

# The Cardinal's Rules

## A West Coast Collector's Stately Collection

by Marcy Gibbel

**D**o your research, recognize the importance of a particular specimen and come to your own assessment of its value.

Understand the financial perspectives of Harry W. Bass Jr. and you'll understand the cardinal rules of coin collecting—and the rules of the Cardinal Collector, the anonymous owner of the finest Professional Coin Grading Service registry set of early U.S. silver dollars.

From the very beginning of his collecting career, Bass knew exactly what he was looking for when purchasing rare coins and currency. He built one of the finest libraries of numismatic books and catalogs ever held by a private collector. At his death in 1998, his library embodied the caveat "Buy the book before the coin" with a collection that included more than 10,000 items.

The foreword in the Bowers and Merena auction catalog for the Bass Collection mentions how Bass realized that the price listed for a rarity was, in essence, only an estimate. After doing his research and com-

ing to his own independent assessment of its value and availability, he bid accordingly—or bided his time—and established a new market price for his purchase.

While adhering to the same principles may be the only similarity shared with Bass by the Cardinal Collector, it's enough. It's enough to have rekindled this West Coast collector's love for coins and turned his love for Bust dollars into a collection with a value currently estimated at \$5 million.

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Even as a young child, the Collector was always interested in finances, and his parents said he was thinking of going into banking or something similar.

"I was always interested in coins I'd get in change," he told *COINage*.

Then, an aunt gave him a 1922 Peace dollar for his seventh birthday, and he was hooked.

"At that time, there weren't silver dollars in circulation. You never even saw half dollars in circulation—and to see something like that, it just looked so amazing that I really had an interest," he said.

Early dollars provide hobbyists with a number of options in forming a significant collection. Shown this page is a 1795 Flowing Hair Dollar, Three Leaves, Head of '95.



With the silver plug coins, a Mint employee would drill a hole in the center of the planchet and add a silver plug to it to bring it up to the correct weight. The plug would flatten out once the coin was struck. Shown here is a 1795 Flowing Hair dollar, Silver Plug, Three Leaves, Head of 1794.

Early Mint engravers chose to model the coins that followed the Continental Dollar after the Libertas Americana medal (right).



All photos courtesy of the Cardinal Collection Educational Foundation.

So he set out to learn more about it.

In an informational piece distributed by PCGS, he wrote that most of his readily available resources, such as the family encyclopedias and school library, were of little help. It wasn't until someone gave him an old copy of *A Guide Book of United States Coins*, the Red Book, that he found everything he was looking for—and more.

He said that in getting more information about his coin, he suddenly discovered that the United States made silver dollars even older than his 1922 Peace dollar.

In an interview for *COINage*, he said, "In getting more information about that, I learned about other things that were available and how neat they were. So, that's really what got me started."

He continued: "I can remember my first trip into a coin shop as a young boy, seeing this 1795 Flowing Hair dollar in the case, in one of those 2x2 cardboard flips marked as Fine 12, tremendously worn. I thought, wow, that's amazing. To get to see something like that ..."

He was also fascinated with the historical value of the early silver dollars.

He told *COINage*:

"I think PCGS' statistics say that more than 90 percent of the ones they have certified are circulated. That's what the people at that time used. It wasn't something to be collected, it was something to be used. That was the normal thought, and the people whose normal thought was to spend

them were people like Thomas Jefferson, George Washington and Alexander Hamilton. I found that fascinating."

These were the coins of our country's founders, the men and women who fought for this nation's independence and designed its government. The tale about George Washington tossing a silver dollar across the Delaware River only added to the Cardinal Collector's excitement, not to mention the coin's history.

Collectors, even collectors of the same series or date, have varying opinions about coins. Most tend to agree, however, that coins truly are just that—small pieces of history and art. The dies were handmade and the designs were "really beautiful."

In the PCGS account of his appreciation for Bust dollars, he wrote: "I believe it was Q. David Bowers who said that we, as coin collectors, are not truly

'owners' of the coins, but actually temporary conservators of pieces of history. We owe a debt of gratitude to the prior conservators of the coins in our collection, for preserving them in the condition we now see.

"Accordingly, we owe a debt of conscientiousness to future conservators to preserve

them the best we can during the brief time (in historical terms) they are in our possession."

He realized that any collection of coins, really, is bigger than any one collector, so why force his own personal name upon them?

Said the Collector: "Back in 1996, I was contacted about a

grouping of coins I had acquired. There was going to be an article in *Numismatic News*. They needed to refer to a name or something, so I had to come up with something. My business partner and I were kind of bouncing names around and that, the Cardinal Collection, happened to come up.

"The name Cardinal sounds kind of like royalty, sounds kind of important, and both he and I are from the state of Ohio, where the cardinal is the state bird. I didn't put this in the PCGS sheet, but my first entrée into moving into the state of California was because the professors of the college I attended in Ohio sent me as a recruit to Stanford University—and it's the Stanford Cardinal. So it all just kind of came together."





After nine years in the making, the Cardinal Collection is still coming together and still evolving.

As a child, the Collector saw such coins as "wildly more expensive than I could ever afford," but he always thought that someday—if he ever hit the lottery or earned some money—someday he'd be able to collect the regal early dollars.

His someday came nine years ago, at a time when Draped Bust dollars were rather overlooked by collectors. The self-employed CPA realized that nice extremely fine Draped Bust/Large Eagle silver dollars were available for around \$700 to \$1,000 each, and about uncirculated specimens started at around \$2,000.

On that basis, he figured that he could put together a set of early dollars in the following manner: Draped Bust/Large Eagles in XF to AU, the Small Eagles in XF, the Flowing Hair dollars in very fine, and leave out the coveted 1794 dollar.

One thing led to another, and the collection has gone through a number of upgrades.

Said the Collector: "As I accumulated more AUs and got to see how nice that luster was, I decided, no, an AU set. Then it was a choice AU set. Then it was, 'Boy, the Mint State coins look really nice. Let's do as many in Mint State as I can.'"

By "horse trading" and adding more money to his collecting budget—the bean-counting business continued to improve—he was able to slowly upgrade the set and move into the realm of mint-state specimens.

In order to complete the set in as high a grade as possible, he heeded the advice of Bowers, Bass and Jules Reiver—and had a good deal of luck with coins becoming available at auctions—and focused on acquiring the toughest coins first.

Prices for Draped Bust dollars were much lower then than they are now, so although the process was slow, it was not impossible.

"For instance," he wrote, "one of my earliest 'high-end' coins was the 1799 Irregular Date/13 Stars reverse variety B-13, BB-151. In 1996, I was able to obtain the finest known specimen (now graded PCGS-AU58) of this tough R5+ variety for \$4,000. At a recent show, I viewed a lesser NGC-AU53 specimen, which was offered at around \$14,000. Times have certainly changed!"

What hasn't changed, however, is the fact that these early silver dollars are still in short supply. The Collector wrote that of the 38 varieties of early dollars currently recognized by PCGS, 18 have populations of fewer than 12 pieces above XF. Yet, those few that do exist are out there and can be found.



Spanish milled dollars were some of the first dollar-sized coins to be used in the United States.

Of those 38 recognized varieties in the Collection—and of those that are not mint state—there is nothing lower than AU-55.

He told *COINage*: "I'd like to get those to a minimum of AU-58."

"For some of those," he added, "it's not possible to get MS. They just do not exist, so a full mint-state set would be impossible. But a set of 58 and better, I think that's what my goal would be."

On March 8, 2003, the Cardinal Collection reached a different goal by completing the basic 14-coin date/major type subset with all certified mint-state coins. This marked the first time in history that such a set had been completed in certified mint-state grades.

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With one milestone toward his ultimate goal behind him, the Collector plans on making a few more reasonable upgrades, then he plans on using his registry-set clout to its full advantage.

The PCGS Set Registry allows collectors to compete against each other to see who has the best set of certified coins within a particular series or date set. The competition is fierce, but the Collector

believes the registry process has more to offer.

Said the Collector: "I know a lot of people like it purely from the Type-A personality, competitive standpoint—I'm gonna beat you! I'll admit, I like a little bit of competition now and then, too. Don't get me wrong, I agree there's a benefit to that. It feels nice to have other people say, 'Wow, that's the best set in the registry.'"

"But I really see a value in sharing information and educating other people. ... I've met other people through the registry process—collectors who have also listed registry sets, or who have contacted me because of the registry set—that I share a sense of community with, gained the ability to share information, and have found the registry system as another means, another mode, of sharing that information.

"So instead of simply, as some collectors have done, register their coins and then block the coins from being viewed, so that only their total can be seen, I allow the coins to be seen and I have full images up on the PCGS Web site."

The Collector has also included extra information on the PCGS Web site, extra information—and photos—that prove to collectors there's more out there than simply what's in the Red Book or recognized by PCGS.

"So, for example," he said, "for 1795 Flowing Hair dollars, PCGS recognizes three varieties. The Red Book recognizes three varieties. I believe I have 10. So for 1795 Flowing Hair Three Leaves, I have two of them, because one of them has the so-called head of '94 obverse, one has the head of '95 obverse. When you look in the Red Book or even the PCGS pop report (population report) for large cents, they make that distinction for those. And I think that distinction is every bit as valid for early dollars as it is for large cents."

Staying true to his beliefs about educating collectors, he established the Cardinal Collection Educational Foundation ([www.earlydollars.org](http://www.earlydollars.org)), and two publications have been released so far. He published a 30-page booklet that "provides a pictorial guide to the most readily distinguishable varieties" of early silver dollars. There is also a 180-page book, *An Introduction to Early Dollars*, which expands the discussion from the booklet and includes numerous additional photos.

Said the Collector: "That's what I use to guide what I collect: things that can be distinguished readily, just by looking at them. There are books that give you

the diagnostics to identify the individual die varieties, and there are more than 110 different varieties.

"Well, for me as a collector, the only difference between a 1795 Flowing Hair Two Leaf B1 variety versus a 1795 Flowing Hair Two Leaf B10 variety, which happens to share the same obverse side, is the presence of an extra berry in the wreath on the reverse on the die of one of them. The one that has the extra berry is an R1 variety, the one that's missing that berry is an R7 variety. There are a dozen of them known, and they're priced into the tens of thousands.

"The typical collector won't be able to tell them apart without a book—can't tell them apart without a scoresheet, basically. So, as a collector, I like to collect the ones that you can tell apart easily. That's why in the case, there are 57 items instead of the 38 coins needed for a registry set."

"Live" early dollars are not seen very often, but these 57 items can probably be seen at a coin show near you.

"I really think people should get to see them," said the Collector, "so I've put them on display in a Long Beach show, the Santa Clara show, an ANA show. I know some people at the Smithsonian. I'm planning on getting them on display there for a period of time, so that people can get to see them."

Yet another method of educating collectors—and the public in general—comes from the responsibility of being the current keeper of the collection. As the Cardinal Collection is upgraded, the duplicate coins are recirculated, sold through either dealers or auctions.

"At least for me and my means," the Collector said, "acquiring a nice MS coin but still holding on to a nice AU coins is tying up a lot of funds, and I guess that's partly the accountant mentality. Tying up something that's no longer really meaningful to my collection, but could be meaningful to someone else's collection ... it just doesn't make sense for me.

"Eventually," he continued, "and I'm not sure when that would be—eventually, I think they should be returned to the collecting community by way of some type of sale."

That being the case, do as the Cardinal Collector did and heed the advice of one of this century's greatest numismatists.

First and foremost, educate yourself. Then focus on what you really need first and what will be the most difficult items to acquire.

And when the opportunity is available, go for it. ☺