

Small, But Mighty

The diminutive dime's diverse designs

offer collectors of U.S. coins big rewards.

THE AMERICAN dime is a metaphor for minuteness. “Turning on a dime” indicates agility, “one thin dime” suggests frugality and “not a dime’s worth of difference” denotes conformity. But numismatists recognize that the dime’s diminutive dimensions are only part of its story and that, although the coin might be small, it’s a great collectible.

The Mint Act of 1792 authorized a silver coin equal to one-tenth of a dollar. Its name—dime—was derived from the French word *disme*, meaning “tenth.” The new nation’s decimal coinage system was a significant departure from the American colonial experience: the Spanish silver 8 *reales* was the colonists’ main medium of exchange, and the British shilling was divided into 12 pence.

The dime’s first decades often were

difficult, and advances were followed closely by setbacks. Spanish-American silver coins dominated Early American commerce, though the dime and other colonial issues were well established by the 1840s. But soon afterward, the California Gold Rush made silver coins worth more as metal than as money, keeping them out of circulation until a weight reduction in 1853. Within a decade, dimes had disappeared yet again, victims of hoarding during the Civil War.

Stability returned in the 1870s and lasted nearly a century. In 1965 rising silver prices forced a switch from 90-percent silver to the current copper-nickel clad composition.

The first dime designs presented established American iconography. Draped Bust (1796-1807) and Capped Bust (1809-37) issues featured allegorical bust portraits of Liberty, while the Seated Liberty type (1837-91)

showed a full-length figure. All these, and the 1892-1916 Barber dime (named for Chief Engraver Charles Barber), shared designs with their larger silver counterparts.

The dime’s artistry improved dramatically in 1916 with Adolph Weinman’s design, which depicted Liberty sporting winged headgear, representing freedom of thought. (The resemblance to Greek mythological messenger Mercury gives the coin its common name, “Mercury dime.”) On the reverse, a fasces—bundled rods with an axe-head—symbolize strength through unity.

Since 1946, the dime has honored President Franklin Roosevelt, who led the nation through the Great Depression and World War II before his death in 1945. Because of the polio-suffering President’s close association with the March of Dimes and its efforts to combat the disease, this ☉



The dime has captured collectors’ attention since its inception. Shown here are (from left) a 1796 Draped Bust, 1902-S Barber, 1916-D Mercury and 1946-D Roosevelt.

COIN PHOTOS: ANA MUSEUM



▲ The fasces on the Mercury dime symbolizes authority and power.

pairing of coin and subject was particularly appropriate.

Dime enthusiasts have many collecting possibilities:

Type. One collecting strategy is to obtain a single example of each design. The flexibility to choose any specific issue makes type collecting an economical choice; for example, the common 1912-D works just as well as the rare 1895-O as an example of the Barber type. A type collection also might account for changes within a series, such as the Seated Liberty dime's five different combinations of weight, design and inscriptions.

Date/Mintmark. It's feasible to obtain complete date/mintmark sets of 20th-century types. Among Mercury dimes, only the 1916-D is truly rare (and often counterfeited, so authentication is essential). The 1921 and 1921-D also are scarce, but Mercury dimes are quite available in most grades. Aficionados seek—and pay a premium for—well-

struck coins with clear delineation between the bands on the fasces.

Silver Roosevelt dimes of 1946-64 are common and readily obtained, and clad issues since 1965 are even more plentiful. A complete set also might include proofs from the San Francisco Mint or the special, non-circulating 1996 West Point Mint piece.

Variety. Not all issues of a given date/mintmark are identical, especially those struck in the 19th century. Major varieties are listed in the "Red Book" (*A Guide Book of United States Coins*), and specialists pursue many others. Blunders among 20th-century dimes include the 1942/1 and 1942/1-D overdates, and 1982 dimes with the mintmark omitted.

Collectible dimes are not quite "a dime a dozen," but they are accessible and interesting. As a collector, you'll surely find that good things come in small, dime-sized packages.

sanders@money.org