

Coins Are History's Canvas

A quick google search yields the literal definition of numismatics to be “the study or collection of coins, paper currency, and medals.” While the general connotation for the word is nearly always associated with the “coin collector” denotation, numismatics is indeed a field of historical study as well. Every coin ever made, beginning with the Lydians c. 610-600 BC and proceeding into the foreseeable future, tells a story about the country from where it originated and the culture that inspired the designs of the coin.

Numismatics is not only an enduring hobby, but it also proves to be an invaluable tool for historians in analyzing the cultural disciplines of any given time period. Coins as an art form also demonstrate a country's artistic prowess and ability. The first impression of the artistic cultural identity of a civilization is its coinage. Time and again throughout history, the countries that are recognized as having been most artistic and culturally-developed are also recognized for brilliant coinage. The Lydians, Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians are a few ancient examples of this, being appreciated as having produced both remarkable coinage design, as well as remarkable artistic achievements.

President Theodore Roosevelt was a strong advocate of this idea that coins are a country's works of art. Roosevelt famously described United States coins of the time to be “artistically of atrocious hideousness” and embarked upon a quest to remedy this. Roosevelt made it his “pet crime” to reconstruct the nation's coinage and commissioned Augustus Saint-Gaudens to the project. Thus, a renewed pride was taken in national coinage and the ‘Golden Age of Numismatics’ was ushered in with the \$20 Saint Gaudens’ Double Eagle and the \$10 Indian Head Eagle. Money was made America's canvas.

Coins are time capsules of a civilization and play a unique role in archaeology. Since first originating in Lydia c. 610-600 BC, coins became the accepted medium of exchange and spread rapidly. For archaeologists, coins are extremely useful in chronologically dating everything from inventions to the rise and fall of empires. Coin hoards buried deep underground during Roman times commonly signify a time of political turmoil, while coins buried alongside the pharaohs of Egypt can demonstrate the economic success of a particular ruler. Some coins portray leaders as divine gods and goddesses, while others portray regal and benevolent kings and queens.

Unlike other methods of archaeology, coins are unique in that they are usually dated and, being made of metal, can stand the test of time. Because of this, coins can travel long distances and be found many centuries later, still identifiable and dateable. One of the earliest examples of this concerns the Athenian Owl Tetradrachm. Athens was one of the first countries to institute strict standards for their coinage. Tetradrachms dependably contained around 17 grams of silver from the nearby mines of Laurium. This dependability allowed the tetradrachm to build a reputation as being the

standard of trade and its usage spread widely. From this, archaeologists can trace the trade routes of Ancient Greece, extending throughout the Mediterranean region.

From an industrial standpoint, coins also speak of the technology used in a country. Ancient coins, for example were traditionally hammered, which results in great variance of strike, rotation, and even the shape of a given coin. This method of hammering coins continued for over a thousand years, until it was replaced by the screw press. Leonardo da Vinci is credited with being the first to conceptualize a screw press minting process in 1500, though it was Max Schwab's equipment that eventually began to be used in the mid 1600's.

With the introduction of the screw press came a decisive shift in the way American Pine Tree Shillings were made. Before the screw press, a roller press was used, which caused the shillings to be elongated, inconsistent, and the devices frequently blended together. With the new screw press technology, the strike was much sharper and consistent. The screw press was replaced by the steam-powered presses in the 1830's, which have since been replaced by hydraulic and motor-powered presses which are used today.

Coins are a snapshot of the country that minted them. Numismatics tells of the gamut of cultural fields of a time and place, ranging everything from political and economic, to intellectual, religious, and artistic. Coins are history's canvas and serve as mementos of the impact of times past and the legacies of the world leaders of yesterday.