

# COIN COLLECTING'S Sweet Spot

## Chocolate as Coins and Currency



by Amy Drew Thompson

Cacao might not have been the world's earliest form of currency, but it remains, arguably, the tastiest.



*The Mayan and Aztec elite received bags of cacao beans as a tribute. Use of cacao probably spread rapidly throughout Mesoamerica once it had been discovered how to process it into chocolate.*

Whether it's free-trade, gourmet and artisan-crafted or an impulse-driven Kit Kat purchase plucked from the rack at the supermarket checkout, we human beings have a tough time passing on chocolate—a fact that has grown increasingly true since its discovery thousands of years ago. "Use of cacao probably spread rapidly throughout Mesoamerica once it had been discovered how to process it into chocolate," says Michael D. Coe, co-author of *The True History of Chocolate* (Thames & Hudson, 2007). "This happened at least 4,000 years ago, most likely on the Pacific coasts of Chiapas and neighboring Guatemala."

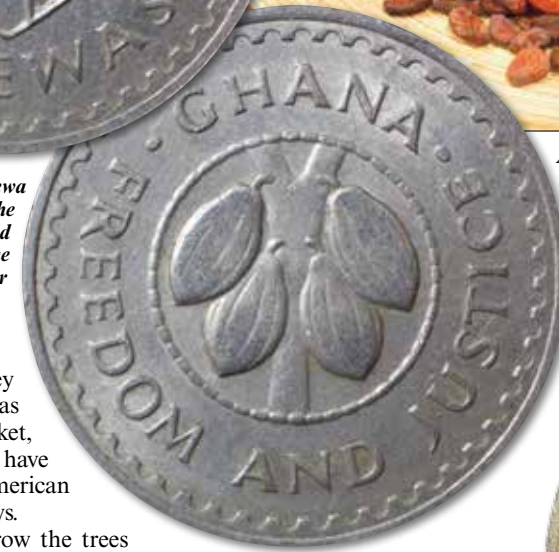
Coe was curator in the Division of Anthropology for the Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History from 1968 until 1994, and the chocolate he refers to—an unsweetened beverage made from the roasted beans—is quite different from the confection we know and love today. Its origins come from "xocolatl," an Aztec word that translates as "bitter water." Coe notes that the Mayan hieroglyphic records are limited to cacao's use as a drink. "There are scenes of the Mayan elite receiving bags of cacao beans as a tribute, but that's it," he says. "All our epigraphic records only record it as an elite drink. It's the post-Conquest documents, both

native and Spanish, that tell us about cacao's value as currency." According to such documents from Cornell University's Mann Library, a commodities price list from 1545 shows the cacao-based values of items market-goers would have purchased. A ripe avocado cost 1 bean; a turkey egg, 3; while an entire turkey hen would cost 100 cacao beans. These facts were taken from a lecture given in conjunction with "Food of the Gods," a 2007 Cornell exhibit on chocolate's history. It is also in these records that we find laws—particularly among the Aztecs—that forbade commoners from consuming

DIEGO RIVERA, PALACIO NACIONAL DE MEXICO



*Ghana's largely defunct pesewa features cocoa pods and the words "Ghana: Freedom and Justice" on the reverse. Divine Chocolate uses this design for its dark chocolate coins.*



*According to documents from Cornell University's Mann Library, a commodities price list from 1545 shows the cacao-based values of items market-goers would have purchased. For instance, an entire turkey hen would cost 100 cacao beans.*

the drink. "Although they obviously used the beans as small change in the market, the value of the beans may have differed from one Mesoamerican region to another," Coe says.

"The Aztecs couldn't grow the trees in their highland homeland and had to import them from lowland peoples like the Mayans, either as tribute by right of conquest or in markets from people outside the empire."

\*\*\*

We modern folk have no such barriers to our beloved chocolate, and at Chocolate Kingdom, an attraction in Kissimmee, Florida—less than 10 miles from Disney's Magic Kingdom near Orlando—tour guides are happy to explain chocolate's journey from bean to bar.

"We wanted to make sure that we showcase the true essence of how chocolate gets created, and it all starts with the cacao tree," says Edgar Schaked, owner of Chocolate Kingdom and heir to the legacy of Baruch Schaked, creator of the Schokolad Chocolate Factory.

The tour begins at a greenhouse with live, growing cacao (while cacao is a continuously bearing fruit, it is sensitive and very difficult to grow) and continues through the process of farming, harvesting, fermenting and bagging.

During the description of the process, its numismatic value is discussed, often to the great surprise of those attending. Samples of both the bean—as nibs (roasted and unsweetened)—and the Mesoamerican

beverage xocolatl are handed out to those who'd care to try them.

Like other numismatic items throughout history, cacao has even been counterfeited. "Counterfeit cacao is mentioned in the great encyclopedia of Aztec life penned by early Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún," Coe notes. Archaeological specimens that have been found, Schaked says, were made of clay and wax.

Once cacao crossed the ocean, Europeans—who already had discovered the joys of sugar—eventually thought to combine them, and its modern incarnation was born. Visitors to the Chocolate Kingdom will learn about the process. Once they leave the "temples" of Mesoamerica, they'll see some of the oldest types of chocolate-making machinery and enjoy more tastings.

Modern-day scientists have linked the chemical phenylethylamine in chocolate to feelings of excitement, attraction and even pleasure (arguably, money might induce the same in certain people), which is why, although gift cards have become semi-ubiquitous, most people still go for chocolate





Among Divine's first products when it launched in 1999: gold-wrapped, milk chocolate coins, popular in the U.K. come Christmastime.

on Valentine's Day. Of the staggering \$13 billion Americans spent on the holiday in 2012, nearly half went toward the sweet progeny of the cacao bean.

\*\*\*

#### Divine Chocolate

Chocolate might have originated in Latin America, but it has proliferated in Africa. Roughly three-quarters of the world's chocolate cocoa beans are grown there. Sadly, much of it passes through the hands of children who work the fields instead of going to school.

"All the value in chocolate today," says Erin Gorman, CEO of Divine US, "is in the bars, not the beans."

Since 2005, Divine Chocolate (in conjunction with a farmers' cooperative in Ghana that owns 33 percent of the company) has been working to change that dynamic.

"Kuapa Kokoo wanted trade to be more dignified for cocoa farmers and they needed a way to communicate with people who ate chocolate so they could understand why trade was unfair and what farmers aspire to," Gorman says.

"They want a dignified livelihood, the best for their kids—education, health care—but they can't have that because the market is structured in a way that prevents them from having that. But you, as a chocolate consumer, can be a part of changing that."

Ghana is the world's second-largest cocoa exporter, just behind Ivory Coast. While production there is astronomical, the continent counts for just 3 percent of chocolate consumption.

Among Divine's first products when it launched in 1999: gold-wrapped, milk chocolate coins, popular in the U.K. come Christmastime.

"One might decorate a tree with gold coins," Gorman explains. "Or hide them. They are given to children and traditionally, perhaps, they are not made with the best chocolate. We wanted to make them Divine." When Divine moved into the U.S. market, a dark chocolate coin was added,

its foil blue and silver.

The coin's design is notable: Its obverse is the company logo, but the reverse is a reproduction of Ghana's now largely defunct pesewa featuring cocoa pods and the words "Ghana: Freedom and Justice."

"It was a subtle way of saying we want you to enjoy our chocolate in ways that are familiar to you, but we want you to think about where your cocoa comes from," Gorman says. "We want you to think about Ghana."

\*\*\*

#### The Candy Man

Al Bobrofsky's candy money exhibits are always the sweetest-in-show.

Bobrofsky, 80, is a former mayor of Battle Creek, Michigan. But in the numismatic community, most people know him as "The Candy Man." Though his love of coin collecting was kindled back in junior high when a teacher offered \$2 to any student who could bring in a 1938-D half dollar, his coronation as the king of candy money came decades later.



Al Bobrofsky's "Numismatics: How Sweet It Is" exhibit started out at only 10 cases. Each case contains a mini display and props, like this one with gold-panning equipment and candy nuggets.

DIVINE USA/L. BOBROFSKY

"I was at a convention in Chicago and I met a man named Steve Taylor who would later become the ANA president," Bobrofsky recalls. "It wasn't really an exhibit, but he had a whole bunch of candy money in one case."

The timing was worthy of note for Bobrofsky, whose fervor for collecting, as he had been doing for some time, had reached something of an apex.

"I'd been buying, trading and collecting coins for quite some time and had gotten to the point where I could finally afford to buy things," he recalls. Except there wasn't much he was interested in. "For most of my collections, I was able to pick things out of circulation [from] back in the late '50s and early '60s."

A chance walkthrough of a shopping mall back home became the first brick in a journey that would turn him from the mayor of Cereal City into a would-be Willy Wonka.

"I walked past a jewelry store and sitting on top of the glass case was a little box with a watch inside, displayed just as you'd usually see a jewelry store display it, except its face was a gold coin made of chocolate."

He looked at it and thought of the case back in Chicago and immediately went in to buy it. "I can't remember what I paid for it," he says with a chuckle. "I have no idea. But it's still my favorite piece."

An impressive feat, as in the time since then, Bobrofsky has amassed enough candy money—85 to 90 percent of which he estimates is chocolate—to fill a 27-case exhibit. Over the decades, the collection has grown exponentially, and it now includes all kinds of American coins and bills: checks, credit cards, casino chips, holiday and special occasion pieces and more—some custom-made.

During his tenure as mayor, Bobrofsky went on a trip to Japan. "It was a mission to bring factory jobs to Battle Creek." Most was business, but a half-day exploration to an international bazaar in Okinawa yielded riches beyond compare.

"My eyes started popping," he exclaims. "Almost every country that had a booth there had candy money in its own currency! I bought from about 50 different countries that day—Russia, India, all different nations ... That added spice to my collection, and it just kept spiraling until I had like 300-400 pounds of candy money."

In lieu of some serious binge eating, what's a person to do with all that chocolate?

"One evening I got some backgrounds out that I had for other exhibiting I'd done," Bobrofsky recalls. "I put out blankets. And I just started laying things out and thinking, 'I could make a pretty dang amazing exhibit!'"

That night, he stopped at 10 cases, breaking it down into themes—a few cases with United States money; several filled with foreign varieties, some 70 different countries' worth; another with a gambling theme. He had at least two pieces for everything—obverse and reverse.

Before long, shows were calling him to exhibit, not the other way around. In Milwaukee, for the Central States Numismatic Society's convention, the exhibit grew to 16 cases. It proved exceedingly popular. Next the Chicago Paper Money Expo called; Bobrofsky expanded to 20 cases.

In 1999, Bobrofsky took his candy back to Chicago for the ANA World's Fair of Money, but other commitments prevented him from attending. "I drove to Chicago, set it up, left and went back on Sunday morning for the breakdown." At that point, he was up to 22 cases. And without even being there, he'd won the "People's Choice Award."



Bobrofsky said that collecting candy coins is just another form of numismatic interest. He researched each piece in order to understand what it was and why it was significant enough to reproduce.

"That made me feel pretty good," he acknowledges.

\*\*\*

Fast-forward to 2012 and, unbelievably, Bobrofsky was at it again. With a bigger, better exhibit (and with the help of his daughter, who lives nearby), he put the candy show on the road again, this time to the World's Fair of Money in Philadelphia. It was August, an unsavory season for packing one's car with chocolate, but Bobrofsky braved it nonetheless.

"When they asked me how many cases, I said I needed 25 to do it right." He called the exhibit "Numismatics: How Sweet It Is."

Ever since he began exhibiting, Bobrofsky had been on the lookout for an old saddlebag, scouring antique stores for a Civil War-era example—and he found just such a relic to help showcase what would have been \$1 million in coins (if they were

real!). The glimmering pieces spilled from the satchel artfully amid an era-relevant pistol and a U.S. marshal's badge.

Whimsical placards with facts about each case's calorie count, dentists' laments and other witticisms, along with neat displays and props—gold-panning equipment with candy nuggets and gold dust, for example—really engaged attendees, particularly when Bobrofsky was on hand to discuss the exhibit. Word got around, and some of the event's biggest dealers and collectors paid him visits. For the second time, he took home the People's Choice Award.

Bobrofsky enjoys the ardor, but says it's not difficult to see why the exhibit connects. "Many attendees who come to shows are serious collectors," he says. "They're talking about spending money, they're intent about what they're looking for. And I think my exhibit of candy money affords them some relaxation from the stresses related to that."

"They come by and just look dumb-founded. 'Where'd you get all this stuff?!' they ask."

It's been decades of collecting at this point. Along with his own acquisitions, just about everyone he knows—family, friends and many other members of the numismatic community—who comes upon a candy money object picks it up for him.

"I learned a great deal about foreign coinage just by trying to identify the chocolate ones I had come by," Bobrofsky says. "It was an education looking all of them up. So really it's just another form of numismatic interest, understanding what the piece is and why it was significant enough to reproduce."

It's also especially fun to see one of his coins' inspirations for real in another exhibitor's case. "But his is selling for \$2,000!"

Other dealers' pieces may be more valuable, notes Bobrofsky, who refrains—for obvious reasons—from eating his display, "but mine are more delicious." ☺



Bobrofsky went on a business trip to Japan, where he bought chocolate or candy money from about 50 different countries. His collection has grown to include 25 cases.

AL BOBROFSKY