

An Eiffel Tower medal

100 years after the tower should have been dismantled by Tony James

THE Eiffel Tower is a monument, a symbol that immediately evokes thoughts of the wonders of the city of Paris. A medal that was struck to commemorate the opening of the tower symbolises how much the tower has come to mean to the people of France. This medallion has so much detail in so little space. My thoughts sharpen as I return again and again to this medal that has been at the bottom of a pile of research for some time. Now it has worked its way up to the top until it has claimed pride of place and an apology from me for ignoring it for so long. I really should not be surprised that I see so much in medals, after all the medal engraver produces the same cameos as the banknote engraver does in vignettes.

Obverse

While the depiction of the Eiffel Tower takes pride of place in the centre of the medal the artist who engraved this masterpiece has his name, C. Troitin, tucked away to the centre right. Charles Troitin, born in Paris in 1833, was a member of the Money and Medallion Commission of France, who engraved a range of medals. The medal engraved to commemorate the opening of the Suez Canal 17 November 1869 showed an aerial panorama of the canal within a wreath of shields of nations on one side and lotus wreath on the other. Troitin created a similar medal to commemorate the 1878 Steam Balloon ascent by Henry Gifford showing the balloon over city views of Paris.



More traditional medallions with busts or coats of arms designed by Troitin included octagonal medallions struck in silver "*La Mutuelle de L'Ouest / Assurances Mutuelles Contre l'incendie*," dated 24 April 1884, and for the *Societe des Cultivateurs - Decret du 7 Mai 1856*. A similar circular medallion was produced by Troitin and Hamel for the International Maritime Exposition at Le Havre in 1868. He is also said to have been responsible for engraving some essays of stamps produced for Iran 1863-1870.

The Eiffel Tower

The Eiffel Tower was named after its designer Gustave Eiffel (1832-1923), a gifted engineer and builder who also completed various projects in Spain, Portugal, Romania, Hungary, Egypt and Latin America as well as bridges and viaducts in France. Eiffel's company was also responsible for the internal structure of the Statue of Liberty, a gift by France to the USA in 1886. Originally planned for Barcelona in Spain, the Eiffel Tower was rejected as unsuitable for the design of that city, and so it was used instead for the World Fair which was held in Paris to mark the centenary of the French Revolution. The tower was proposed as a monument at the gateway to the exhibition and built to last 20 years. According to the government gazette, the brief required this iron tower to be on the Champ-de Mars with a square base measuring 125 metres on each side and to reach 300 metres in height. The design by Gustave Eiffel and his engineers Maurice Koechlin and Emile Nouguier and architect Stephen Sauvestre was chosen out of 107 submitted proposals. It was an engineering marvel.

Construction started on January 26 1887, the foundations alone taking five months to prepare because the workers used only spades. The deepest foundation is just 15 metres below the surface.

The major difficulty lay in the assembly of the slanting angle of the frames to meet the horizontal beams of the first floor. Special hydraulic jacks and an original scaffolding scheme regulated the slant of the beams. The parts of the second floor were prefabricated in the Eiffel workshops in the suburb of Levallois – Perret and riveted into position on site. Construction of the tower took only 21 months and despite the basic methods of construction employed and the tremendous heights at which workers operated, the stage between the second and third floor was completed without any mishap. Safety precautions taken by the company were such that only one man died during the construction of the tower. The number of iron





Base of the Eiffel Tower and the Trocadero, Exposition Universale, 1900, Paris, France. Image courtesy US Library of Congress LC-USZC4-10697

parts totalled 18,038, put together with 2.5 million rivets. When completed the metal structure weighed 7,300 tons and the whole tower 10,100 tons. These figures have changed over the years due to renovations. The height is quoted as 324 metres including the flag pole. The Eiffel Tower was the tallest building in the world from 1889 until the construction of the Chrysler Building in 1930.

Controversy

The tower attracted much criticism particularly from writers and artists who saw it as an eyesore. A letter published in *Le Temps* on February 14 1887 "...protested with all their might and indignation in the name of French taste gone unrecognised... of the useless and monstrous Eiffel Tower already baptized the Tower of Babel." ... "an ugliness that can never be corrected... tower, which even commercial-minded America does not want..."

"...all our monuments humiliated, all our architecture belittled and ultimately disappearing in this staggering dream. And for twenty years, we will see stretching out over the entire city, still quivering with genius from so many centuries, we will see stretching out like a growing ink spot the hateful shadow of the hateful column of bolted iron..." Signed by many noteworthy names such as the Paris Opera architect Charles Garnier, writers- Coppee, Dumas fils, Maupassant and Prudhomme.

Gustave Eiffel countered that the tower had its own beauty and just because he was an engineer it did not mean that beauty played no part in the design. He said that the design had to take into account wind resistance, and that the boldness of the total concept would actually give a great impression of strength and beauty. He compared it to the Pyramids of Egypt saying "were these artificial hillocks any less awe-inspiring"



A caricature by Sambourne Linley shows Gustave Eiffel in the form of the Eiffel Tower. Image US Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-02294

and “as the tower will be the highest edifice ever raised by man””will it not therefore be grandiose as well in its way? Why would what is admirable in Egypt become hideous and ridiculous in Paris? I’ve sought an answer, and must confess have found none”

The city authorities allowed it to remain after the expiration of its original 20 year life span, not least because it had proved so valuable for communication purposes. Today there are 54 television stations, 31 radio stations using the tower for broadcast as well as being home to 120 antennas, and today the tower is widely considered to be a striking piece of structural art.

Reward or souvenir

The reverse of a medal is usually less exciting than the obverse and so it was when I examined this item. That is, until I looked at it with a loupe and saw the minute details at the top and bottom. The inscription in French reads: - *SOUVENIR DE MON ASCENSION AU 1^{ER} ETAGE DE LA TOUR EIFFEL* translated as “Souvenir of my ascent to the 1st level of the Eiffel Tower.” Then there is a space for a name to be engraved and the year 1889.

At the top there is the word “cuivre,” signifying copper, and then a cornucopia or horn of plenty which is one of the mint marks used by the Paris Mint between 1880 -1898 and in 1901. Under the date 1889 there are the words “*usine metallurgique Parisienne*” which can be translated as ‘metal factory in Paris;’ there were no imports for this commemorative item.

Checking the offerings from the auction houses and sites on the web there are similar medals for those who reach the second stage of the tower, with the same wording except that it for *AU 2^{me} (2nd) ETAGE*. Those who had a head for heights or didn’t suffer from either acrophobia or vertigo could also obtain a medal that commemorated their reaching the top of the tower. This edition stated: - “*SOUVENIR DE MON ASCENSION AU SOMMET DE LA TOUR EIFFEL*” followed by the name space and dated 1889.



Obverse

The centre piece of the obverse depicts the tower itself. On each side of the uppermost section are the words *LES TRAVAUX ONT COMMENCÉ LE 27 JANV.1887*, on the left, and on the right – *LE MONUMENT A ÉTÉ INAUGURÉ LE 6 MAI 1889*. Meaning “The work commenced 27 January 1887” and “The monument was inaugurated on 6 May 1889”. The background is filled with other buildings which are mentioned at the base of the medallion. *INVALIDES 105: NOT.DAME 66: COLOGNE 169: OPERA 56: GT PYRAMIDE 145: PAN-THEON 83: ST PIERRE 132: ARC DE TRIOMPHE 45: ROUVEN 150: OBELISQUE WASHINGTON 169: TOUR EIF-FEL 300*. These name the buildings shown on the medal behind the Eiffel Tower.

Les Invalides is a building complex in Paris that houses a hospital and retirement home for war veterans as well as a church whose dome is 105 metres in height. There is also a museum and it is the burial site for some of the war heroes of France, the most notable being Napoleon Bonaparte, whose body was moved from the island of St Helena in 1840.

The Cathedral of Notre Dame is the cathedral of the Catholic archdiocese of Paris and the home of the hunchback Quasimodo who looked down from his belltower 66 metres above the square below. The church is known for its Gothic architecture, its bells and its great organ of 7,800 pipes, 900 of which are classified as historical. Today the instrument has 109 stops, five 56 key manuals and the 32 key pedal-board which was fully computerised in 1992.

Cologne refers to the cathedral which is the seat of the Catholic archdiocese of Cologne. A world heritage site, its spires rise 169 metres above the city and it was the tallest structure in the world from 1880 until -1884, when the Washington monument was completed. The cathedral is known for its “shrine of the Three Kings,” a gilt sarcophagus said to hold the remains of the Three Wise Men. For those who may be tempted to check my facts the towers are now said to be 157 metres high, probably due to post war repairs completed in 1956.

The *Theatre de l'Academie Royal de Musique* was the home of the Paris opera until fire destroyed the building on October 29 1873. The successor, the Palais Garnier, often known simply as Paris Opera, was completed in 1875 and seats 2,200 patrons. The neo-baroque style building rises 56 metres into the Paris skyline.

At the back of the building-scape is the Great Pyramid, the largest of the three pyramids of the Giza necropolis near Cairo. The only remaining member of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, it is believed to have been built as a tomb for King Khufu, and was constructed over a 20 year period around 2560 BCE. The “G.Pyramide” at 146 metres in height was the tallest man-made structure in the world for more than 3,800 years.

The *Panthéon* in Paris stands 83 metres high and was built as a church in the Latin Quarter in Paris. King Louis XV sponsored the architect Soufflot to replace the ruined church of St Genevieve who was the patron saint of Paris, and the building was completed in 1789. The dome was the site for the experiment conducted by Leon Foucault in 1851 when he constructed a 67 metre pendulum to demonstrate the rotation of the earth.

The next building named on the medallion is St Pierre: 132, and this refers to St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. This church is the burial site of the apostle Peter, said to have been the first Bishop of Rome and therefore first in the line of papal succession. The church is famous as a pilgrimage site and its association with the papacy, and many popes have been buried here. Specifications of the Basilica note the height as a maximum of 138 metres, the dome being the tallest in the world at 136.57 metres from the floor to the top of the external cross.

The *Arc de Triomphe* is a monument and is situated in the centre of the *Place Charles de Gaulle*. It is also known as the *Place de Etoile*. (Star formed by the radiating avenues in Paris) Built to honour those who fought for France, particularly during the Napoleonic Wars, it houses the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The monument is variously quoted as being from 45 to 49.5 metres high.

Rouen Cathedral is a Roman Catholic cathedral built in a variety of the Gothic styles. It was constructed between 1202 and 1880. Between 1876 and 1880 it was the tallest building in the world at 151 metres including the spire. The church contains the tomb of crusader King Richard the Lionheart as well as being famous for its stained glass windows.

The Washington Monument (*Obelisque Washington*) was commenced in 1848 but due to lack of funds and the American Civil War it was not completed until 1884. Dedicated in 1885, it was officially opened October 9 1888, and for a brief five years



A more modern example of a souvenir regarding the construction of the tower.

from 1884 until 1889 was the tallest structure in the world, standing 169.294 metres high. Then the Eiffel Tower took that honour and held it for the next 41 years.

Last words

This 'tragic street lamp' (Leon Bloy), 'this mast of iron gymnasium apparatus, incomplete, confused and deformed' (Francoise Coppee). Criticism burnt itself out when the tower was completed and the master piece was greeted as being a popular success. Repainted every seven years it takes 18 months and uses 60 tons of paint. Two million visitors were welcomed to the monument during the World Fair of 1889, and in 2002 it received its 200 millionth visitor. Today the visitor can still obtain souvenirs of the Eiffel Tower, however the artistry and detail of the medallion is a reminder of earlier visitors and how the souvenir trade used to be.

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