The Pleasure of Numismatics

HISTORY as reflected in Coins, Tokens, Medals and Paper Money

This informational booklet is a public service of the Professional Numismatists Guild
Founded in 1955, the PNG is a non-profit organization dedicated to the furthering of professional numismatics and the fields of collecting coins, tokens, medals and paper money.

Where the emblem of the Professional Numismatists Guild is displayed, you can buy and sell with confidence. The PNG has set very high standards, and each member has pledged to abide by the PNG’s strict Code of Ethics.

Working with a PNG member-dealer is the ideal way to enjoy building a collection of rare coins or currency. Conducting business with a professional who has many years of experience is not only a prudent move, but a wise one!

PNG also stresses the importance of consumer education. Members are willing to share their knowledge, and this is bound to result in a far more pleasurable experience for the collector.
INTRODUCTION
TO COINS

Rare coins (as well as tokens, medals and paper money) offer history you can hold in your hand; tangible reminders of yesteryear. Was that gold doubloon once part of a pirate treasure? Did George Washington ever gaze upon this 1794 silver dollar? Did a soldier in the Civil War carry this specific 1861 dime in his pocket? Or is this particular banknote one that was snatched by Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid long ago? Every period of history during the past 2,500 years is reflected in coinage. The achievements of ancient Greece, the court of Queen Victoria, the Gold Rush in California – all are reflected by coins from those times.

Today, coin collecting – numismatics as it is called – is one of the world's most popular and rewarding pursuits. The formation over a period of time of a fine collection can be your passport to untold hours of enjoyment. At the same time, a quality collection formed with care and held for a period of years can be a worthwhile investment and store of value.

In 1792, the federal government established the Philadelphia Mint, which began striking half cents and cents for circulation in 1793, followed by silver half dimes, half dollars and silver dollars in 1794, gold $5 and $10 pieces in 1795, and silver dimes, quarter dollars and gold quarter eagles in 1796. Today, only the cent, nickel five-cent piece, dime, quarter, half dollar and reduced-size dollar coins are struck for circulation. However, during the past 200 years the United States has issued many other denominations, some of them quite unusual. These have included two-cent and three-cent pieces, 20-cent pieces (produced only four years, from 1875 to 1878) and gold coins in the denominations of $1, $2.50, $3, $4, $5, $10, $20 and $50.

Did you know that in the year 1873 there were three different types of dollar coins available? They were the silver dollar, the silver trade dollar (made especially for trade with the Orient) and the gold dollar. The largest coin denomination, the massive $50 gold piece containing almost two and one-half ounces of pure gold, was made on several occasions, including during the California Gold Rush and years later for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition.
How Value is Determined

Several factors affect the value of a coin.

(1) Rarity is an important consideration. In general, the rarer a coin is, the higher its value will be. However, not all rare coins are valuable. There are some series in which rarities can be purchased for a few hundred dollars, or even less.

(2) Popularity is important. Coins in popular United States series, such as one-cent pieces, silver dollars, and commemoratives (among many others) will sell for more than coins in a series collected only by a few (such as streetcar tokens, for example).

(3) The condition – or grade – of a coin is important. A coin in Uncirculated condition, or Mint State, is worth more than one of the exact same variety in a worn grade, such as Good or Fine. Carefully preserved Proof coins (with mirrorlike surfaces especially made for collectors) are also valuable. Coins are often graded on a numerical scale from 1 (worn nearly smooth) to 70 (perfect and without blemish). A grade such as MS-65 (Mint State 65) represents a superb quality Uncirculated piece.

(4) The coin market varies and sometimes moves in cyclical patterns. This affects price and demand.

(5) Other considerations contributing to value include the beauty of the design, a coin’s historical significance and, in some instances, its bullion or metallic value. Curiously, age is not particularly important. There are United States coins issued within the past 50 years that are worth thousands of dollars, and there are 2000-year-old Roman coins that are worth less than $20 each!

Buying Coins

Coins are bought and sold in many ways. New or current coins, including modern commemoratives, can be obtained from banks and government agencies. Older coins are available from professional numismatic firms by outright purchase or at auction. In general, there are several rules to observe when buying coins.

(1) Buy a coin because you like it, because you want to own it. Rely upon your own preferences. If in doubt, acquire some books and formulate a collecting strategy. A basic numismatic library is inexpensive and will easily repay its costs.

(2) Buy from a knowledgeable seller who is known
for handling quality pieces. Grading is important, and a small difference in grade can mean a big difference in price and value.

(3) Learn market values so you can determine that you are obtaining good value for the money spent. An ideal way is to subscribe to weekly and monthly numismatic publications.

(4) Hold your coins for the long term. Historically, the greatest profits have gone to collectors who have built their holdings over a long period of time. Buying today and selling next year is rarely profitable.

(5) Build an organized collection and work toward its completion. This is vastly preferable to acquiring a hodgepodge of miscellaneous coins.

**Branch Mints**

Philadelphia is the parent mint. Beginning in 1838, several branch mints were established. Coins struck at these facilities bear tiny letters known as mintmarks. The mint at New Orleans used an ‘O,’ the mint at San Francisco used an ‘S,’ and so on. United States mints and mintmarks are as follows:

- **Philadelphia (PA):** 1793 to date. No mintmark until recent years when a bold ‘P’ was used on certain (but not all) coins produced there.
- **Charlotte (NC):** 1838-1861. ‘C’ mintmark (gold only).
- **Dahlonega (GA):** 1838-1861. ‘D’ mintmark (gold only).
- **New Orleans (LA):** 1838-1909. ‘O’ mintmark.
- **San Francisco (CA):** 1854 to date. ‘S’ mintmark.
- **Carson City (NV):** 1870-1893. ‘CC’ mintmark.
- **Denver (CO):** 1906 to date. ‘D’ mintmark.
- **West Point (NY):** 1984 to date. ‘W’ mintmark.

Sometimes the presence of a mintmark can make a coin very valuable. For example, a nice Mint State 1927 $20 gold piece made at Philadelphia (no mintmark) can be purchased in the couple thousand dollar range, but a 1927-D $20 (with a tiny ‘D’ mintmark above the 1927 date, signifying it was made in Denver) in Mint State is a major rarity that will set you back several hundred thousand dollars. Quite a difference!

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*The best advice you can heed is to do business with a reputable dealer; someone in whom you are comfortable placing your trust. For a number of reasons, a PNG member-dealer would be a prudent choice.*
Early American Coins

The first coins struck in what is now the United States were the silver NE (for New England) threepence, sixpence and shilling pieces made in Massachusetts in 1652. From then until the 1790s, numerous individuals, state governments and merchants minted coins and token issues. Did you know that at one time Vermont, Connecticut, New Jersey and Massachusetts each issued copper coins in the 1780s? Struck from hand-engraved dies, such coins were made in many interesting varieties.

In 1793, the Philadelphia Mint issued its first coins in quantity for circulation – copper half cents and cents. The one-cent pieces, called large cents by collectors today, are substantially larger than the present-day quarter dollar. The small-sized cent was not made for circulation until 1857, at which time half cents and large cents were discontinued.

Among large cents there are many common issues in the 1840s and 1850s which can be purchased inexpensively. On the other hand, such dates as 1793, 1799 and 1804 are considered to be rarities and are costly. Many books have been written on the subject of large cents alone. Forming a collection of them can be a fascinating challenge and pursuit.
During the 19th century, the various United States mints produced a dazzling variety of copper, nickel, silver and gold coins. Many of the early silver coins were of the Draped Bust and Capped Bust types, while those issued from the late 1830s through 1891 were of the Liberty Seated design.

Morgan silver dollars (named for the designer, George T. Morgan) were produced from 1878 to 1904 and again in 1921. They were particularly popular in circulation in the American West and are avidly sought by today’s collectors. Many varieties were made in large quantities and are relatively inexpensive. Collecting as many varieties as possible of a given design is a popular pursuit of many numismatists.

Flying Eagle cents were made for circulation in 1857 and 1858, after which the Indian Head cent made its appearance and was produced continuously through 1909. It was then replaced by the familiar Lincoln cent later in that year, in remembrance of the 100th anniversary of the birth of the slain 16th President of the United States.

In 1892, the Barber or Liberty Head design made its appearance on the dime, quarter and half dollar denominations and was used for over two decades following.
Twentieth century coins are represented by many familiar motifs, and include the Lincoln cent (introduced in 1909 and still used); Buffalo (1913-1938) and Jefferson (1938 to date) nickels; Mercury (1916-1945) and Roosevelt (since 1946) dimes; Standing Liberty (1916-1930) and Washington (since 1932) quarters; Walking Liberty (1916-1947), Franklin (1948-1963), and Kennedy (since 1964) half dollars; and the Peace silver dollar (1921-1935).

Coins made of a special clad or "sandwich" composition have largely taken the place of silver since 1964. Included among clad coins are current denominations from the dime to the half dollar, as well as the Eisenhower dollar (1971-1978) and small-size Susan B. Anthony dollar (1979-1981 and 1999), "Golden" clad Sacagawea (2000-2008) and Native American (2009 to date) dollars have also been produced, as have the Presidential (2007 to date) type.

Coins of the 20th century are popular to collect by design types or by date and mintmark sequences. There are numerous scarce and rare varieties to challenge the avid numismatist. Considered hard to find are the 1909-S V.D.B (with initials of the designer on the reverse) and 1914-D Lincoln cents, the 1916-D Mercury dime, the 1916 Standing Liberty quarter, and the three Walking Liberty half dollar varieties of 1921, (one each from the Philadelphia, Denver and San Francisco mints), among many others.
Gold coins, first minted by the federal government in 1795, form a rich and romantic chapter in American coinage, for these were the largest denominations, the most valuable coinage of the realm. Although $20 gold coins, containing just under one ounce of gold, were first issued for circulation in 1850, these impressively large and heavy pieces were primarily used in banking channels and were not used by the average citizen, for whom $20 might be the best part of a week's wages, or more likely even more! Surprisingly, many different varieties of $20 coins are available today for only slightly more than their gold content value. On the other hand, the beautiful MCMVII (1907) High Relief $20, by noted sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, is apt to cost tens of thousands of dollars for a nice mint state specimen.

Other gold coins from $1 to $10 are also avidly collected. Among the various United States mints, Charlotte (North Carolina) and Dahlonega (Georgia) struck only gold coins. All such pieces are scarce today.

Gold bullion coins, of different designs and denominations, have also been struck since 1986 to satisfy the public's demand for a convenient form of this precious metal (bullion coins in silver, since 1986, and platinum, since 1997, have also been minted).
The first United States commemorative silver coins were the 1892 and 1893 half dollars issued for the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The commemorative Isabella quarter was also minted in 1893 for the same occasion. The so-called Classic Commemoratives, produced from 1892 until 1954, include 48 different designs for various silver half dollars, plus the aforementioned quarter dollar and one silver dollar, the Lafayette coin of 1900. Gold commemoratives are represented by 9 designs and denominations and include the massive and impressive $50 round and octagonal varieties of coins struck to honor the Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915. Many of the Classic Commemorative designs were produced in more than one year, and by more than one mint.

Some events commemorated were significant – more or less – such as the 150th Anniversary of American Independence and various anniversaries of statehood (Alabama, Missouri, Iowa, and others). Several events were obscure – such as the 100th anniversary of the founding of Fort Vancouver (in Washington state) and the 200th anniversary of Norfolk, Virginia’s operation under the borough form of government.

Modern commemoratives – those minted since 1975 in both circulating and collector-only formats – have been produced in gold, silver and clad compositions and encompass scores of design types and several denominations.

Significant or obscure, all commemoratives have one thing in common: they are interesting to collect.
Under the general heading of *numismatics* will be found many other collecting specialties, each of which furnishes its own challenges.

Metallic issues include tokens used as emergency money during the Hard Times era of the 1830s and during the Civil War, many of which can be acquired for $10 to $20 each; 19th-century medals of George Washington, several of which can be purchased in the $10 to $100 range; and privately-made gold coins of the mid-19th century, issued in California and several other locales by banks, assay offices, and others from the 1830s to the 1860s, which can cost from several thousand dollars apiece and upward.

Paper money and other related items (such as stock and bond certificates) present an extremely wide array of choices for the collector. Examples can be aesthetically very appealing and are very collectible. Many varieties of ornately engraved banknotes from the early 19th century are obtainable for $20 each and up.

United States paper money spans the range from Colonial and Continental issues to various obsolete (and Confederate States) notes; Federal issues, commencing in 1861, include Demand and Legal Tender notes, Gold and Silver Certificates, Federal Reserve and National Bank notes, and others. Many U.S. notes are available in both large- and small-size formats.

Specific rarities in this category, of both the metallic and paper variety, can be quite costly indeed. Some items have realized over $1 million each at auction!
The first coins ever made were struck in the 7th century B.C. in the Kingdom of Lydia, located on the Mediterranean coast of modern Turkey. Lydia, at the time, was a fabulously rich kingdom and its greatest king is still remembered today in the expression “as rich as Croesus.”

Ancient coins were struck by literally hundreds of different states and principalities from that time until the 5th century A.D., or a period of over 1,000 years! In many cases, the artistry visible on ancient coins rivals anything that has ever been struck in modern times. In fact, when the United States gold coins of 1907 were re-designed by Augustus Saint-Gaudens, their inspiration was classical Greek coinage.

Although they are very old, ancient coins are not necessarily expensive. Excellent quality Roman silver coins, known as denarii, can be purchased for under $100. For a small outlay of money, you can hold in your hand a relic from thousands of years ago.

Among the many ways to collect ancient coins is to acquire pieces mentioned in the Bible, such as the “Widow’s Mite,” the “Tribute Penny,” and a piece of silver similar to those accepted by Judas Iscariot.
Coins of the world offer a very rewarding and interesting area of numismatics. Anyone with even a passing interest in history will find hours of enjoyable pleasure in collecting crown-size and other world coinage.

The first large crown-size silver coin ever struck was minted in Germany in the middle of the 15th century. Denominated a thaler, this type became so popular and widespread that it has given us our modern word dollar.

Coins of the world include pieces struck in gold, silver, copper, bronze, brass, cupronickel, aluminium-nickel and many other alloys in an abundance of sizes and denominations. Designs are virtually endless in their variety and range from depictions of monarchs to scenic and commemorative issues.

A popular way to collect world coins is to acquire a crown-size silver coin (the approximate size of a U.S. silver dollar) of each country from Afghanistan to Zanzibar. A very inexpensive way to collect is to acquire copper coins of the world, the vast majority of which are available for modest sums. The field of world coins offers many interesting opportunities and is limited only by the imagination of the collector.
World Gold Coins

Gold coins of the world present a fascinating collecting area. Most modern countries have struck gold coins, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries when gold circulated widely, unlike today when most gold coins are special commemorative issues, or bullion pieces which derive their value almost entirely from their metallic worth. Some countries issued nearly unbroken runs of gold issues from the early 1800s through the middle of the 20th century. A collection of British gold sovereigns, for example, can include issues struck from the early years of Queen Victoria’s reign through 1953 when Queen Elizabeth was crowned, a span of over 100 years.

In many cases, gold coins are among the most artistic and beautiful of a nation’s coinage. Denominations range from the very tiny 1/64th ducat of Nuremburg, a coin not much larger in diameter than a pencil eraser, to massive 100-ducat presentation pieces weighing nearly a troy pound.

A very popular way to collect gold coins of the world is to acquire examples from each modern country striking coins in this precious metal. Coins struck by Afghanistan through Yugoslavia can be acquired for relatively reasonable sums. Many gold coins of the world in collectible condition, of sovereign (or U.S. nickel) size, can be purchased for under $500 each and upward, depending in part on the ever-changing market price of the precious metal.
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