

Seated Liberty

*For more than half a century, a design
held its place on our country's silver coinage.*

THE DECADES from the 1830s to the 1890s were an era of profound change for the United States. The nation acquired and settled the western half of the continent, struggled with rebellion and reconstruction, welcomed waves of immigrants, and began the transition from an agrarian system to an industrial powerhouse.

During those turbulent times, one element of American culture stood for stability: a stoic figure on our nation's silver coinage. It represented the country in war and peace, in austerity and prosperity, from sea to shining sea. That now-classic motif was Seated Liberty.



The reverse of the 1837 Seated Liberty half dime featured an open laurel wreath.

Americans already were familiar with the recumbent, allegorical image of Britannia on English coinage. But the homegrown version is distinctively American. Liberty, personified, sits on a rock. With one hand, she supports a shield emblazoned "Liberty"; in the other hand, she cradles a pole topped by a liberty cap, symbolic of release from slavery. Could there be any doubt about America's

most cherished ideal?

Starting in the late 1830s, the Seated Liberty design had a near-monopoly on silver coinage for more than five decades. It graced the humble half dime until its abolition in 1873 and was the sole design on the short-lived 20-cent piece of 1875-78. Seated Liberty dollars were standard before Morgan's motif came along in 1878, and the design persisted on smaller coins until the introduction of Charles Barber's dime, quarter and half dollar in 1892.

Starting in 1860, the reverse of the half dime and dime featured agricultural wreaths, while a magnificent eagle flew across the reverse of dollars from 1836 to 1839. Most Seated Liberty reverses carry a Heraldic Eagle gazing to the left, clutching two, very different objects. The olive branch represents a desire for peace (thus, the direction of the Eagle's gaze is symbolic), while an arsenal of arrows conveys preparedness in the event of conflict.

These coins' connection to conflict was more than symbolic. At the start of the Civil War, 1861-O half dollars were made at the New Orleans Mint under three, successive authorities: the United States of America, the State of Louisiana and the Confederate States of America. After the end of hostilities, in 1866, the motto "In God We Trust" appeared on the reverse of most silver denominations.

Economic dislocations also affected Seated Liberty coinage, starting with the California gold rush. The rising price of silver required a weight reduction for fractional silver coins—a change temporarily indicated by arrows located near the date from 1853 to 1855, and rays on the reverse of the quarter and half dollar in 1853.

Not long afterward, inflation-inspired fractional currency circulated in place of silver coins for the duration of the Civil War and for a decade afterward. In the meantime, arrows returned on coins dated 1873-74, after a tiny weight increase to conform to international metric standards. The



A Heraldic Eagle is depicted on the reverse of the 1854 Seated Liberty half dollar.

Coinage Act of 1873 also ended production of silver dollars, kicking off a quarter-century of sectional and class conflict over monetary standards.

When collecting this historic design, you might be content with one, representative Seated Liberty coin, in the denomination of your choice. If you decide to pursue an expanded type collection, you'll find that most denominations, types and subtypes are reasonably available.

On the other hand, date-mintmark collecting is a considerable challenge. Not only did the design continue for

PHOTOS: ANA ARCHIVES/JOHN NEBEL (HALF DIME) & HERITAGE AUCTION GALLERIES

decades, but it also was produced at four, different mints: Philadelphia (no mintmark), San Francisco (S), Carson City (CC) and New Orleans (O). Some issues are common, but many are not.

The 19th-century Seated Liberty design recently experienced a 21st-century revival, with 2008-dated "First Spouse" gold coins and bronze medals recognizing the Presidency of widower Martin Van Buren. But even with this contemporary connection, the Seated Liberty motif is very much an anachronism.

Figurative designs largely have replaced allegories on coinage, and with today's diversity of design, it's almost inconceivable that the same image could be so ubiquitous, or so enduring, in circulation. Still, for numismatists, a Seated Liberty coin is an evocative reminder of American history, and a great addition to any coin collection.

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