

White House Curator Hit On Mint Deal

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A White House official has negotiated an unusual business venture giving a private manufacturer the right to distribute presidential medals in return for royalties intended to help furnish the executive mansion.

The contract with the Franklin Mint, a rapidly growing manufacturer of coins and medallions, was worked out by Clement Conger, who as White House curator is a federal employee.

Officially, the contract is between the Franklin Mint and the White House Historical Association, a semiautonomous, nonprofit group set up under the Kennedy administration to raise funds for White House acquisitions of historic furnishings by selling a guidebook to tourists.

William Walton, former board member of the association, said yesterday that the venture represents crass commercialism and misuse of both the historical association and the White House.

But Conger said the contracts have produced much-needed revenue to purchase antiques, paintings and other historic furnishings for the White House. Conger acknowledged that a mail order brochure sent out by the Franklin Mint to potential purchasers of the presidential medals appears to have been printed by the White House Historical Association "while actually

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... it is part of the Franklin Mint's promotion."

Joseph M. Segel, board chairman of the Franklin Mint, said "the whole situation is ethical and innocent" and was not connected in any way with his contribution to the Nixon campaign of \$113,000— "considerably less than 1 per cent of my net worth." Two other Mint executives contributed \$16,000 apiece. All of the contributions were in the form of stock in the Franklin Mint.

Segel said the White House Historical Association will receive more than \$1 million and possibly \$2 million in royalties on sales of the presidential medals and two earlier joint ventures: sale of a series of First Ladies medals and of presidential plates.

"I think we're doing a public service," said Segel. "I think that the project is something to be proud of."

Walton, former chairman of the Commission of the Fine Arts, disagreed. He said that he strongly disapproved of the initial agreement on First Ladies Medals at a time when he served on the White House Historical Association board.

"The name of the White

House has never been used in this way," said Walton. "It's scandalous. It's just the kind of crumby commercial deal that we tried to avoid. Clement Conger should be ashamed of himself."

John Walker, former director of the National Gallery of Art, who still serves as a board member of the White House Historical Association, had reservations about the projects as "too commercial" but stood by the decision . . . made by the majority of the board."

Walker characterized the sales agreement as "obviously a promotional venture on the part of the Franklin Mint with the White House getting some of the money."

Although the board felt that the medal design and promotional material should be checked by a three-member subcommittee, Walker said, this procedure apparently has not been carried out.

"As long as they were going to do it," Walker said, "I felt that the quality ought to be good. I remember looking at the First Lady medals and saying they were not very good and should be redesigned."

Walker said he doesn't re-

member the committee meeting again to approve the medals.

White House curator Conger, however, said that the board does not play a role in approving design and publicity. Conger said that such approval is provided by himself and Hillory Tolson, executive director of the historical association.

The contract for the Presidential Medals was signed on Aug. 28, with the White House Historical Association receiving a 10 per cent royalty on gross sales and a minimum payment of \$200,000.

Franklin Mint board chairman Segel and White House Curator Conger negotiated the agreement following an exchange of letters in June.

Historical association board members then approved the contract in a mail ballot. At the insistence of board member George Hartzog, director of the National Park Service, a provision was eliminated that would have given one-half the revenue to the State Department Committee of Fine Arts.

The Franklin Mint began publicizing the Presidential Medals in a promotional brochure mailed to coin collectors on Nov. 15 and in

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double page newspaper advertisements beginning on Nov. 19. This promotion offered "proof sets" of the medals, each bearing a likeness of the 36 Presidents, to anyone who sent in an order prior to Nov. 30. Cost of the individual medals is \$12.50 for solid sterling silver and \$24.50 for 24-carat gold on silver.

The complete sets cost \$450 for sterling silver and \$630 for gold on sterling and can be paid for in monthly installments.

The promotional literature heavily emphasizes the role of the White House Historical Association. For example, the mailed promotion includes a brochure which concentrates almost entirely on the White House role and only once mentions the Franklin Mint. The brochure contains a letter from Conger to the historical association in which he "authenticates" the presidential portraits and notes that a complete proof set will become part of "The White House Collection."

Conger's letter states that "it is particularly gratifying that royalties from the sale" of the medals will make it possible for the White House to acquire more art and furnishings. The brochure does not

state that the bulk of earnings from sales go to the Franklin Mint.

The brochure is identified on its back cover as coming from the White House Historical Office Building, 726 Executive Office Building, 726 Jackson Place NW, Washington, D.C.

Segel said the mailed promotion is not misleading because it also includes a letter from the Franklin Mint and an order blank to be mailed to the Franklin Mint.

Describing his role in the contract, White House official Conger said:

"We don't have enough funds for needed acquisitions. A part of any active curator's job is to raise funds. We heard the Franklin Mint medals were a good fundraiser. It turned out to be very beneficial to us.

"They came to us and made a good business-like proposition. I helped them find the most lifelike portraits or statues to use as models."

Advertisements for the Presidential Medals state that Gilroy Roberts, chief sculptor and chairman-emeritus of the Franklin Mint and formerly chief sculptor of the U.S. Mint, has "devoted the better part of two years to researching and sculpting portraits" of the 36 Presidents.

"As the work progressed," the advertisements state, "every detail was reviewed and authenticated by Clement Conger, Curator of the White House."

However, negotiations between the Franklin Mint and Conger began five months ago and were concluded only three months ago.

The Franklin Mint has been

involved in a continuing contest with the U.S. mint over which would sell medals in connection with the bicentennial celebration in 1976.

Congress authorized the U.S. Mint to put out medals for the bicentennial but the White House's budget officials have blocked funding of the project, according to an article by James Ridgeway in The Village Voice. Ridgeway said Sen. Hugh Scott (R-Pa.) persuaded budget officials to withhold funding. The Franklin Mint is located in Philadelphia.

Segel said the Franklin Mint is making medals in connection with several bicentennial projects.

Prior to 1968, Segel said, he did not make large contributions to national political campaigns, but contributed at the state and local level.