

THE MAGAZINE FOR COIN COLLECTORS

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THE Numismatist

AUGUST 2024



Nero & the **ANCIENT GAMES**



- **DWIGHT N. MANLEY**
2024 Krause Award Recipient
- **ROBERTO CLEMENTE MEDALS**

THE Numismatist

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Major League Man

Roberto Clemente broke barriers, inspired his community, and died far too young. In 1973 the U.S. Mint honored his legacy with a little-known medal.

IN 1973 THE U.S. MINT struck one of the most remarkable 3-inch bronze medals in its history. Both sides are convex, and its obverse depicts a man wearing a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball cap, looking to the right. On the reverse, a line of Maria Cantini's wistful poetry encircles a cluster of baseballs breaking through the center of the medal, symbolizing how a determined spirit can shatter barriers. The inscription reads YOU SHARED YOUR JOY WITH THE LESS THAN JOYFUL LOT, expressing Cantini's, and perhaps the world's, homage to the man honored on the front. That man is none other than baseball legend Roberto Clemente, who is universally recognized as one of the greatest to have ever played the game.

Among the more elusive artifacts of our time, the artistry of the Clemente medal commemorates both the man and the sport of baseball in style and form. The medal's wording and imagery is a metaphor for empathy and community. Its double-sided convex form with a 3-inch diameter (identical to that of a baseball) and engraved stitching reveals it as a monument to baseball. The engraved number along its edge tells us that only a fateful few will possess this elegant symbol of grace and honor. Weighing in at a whopping 10.5 ounces (297.6g), it is a hefty piece of numismatic art. This innovative collectible is a faithful duplicate of the 3-inch Congressional Gold Medal posthumously awarded to Clemente following his death in a 1972 New Year's Eve plane crash when he was 38.

In addition to the 3-inch duplicate medal, two much smaller bronze reproductions were issued the same year. The first was a 1.3-inch flat version bearing the same images and poetry. The second, using the same 1.3-inch bronze medal as its base, was issued

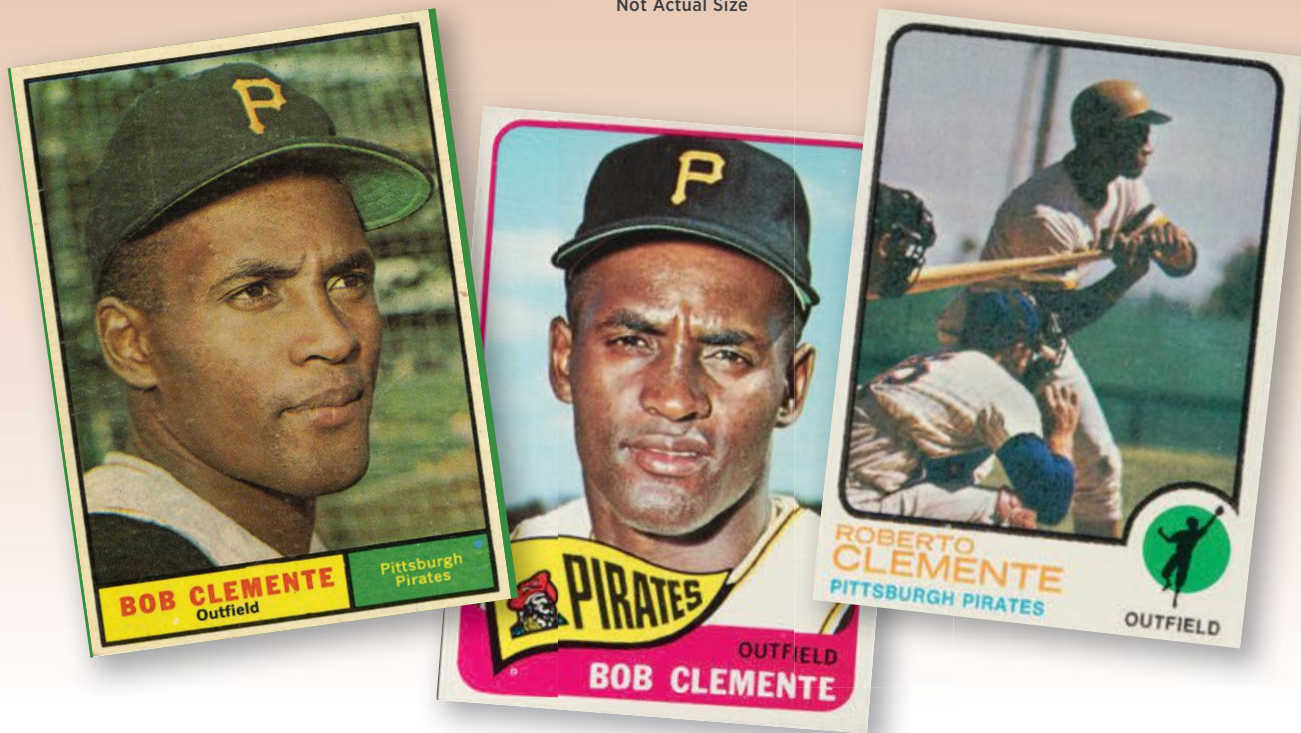
PHOTOS: IRSHAD ABDAL-HAQQ (MEDALS) & WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Not Actual Size



A POPULAR PLAYER, Clemente appeared on numerous sports cards during his heyday.

Not Actual Size



as a gleaming gold-plated pendant mounted onto a vintage bezel. While the artistry of the smaller versions is every bit as fascinating as the 3-inch medal, the latter, with its prominent double-curved features, is visually and tangibly more engaging. The U.S. Mint would not strike another curved coin or medal until 2014, when it issued its National Baseball Hall of Fame commemorative silver and gold coins, which have a convex obverse and concave reverse. The mint repeated this curved style in 2020 with the release of its National Basketball Hall of Fame commemorative coins.

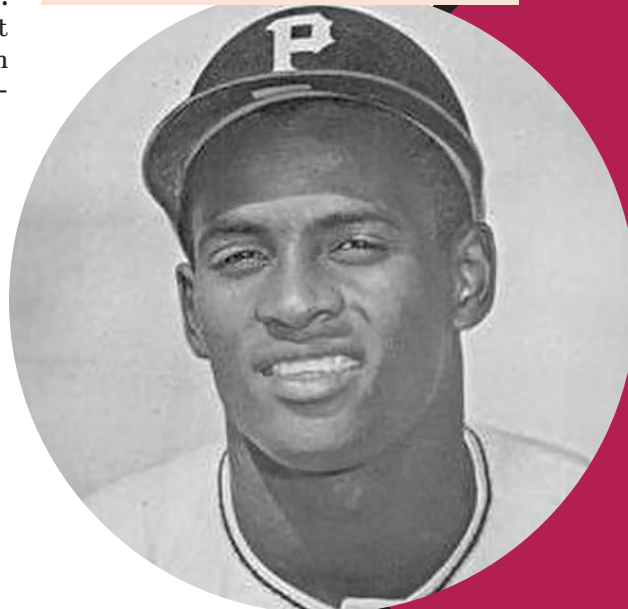
The mint shipped the 3-inch Clemente bronze medal to purchasers in the plain square white box that it typically used during that period. However, the box's contents were anything but square or plain. In addition to the medal, which was sealed in a plastic bag, a biographical fold-out brochure titled *Roberto Walker Clemente—The Man, The Athlete, The Hero* was enclosed. Written in English on one side and Spanish on the other, it is yet another remarkable element of a historic memorial.

From Puerto Rico to Pirate

Traditionally, baseball is called America's national pastime. No other sport is as relaxing or fun to watch from a stadium seat on a summer afternoon or evening as baseball. Hot dogs, peanuts, popcorn, beverages, cheers, chants, and the antics of team mascots make the

experience even more enjoyable. It's no wonder that our great baseball players are so revered. From Ty Cobb to Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson to Hank Aaron, and so many others, the names of celebrated players are etched into our collective national memory. Among them, perhaps none is more recognized for both his athleticism and international humanitarianism than the "Pride of the Pittsburgh Pirates," Roberto Clemente. Also called "The Great One," he played his entire Major League Baseball (MLB) career for the Pirates from 1955 until 1972.

ROBERTO CLEMENTE



PHOTOS: HERITAGE AUCTIONS (BASEBALL CARDS) & WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Clemente—whose proper name, despite its order on the brochure, is Roberto Enrique Clemente Walker—was born the youngest of seven children on August 18, 1934, in Carolina, Puerto Rico. He showed an interest in baseball at an early age and played for amateur and professional baseball teams in Puerto Rico during his youth. In 1952, while playing for Cangrejeros de Santurce of the Puerto Rican Professional Baseball League, he was signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers to play for their Triple-A team in Montreal. During the subsequent MLB annual rookie draft, the Pittsburgh Pirates selected him first overall in 1954. First assigned number 13 during the 1955 season, he soon wore what is now the iconic number 21 after Earl Smith departed the team. Each year on the MLB's Roberto Clemente Day (September 15), all of Pittsburgh's players and coaches wear that number. When establishing that special day in 2022, the MLB stated that Clemente's storied name is "synonymous with moral excellence, compassion, and charitable work."

Over the course of his MLB career with the Pirates, Clemente, a right-handed batter who played right field, achieved many accomplishments. Most notably, he batted over .300 every year of his career (except in 1968). He is a member of the exclusive 3,000-hit club—the group of 33 batters who have achieved 3,000 or more hits during the regular season. He won the coveted Gold Glove award every year from 1961 to 1972 for his superior fielding performance. He was a 15-time All Star. And he was the first Latino MLB player to win the World Series as a starter, be named league MVP and World Series MVP, and be elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Perhaps just as significant, Clemente was one of the members of the celebrated first "all-Black lineup" in MLB history, fielded by the Pirates on September 1, 1971. Other members of that African American and Afro-Latino lineup included Al "Scoop" Oliver, Rennie Stennett, Jackie Hernandez, Dave Cash, Manny Sanguillen, Dock Ellis, Gene Clines, and Willie Stargell.

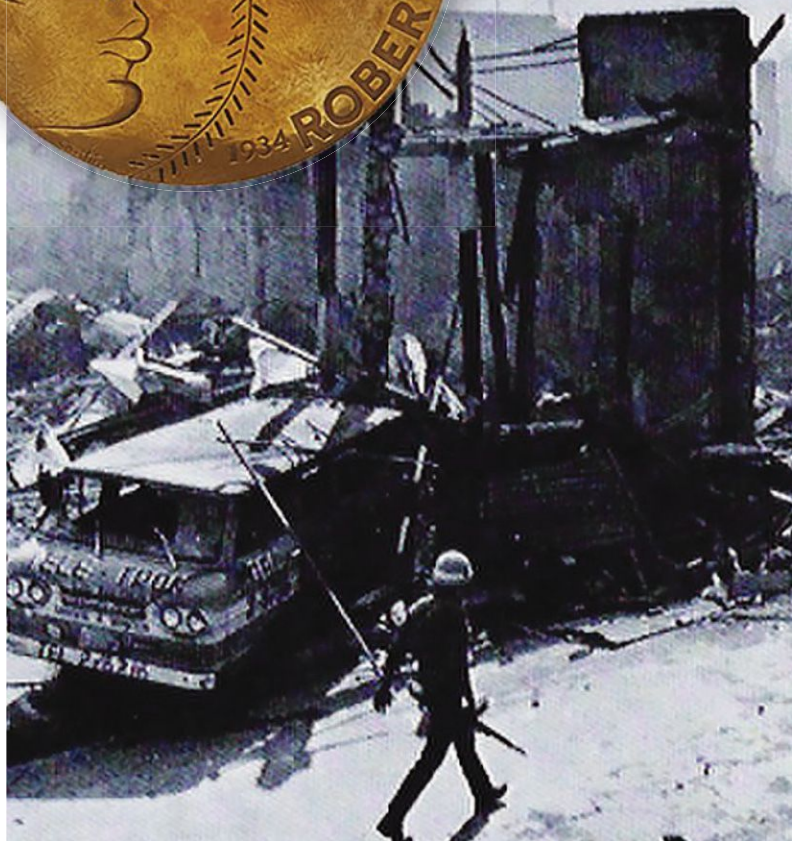
Early in his career, Clemente was identified racially in the media as "Negro" or "black." Later, as the number of Latino baseball players substantially increased, the mainstream media began referring to him as Latino or Afro-Latino. However, the black or African American media, such as *JET Magazine*, a leading publication of that period, consistently referred to him as a "fellow Negro" during the 1950s and '60s, and later as

black, when the term Negro fell into disfavor. Clemente self-identified first as Negro, then black and Latino, but always proudly as Puerto Rican. The former Marine Reserve also proudly identified as American. "I'm Puerto Rican. I'm Black. And I'm between the wall," he told Sam Nover of Pittsburgh's NBC affiliate (WIIIC-TV) on October 8, 1972—less than three months before his death. The "wall" between black and brown racial identities that had been culturally erected over the previous decade or so by a society obsessed with race and ethnicity had left him feeling "stuck."

Clemente's Humanitarianism

Clemente's athleticism—as phenomenal as it was—and his racial and ethnic identity—as groundbreaking as they were for the MLB—were not the principal reasons for his selection for a Congressional Gold Medal. Many other remarkable black and Latino players could have been selected for a gold medal by those criteria. No, Roberto Clemente was elevated in the eyes of the

PHOTOS: HERITAGE AUCTIONS (MEDAL) & U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY



➔ **CLEMENTE'S HUMANITARIAN** efforts following Nicaragua's devastating earthquake in 1972 was one of the reasons he was posthumously honored with a Congressional Gold Medal. Actual Size: 76.2mm



PUBLIC LAW 93-33 allowed for duplicates of Clemente's Congressional Gold Medal to be produced (top). It also allowed for smaller bronze medals (middle) and gilt pendants (bottom).

Actual Size: 76.2mm (medal) & 33.02mm (small medal and pendant)

people and the nation because of his selfless devotion to serving humanity in its entirety. He had hosted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at his home and expressed admiration for his principles. He was a devout Catholic who embraced King's philosophy of love, nonviolence, and social justice. And though he had suffered firsthand the indignities of the United States' perverse system of segregation during the 1950s and '60s, he did not discriminate based on race or color. Further, he used his growing fame and mounting resources to assist the children of Puerto Rico by sponsoring baseball-related activities and to advocate for fair MLB policies. On the day following King's assassination, he led the growing chorus of players demanding that MLB games be suspended in honor of his fallen hero.

Having grown up poor in Carolina, Puerto Rico, he had an intimate knowledge of the needs of the people of his Caribbean homeland and how he might be able to help some of them achieve success in life through sports, such as baseball. Also having witnessed the injustices of MLB policies for more than 15 years, he felt compelled to speak out against them. In this respect, at his core, Roberto Clemente was more than a ballplayer—he was a social-justice activist and humanitarian. And this is why he was selected to receive a Congressional Gold Medal.

Following Nicaragua's devastating earthquake of December 23, 1972, that left almost 10,000 people dead and over 300,000 without food, water, clothing, or shelter, Clemente launched a humanitarian aid operation for assembling and transporting resources to the victims. Rumors circulated that corrupt officials were diverting his shipments for their own use. To ensure that the aid reached those most in need, Clemente, in the manner of a true hero, decided to confront the problem by personally accompanying the next shipment. Unbeknownst to him, however, his supply plane was mechanically unsound and significantly overloaded. Thus, shortly after takeoff on December 31, 1972, the plane crashed off the coast of Puerto Rico, killing Clemente and three others. Only the pilot survived. Despite repeated searches, Clemente's remains were never recovered. He left behind his wife, Vera, and their three young sons—Roberto Jr. (b. 1965), Luis Roberto (b. 1966), and Roberto Enrique (b. 1969). Several days after the crash, over 1,300 people packed the ecumenical memorial service for Clemente at Trinity Cathedral in downtown Pittsburgh, and many members of the Pirates organization later traveled to a memorial service in Puerto Rico.

The Medal

Immediately following Clemente's death, political, business, and community leaders of Puerto Rico and Pittsburgh developed strategies for continuing his humanitarian programs. This included convincing the U.S. Congress to acknowledge Clemente by passing legislation to award him a gold medal and authorize the mint to produce thousands of duplicates for sale to the public as a fundraising tool. After some political

PHOTOS: IRSHAD ABDAL-HAGG

“After Clemente’s passing, he received numerous awards and honors posthumously.”

wrangling, Public Law 93-33 was passed and then signed by President Richard Nixon in the spring of 1973. It authorized a posthumous Congressional Gold Medal to be presented to Clemente’s widow through the Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce (GPCC), and for the production of up to 200,000 duplicates that would be transferred directly to the GPCC in 2,000-unit increments for sale to the public. The legislation specifically directed the GPCC to distribute profits to the Roberto Clemente Memorial Fund in Pittsburgh. It was quite an unusual public-private arrangement involving a numismatic item issued by the U.S. government. The mint’s 1973 Annual Report includes the Clemente medal as part of its “Public Services” mission.

As Congress worked on passing the Clemente gold medal legislation, Pittsburgh-area artist and sculptor Virgil Cantini was busy in his workshop developing the medal’s extraordinary design that would ultimately be approved by all interested parties. That design now graces the Clemente gold medal and, of course, its bronze duplicates. The artist’s daughter, Maria Cantini, authored the one-line poem that rings the medal’s reverse.

Clemente’s was the first Congressional Gold Medal awarded to an athlete, black American, and Afro-Latino/Caribbean individual. However, it is not the first awarded to a Latino. That honor belongs to statesmen Domicio da Gama (Brazil), Romulo Sebastian Naon (Argentina), and Eduardo Suarez Mujica (Chile), who were collectively awarded gold medals in 1915 for mediating ongoing disagreements between the United States and Mexico.

Clemente’s gold medal was ultimately delivered to Vera, who resided in Puerto Rico. A photograph

of it appears on the Roberto Clemente Foundation’s website, along with his other awards. But the 3-inch bronze duplicates were introduced for sale to the public by the Pirates and GPCC during a special ceremony at Pittsburgh’s Three Rivers Stadium on September 18, 1973. The smaller 1.3-inch bronze medals and gilt pendants did not become available until later that year. Following its public introduction, the 3-inch medal was distributed by the GPCC through Pittsburgh-area retail outlets such as Sears, Gimbels, and Pittsburgh National Bank, as well as via mail order. When adjusted for inflation, its initial \$8.50 purchase price would equate to around \$61 in 2024.

While the law authorized the mint to make and distribute up to 200,000 duplicates of the Clemente gold medal, GPCC may have struggled to sell the first 4,000 units it requested. According to statistics posted online by the Professional Coin Grading Service (PCGS), only 2,000 each of the 3-inch and 1.3-inch bronze duplicates were minted. Of the smaller-sized medal, 1,500 were of the unmounted variety, while the remaining 500 were offered as gilt-bronze pendants.

Assuming these mintage figures are accurate, remarkably few duplicate medals were produced and sold, given the maximum legally allowed. Considering the surge in the number of organizations competing for funds to support Clemente’s humanitarian programs in the aftermath of the plane crash, it is understandable that far fewer medals were sold than anticipated. Additionally, private organizations in 1973 also marketed commemorative Clemente coins and medals, including Sociedad Numismática de Puerto Rico and the World Art Precious Metals Guild, which offered a silver coin and a massive solid sterling medallion, respectively. Thus, Clemente’s signifi-



↑ **SOCIEDAD** Numismática de Puerto Rico produced silver medals to honor Clemente. Not Actual Size

PHOTOS: IRSHAD ABDAL-HAQ

cance to our nation and his homeland cannot be credibly measured by the number of duplicate bronze medals that the GPCC sold.

After Clemente's passing, numerous awards and honors were conferred upon him posthumously. His image even appeared on U.S. postage stamps twice—once in 1984, and again in 2000. And in addition to the Congressional Gold Medal and being admitted to the Baseball Hall of Fame under a special exception, he also was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which President George W. Bush presented to Vera in 2003.

As a testament to the high esteem the MLB holds for him, it annually bestows the Roberto Clemente Award upon the player who best represents the game on and off the field through extraordinary character, community service, and other positive contributions to society. Lastly, on December 13, 2023, Congressman Adriano Espaillat (D-NY) and two cosponsors introduced the Roberto Clemente Commemorative Coin Act (H.R. 6751). If adopted by Congress, the new law would require the minting and issuance of \$5 gold coins, \$1 silver coins, and half-dollar clad coins honoring the baseball great. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of the coins would support the Roberto Clemente Foundation's numerous social and humanitarian-related initiatives.

Clemente's numismatic honors began with the 1973 Congressional Gold Medal and its bronze duplicates. And while the bronze duplicates are now somewhat elusive, information about Clemente's legacy is not. An array of books, museums, monuments, and websites provide extensive historical and cultural material about one of the most revered baseball legends that ever played the game, but who also was more than a ballplayer—Roberto Enrique Clemente Walker. ◇

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