



Next-Gen NUMISMATICS

The Atmosphere Has Shifted Since Most Collectors Were Kids

Is there a shortage of torch-bearers to carry this hobby into the future? Opinions differ, but most agree that with encouragement, outreach and a culture of community, today's Young Numismatists will continue to build on the legacies of those who came before.

by Amy Drew Thompson

If “reality” TV has proven anything, it’s this: The American public sure loves a makeover.

From the wardrobe renovations of “What Not to Wear” to the fitness fixers of “The Biggest Loser” to the radical, total-teardown plastic-surgery competition of “The Swan,” people just can’t get enough. In fact, they don’t often care what’s getting the makeover, as evidenced by the preponderance of HGTV-driven home-renovation shows and others aimed at even younger viewers.

For example, MTV’s “Pimp My Ride,” which ran from 2004-2007, would take a beat-up clunker of an automobile and, yes, make it over with everything from custom paint to high-end accessories to tricked-out electronics (because surely every parent wants a 20-year-old son driving around in a car outfitted with an Xbox and a flat-screen).

Olivia Beauvais is a fan of the makeover as well. It’s just that no producer has yet taken up the gauntlet this 16-year-old American Numismatic Association member has thrown down. Nor, to her chagrin, has the U.S. Mint. In her winning entry for Heritage Auctions’ quarterly Young Numismatist Essay Contest, she suggests that the perceived dearth of YNs is due in part to the fact that there have been no major coin makeovers to spark new interest.

“There’s not been a single composition change in our circulating coinage in my lifetime,” she told us. “The last was in 1982, with the copper cent [going to] copper-coated zinc—that was 30 years ago!”

This disregards the switch from cupronickel “clad” composition in the 1999 Susan B. Anthony dollar to a “golden” base-metal alloy in the 2000 Sacagawea dollar. Then again, mini-dollars haven’t really been “circulating” coins. So in practical terms, Olivia’s observation is on the mark.

Why aren’t there more young numismatic enthusiasts? There’s no shortage of opinions, but most of those we spoke to—both burgeoning and seasoned—agreed

that the competition for youthful attention is fierce.

“A generation ago, youngsters could fill a stamp album or collect coins from circulation and be stimulated by it,” said esteemed coin dealer-author Q. David Bowers, chairman emeritus of Stack’s Bowers. These days, he believes, technology has co-opted much of that energy.

“The Internet and computer games, in particular, have absorbed a lot of the time capital available for intellectual curiosity,” Bowers commented.

That said, hope springs eternal, as evidenced by the remarkable group of next-gen numismatists we culled for a foray into the hobby’s future.

The fact that coin collecting suffers from what many deem a severe coolness deficiency has done nothing to deter 16-year-old Katie Reinders from Portland, Oregon.

“My friend said it pretty well when he asked me when ‘Halo’ (a billion-dollar sci-fi video game franchise) became cooler than coin collecting,” she deadpanned. “The whole atmosphere has changed since the childhoods of most coin collectors.”

“It used to be prolific and now it isn’t something most people know about, and those who do think of it as just another nerdy hobby.”

Katie, a member of several collectors’ groups, was drawn into the pastime by her father.

“One of my earliest memories is him taking me to a coin shop to buy a display board for the state quarters at the beginning of their release in 1999. I was 3,” she recalled.

She’s also been going to coin shows with him for years, which helped spark an interest in exhibiting. Her first was themed on her home state, “the central piece being a cake mold I decorated ... with the design of the newly released Oregon state quarter.” She was 8.

“Exhibiting has been a huge part of the hobby for me,” she said. “I tend to look at everything through the eyes of an exhibitor. I look for what has a fascinating story or an unknown one ready to



Erik Elbieh of Boston was drawn into coin collecting by the 50 State Quarters program. He didn’t have a relative to mentor him, so he learned much on his own.

be discovered.” As such, research is also a focus. “My free time at [the ANA’s] Summer Seminar is usually spent in the amazing library ...”

Olivia Beauvais, too, cites Dad as her numismatic inspiration. “At first, I only liked coins because it meant I could spend time with him doing what he loved,” she said warmly. That said, the bug bit hard; she collects all United States coins and some foreign issues as well.

Nine-year-old Philadelphia native Garrett Ziss, who funds his hobby by dog sitting, leaf raking and snow shoveling, collects Lincoln cents, “Mercury” dimes and Capped Bust half dollars, each for a different reason. He collects Lincoln for their link to U.S. history and Mercury dimes for both a family connection—he was given some that belonged to his great-grandmother—and their beauty.

His interest in Capped Bust half dollars stemmed from a chance meeting with a collector at the World’s Fair of Money in his hometown last August. A week later, a package came in the mail. “It contained an 1834 Bust half from a very generous member of the ANA. I was thrilled!”

Garrett finds Bust halves fascinating “because they are not only coins but puzzles, too. You have to unlock the mystery of the die variety of each.”

Bostonian Erik Elbieh, 17, was drawn in like many younger collectors today by the 50 State Quarters program. “I got an album when I was 5 and began filling it by looking through pocket change,” he said. Once this was completed, he moved on to other albums and other denominations. Before long, he said, his interest grew out of control.

Unlike many YNs, Erik didn’t have a relative with whom to share knowledge, thus much was culled firsthand. “It was a little challenging at first walking around the bourse floor alone while 4 feet tall,” he admitted, “but many dealers were kind enough to hand out a few coins—gestures for which I can’t thank them enough.”

He cites both history and art as parts of the fascination—“but primarily, it’s about the stories. Early on, I began collecting first-year-issue coins so I could remember the year a design was first used ... and capture a piece of history from that time period.”

Coins, in fact, were not even Q. David Bowers’ first collecting love. “At 13, I was interested in rocks, minerals and fossils, and was visiting an older collector of the same [the notable Robert W. Rusbar, whose collection was, years later, cataloged by Bowers & Merena] when he asked whether I had any interest in coins. I didn’t know much about them, so he showed me a couple of folders with Lincoln cents in them and told me that a 1909-S VDB in the folder cost him \$10.

“I found that amazing, and thought to myself that I could immediately find a bunch of them in circulation. He gave me a couple of folders and that was how my interest began.”

And even though he lacked a mentor, we all know where that newfound passion took him.

Alas, kindling a child’s interest is less challenging than holding it.



John Siteman, pictured here with ANA Vice President Walter Ostromecki Jr., has won numerous awards for his exhibits at ANA conventions.

James L. Halperin, co-chairman of Heritage Auctions (and a longtime collector himself) has a vested interest in the future of numismatics—and he happens to believe it's a bright one.

"So," I asked, "why then do you think there's a perception that young people aren't into collecting coins?"

"Because they're not," he said with a laugh.

Seem incongruous? Not to Halperin, who offered a good explanation.

"Most kids who collect are in and out," he said. "They collect for a short time—six months, a year. And these are the ones who don't have attention deficit disorder," he joked.

The catch, he said, is that these same kids come back to the hobby when they're older. It just takes them a while. In fact, Halperin's own return came at age 16 when he opened a coin and stamp shop as a summer business. There had been an eight-year hiatus from when he first began collecting.

"We have clients who are eight-figure coin collectors who had penny books for a year when they were kids," he said. "And then they had their IPO or some other liquidity event and decided to start collecting coins again. People tend to collect things that bring them back to their childhoods." He ventured that the primary motivation for people who decide to start collecting something is nostalgia.

"Whitman has sold something like 100 million coin albums," Halperin said. "And there was a U.S. Mint survey about a decade ago that estimated there were 75 to 100 million coin collectors in the United States. I don't think it had ever been higher than maybe 10 million in history before

that ... which is what's so exciting. We have this huge group of kids who collected 10 years ago—an unprecedented number. And I think that's extremely promising for the hobby over the next 50 years."

Indeed, several of our YN sources mentioned the State Quarters series as being instrumental in their foray into numismatics. "They were a fantastic success," said Halperin, noting the role they played in cultivating lasting knowledge. His children were able to recite the state capitals since the ages of 6 and 8; he attributes that directly to the coins.

"Congress should have mandated presidential quarters too," he said. "They also should have quarters for the Bill of Rights and all the amendments to the Constitution. Personally, I can't recite all the presidents names in order, but if we had presidential quarters, I can guarantee you my kids would still know them cold!"

What else fortifies a collector's passion? "Accomplishment," said Rod Gillis, numismatic educator for the ANA. "Coin collecting does not always supply the immediate feedback so often featured in video games and the like."

As such, he believes a child's best chances of staying in the game lie in feeling that prized sense of completion. "The road of numismatics is littered with people who get into the hobby and want to collect the entire Morgan dollar series," he declared.

Gillis religiously instructs beginners, if they insist on collecting by set, to choose one that's easier. "They get that feeling of accomplishment," he said, "at which point they can graduate to more difficult sets." The ways in which to collect, he said, are limitless. "The only restrictions are your wallet and your imagination."

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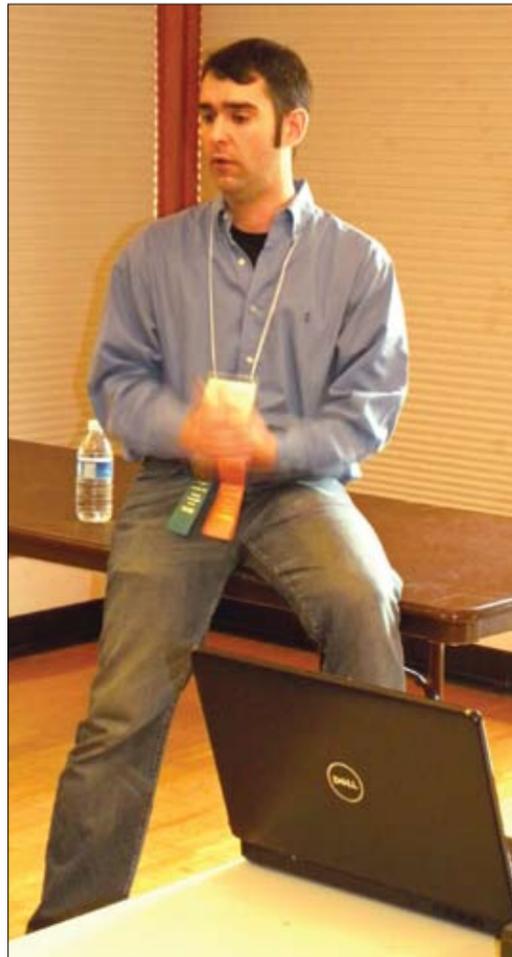
Getting in, staying there

Is there an event horizon to numismatics? A black hole equivalent wherein a collector can no longer escape the pull? The jury's out on such finality, but there is something of a gravity that can hold one firmly in orbit: camaraderie.

“If there is any knowledge that a love of coins cultivates, it is that of history—something that each of our YNs mused about.”

Much like young Reinders, John Siteman, 15, said the ANA's Summer Seminar has been a critical element—not only in cultivating knowledge but also in perpetuating interest. He cited teacher Mike Ellis, who ran the program's "Introduction to Grading United States Coins" class, as a mentor. "We kept in touch," John said. "Whenever I had a question relating to American coinage, I'd message him and he'd answer." And when John won the PCGS grading competition at the 2012 World's Fair of Money, Ellis was proud.

Though his interest began with his native Canadian currency, the Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia, native's interest has evolved to include a focus on coins issued



James Halperin, Q. David Bowers, John Krajjevic (pictured) and others all turned their collecting interests into successful careers.

by host nations honoring the Olympic Games. "Using this collection, I won first place and the Derek Pobjoy Award for the Best Exhibit of Modern Circulating Commemorative Coins at the same exhibition," he reported proudly.

Cole Schenewerk's involvement with the ANA is multifold. At the time of this writing, Cole was just 17 and working on several committees. His initial interest was kindled at age 4 by his dad; the two worked hard to find a coin club in their hometown of San Diego.

"In 2002," he said, "a visiting ANA member gave me a free one-year membership and I began to participate in programs like the David Cervin Ancient Coin Project." Five years passed and he was awarded a scholarship to attend the Summer Seminar.

"My passion for coins was solidified that summer," he said. "The friends I made had a huge impact, especially on my involvement with the ANA. They showed me how much you could do with numismatics, from the YN programs and conventions to future careers in the business." Since then, he's been awarded two internships at Heritage Auctions.



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"I love the history and stories behind older coins such as commemorative coins," said 16-year-old Kyle Woolard, a Barrie, Ontario, native who began amassing his collection at age 7 when he purchased about 10 coins from the rummage bin of a small shop for \$2. From that day on, he said, it has been a never-ending treasure hunt.

"Starting to build my collection at a young age allows for lots of time for it to rise in value and possibly sell for a high amount at auction in the future," he observed.

Much like the young Halperin, Kyle became an entrepreneur last year, founding Woolard Coin Supplies. "To do my part in promoting the hobby, my first product is a book—*The Coin Collector's Field Guide, 1st Ed.*" It was conceived, he said, "as a great quick-reference guide when shopping for coins at stores and shows in an easy-to-read format, including an (illustrated) coin-grading section, Canadian coin checklist, silver coin values and more."

Kyle has drawings and plans for at least 10 more products he calls "revolutionary," as well as books to suit the needs of coin collectors worldwide.

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Olivia Beauvais firmly believes the old guard has a hand in ensuring the future of her beloved hobby.

"In order to get younger people interested in coins," she said, "we need older numismatists to take action—maybe give their children and grandchildren a few wheat cents and see how they react."

Taylor Webb of Fremont, California, whose essay "Mentors of Numismatists" won Heritage's first quarterly essay contest, is on the same page. So enamored with coins is he, in fact, that he was delighted to spend time answering our questions on his 13th birthday. He is a zealous ambassador.



Whether it's a Scouts clinic, the ANA's Summer Seminar, or a simple club meeting, camaraderie is a factor that draws many young people into the hobby and keeps them there.

"I have given everyone in my class a steel wheatie and explained the story, and have had a few people come back to me to ask if I could show them more numismatic items," he reported. Similarly, some have given them back, expressing gracious disinterest. Webb is undeterred. "It's OK," he said. "I take them and give them to other people."

Schenewerk, like Halperin, doesn't think there's a shortage of YNs at all. "Our problem isn't getting kids interested in coins," he said. "It's getting them interested on a greater scale. There are thousands of kids across the country who have a book of state quarters on their shelves just like I did. We need to help them progress."

Schenewerk said the pervasive adult dialogue is that their kids are more interested in PS3 than coins. "Though that may be generally true, it's still an oversimplification," he said. "The days when coin collecting was cool are long gone, but there is still a type of kid who will find coins interesting ... We need to appeal to these YNs and develop them into more involved numismatists."

The Internet, he said, is a great place to start.

"The online presence of numismatics is spotty and scattered," he observed. "By improving this presence, we can attract new collectors and increase the involvement of the current ones ... I've heard it so many times it's a cliché, but social media need to be a part of the hobby's outreach program. The ANA's Facebook page has more than 3,000 'likes,' but that's nowhere close to the thousands of members it has or the hundreds of thousands of collectors in the country."

The ANA's Coins for A's program is a great incentive, Olivia Beauvais said. "If you have three or more A's on your report card, you can mail it in and receive not only free membership but a free coin!"

Indeed, budding numismatists tend to be good students. Good eggs all around, really.

"It has been a truism that youngsters who collect things are much less likely to get in trouble or be distracted by things they shouldn't," said Bowers, citing an old issue of *The Numismatist*, the ANA's official monthly journal, in which a judge reported that in his many years on the bench working with young offenders, he'd never once had to deal with one who was also an enthusiastic coin collector.

Of course, he added wryly, collecting coins to avoid a life of crime cannot be considered a reason for doing so. "But it certainly is a side benefit," he remarked. ☺