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‘Celebration’ quarters mark a fresh direction for Royal Mint



Famed artist and illustrator Gary Taxali tackles his biggest small project yet—the 25-cent piece

by Sara Angel on Wednesday, January 11, 2012 12:20pm - [0 Comments](#)

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Photograph by Jaime Hogge

Few Canadians can afford an oil painting by Gary Taxali, whose whimsical, vintage-inspired art sells for as much as \$10,000 and is part of collections in New York's Whitney and London's Victoria and Albert museums. Now everyone will have a chance to own an original when his images appear on the smallest surface he has ever worked on: a 25-cent piece.

While each of the Toronto-based artist's six coins is a mini-masterpiece, it's unlikely you'll see them the next time a cashier gives you change. The Royal Canadian Mint's 2012 "celebration" quarters, to be unveiled Jan. 17, are meant to be keepsakes, to mark marriages, birthdays and even the tooth fairy's visit. You can spend them if you want, but it's unlikely you will, because all but one will be packaged in sets and sold for \$19.95. The tooth fairy coin is \$9.95.

The mint's decision to commission the artist to design its special edition, 25-cent coins marks a fresh direction for the federal money maker. Famed artists Alex Colville and Robert Bateman created wildlife coins in 1967 and 1990 respectively, but most of the mint's designers are not household names. Taxali brings his retro style to the imagery and typography, and uses his trademark font "Chumply" on all six quarters. To celebrate the arrival of a new baby, he presents a toy rabbit, moon, duck and other objects as smiling characters that hang from a child's mobile. His birthday coin design shows a wide-eyed cupcake carried away by balloons. To mark the December holiday season, Taxali created laughing ornaments that dangle

from a tree gazing mischievously at one another. For his tooth fairy coin, Taxali crafted a puckish sylph who waves a molar-capped wand as she nods downward with an enchanted grin.

The artist takes particular pride in his *O Canada* coin, which features six friendly maple leaves, each with a different human expression, to “show the vastness of how we all look.” His face also lights up when talking about the marriage quarter, where two intertwined wedding bands smile at one another beneath a halo-like heart bracketed by jubilant rays. “We live in a country where people of the same sex can get married,” says Taxali. The coin “represents the possibilities of love and marriage here.”

Taxali, 43, started working with the mint last summer after he was cold-called by Dave Tupper, an associate creative director at the advertising firm Young & Rubicam, who was charged with making Canada’s 2012 celebration quarters feel like a modern set. Says Tupper, “We wanted to give them a bit of a cool factor.”

Tupper approached Taxali because he was “a well-known artist,” but not “someone who is predictable.” Moreover, Y & R had confidence that Taxali could do something “totally different, but never offensive.”

The mint immediately supported Tupper’s recommendation, swayed by Taxali’s unique ability to straddle the worlds of high and low culture because he creates canvases and cufflinks, toys and stationery. He has also written a children’s book (*This Is Silly!*) and snagged a Grammy nomination for the album cover he designed for Aimee Mann. In all his art, says Tupper, he creates these icon-like characters that are memorable, amusing, and accessible.

As for Taxali, the commission from the mint feels like a fortuitous destiny. His surname means “superintendent of the mint” in modern Hindi, a name bestowed upon an ancestor 300 years ago when he came up with a coin that was difficult to counterfeit. Also, Taxali has worn a flat doughnut-shaped Chinese coin on a string around his neck. “Years ago my sister gave it to me for good luck,” he says. “Look at what it has led to.”

Born in Chandigarh, India, Taxali moved to Toronto with his parents and sister when he was a year old. From the time he was a child, his mother, now a retired postal worker, encouraged her son’s lighthearted approach to creativity that merged art and laughter (Taxali dedicates *This Is Silly!* to her). After graduating from the Ontario College of Art in 1991, Taxali moved to New York City, where his career took off as a commercial illustrator when he began creating award-winning works for such publications as *Rolling Stone*, *GQ* and *Esquire*. He stayed in Manhattan for a year, returning to Toronto to be with his family when his father died.

Back home, Taxali made the leap from commercial art to the gallery world when he sent some of his fine-art pieces to La Luz de Jesus Gallery in Los Angeles. Today he is represented there as well as at the Lazarides Galleries in London. Over the last decade Taxali has become known for his works that blend doodles and screen printing, as well as Depression-era ephemera and typography. “The minimal colours, visual beauty, craftsmanship, honesty and hopefulness of the ’30s appeal to me,” says Taxali. “Also, it was a time when there was rampant use of cartoon characters for corporate identities.”

For Taxali, the challenge of creating the six celebration quarters had little to do with figuring out their designs (on average he worked through about five conceptual sketches before the mint signed off on a final image). Nor did he find it difficult to handle the institution’s bureaucracy, where all collector coins have to be approved by Finance Minister Jim Flaherty (Taxali says the process was a “like-minded, respectful collaboration”).

The hardest part of the project came when Taxali tried to imagine how his drawings would translate as monochromatic reliefs, because until now, he has always worked in colour and primarily on large flat surfaces. For inspiration, Taxali kept a quarter next to his computer, but in the early stages, he often found himself thinking, “I just can’t see it. The real estate of a coin is so tiny!”

With the mint’s help, Taxali was eased through the coin-making process. Once finished with his designs, he sent them to Ottawa, where they were rendered in a software program that simulated his pen marks in a three-dimensional form and with varying degrees of texture. “They took my big fat lines and turned them into edges that could be raised,” says Taxali. The mint also dealt with details that never occurred to him, “like how when metal is poured it’s really heavy in the middle and then spreads out, so the coin’s edges are more fragile than its centre.”

The mint will make at least 20,000 of each design, which Taxali describes as his “most important” job to date. The mint is collaborating with Y & R on future projects (all strictly confidential) and Alex Reeves, the mint’s senior communications manager, says it is guaranteed it “will work with new artists in the future.”

For Taxali, this is good news for all of us. Coins are ordinary, everyday things, but we often take their design for granted. Now that the mint is “rolling with the times,” he says we might all become more mindful of our money and more culturally aware. “Artists are the pulse of humanity. If we put their original designs on coins, we honour our heritage.”

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