D. 145.

The figure of Spes personifies good hope. She came to be associated with provision for the succession, always a thorny issue at Rome. It would have been natural for the viewer to see in the two male figures drawing the chariot those of the future emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus.

9.

### *Medallion of the Ionian League*

Probably Sardis, A.D. 137–(?)141

Obv.: AV KAI TI AI AΔPIANOC ANTΩNEINOC Bust laureate draped cuirassed r., seen slightly from behind

Rev.: KOINON IΓ ΠΟΛΕΩΝ/ΠΡΟΜ ΚΛ ΦΡΟΝΤΩ/Ν in exergue. Herakles seated nude r. facing l., extending his r. hand to grasp the l. wrist of Auge standing l. seminude; her head turns to r. Herakles supports himself with his l. hand, which rests atop a pile of rocks over which a lion skin is thrown. His club rests against it near his hand. Auge reaches down to grasp her drape with her r. hand. At far l. a bow and large quiver of arrows stand upright.

Orichalcum, the whole enclosed in an added frame, which has been turned down at the edges, possibly to remove corrosion, 64.70 gm, 12:00, 54.7 mm

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This is a Greek version of a Roman medallion; its high-style engraving, large flan, and heavy weight all set it apart from the usual issues of local cities in Asia Minor. It is struck on the authority of the Ionian League, an ancient institution that originally consisted of twelve cities and apparently expanded to thirteen with the addition of Smyrna in 270 B.C. (Vitruvius, *De architectura* 4.14). The scene portrays Herakles' seduction of Auge, daughter of Aleus, the king of Tegea. Telephus was their son, and his exploits took him to Asia where he became the object of a cult under the Attalids, kings of Pergamum.<sup>8</sup>

This piece shares with its Roman brethren the large flan and high-style engraving, as well as a rare motif whose occurrence seems to be confined to large provincial coins.<sup>9</sup> The attribution to Sardis is suggested by the signature of M. Claudius Fronto on a series of coins minted there.



10.

*Aureus of Septimius Severus*

Rome, A.D. 207

Obv.: SEVERVS PIVS AVG Head laureate r.

Rev.: IOVI VICTORI Facing head of Jupiter Ammon facing slightly r.

Gold, 7.21 gm, 1:00, 21 mm

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11.

*Aureus of Septimius Severus*

Rome, A.D. 207

Obv.: Similar to the above

Rev.: COS III P Jupiter seated facing on high-backed throne holding vertical scepter in upraised l. hand; to l., Hercules standing l. head r., holding club on ground in r. and uncertain objects in l.; to r., Bacchus standing r. head l., holding thyrsus in l. and cup downward in l. over panther behind him

Gold, 7.00 gm, 6:00, 20.2 mm

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12.

*Aureus of Septimius Severus*

Rome, A.D. 207

Obv.: Similar to the above

Rev.: P M TR P XV COS III P P Asclepius-Eshmun standing facing naked, leaning on a snake-entwined staff with his r. hand, l. hand on his hip, his weight on his

l. leg. He is flanked by upright, symmetric serpents that face outward and have crested and bearded heads. All this is within a distyle shrine with Corinthian columns having a triangular pediment topped by three palmettes, wreath in center with ties flowing outward at each side.

Gold, 7.15 gm, 1:00, 20.5 mm

Promised gift to the Yale University Art Gallery of Ben Lee Damsky

These three pieces are treated together because they highlight Damsky's interest in the Severan period while illustrating the importance of close numismatic study. One of these coins, taken on its own, bears no date at all (no. 10); a second is dated only vaguely to Septimius's third consulship, which he held in A.D. 202, but since he never held another the title was valid until his death in February A.D. 211;<sup>10</sup> the third, however, bears a tribunician date, which places the coin in the period of December 10, A.D. 206 to December 9, A.D. 207. All three are struck from the same obverse die, which guarantees their association in time with one another. All three, then, must belong to the period A.D. 206–7. This corrects vague or faulty datings assigned in the past.

All three coins have associations with North Africa, Septimius's homeland. Bacchus and Hercules were the primary gods of Leptis Magna, Septimius's hometown. Ammon is the god of the famous oracle and symbolic of the province of Cyrenaica. Eshmun is shown here in the guise of Asclepius, but the serpents identify him with the consort of Tanit, who in turn has been identified with the Roman *dea caelestis* of Carthage.<sup>11</sup> The African associations were strong enough that Harold Mattingly suggested that Septimius was contemplating a journey to North Africa, but this theory has not found favor in recent years.

1. See Ben L. Damsky, "Vergil's Siren on the Coins of 19 BC," *Revue suisse de numismatique* 76 (1997): 75–102.

2. C. H. V. Sutherland, *Roman History and Coinage: Fifty Points of Relation from Julius Caesar to Vespasian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 125.

3. [Martial], *Epigrams*, trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 8.65.9–.12.

4. Lawrence Richardson, Jr., *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), s.vv. "Porta Carmentalis," "Arcus Domitiani." The profectio panel of M. Aurelius on the arch of Constantine shows the arch with one of its quadrigas; see H.-P. L'Orange and A. von Gerkan, *Der spätantike Bildschmuck des Konstantinsbogens* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1939), pl. 47.B; and Inez Scott Ryberg, *Panel Reliefs of Marcus Aurelius* (New York: Archaeological Institute of America, 1967), pls. 22, 26.

5. The fullest treatment of the Circus Maximus is John H. Humphrey, *Roman Circuses: Arenas for Chariot Racing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 56–131 passim.

6. J. M. C. Toynbee, *Roman Medallions*, ANS Numismatic Studies 4 (New York: American Numismatic Society, 1944), 73–111.

7. Francesco Gnechi, *I medaglioni romani* (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1912), II, p. 16 no. 57, pl. 50.6 (Paris).

8. J. U. Gillespie, "KOINON IF ΠΟΛΕΩΝ: A Study of the Coinage of the Ionian League," *Revue belge de numismatique* 102 (1956): 31–52. This is Gillespie's no. 14.

9. Compare, for example, *SNG von Aulock* 7506 (31.60 gm, 39 mm) and *SNG France Mysie* A.D. 161–69; and another of Commodus from Ephesus seen only in trade, in sale cat., J. Schulman, June 8–10, 1966, no. 2485, and sale cat., Münzhandlung Basel, March 3–4, 1935 (Prince Waldeck), no. 620.

10. These and all dates are based on Dietmar Kienast, *Römische Kaisertabelle Grundzüge einer römischen Kaiserchronologie*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996).

11. Gilbert Charles-Picard, *Les religions de l'Afrique antique* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1954), 125.