

A less reflective surface and a high-relief design made the Peace dollar a difficult coin to strike, but it is still considered one of America's most beautiful coins.



The **FADING** *of* **American** **Beauties**

The Nation's Coinage Is Due for a Renaissance

by Amy Drew Thompson

What it constitutes may vary in the eye of the beholder, but many in the collecting community lament what they perceive as a decline in artistry on U.S. coinage. Why has it faltered? Can America ever resurrect the glorious art of the Teddy Roosevelt era, or produce innovative new designs?

For the moment, Harlan J. Berk and I were talking cars, not coins.

"I just went to the auto show in Chicago," he told me. "There were three body designs for all the cars in the world. Then you look at the antique cars—from the '20s, '40s, '50s. These things are absolutely stunning, and we go and make everything look the same. And they're boring."

I nodded silently. I'm a sucker for the Corvettes of the late 1960s, myself.

"When I was a kid, I could tell a Cadillac or a Dodge from a block away. We've lost all those distinctive designs ... and coins? A lot of them are the same way."

Berk, whose numismatic achievements and awards are too many to list (he's held every office in the Professional Numismatists Guild, including president), has run his eponymous Chicago-based firm since 1964, dealing in ancient, world and U.S. coins, as well as antiquities. On this day, we were attempting to focus on American.

"I really like the 1793 Flowing Hair large cent," he said. "The Liberty Cap large cent of 1793 is very elegant and the Chain cent obverse is very beautiful as country art—all are very appealing ... as is the 'Mercury' dime." It looks, he said, like a Roman Republic denarius on the obverse.

And now?

LARRY STEVENS

“They’ve become buttons in boxes,” he said flatly.

Not unlike the coinage of ancient Rome, in which Berk is exceedingly well versed, the American variety, he said, has been debased.

“It started in about 1964. The art went downhill because they were producing so many coins. Because of the debasement, they had inflation and, of course, we produced a lot of coins quickly, and less artistic coins because we wanted to produce so many.”

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Renowned Russian-born medalist Alex Shagin, whose works are on view worldwide at such prestigious repositories as the Smithsonian Institution and the British Museum, treats coin design as a very special form of public art that should be, above all, emblematic of the country that issues it.

“It is national identity,” he said. “And because of that, timelessness takes the driver’s seat. Theodore Roosevelt made an effort to have real, classic art attached to our coinage, and what I call the T.B.M. virus—techno-bureau mediocrity—is eating up what is important today.”

Through most of its early existence and up to 1906, author and lifelong numismatist Roger Burdette points out, “the U.S. Mint did not have access to the best artists. The ones who were corralled by the Mint tended to be locked in their creative cages making imitative government medal and coin designs and cranking out private commissions of similar ilk in their free time.”

Many collectors know the “Renaissance of American Coinage” story very well via Burdette’s three-volume series of prize-winning books of the same name, but he has precious little to say about the beauty of our modern pieces.

“Our circulating coins are, with few exceptions in the Native American dollars and the States and Parks series, abysmal failures that remind me of contracted ‘art’ sold in flea markets or third-world cruise-ship landings. Mediocrity,” he says, echoing Shagin, “is the present standard.”

Collector, broadcaster and occasional *COINage* contributor Scott Fybus thinks we’re turning out some nice pieces. “But the process by which they’re designed doesn’t encourage real artistic merit,” he said, citing the Mint’s current review process. “It’s based on two-dimensional drawings ... because of this, it’s very easy to end up with what I call ‘clip art’ coinage, where there’s no attempt to use the full surface of the



The old neoclassical pieces, such as the “Mercury” dime, featured beautiful designs in their day, but we can’t keep repeating them.

coin in an artistic manner. The Florida state quarter is probably the worst of the bunch—literally a space shuttle, a Spanish galleon and a palm tree slapped on an otherwise-empty field.”

To boost interest in collecting U.S. commemorative coins, Berk said, the Mint should limit their production. “They should make one or two a year,” he said. “And then they come out with these absolutely horrid five-ounce monstrosities ... I get sick when I look at them. They’re worse than hockey pucks because they’re too big to play hockey with.”

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Clearly, there is no shortage of opinions. Seattle-based medallist artist and sculptor Heidi Wastweet would likely agree. She has served as the lead designer at the Global Mint and has produced more than a thousand coins, medals, tokens and rare coin replicas during her career. Wastweet is currently serving on the Citizens Coinage Advisory Committee, a panel that advises the U.S. Mint on coin designs. And she can’t

recall a single instance when a collector or seller (or journalist, or blogger or *anyone*, really) has expressed a belief that today’s U.S. coinage is beautiful.

Though not an expert in Mint technology, she sees two clear factors that inhibit the appearance of newer coins: metal content and surface treatment.

“The metal content is, of course, no longer pure, but clad metals and alloys,” she noted. “This has been done to keep costs under control, and yet it still costs more than a penny to make a penny, more than a nickel to make a nickel.”

These cost-controlling changes, she said, allow for only much shallower images. “Gone are the days of high-relief [pieces] like the Mercury dime or Peace dollar—but it’s not unique to the U.S. Mint. You can see it in coins all over the world.”

In addition, she said, in an effort to increase the die life by reducing friction, which also saves money in production, “the surface of our circulating coins is extremely shiny. A highly reflective surface makes it difficult for the eye to see the image. If you took a new dollar coin and used an abrasive to remove the shine ... it instantly becomes more beautiful because you can see the detail.”



Bela Lyon Pratt’s Indian Head design was incused, recessed into the coin, an innovative method for early 20th-century coinage.

Similarly, while serving as PNG president, Berk was asked by some at the Mint how they could improve their products. Wear was first and foremost on his mind. “Stop putting them in plastic cases,” he told them, recommending stapled cellophane bags in cardboard boxes. “That’s the way the proof sets were sent out until 1955,”

he noted. “When they encase the coins in plastic, there is no attrition. All the coins remain perfect forever.”

While this tactic has little to do with age-created character and everything to do with the value of finding a perfect specimen amid a sea of mishandled coins, part of coin collecting is the story that comes with each piece—from that of its journey

(Whose hands held this coin? What might it have purchased?) to that depicted in the art it showcases.

“Personally, I love the Peace dollar, the Mercury dime and the Indian Head nickel,” said Wastweet. “They are simply beautiful and sculptural.” Even so, she hungers for a new concept of beauty and innovation. “These old neoclassical pieces were great in their day, but we can’t keep repeating that.”

Wastweet, who hears what collectors say at the CCAC’s public meetings and Q&A sessions, believes they’re looking for something new as well. “They want more visually appealing, more artistic coinage.”

Though she’s unsure whether this is a new trend or simply newly vocalized, she said many have resorted to collecting foreign coins for this reason. “The European countries are doing a really nice job of not only making beautiful coins, but also innovative designs.”

“Coins should come alive,” said Kirsten Petersen, director of international marketing for the Austrian Mint—an operation many collectors place near the head of the pack for continually producing beautiful, meaningful coins. “We put a great deal of development into each piece.”

In recent years, the Austrian Mint has produced highly sought-after coins using a number of metals—such as its piece highlighting achievements in robotics. Its heat-treated niobium center takes on a beautiful pinkish hue. Another, saluting renewable energy, is a dazzling flash of silver and cerulean.

Fybush would love to see the U.S. adopt such techniques, citing Austria, along with Canada and the U.K.’s Royal Mint, as being pioneers in the arena. “They’re doing fantastic things with holograms and color and other distinctive finishes,” he said. “[Here in America], we seem to be locked into a ‘shiny field, matte devices’ paradigm we can’t break.”

In addition to inventive engineering, Petersen believes collectors often look beyond immediate aesthetics; many seek to collect the story of the piece, as well. Take Fybush, for example, whose personal numismatic taste includes coins with radio or TV themes that relate to his day job as a broadcaster.

And whether you’re going to produce a coin that commemorates a person’s achievements, a special event or something else, Petersen added, attention to detail is a must. “Collectors will know how many windows a given building is supposed to have. You have to get it right.”

AUSTRIAN MINT



Austria’s 2012 calendar medal draws from Greek mythology and astronomy, but its elements have been updated, modernized.



The Austrian Mint’s 2012 silver-niobium “Bionik” coin combines nature with technology in every aspect of its design details.



Austrian-born artist Gustav Klimt is commemorated in a new series. “Klimt and His Women” utilizes devices from Klimt’s work as well as his subjects in the coins’ designs.

The Austrian Mint's process is expeditious—"it's generally somewhere between three and six months from when a design is selected to when the first coin is struck," Petersen said—but design does not suffer. "All engravers are invited to submit designs for each coin." They do so anonymously. "A panel chooses from the designs presented without knowing whose they've agreed upon."

A preponderance of bureaucracy, in fact, is what many blame for the lack of excitement about U.S. designs. "Smaller mints tend to be more nimble and able to come up with new designs," Wastweet observed. But it appears the U.S. is working on this, at least to some degree.

In January 2011, the CCAC, in concert with the federal Commission of Fine Arts, released a "Blueprint for Advancing Artistic Creativity and Excellence in United States Coins and Medals." More than 60 pages long, the report highlighted what its authors saw as impediments to improving the artistic process.

"Within the Mint bureau, the most important [of these] was control of the process by marketing and legal, rather than by trained artists and creative managers," said Burdette. "While not intentionally nefarious, this confines the Mint and contract designers to a narrow range of template-type options."

The most crucial recommendation, Wastweet said, was to hire an art director. "This position has yet to be filled," she added ruefully.

Shagin said it takes the same amount of time to produce an ugly coin as it does a beautiful one; it's simply the over-division of labor gumming up the process. "I was part of one such shameful project," he said. "Five people were involved with one coin." He uses etymology to make his point. "'Style' comes from the Greek word *stylo* or *stylus*, which means 'pen.' You can't hold a pen with five hands."

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So, what of investing? Most seem to agree that investors fall into a different category altogether.

"If you look outside the coin world," Wastweet said, "you see that buying art is an emotional purchase, while all the investment advice is to remain unemotional. There is a fundamental contradiction there. Even in the case of heightened investment art, like what you see at Sotheby's, it is mostly handled by advisers who look at the value of the art, not the appeal." Similarly, she said, coin buyers fall into two categories: those who buy coins they like to look at and those who think they can resell them at a higher price.

"With gold and silver prices on such wild swings, it's hard for any collector not to at least be thinking about the investment value of their collections," said Fybush. But in his experience, most who label themselves as collectors don't do it with money in mind.

"A fair number of our [coin club] members are specializing in series that have very little investment value or appreciation. You don't collect early U.S. copper or Byzantine bronze because you're trying to make a killing in the market; you do it because you're passionate about the history or because you're obsessive about collecting die pairs."

It's not business, it's pleasure. Which, much like art (as you can glean even from the opinions expressed herein), is entirely subjective. It is hard, Fybush said, to be passionate about what many perceive as computer-generated coin art.

"Don't get me started about the incoherent sense of lettering style on newer coins," he said. "Designers are using print fonts with no sense of how they'll work as three-dimensional sculptural elements on a finished coin, and often with no consistency even from one side of a coin to the

other." In the "Golden Age," he laments, it was all done by hand.

Do today's artists even know how? Wastweet worries that, at least stateside, such techniques become closer to lost art each day as academic opportunities are so limited. "A young artist who wants to become a medallist sculptor has no program available. None." In fact, there is only a single college-level medallist class available that she's aware of. "And its focus is on avant-garde. There are no books available on the subject either. This serious lack of resources is never going to cultivate fresh young minds into the field."

The soul is not in the machine, said Shagin, who, outspoken and unashamed, still lives in that aforementioned "Golden Age." It lies in the hand and the heart of the creator. And most people just don't get it. "A coin is not two-dimensional, it's not three. It's five, plus one."

The sixth dimension, Shagin said, is time.

"When you design a coin, you're sending a message in a bottle to a distant generation. You have to be a visionary." ☺



The process by which American coinage is now designed doesn't encourage real artistic merit. The coins are based on two-dimensional drawings, and it's easy for them to fall flat.



The America the Beautiful five-ounce silver quarters have the benefit of utilizing a larger surface and higher relief, but the designs are still fairly ordinary.