

Chuck Goergen Presents “Elvira Elisa Clain-Stefanelli’s Legacy”

By Stephen Kuhl

“Have you ever heard of Mrs. Elvira Elisa Clain-Stefanelli?” This was the question posed by Chuck Goergen at a recent meeting of the Stephen James Central Savannah River Area Coin Club in Aiken, South Carolina. According to Chuck she has “affected every coin collector in the room”.

Wow, that was some statement, and no small feat! As a member of the audience that night, I was not sure of this claim. In fact, I had never heard of this lady, so, on the surface, one might consider this assertion to be a bit of hyperbole. Perhaps it was not? As Chuck gave his presentation it quickly became clear that his declaration was true.



Elvira Elisa Clain-Stefanelli
[Courtesy of Rahakabinetti
Wordpress]



Elvira & Vladimir Clain-Stefanelli
[Courtesy of Numismatics.org]

His presentation began with a history of this icon of the numismatic world. She was born in Romania in the early part of the 20th Century; She experienced, on a very personal level, both World Wars - to include spending approximately three years in the Buchenwald concentration camp with her husband Vladimir. It was noted that her husband was an internationally renowned and highly acclaimed numismatist. Perhaps they can be considered the first “power couple” of coin collecting!

As explained by Chuck, following the end of the Second World War Mrs. And Mr. Clain-Stefanelli immigrated to the United States. In 1956 they became the Curators of the National Numismatic Collection. This collection is held at the National Museum of American History in the Smithsonian Institution at Washington, D.C. Together, over many years, they helped expand this collection from 60,000 items to over 900,000! The current collection contains over a million items.

One of the Clain-Stefanelli’s achievements discussed by Mr. Goergen was that in 1968 they obtained (for the Smithsonian) 6,125 coins from the collection of pharmaceutical magnate Josiah K. Lilly. At the time this was one of the largest collections of domestic, foreign and ancient gold coins ever assembled, and was valued at \$5.5 million (\$24.8 million in 2018 dollars).

Unfortunately Mr. Clain-Stefanelli passed away in 1982. However, Mrs. Clain-Stefanelli continued her work, and became the Executive Director of the Smithsonian’s Coin Department. In addition to her duties as a Curator of the National Numismatic Collection, Mrs. Clain-Stefanelli was a prolific author.

She wrote many books on a multitude of numismatic topics, to include the tome *Numismatic Bibliography*, which, as its name implies, provided a comprehensive history of numismatics.



Goergen with book authored by Elvira Clain-Stefanelli
[Courtesy Stephen Kuhl]

Mr. Goergen brought several of the books written by Mrs. Clain-Stefanelli for the Club members to review. At the end of the presentation he graciously placed one of the books up for auction, which resulted in a short but spirited bidding spree.



Goergen with Denarius & Certificate of Authenticity
– Ex-Elvira Clain-Steffanelli [Courtesy Stephen Kuhl]

In addition to the books, Mr. Goergen brought some coins for the audience to look at. One very special item he had was a beautifully brilliant Roman Denarius, circa 211 – 206 BC, which was once owned by Mrs. Clain-Stefanelli (see Figure below). Obtaining a coin from her collection was “a dream come true” for Chuck! The coin was accompanied by a certificate of authenticity citing the Ex-Clain-Stefanelli attribution.

Chuck wrapped up his presentation by sharing the story of when he had the good fortune to personally meet Mrs. Clain-Stefanelli. Chuck had a cousin who was a Fellow with the American Numismatic Society and knew Mrs. Clain-Stefanelli. Cousin arranged for he and Chuck to have a private tour of the Smithsonian’s collection and a “meet and greet” with her. They were taken to the non-public vault area and a Curator brought them a platter labelled “America’s Rarest Coins”. They were able to handle and examine these very rare coins, to include one of the two 1804 US Dollars in the collection! (Chuck said the full story of that tour will have to be a separate presentation. We can hardly wait to hear!) Following their inspection of America’s rarest coins, Mrs. Clain-Stefanelli spent time chatting with them about numismatics.

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In a 1996 profile piece, The Numismatist magazine, (published by the American Numismatic Association) called her "a remarkable treasure in the world of numismatics." Given the fascinating story of her life as presented by Chuck, it is easy to understand this characterization and to recognize that her legacy endures.



Roman Republic; 211-206 BC. AR Denarius. Anonymous
Obv: Helmeted head of Roma right, with triple earring, spike above visor, X behind.
Rev: The Dioscuri riding right, ROMA in linear frame below.
Ref: Sear5# 38, Cr 53/2; Syd 229. 3.65g; Ex: Elvira Clain-Stefanelli Collection [Courtesy of Chuck Goergen]

Mr. Goergen’s presentation was thoroughly enjoyed by the audience! The Club is thankful to Chuck for sharing his numismatic items, and appreciative of the effort he expended in researching and developing this program. Well Done!

Author’s Note: Chuck Goergen is a member and Treasurer of the Stephen James Central Savannah River Area Coin Club, and the owner of AikenAncients. Chuck has been a collector since childhood and his interests include ancient Roman and Greek, Spanish Colonial, and modern US coinage. Chuck may be contacted at aikenancients@gmail.com.