

The Nobel Prize Medals and the Medal for the Prize in Economics

by Birgitta Lemmel

According to the Statutes of the Nobel Foundation, given by the King in Council on June 29, 1900, "the prize-awarding bodies shall present to each prize-winner an assignment for the amount of the prize, a diploma, and a gold medal bearing the image of the testator and an appropriate inscription."

The medals for Physics, Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine and Literature were modeled by the Swedish sculptor and engraver Erik Lindberg and the Peace medal by the Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland. The medal for The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel (established in 1968 in connection with the 300th anniversary of the Sveriges Riksbank), was designed by Gunvor Svensson-Lundqvist.



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The front side of the three "Swedish" medals (Physics and Chemistry, Physiology or Medicine, and Literature) is the same, featuring a portrait of Alfred Nobel and the years of his birth and death in Latin - NAT-MDCCC XXXIII OB-MDCCC XCVI. Alfred Nobel's face on the Peace medal and on the medal for the Economics Prize has different designs. The main inscription on the reverse side of all three "Swedish" Nobel Prize medals is the same: "Inventas vitam juvat excoluisse per artes," while the images vary according to the symbols of the respective prize-awarding institutions. The Peace medal has the inscription "Pro pace et fraternitate gentium" and the Economics medal has no quotation at all on the reverse.

Up to 1980 the "Swedish" medals, each weighing approximately 200 g and with a diameter of 66 mm, were made of 23-karat gold. Since then they have been made of 18-karat green gold plated with 24-karat gold.

Today the "Swedish" medals are cast by Myntverket - the Swedish Mint - in Eskilstuna and the Peace medal by Den Kongelige Mynt - the Royal Mint - in Kongsberg, Norway.



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The Nobel medals have had the same design since 1902. Why not since 1901, when the first Prizes were awarded? In early 1901 the young and talented Swedish sculptor and engraver Erik Lindberg - later Professor Erik Lindberg - had been entrusted with the task of creating the three "Swedish" Nobel medals, while the Norwegian medal - the Peace medal - had been entrusted to the Norwegian sculptor Gustav Vigeland. The designs of the reverse sides of the "Swedish" Nobel medals were not finalized in time for the first Award Ceremony in 1901. We gather from Erik Lindberg's correspondence with his father Professor Adolf Lindberg that each of the 1901 Laureates received a "temporary" medal - a medal bearing the portrait of Alfred Nobel, cast in a baser metal - as a memento until the "real" medals were finished. The first of these medals was not completed and cast until September 1902.



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During the years 1901-1902 Erik Lindberg was living in Paris. He was influenced by modern French medal engravers of that period, such as the masters Roty, Chaplain, Tasset and Vernon. The portrait on the front of the Swedish medals was completed in time. It was reduced in October 1901 at Janvier's in Paris and the final punching took place in Stockholm. The reason for the delay was that the symbols on the reverse of the medals had to be approved by each Prize-Awarding institution, which was not

without controversy. After lengthy discussions by letter, Erik Lindberg decided to return to Stockholm in November 1901 in order to present his ideas in person. His proposals were then all accepted, and he was finally able to produce the plaster casts for the reverse sides, which were then reduced for the final metal-stamping dies.

As Gustav Vigeland was a sculptor and not a medal engraver, Erik Lindberg was asked to make the dies for the Peace medal. His reductions were based on Vigeland's designs.



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On all "Swedish" Nobel medals the name of the Laureate is engraved fully visible on a plate on the reverse, whereas the name of the Peace Laureate as well as that of the Winner for the Economics Prize is engraved on the edge of the medal, which is less obvious. For the 1975 Economics Prize winners, the Russian [Leonid Kantorovich](#) and the American [Tjalling Koopmans](#), this created problems. Their medals were mixed up in Stockholm, and after the Nobel Week the Prize Winners went back to their respective countries with the wrong medals. As this happened during the Cold War, it took four years of diplomatic efforts to have the medals exchanged to their rightful owners.



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On December 10 at the Prize Award Ceremony in Stockholm, His Majesty the King hands each Laureate a diploma and a medal. The Peace Prize, i.e. diploma and medal, is presented on the same day in Oslo by the Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee in the presence of the King of Norway. The Irish poet [William Butler Yeates](#) wrote the following in "The Bounty of Sweden" (The Cuala Press, Dublin, 1925) after receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923:

"All is over, and I am able to examine my medal, its charming, decorative, academic design, French in manner, a work of the nineties. It shows a young man listening to a Muse, who stands young and beautiful with a great lyre in her hand, and I think as I examine it, 'I was good-looking once like that young man, but my unpractised verse was full of infirmity, my Muse old as it were; and now I am old and rheumatic, and nothing to look at, but my Muse is young'."



There are many rumors of what happened to the Nobel medals of three Nobel Laureates in Physics during World War II: the medals of the Germans [Max von Laue](#) (1914) and [James Franck](#) (1925), and of the Dane [Niels Bohr](#) (1922). Professor Bohr's Institute of Theoretical Physics in Copenhagen had been a refuge for German Jewish physicists since 1933. Max von Laue and James Franck had deposited their medals there to keep them from being confiscated by the German authorities. After the occupation of Denmark in April 1940, the medals were Bohr's first concern, according to the Hungarian chemist [George de Hevesy](#) (also of Jewish origin and a 1943 Nobel Laureate in Chemistry), who worked at the institute. In Hitler's Germany it was almost a capital offense to send gold out of the country. Since the names of the Laureates were engraved on the medals, their discovery by the invading forces would have had very serious consequences. To quote George de Hevesy (*Adventures in Radioisotope Research*, Vol. 1, p. 27, Pergamon, New York, 1962), who talks about von Laue's

medal: "I suggested that we should bury the medal, but Bohr did not like this idea as the medal might be unearthed. I decided to dissolve it. While the invading forces marched in the streets of Copenhagen, I was busy dissolving Laue's and also James Franck's medals. After the war, the gold was recovered and the Nobel Foundation generously presented Laue and Frank with new Nobel medals." de Hevesy wrote to von Laue after the war that the task of dissolving the medals had not been easy, as gold is "exceedingly unreactive and difficult to dissolve." The Nazis occupied Bohr's institute and searched it very carefully but they did not find anything. The medals quietly waited out the war in a solution of aqua regia. de Hevesy did not mention Niels Bohr's own Nobel medal but documents in the Niels Bohr Archive in Copenhagen show that Niels Bohr's Nobel medal, as well as the Nobel medal of the 1920 Danish Laureate in Physiology or Medicine, August Krogh, had already been donated to an auction held on March 12, 1940 for the benefit of the Fund for Finnish Relief (Finlandshjälpen). The medals were bought by an anonymous buyer and donated to the Danish Historical Museum in Fredriksborg, where they are still kept. Regarding the Nobel medals of von Laue and Franck, the Niels Bohr Archive has a letter from Niels Bohr dated January 24, 1950, about the delivery of gold to the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in Stockholm relating to these two medals. The proceedings of the Nobel Foundation on February 28, 1952, mention that Professor Franck received his recoined medal at a ceremony at the University of Chicago on January 31, 1952.

The Medal for The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel



The medal for The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel shows the North Star emblem of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, dating from 1815, with the words "Kungliga Vetenskaps Akademien" (The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences) around the edge.

The upper half of the face of the medal depicts Alfred Nobel, but in a pose different from the one appearing on the Nobel Prize Medals.

Around the upper edge are the words:

Sveriges Riksbank till Alfred Nobels Minne 1968
(*The Sveriges Riksbank, in memory of Alfred Nobel, 1968*)

The lower half displays the bank's crossed horns of plenty. This design distinguishes it from the medals of the five prizes awarded under the terms of Alfred Nobel's 1895 will.

The name of the Economics Laureate is engraved on the edge of the medal.

The Medal for The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel was designed by Gunvor Svensson-Lundqvist.

